

INTRO:

Tim Keller recently stated, *“If God is real, don’t assume He’ll perfectly align with your views. If He never challenges your assumptions, you may have a made-up God.”*¹... One of the things we’re seeking to do in our **Upside Down** series is kinda lay all our preconceived notions, spiritual assumptions and even religious traditions on the table in order to just hear from Jesus Himself about... what God’s like; SO THAT of course, we don’t fall into the trap Dr. Keller describes... TODAY we’re talking about something, which maybe more than anything, can expose what you REALLY think God is like. It’s a topic that, at first glance, might seem straight forward/maybe easy, BUT I promise is neither, since if you have any self-awareness at all, you’ll know you struggle with this. And the topic I’m referring to is... Forgiveness! **The Ol’ F-Word**, since often, the thought of extending/even sometimes receiving forgiveness makes us wanna use the F’word!... Forgiveness! So follow-along as hear the reading of Jesus’s Parable of: **The Unforgiving Servant**... **(PAUSE RECORDING)** **Arianna** reads...

TEXT:²

(START RECORDING)... So pretty crazy parable here right? We got kings and servants, exorbitant sums of money, street fights and jail time, and of course unexpected plot twists... ALL of which is, if you’re taking notes here, intended to show you two things: **One, The Lavish Forgiveness Of God.** And **Two, The Absurdity Of Our Unforgiveness.** *The Lavish Forgiveness Of God And The Absurdity Of Our Unforgiveness*... Take a look: If you have a Bible or Bible app, you’ll notice that this parable comes immediately after Jesus has just taught two on things: **One**, the just outlandish grace and forgiveness of God to, as our shepherd, not let anything/even our sheep-like waywardness, separate us from Him, and **Two**, what’s been called “church discipline” or how we’re to justly treat those who continually sin without repentance. So He’s just taught on BOTH forgiveness AND justice, which ya gotta believe left those listening/ certainly Peter given his little Q/A with Jesus there in **vv.21-22**, feeling like they’d gotten spiritual whiplash or something - wondering, is God gracious and forgiving OR just and righteous. And if both, how does that work? Which is WHY, you see, Peter asks Jesus how many times we should forgive those who keep doing stuff to us. He’s trying to work out this interplay between God’s forgiveness and His justice... And I love Peter right, cuz he’s just SO extra! Like many of us, THINKS he’s figured it out. Says to Jesus, *“7 times! That’s how many times we oughta forgive someone right?”* Cuz he’s thinkin’ 3 things: **One**, that within Judaism forgiving someone 3x was sufficient for showing a forgiving spirit. That was the rule. **Two**, the number 7 had long-been associated with God’s perfection and so was likely a number pleasing to God; not to mention, way more than 3 and therefore EXTRA gracious. But then **Three**, thinking, while 7 is definitely gracious, it’s not crazy right? Cuz I mean ya can’t just forgive people indefinitely right? So, cap it at 7!... To which you see Jesus says, *“ACTUALLY, it’s 70x7”* And His intent there is not for you to start doing the mental-math/it’s 490 by the way, but rather to essentially say, *“Peter, I know you wanna work this out/know you want a nice, tidy rule that you can control. Ya know, do enough forgiving to be gracious, but NOT enough as to leave yourself vulnerable to*

¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cagd2HSAEYc/>

² A large portion of this message adapted from various thoughts and insights provided by “12. The Real F-Word (Parables #9)” - <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/larkcast/id1339351918?i=1000524633912> + “13. The Real F-Word 2 (Parables #10)” - <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/larkcast/id1339351918?i=1000525609345>

*real hurt. I know that's what you want...But when I say 70x7, what I'M saying is 'perfection x perfection! My forgiveness, Jesus is saying, is un-ending/never-stopping. It's a black-hole. Ya never get to the bottom of it' ... Which in that moment must've AGAIN blown Peter's mind right? Is God forgiving or just? Maybe forgiving AND just? Well how does that work? Maybe He's just crazy-forgiving OR just crazy!...And so Jesus says, let me explain: "The kingdom of heaven (is like) a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants." He gives, you see, this parable to show us just how **Lavish God's Forgiveness Is** and by extension **How Absurd Our Unforgiveness Is**.*

