

**Weekly Bible Study Series, Vol. 10, No. 22: 19 July 2009**

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## **FORGIVE OR FACE LIFE IMPRISONMENT!**

**Today's Text:** Matt. 18: 11- 35

### **Extracts:**

**So, when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then [the unforgiving servant's] master, after he had called him, said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" And his master was angry and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. [Concluding the parable, Jesus said], "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" [Matt. 18: 31- 35]**

*On Monday, 29 June 2009, a US District Court in New York sentenced Bernard Madoff to a total of 150 years in prison.<sup>1</sup> He had been found guilty of operating a Ponzi scheme<sup>2</sup> by which he had defrauded innocent but trusting victims of over US\$65 billion. Before sentencing him, Judge Denny Chin said, "I have taken into account other cases - but nothing compares in terms of scope. The message must be sent in society governed by rule of law that Mr. Madoff will get what he deserves."*

*Madoff was 71 years old and he will be 221 years old by the time he serves his full term! How many people do you know that can live that long? Therefore, by all definitions, he has been sentenced to life imprisonment. He may die in jail if he is not paroled.*

*Madoff's offence was grievous by any definition. Like some of Madoff's victims present in court at his sentence, some of us would applaud the punishment meted to him. But do you know that most of us do something each day against others that God considers more grievous, and yet we are not about to give it up? We refuse to forgive others even though God says we must. Do you know God's punishment for those who refuse to forgive? It is life imprisonment! Let us find out from this week's study.*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Jonathan Dienst & Michael Clancy, "Madoff Gets the Max: 150 Years in Jail," <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Hundreds-Expected-at-Madoff-Sentencing.html> , Thur, July 9, 2009

<sup>2</sup> A Ponzi scheme is a fraudulent investment operation that pays returns to investors from their own money or money paid by subsequent investors rather than from any actual profit-  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponzi\\_scheme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponzi_scheme)

## 1. Background: The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven” [Matt. 18: 20-21]. To drive the point home, the Lord illustrated with the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. He used the story to illustrate what obtains in heaven. That was why He began by saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like ...” [v. 23]. The king represents God and His servants stand for us. Let us pay attention to the following key points:

### a) *The master forgave one servant a debt he could not pay*

The king wanted to settle accounts with his servants, that is, to determine who owed whom on balance. The king, as an employer, could owe his servants wages and other entitlements while his servants could owe him service or loans and advances. In the process, the king discovered that one servant “owed him ten thousand talents” that he could not pay [v. 24].

A talent was a lot of money, about 3,000 shekels in Palestine during the time of Jesus, and it took years and years of labour to earn it.<sup>3</sup> That servant was brought before his master who commanded that they should sell him, his family and all his possessions to recover the debt. The debtor “fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all’” [vv. 25-26]. The king was moved with compassion. He did not only release the man; he forgave him all that he owed [v. 27]!

Every month, you may receive bills from utility, mortgage and credit card companies, among many others. Your student loans may be due for payment now that you are working. If you renege on such bills, they can cut your utility supplies or foreclose on your home or send debt collectors after you. You have no place to hide and even declaring yourself legally bankrupt does not set you free from certain debts, such as taxes and student loans. But, think of how much you are owing God this moment. From birth, you have lived on His air, sunshine and moonlight and all other benefits. Have you ever received any bills from Him? No! He has shown compassion on you, whether you are good or evil [Matt. 5: 45]. So, as the king in this story discharged his servant of all that he owed, so has God forgiven you all your sins if you ask Him [1 Jn 1: 9].

### b) *But the forgiven servant refused to forgive his fellow servant!*

The forgiven servant came out of jail and found one of his fellow servants that owed him a hundred denarii. The denarius was a Roman coin worth a day’s wage in Jesus’ time [Matt. 20: 1-16].<sup>4</sup> In modern day comparison,

<sup>3</sup> Karen Dockrey, et al, *The Student bible Dictionary*, Ulrichsville, OH: Barbour Books, 2000; p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 76

the first servant owed his master thousands of dollars while the other servant owed his colleague mere pennies or cents. What did the creditor do? He “laid hands on (the debtor) and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’” His fellow servant fell on his knees and begged, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you all” [Matt. 18: 28-29]. Those were the exact words that the first servant had used to plead with his master [v. 26] but this time, he refused the plea and threw his colleague into prison “till he should pay the debt” [v. 30].

How many people have you held by their throats right now with your fits of vengeance? You may be waiting for them to come and apologize even though they are ignorant of their offence against you. Some have been begging you but you have refused to forgive them. You may claim to have forgiven but you still relive the story everyday with anger and bitterness. Have you forgotten so soon the gravity of the sins that God has forgiven you? Can you afford it if He should take back His pardon and leave you to your whims and caprices? Let us learn from the experience of the unforgiving servant.

**c)** *And his master returned the unforgiving servant to jail for life!*

The other servants who saw what the first servant had done to their colleague were very grieved. So, they went and told their master all that had happened. He called the unforgiving servant and said to him, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt *because* you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, *just as I had pity on you?*” The master was angry with him. So, he delivered the unforgiving servant “to the torturers until he should pay all that was due” to his master. Jesus concluded, “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, *from his heart*, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” [vv. 31-35].

The unforgiving servant could never pay back what he owed his master because the amount was huge and he had lost his means of employment. Therefore, he had actually been sentenced to life imprisonment for refusing to forgive. We are told that the master handed him over to the torturers. Those were prison officials who were paid to make life miserable for inmates. You may recall what such torturers in a Macedonia prison did to Paul and Silas who were mere suspects, not convicts. After they had “laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. *Having received such a charge*, he put them into the inner prison *and fastened their feet in the stocks*” [Acts 16: 23-24]. Ouch! That was painful.

