

[Long silent pause]

What if this pulpit went silent? What if the Word of the Lord stopped speaking? What if you never heard about salvation again? Picture your life without the Gospel . . . without Christ crucified . . . without forgiveness. Imagine saying this morning, "Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. . . ." imagine saying that and then . . . nothing . . . no Holy Absolution from God! Visualize how it would be knowing God may've turned His back on you, left you in your sins, banished you into outer darkness. Not good, right?

Well, now you know what it's like at first for the servant in today's parable. I mean, here's this guy getting dragged before the king to settle accounts. As he's pulled through the door into the king's court, his heart must be racing, his palms sweaty, his stomach in knots, as he's bracing for the worst. You see, he's run up a giant bill, and he has no idea how he's going to come up with the money. For him, all hope is lost—salvation feels out of reach.

We're not told how he got into such debt, but this man owes a total of 10,000 talents! Now, for us twenty-first century Americans, this sorta falls flat. My guess is many of us are thinking somewhere in the ballpark of \$10,000. And while a lot, that amount wouldn't be impossible to pay off. But if we really knew how much a talent was, \$10,000 wouldn't even make a dent.

Look at it this way—in Jesus' day, a talent was the largest unit of currency. Some commentators estimate that a single talent was the equivalent of 20 years' pay for the average worker. It would be like if someone made a \$50,000 salary, then 20 years' wages would come out to \$1 million. So, then take that \$1 million and multiply that by 10,000—that's a lot of money! Or, looking at it from a labor standpoint, since 1 talent is about 20 years' work, then take 20 years x 10,000 talents = 200,000 years. Then, let's say the average person works around 60 years in their life. Well, if this servant were to ever pay back his debt of 10,000 talents, it would take him more than 3,333 lifetimes—how is that for perspective!

There's a reason Jesus sets the debt in this parable so impossibly high. Because before Almighty God, our heavenly King, so is ours. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). We owe God—and we owe Him BIG! In Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer, He doesn't say, "And forgive us our trespasses," but "forgive us our debts." 3,333 lifetimes—well, that doesn't even begin to cover it. When it comes to God, it takes a whole eternity just to pay off one single sin—and who of us here have only sinned once? I wonder how many eternities we've each racked up just this morning alone.

Maybe now it's easy to translate this parable into our own lives. Here we go with this servant before our creditor king. We don't stand a chance, do we? We haven't a prayer in the world. Like this guy, even if we were working two jobs and pullin' overtime for the rest of our lives, there's just no way. I mean, we're not just drowning in debt, our heads are never getting above water again. Maybe with this realization, we too are down on our knees, groveling at the king's feet like today's servant. We're sniveling, we're blubbing, we've got snot running down our faces. Our voices come out all phlegmy as we cry, "Have patience with me, I'll pay back everything."

You and I know that in any court such a plea would be more than ludicrous, ridiculous, laughable even with that kinda debt. There's no way the servant could pay it off—it would take more than 3,333 lifetimes and he's only got one. And for us, we'd need countless eternities without end. So, imagine everyone's surprise . . . when the king isn't laughing . . . doesn't just dismiss this servant with a wave of his hand . . . or scowl at him fiercely demanding payment. No, seeing one of his dear subjects sprawled out on the floor like that . . . losing all dignity and self-respect . . . broken and beyond repair . . . the king is moved to his core. Something is stirred deep inside, and compassion gets the better of him—this king would rather take the hit himself than see anything happen to his beloved servant. The text tells us that "the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt."

So the other night before bed, I'm reading the story of the flood to my son Jude. And something in the Bible—even a kid's Bible—jumps out at me. At the end of the Noah's ark story, it says that, when God set the rainbow in the sky promising never to pour out His wrath again on the world by a flood, it's like God was hanging up his war bow for good. Now think about that—a rainbow goes like this . . . [*trace with finger*] . . . the bow is facing upward. What God is saying is that His demand for justice is no longer directed downward at us, His arrow pointed at you and me. But instead, that bow in the sky shows us that the fatal arrow is pointed upwards, directed straight at God. And we know His very heart will be pierced when His Son is pierced for our transgressions, shot through for our debts.

Take a moment to let that sink in. Here we all are, going before our king, and instead of demanding any of us to pay off an impossible, unfathomable, incalculable debt . . . our heavenly King voluntarily eats the cost. It's too bad how we so often talk about God's forgiveness so flippantly—like, *Oh, don't worry, God forgives you*—as if such forgiveness comes cheap. It's like that one episode of Seinfeld—maybe you've seen it—called "The package." You might remember that the warranty on Jerry's stereo is expired but Jerry's friend Kramer figures out a way to get him the money.