So **First, The Lavishness of God's Forgiveness**: When Jesus says that the kingdom's like a King, "*wishing to settle accounts with his servants,*" you can read that one of two ways: **On the one hand**, you could assume: this is a ruthless king determined to get every last cent he's owed from his subjects. Ya know, GOD as this cranky, demanding sovereign trying to settle-the-score with us sinners. And sadly, that's the image many of us have with God and frankly the image that keeps a lot of our friends, neighbors, even family members from wanting anything to do WITH God! And the problem with that image, is that it's not consistent with the details Jesus provides here. Cuz notice **First**, He tells us that this King is rightly owed by "*10,000 talents*" by just ONE of his servants. In NT times, a "*talent*" was equivalent to about 20 years wages for the average day-laborer. So in approximate modern equivalents, if a laborer earns, let's say \$15/hr/about Boston minimum wage AND works around 40hrs a week, then that laborer would gross roughly \$30,000/yr AND \$600,000 in 20 years. THAT would be 1 "*talent*." So "*10,000 talents*" then, is/ if I'm doing the math correctly here: 60 million work hours and \$6 BILLION dollars in wages. Or over 3x the GDP of Belize.³ In other words, just an insane/really insurmountable debt - like a little kid saying they own "a bazillion dollars." And Jesus says that's what just this ONE servant owes His King. **So think about that!** If this King is looking to settle accounts with **what?** His Servant? No! His ServantS/plural, and just ONE of those servants owes Him \$60 billion, you understand, this King must be extraordinarily generous as to be willing to underwrite that kind of line-of-credit! Not to mention, I don't care who you are: Racking up 6 billion in debt takes a LONG-time. According to CNBC, the average American spends about \$165/day.⁴ Even if you, let's say, spent 1000x that every day/so \$165,000/day, which would be like buying 2-3 Porsche's⁵ a day. Even if you COULD do that, it'd still take you over 100 years to accrue 6 billion in debt. So not only is this King extraordinarily generous, he's obviously, INCREDIBLY long-suffering to be willing to underwrite such a debt for so long. Incredibly generous AND long-suffering!

But then **Second**, we see he's extraordinarily GRACIOUS too. Cuz notice: When he finally/and rightly-so, calls-in his servant's debt; we're told that in realizing he can't pay, the servant asks for, as **v.26** says, "*patience*" - more time to pay him back, which frankly is ridiculous cuz there's no way/no matter how much time he has that this guy's ever paying off his debt. BUT obviously the King could've given him more time, and at this point, that woulda been pretty gracious! But

³ <https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-by-country/>

⁴ <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/13/heres-how-much-the-average-person-spends-in-a-day.html>

⁵ <https://www.kbb.com/porsche/>

no! He takes it a step further: The King, it says, “*out of pity for him...forgave the servant his debt.*” COMPLETELY absorbed/without ANY expectation of re-payment, his \$6 Billion debt/ threw away the accounting records/ended the bookkeeping. AND not begrudgingly-so. He did it, it says, “*out of pity.*” And that word “*pity*” is the same word used of Jesus in **Mark 6:34**⁶ when it says that “*Jesus looked at the crowds, and had COMPASSION or pity on em, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*” Literally means to be moved in the deepest parts of your being to show goodness to those who are hurting! THAT is how this King responds. Just INCREDIBLE grace that, frankly, has NOTHING to do with this servant’s offer OR ability to pay back the debt. No, what moves this King is compassion and ability. Compassion for his servant and ability to help his servant. Cuz obviously if this King’s ABLE to instantaneously absorb a \$6 Billion loss, he clearly has extreme means! So we’re not just talking some loving, but ultimately limited father-figure. NOR are we talking just some powerful King! We’re talking BOTH a loving father-figure AND a powerful King. Really, you could say...“a Heavenly...Father”...***So ya see?*** While you COULD read this king as being harsh/ruthless; the better/I’d say, intellectually honest way to read it, is to see him as being SO committed to maintaining relationship with those in His Kingdom, that He’s willing to ***lavish forgiveness***/take-on ANY cost, no matter how great! THAT, Jesus says, is WHAT “*the kingdom of heaven*”/God/the Gospel “*is like!*”