If God does not forgive the unforgiving, it means they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Instead, they are heading for hell “into the fire that

shall *never be quenched*" [Mk 9: 43, 45]. What life imprisonment can be worse than that? That is why you need to revisit this important matter in your life.

## 2. Happily, Jesus has provided a grievance resolution procedure

Peter was obviously anxious to practise forgiveness. That was why he came to Jesus to know how many times he should forgive his brother before blowing his fuse, so to speak! Jesus told him that he needed not just seven times but seventy times seven [Matt. 18: 21-22]. Peter's question was a follow-up to the grievance resolution procedure that Jesus had taught them a moment earlier [vv. 15-18]. In Luke's account of another story on forgiveness, Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and *if he repents, forgive him*. And if he sins against you *seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him*" [Lk 17: 3-4]. Therefore, both the offender and the offended have their responsibilities. That does not mean that you will not forgive if the offender does not apologize, something most of us find difficult to do.<sup>5</sup> Rather, Jesus has provided the means by which you can purge yourself of anger and a vengeful spirit. This is a matter of life and death and you cannot afford to take it lightly.

Your brother or sister is not necessarily your sibling but everyone that you interact with in order to achieve personal or group purposes. The example used by the Lord applies to a member of your church [Matt. 18: 17]. Interestingly, we tend to have the most offences from fellow church members over backbiting, envy, political struggles and so on. However, we can extend the principles to family, school, place of work, business or club, etc. Once you are convinced that someone has offended you, this is what Jesus has asked you to do:

### Step 1: Confront the offender alone

You should "go and tell him his fault *between you and him alone*" [v. 15]. Many differences can be cleared up at this stage. You may find that there was no offence intended but the problem was how the offending action had been perceived. In some cases, the offender may not even know that s(he) has offended another party. Sometimes, the offending party may be too afraid to come forward to apologize for fear of repercussions. Or the offended party may actually be shifting blame from himself/herself when the first finger ought to point in his/her direction! That is why communication between both parties is very important so as not to allow misperception to degenerate into a conflict. It takes courage and humility to confront others to let them know how you feel about a matter. However, the risk can be worth it. Jesus says that when you are able to resolve the matter, "you have gained your brother" [v. 15]. Some of my best friends today

<sup>5</sup> For more on this subject, read, "Can you repent when you can't apologize?" *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 8 No. 31: 18 November 2007;

[http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume\\_8/PDFs/Apologyprecedesrepentance.pdf](http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_8/PDFs/Apologyprecedesrepentance.pdf)

came from such confrontations soon after joining a new school, organization or congregation.

Step 2: If that fails, take witnesses with you

If the offender will not hear you, “take with you one, or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established” [v. 16]. Perhaps out of pride or blame shifting, the offended party may not be amenable to direct confrontation. They may suspect that the matter could escalate into litigation and it may be necessary to start building a paper trail (so to speak). Therefore, they may not own up unless a third party can hear both of you out and pronounce some judgment.

The challenge here is the integrity of the witnesses. How were they selected? By you or jointly with the offender? I have known some witnesses who take sides even before they hear out the other party. I have come across witnesses who are afraid to speak the truth to people they consider their friends, family or those older or in authority. I have also seen some people whose principled stand has brought some proud offenders to their knees to ask for forgiveness. It is important to create a favourable (spiritual) enabling environment for the truth to emerge and be upheld for the resolution of the conflict.

Step 3: If that fails, take the matter to the church

Jesus says that when the matter cannot be resolved in Steps 1 and 2, you should “tell it to the church” as the ultimate authority [v. 17], bearing in mind that believers are not expected to bring their matters “to law before the unrighteous” [1 Cor. 6: 1-2]. Based on the word of God, the church elders should be able to resolve the matter and restore forgiveness and love. God has granted authority to the church to make a final pronouncement on the matter and, if it is not acceptable to the offending party, “let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector,” that is, an outsider [Matt. 18: 17-18].

Some churches have strong respectable disciplinary committees/councils which can take and enforce measures to resolve disputes between and among members. However, there are also examples of such bodies that cause more conflicts than resolve them because of the bad example that their leaders and members show.

From the foregoing, we see that *both the offender and the offended* have their respective responsibilities. The offender must accept full responsibility for his/her offences, failing which their confession to God is empty. On the other hand, the offended party does not have or need to await the offender’s apology before forgiving him/her. Rather, such apology, if offered, must never be refused. To make it easy for the offended party to forgive, Jesus has provided guidelines for believers as outlined above.

### 3. Conclusion: You are the one on trial!

The bottom-line is for the offended party to recognize that his/her vindication will come from God, not from man [Ps. 75: 6]. But remember, you are the one on trial, not the offender! Jesus has warned you, “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, *from his heart*, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” [Matt. 18: 35]. Forgiveness from the heart goes beyond avoiding the person who has hurt you. It goes beyond merely mouthing forgiveness when your countenance betrays your deep-seated feeling of hurt. God wants to set you free from eternal damnation in hell “for if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; *but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*” [Matt. 6: 14-15].

That is why Jesus has given you the process of ventilating your grievances. When you set yourself free by forgiving, you have handed over the offender to God in whose hand alone is vengeance [Rom. 12: 19]. If you can hand over those who have offended you in the secular world to the police and the law courts, as in the case of Madoff, you should also hand over your offenders to God and trust Him to apply heaven’s rule of law to your case.

Forgive now or face life imprisonment in hell!