Well, as Jerry opens up a box he got in the mail in front of Kramer, he holds up broken bits of his old stereo.

"Hey, what happened to my stereo? It's all smashed up," Jerry asks.

Kramer says, "That's right, now it looks like it was broken during shipping, and I insured it for \$400."

"But you were supposed to get me a refund."

"You can't get a refund," Kramer insists, "your warranty expired two years ago."

"So we're gonna make the post office pay for my new stereo now?"

Kramer says, "It's a write-off for them."

"How is it a write-off?"

"They just write it off."

"Write it off what?"

"Jerry, all these big companies, they write off everything."

"You don't even know what a write-off is."

"Do you?"

"No, I don't."

"But they do, and they're the ones writing it off."

When it comes to forgiveness, God's not writing off anything—somebody has to pay. And in the person of Jesus Christ, God foots the bill. He pays dearly, giving His life in exchange for ours. And by such grace, like that servant, we find ourselves released from debtor's prison, forgiven our sins. That's really the point of this parable, and the point of this petition too, "And forgive us our trespasses." Not so much the indebtedness, but to know just how high and deep and wide is the grace of God. Once you see the high price tag He's paid for you, you go away different.

It's sad how the servant didn't though. We know how the rest of the parable goes. He kept on living as if grace was easy, no big thing, didn't have any teeth. Despite having been shown absurd amounts of it, he couldn't even show a little mercy to a fellow servant who, in comparison, owed him some pocket change. But that's not us—no we pray not only "And forgive us *our* trespasses," but also, "as we forgive *those* who trespass against us." We know grace, and so we show grace.

In the riots that followed the first racially tense Rodney King verdict, Reginald Denny was dragged from his truck and was beaten within an inch of his life by a raging gang. After his painful recovery, he met face to face with his attackers, shook

hands with them, and *forgave* them. A reporter, commenting on the scene, wrote, "It is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage." Maybe the reporter was right . . . or maybe Denny himself had been touched by grace.

After the Oklahoma City bombing, there was a city-wide memorial service. Billy Graham was there, and he was invited to speak. He began by saying, "We are here with you to let the healing begin. We are here to show you that a nation stands beside you in your grief. We are here to forgive." Did we hear him right—did he just say *forgive*? Maybe Graham also knows something about grace.

You see, in commanding us to forgive, Jesus invites us to take charge of the world in God's name. He sends us out to shake things up, to throw a monkey wrench in the eternal wheel of vengeance and retribution. He shows us we don't have to allow the sins of others to have power over us anymore. We don't have to keep hurting, consumed with rage, and obsessively plotting our revenge. Instead, we can take control, turn things around, be victors rather than victims. Because in forgiving and being forgiven, we can live already in God's new age. Being swept up in such adventure, you and I can play a part in our Lord's defeat over the powers that would otherwise dominate our lives. It is freeing to be forgiven, sure, but it is also freeing to forgive—breaking the hold that a particular wrong has on us. And if we do that, all of us can share in some of that divine energy released the day when God in Christ forgave us for what we've done.

In a YouTube video entitled "Who Would Dare to Love ISIS? (A Letter from the People of the Cross)," we find a group of Christians who have themselves felt the impact of divine grace firsthand. Addressing Islamic militants, the letter reads, "The world is talking about you. Your apocalyptic dreams and spectacular sins are now awakening the Middle East. . . .

"There is blood on your hands, brothers. But come, brothers, come. Come with your bloodstained hands. . . . Come lay your guns and knives at the foot of the cross.


"A love that is overdue and overwhelming breathes through your cities. Though your sins are like scarlet they can be washed white as snow. Though you call yourselves servants He will make you sons. Where can you run from his love? Even the darkness cannot hide you.

"Come, brothers, come! To remove every sin and bind every wound. You die for your God, our God died for us. The King of kings comes to be the sacrificial lamb. Slain on the altar where we should have been.

"Jesus Christ walks through the Middle East. There is forgiveness tonight, oh brother. There is healing for your sins, oh brother. We are no different. Apart from His blood, we are no [better] than the worst jihadist. Christ has been crucified. Once, and for all. To make sinners like you and me into brothers. Even you. Even now."

What a message we Christians have!

Our debts: 

The debts of others: 

We know grace: 

So we can show grace: 