Listen: you can define the Gospel in 3 words: Here it is: **You...Are...Forgiven!** NOT you CAN be forgiven, or ought to be forgiven, or should be forgiven. Certainly not: If you’re able to work your way back into God’s good graces, THEN you’re forgiven. No! You ARE forgiven. Through faith in Jesus Christ, forgiven of the massive debt of your sin against a holy and righteous God/ your living for yourself at HIS expense, since that’s what sin is. Through Christ, forgiven of that! Because think about it: ***What’s the perfect example of this parable?/the truth behind it’s fiction?*** The Cross of Jesus right? Really, the only difference BETWEEN this parable and the Cross is that this parable’s a story; while the Cross...is true! ***Cuz what do we have in this parable?*** We have a man, pleading with a King, for his forgiveness. But at the Cross, you understand, we have the King of Kings, pleading with His Father...for OUR forgiveness. And not cuz God the Father in anyway wants to withhold forgiveness from you/after all the Cross was His plan from the beginning. But rather because your sin-debt and mine demands payment! As **Romans 6:23** says, “*For the wages/or payment of sin is death.*” When you and I sin against a holy God, what’s demanded is our life! That’s the only punishment/payment that fits the crime. Like, if you steal money from someone, the punishment is: you pay back with your money right? If you murder someone/commit a capital offense, the punishment is: you pay back with your life! That’s why it’s called “capital punishment.” When you offend a holy/eternal God, the only fair and just punishment has to be an eternal one. And what’s the only eternal thing that can be exacted from us? Our lives! So the “*wages of sin...is death.*”

But here’ the thing, because you and I obviously can’t PAY that and God still maintain relationship with us; HE instead absorbed that debt HIMSELF! That’s what the Cross is! Before you ever plead for forgiveness/even knew you NEEDED forgiveness, Jesus Christ gave His life

⁶ **σπλαγγίζομαι** William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 938.

FOR your forgiveness! ***Or let me say it another way:*** *The justice God has delivered to the world IS the forgiveness of sins!* Doesn't mean God won't bring a full and final justice in the end, which you see Jesus alluding to there in **vv.34-35** and which I'll mention in a second. But it does mean that by the Cross of Christ, bookkeeping with God is DONE! And as such, you and I can't now point at anyone and say, *"your sin...still needs to be punished/still demands justice!"* Not ultimately. Their punishment has been laid on Christ. And justice has been served BY Christ! So you and I CAN'T now look at someone and say EITHER they owe an insurmountable debt OR they aren't loved! In other words, we're free to, not just ourselves BE forgiven, BUT forgive!

