

Efficacious forgiveness
– Interpreting the parable of Unmerciful Servant Matt. 18:21-35

SC 134: Reading Matthew through the Lens of his Parables
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Introduction

Parable exegesis as a whole is, like all forms and methods of exegesis and interpretation, a product of its own time. It has the scent of post-modernism, where small stories swarm over the corpses of the old big stories and everyone is free to interpret the small stories as they see fit in the name of relativism. Clearly this is not purely negative thing; it encourages people to read the Scriptures by themselves and follow what they understand from the text in their own lives. But the parables are not meant to be interpreted in any manner whatsoever; reading them as realistic texts is the first and crucial mistake. Theological expertise, knowledge, is still needed.

I approach the parable of Unforgiving servant layer by layer. Interpretation can be assigned only after the context, structure and details of the parable are studied. After that it is fruitful to look how a parable means, what was its *Sitz im Leben*. I was lucky to find several books, which open different perspectives to the text. Most interesting was Richard Q. Ford's psychotherapeutic approach, which is a fine example of how the parables cannot be read.

Unmerciful servant in the gospel according to Matthew

The whole chapter 18 is an ecclesial discourse, which ends in the parable under study.¹ Donahue sees in this teaching about the ethics of discipleship, which is above all communal life. Eschatology and *parousia* form the context in which light ethics are dealt with: the ultimate judgement is in the hands of God.² Likewise the parable is one of many about the Kingdom of Heaven, which shows the ideal of unity to the divided community.³

¹ Jan Lambrecht, S.J., *Out Of The Treasure – The Parables In The Gospel of Matthew* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1998), 53

² John R. Donahue, S.J., *The Gospel in Parable* (USA: Fortress Press 1990), 66, 69

³ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable – A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (USA: Ausburg Fortress, 1990), 268

The chapter starts with concern to the smallest and weakest, of whom the community must take special care (verses 1-11). God doesn't wish to lose a single one (v. 12-14). Christians must always seek peace and reconciliation in their inner strives (v. 15-16), but at the same time they must realize that sometimes communal life is not possible (v. 17). A congregation has the authority of Jesus to make its decisions firm (v. 18-20), although this also carries connotations of mercifulness and responsibility to God.

Scott states that "a major problem in the interpretation of Jesus' parables is the preservation of them in contexts created by others." He goes on arguing that Matthew has placed Jesus' parable in his own allegorical frames, seeing thus that the parable is made of verses 23-34.⁴ While this might be true, it is still this in this particular frame that the parable has been part of tradition and in which it has been interpreted. Therefore, in order to understand what Matthew wishes to express with this parable, it cannot be omitted from its frames or from its context in the whole chapter – and, indeed, in the whole gospel.

Various structure models

Donahue presents J. Dominic Crossan's model, which divides the parable into three acts: first with the indebted and the king (v. 23-27), the second with the indebted and a fellow servant (v. 28-30) and final again with the indebted and the king (31-34). He also notes that each act is made of narrative part, dialogue and action,⁵ even if the last dialogue is the king's monologue.

In the beginning of his book Donahue speaks about parables in a common level and mentions that often the overarching structure is either A, B, A or A, B, C, B', A'⁶. This parable fits well in the first paradigm, although one does not have to bend his mind to make it fit the latter one,

⁴ Ibid., 268-269

⁵ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 74

⁶ Ibid., 23

either: A represents indebted man in front of the king, B is indebted man related to his co-workers (first he attacks one and later the rest of them report him to the king) and C is his action. The common stance is that the structure of the parable emphasizes strongly the meaningfulness of the second act, where the indebted servant meets a fellow servant. This is the crucial moment in the parable, which sets the poor man's fate.

From another perspective the first verses (21-22) present a thought, which the parable then elaborates and engages with. The idea of unlimited forgiveness is presented in the circle of forgiveness: a servant is indebted, forgiven, and indebted again (v. 23-31). But then the tone changes drastically, as if to answer to those who are afraid that unconditional forgiveness could lead into ignorance and selfish carelessness. There's like a gap of time or other kind of movement to another perspective, even if this is not represented in the narrative. The king judges the unforgiving servant to be tortured to show that justice and judgement are still valid and parts of God's will (v. 32-35).

Some insights about the details

Lean Morris notes that Jesus doesn't speak about the amount of forgiveness but about the quality. ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ (v. 22) can be translated as "seventy-seven times", which echoes the greatness of Lamech's revenge (Gen. 4:24) – Jesus turns this upside-down as He speaks about forgiveness. It can also be translated "seventy times seven", which implies the perfect of perfection. Therefore He speaks about wholehearted and constant forgiveness as a way of life.⁷

⁷ Lean Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 2nd print (USA: William B. eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 471-472

Another important detail is the debts. The first servant had a gargantuan debt – “the annual income of Herod the Great was about 900 talents”, as Donahue tells.⁸ As talent was about 6000 denarii and a denary was the wage of day labour, the debt would have meant more than 150 000 man work years. However, the original listeners probably understood that it did not mean any exact sum of money. “Talent is the most valuable coinage and ten thousand is, for Greek, the largest number”⁹, so μυριάων ταλάντων (v. 24) would probably be best translated as “zillion” (cf. 1 Cor. 4:15, 14:19). The fellow servant’s debt was 100 denarii, which is a third of labour class annual income, so it loses its meaning only if compared to the other debt.