Which brings us ***Finally***, to the **Absurdity of our UNForgiveness**: And unfortunately, we don't have time to get into every situation of extending or receiving forgiveness and the emotions/very often difficult emotions that go with it all. But/and without wanting to sound un-pastoral here, I think it's ok, because really, the purview of this parable is NOT tips or even counsel on how to be more forgiving or receive forgiveness. Nowhere does Jesus say, *"and this is how you extend or receive forgiveness."* No! Along with the **Lavishness of GOD'S Forgiveness**, what Jesus is trying to show you is just the simple **Absurdity/literally Incongruity of YOUR Unforgiveness**. That's why you see, when this servant gets his debt forgiven and then goes and *"chokes-out"* his buddy for what's the equivalent of an unpaid bar tab, his *"fellow servants,"* in **v.31**, are so shocked at the **absurdity** of his behavior that they literally turn him into the King. It's like Jesus has intentionally painted these fellow-servants into the story in order to represent the listening crowds who are likely going, *"Ok, Jesus we've been tracking with ya this whole time. But come on! THAT is ridiculous. NOBODY would act like you're saying this guy acted."* To which Jesus basically says, *"And that's my the point. Nobody WOULD act like that/WOULD be unforgiving if they really trusted in how much God has forgiven THEM."* Cuz that's really the problem with this servant right? His response is **absurd** NOT because it's uncommon/cuz let's be honest, we ALL can harbor unforgiveness right? I mean you may not "choke" a person out. Maybe you're not the "fight-type"/maybe you're the "flight-type." And so instead of choking em out you...ice em out! The point is: We ALL harbor unforgiveness that plays out in different forms. THIS servant's unforgiveness is **absurd** NOT because it's uncommon...but because it's INCONSISTENT/Incongruous! HE'S continuing to bookkeep and keep people on the hook, when the books of HIS debt were thrown out, so that HE could be let OFF the hook. HE'S continuing with the "relational accounting business" when God declared THAT business to be bankrupt. HE'S choking people out NOT cuz he's some angry unforgiving person/he might be/ we don't know. We just know he's choking people out, because he doesn't truly BELIEVE-IN or enjoy the forgiveness that's already His. Cuz if he did, he wouldn't have to keep extracting from everyone else. He's living INCONSISTENT with the reality of his forgiveness!

And Friends, THAT'S really the scandal of this whole parable and ULTIMATELY the Gospel: That BY Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, you REALLY are forgiven! BUT at the same time/like this servant, you REALLY are free to live as if you aren't. Doesn't mean that's gonna go well for ya/again, like this servant, might actually get ya thrown in jain/ultimately...hell, which is what Jesus is alluding to there in those final two verses about *"being delivered over to jailers"* - it's a metaphor for hell, BOTH as a final justice for the world AND as a consequence of continued disbelief in God's forgiveness. So it doesn't mean it's gonna go well for you. But it

does mean that Jesus Christ has NEVERTHELESS purchased total forgiveness FOR you to both enjoy AND share with others, IF ONLY you'll take Him at His word.

There may be no better picture of this in recent days than Rachel Denhollander. You might remember a couple years ago, a number of female, American gymnasts came forward with how they/along with over 150 other fellow gymnasts, had repeatedly been sexually molested by Larry Nassar, all under the guise of "professional athletic treatment." And the first victim to speak out at Nassar's trial was Rachel Denhollander. And I'll just read to you a portion of her testimony. Looking Nassar directly in the eye, she said and I quote, *"You chose to pursue your wickedness no matter what it cost others. And the opposite of what you have done, is for me to choose to love sacrificially no matter what it costs me. In our earlier hearings you brought your Bible into the courtroom and you've spoken of praying for forgiveness. And so it's on that basis that I appeal to you: If you've read the Bible you carry, you know that the definition of sacrificial love portrayed is of God himself loving so sacrificially that He gave everything to pay a penalty for the sin He did not commit. By His grace I too choose to love this way!"* And then she went on to say/again still looking Dr. Nassar directly in the eye: *"Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you've done, the guilt will be crushing. And THAT, she said, is what makes the Gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found and it will be there for you."* *"I pray, she said that you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt so that YOU may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me, THOUGH I extend that to you as well."*⁷..... You hear what she's saying? She's saying, *"No matter what it costs/if it brings accountability, change, justice, it doesn't matter! I refuse to live inconsistent with the reality of what Jesus Christ has already accomplished! And I pray Dr. Nassar that you wouldn't live inconsistent with it either. Cuz that would be Absurd, given the Lavishness of God's Forgiveness already made available in Christ!"*...**Don't you see?** If *"the kingdom of heaven is like a king, who wished to settle accounts with his servants,"* then the only question you have to ask yourself is: **How then are you relating to the work OF THAT King?** NOT how are you trying to get better at forgiving. But how are you simply relishing in the *lavish forgiveness* of King Jesus, until it pushes you past *the absurdity of any unforgiveness*. And THEN even relishing that when you DON'T relish or forgive like ya should, there's forgiveness for that too. **How are you relating to that? ...Let's Pray...Amen!**

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFBtnQyIbhl&t=1s>