Scott on his behalf focuses on the parable’s social world. The king’s demand, the whole family should be sold because of man’s debt, was an indication that he was a Gentile: such a punishment was not in accord with Jewish law. Therefore the first surprise is the king’s unexpected mercifulness (v. 27). The king’s next judgement is as surprising: the servant has already suffered humiliation in the face of his kin (v. 31), but the king is not satisfied. He actually takes his word back, shaking thus the very foundation of the hierarchical social world.¹⁰

Verse 35 finally turns the whole parable into an allegory: the king is God, the servants are Christians and the impossible debt is the debt of sin.¹¹ There are actually several signs along the parable to support this: the indebted servant “worshipped” the king, the king “takes pity” on the servant representing very deep affection, “fellow servant” is the same word used of Christian brothers and sisters (cf. Col. 4:7) and “to be tortured” has the same tone as “gnashing of teeth” (cf. Matt. 13:42).

⁸ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 75

⁹ Lambrecht, *The Parables*, 57

¹⁰ Scott, *Hear Then*, 275-277

¹¹ Richard Q. Ford, *The Parables of Jesus – Recovering the Art of Listening* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 48

The problem of interpretation

The frames and the parable do not match: they seem to represent different ideas about forgiveness. Reconciling these two is not easy. “Human forgiveness is not so much the prior and necessary condition for God’s forgiveness; it is rather the required consequence”¹² Lambrecht tries, but in the light of the parable it seems more right to say that a person is given a task to forgive others and in the end he will be either rewarded or punished. The divine mercy seems inefficient as the parable precisely shows that it does not change the indebted man.

Scott makes it a bit further, as he notes that everyone in the parable failed to forgive: the fellow servants (with whom the reader stands) demanded punishment and the king himself could not keep his previous promise. The ending is chaotic and leaves repentance as the only option. “The ability to acknowledge one’s entanglement in evil is part of the experience of the kingdom”¹³ he concludes, but unfortunately there is still the verse 35, which ruins this interpretation.

Solution by deducting from certainties

As was mentioned in the beginning of this essay, none of the verses cannot be omitted to make the interpretation easier. Matthew certainly knew what he was writing and altering the text is just moving further away from his message. Likewise it’s wise to look after the gospel as a whole, if there are similar or different kinds of attitudes. These similarities – a task or entire life as an opportunity to show what kind of person one is – are abundant: Sermon on the Mountain (especially 5:48), Our Father (Matt. 6:12, 15), the good fruit (7:16-23) and the later eschatological parables Talents (25: 14-30) and The Sheep and the Goats (25: 31-46). This seems to be one of the central issues in the entire gospel.

¹² Lambrecht, *The Parables*, 68

¹³ Scott, *Hear Then*, 268, 278-280

It seems clear that the parable denies absolutism, a practise where the forgiveness allows person on keep on with his life without changing anything. Parables are instruments of teaching; they have clear “strategic-rhetorical character” as is most evidently shown in the encounter between David and prophet Natan (cf. 2 Sam 12:1-13). The same principle applies here, to quote Lambrecht: “it contains an appeal: we must live from that received gift; we must make that forgiveness operative and thus forgive others.”¹⁴ The king asks for *metanoia*, the conversion of heart, pondering and understanding what has happened and then adapting the same attitude which the merciful king showed¹⁵ (cf. James. 2:13). And since the king is an allusion of God, the appeal is to become like God.¹⁶

The edge of the parable is in the king’s last words: “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” (v. 33). The emphasis does not lay in the forgiveness as such, but in its efficacious motive. The forgiveness is a call to new life, to share what has been given and to follow the revealed and experienced example.

Conclusion: Unwilling acceptance

“The severity we discern in the punishment of the man in the parable is all that unfor- giving sinners can look for from the hand of God”, writes Morris.¹⁷ Parables are said to be open to several different interpretations, which appeals to a post-modern individualist who seeks the meaning of his own existence. While this gives a means to make religious language relevant to a modern person, it also carries certain risks. If we believe what we want to believe, listening to others is useless and the question of truth is covered under subjectivism.

¹⁴ Lambrecht, *The Parables*, 27-28, 64

¹⁵ Morris, *The Gospel*, 477

¹⁶ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 77

¹⁷ Morris, *The Gospel*, 477

Parables do give some freedom of movement in their own world and especially in how to apply it one's own life and its situations. Still they are strong persuasive methods, which engage the very person of the reader. The reader must either break and reorganize his heart to match what he has just heard or deny the message and harden his heart. The rule of love is a strict rule, but God is approached only through constant repentance and *metanoia*.

Bibliography

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