



September 13, 2020

## The Lord Forgives, Redeems, Satisfies

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles

*Psalm 114; Matthew 18:21-35*

A number of years ago, I officiated at a wedding, and the reception happened thereafter. As was often the case, Judy and I were invited to attend the reception. We are always glad to do that, to share in the joy of the newly married couple, and to celebrate with them. It just so happened that the reception venue was one of the area clubs, of which Pittsburgh has any number; and they all are lovely. This one has a quaintly spelled name: Longue Vue. If I had spelled the word "long" L-O-N-G-U-E in school, or the word "view" V-U-E, I would have been marked wrong. The main thing about that location was the long view. There at our table, we could see rolling hills, and the Allegheny River, and, off in the distance, the Allegheny mountains themselves. It was a clear day. We could see nearly forever. The setting lived up to its name.

This lectionary passage is not going to make anyone's top ten favorite parables list. The topic is a bit obscure and archaic for us. We are not accustomed to kings. We are long past slaves. So is there anything that this story can tell a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christian? Like someone who reads the last chapter of a mystery in order to find out who done it, I take the long view. I go to the last portion of the passage, to the summing-up verse, and what do I find there?

*"So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

That is clear as day, which means that the parable is a cautionary tale. It forewarns us about how we treat others, and says there are consequences to our attitudes and our behavior.

I am suspecting that most of us know this already. That is why, for instance, we do not hesitate to wear masks during this time of COVID-19. We may not like wearing masks. They may be uncomfortable, even if they were handmade for our face. Our daughter Anne sewed some for us, and we wear them. Judy also made one for me out of a material that looks like a checkered flag at the end of a race. It is my not-so-subtle way of saying that, when we wear these masks, we have a good possibility of getting to the finish line of what has become a long-distance endurance test for us and for the whole world. I do not like wearing masks because they tickle my nose. Maybe if I had been born wearing a mask, and had worn one all of my lifelong days, they would not make my nose itch. But they do. And what is it that we are not supposed to do right now? Touch our face. You know how it is when you have an itch and you cannot scratch it. It is a kind of torment.

But, in spite of all of these things, I wear a mask — and so do you, because you are caring and compassionate, and you want to treat others as you yourself wish to be treated. I applaud you for that. Keep it up. If the parable of today's Scripture passage had been written in our day, maybe the king would be the county health officer, and the slave would be someone who lived in the county, and the fine levied might be less harsh but still a reminder to do what you are supposed to do. Maybe not. But there are some parallels there that would not have occurred to me before March 18 of this year.

You see, one of the clear messages of that last verse of the parable is that we are to be thoughtful, respectful, and forgiving of those around us — especially for those over whom we may have some kind of authority; especially those who are caught off guard by events; especially those who would, eventually, respond favorably to what God requires, even if they are prevented from doing so, just at this moment. Forgive. Why? Because the Lord forgives. It is one of the chief messages of the Christian faith that sets our faith apart from all other religions of the world. Forgive.

We know that Jesus came to pay the debt we could not; so, we are freed from it — by His suffering; by His death; by His resurrection. We are claimed by grace for righteousness and for everlasting joy. Our debt is forgiven. So why in the world would we do anything but treat others with the same level of kindness, respect, and — yes — forgiveness? In big things, like the one thousand talent debt, and in small things like the one hundred denarii debt.

You may have come across — I know I have — people who have to be right no matter what. Oh, dear Lord, may their tribe decrease. It is kind of like the spouse who always corrects his or her spouse's story — like when Maurice Chevalier and Hermione Gingold sing that song, "I Remember It Well," and they have different memories of the same fond event of their youth:

*We met at nine; we met at eight. I was on time; no, you were late.  
Ah, yes, I remember it well.  
We dined with friends; we dined alone. A tenor sang; a baritone.  
Ah, yes, I remember it well.*

(from *Gigi*, by Lerner and Loewe)

The song that keeps coming to us from Scripture, including through this rather difficult parable, is that the Lord forgives. Remember it well. Don't get nitpicky about whether it was this or whether it was that. Let that go. Remember that the king in the story forgave the first slave entirely. He did not prolong the loan or issue a new IOU. The slate was wiped clean.

*"Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times."*

If the Lord forgives, you forgive, too.

Then, the next thing that pops out of that last verse is this line: *"So my heavenly father will also do to every one of you ..."* If there were a cartoon caption bubble over the reader of this part of the verse, the word in it might be: **"GULP!"** Because, as I mentioned, there are consequences to not forgiving another. The consequences are not a warning, or slap on the wrist. They are dire consequences. Now, we know that the Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and we are grateful for that truth; but this parable tells us that, slow as the Lord may be to anger, the Lord *can* become angry. We do not want to do anything to cause that, do we? One of the things that angers God is not treating others in a way that redeems their situation — makes it better, improves upon it. We find it in other places in Scripture where Jesus is talking about eternal consequences, including that passage, *"as much as you have done it to the least of these ...,"* which is also from this same Gospel of Matthew.

Sometimes one comes across a person who thinks that God will save everyone, and so, they can do what they darn well please. I have come across this kind of thinking, and I am distressed whenever I do. Because, not only is it wrong, it also indicates that the person who thinks this way has not been reading his or her Bible. So, here we have a somewhat harsh parable that is not one of our favorites, and, yet, it has a message that is at the core of what Christ teaches. Redemption happens when we live like Jesus — and something else happens if we do not.

It should be a matter, then, for us to ponder: *Do I embody what I say I believe? Am I working toward the well-being of God's children? Am I engaged in the active pursuit of truth?* Such soul searching should be continuous. Oh, it can be the kind of thing that we include in our devotions and prayers, but there is no reason for us to stop there. As we go about our daily lives, there can be this good spirit about us, as we ask ourselves: *Am I living along the lines of Jesus Christ? Am I growing in the faith while I do? Am I producing good results (what Jesus calls good fruit)?* You know, the Lord can redeem: a day, a moment, a situation, a life, a community, an organization. If the Lord redeems, you redeem, too.

If we take the long view of history and of life, then we will look far beyond where we find ourselves at the present moment. We will see down into the future, as well as to the far horizon — as far as the eye can see, and beyond, so that what stretches out before us is beautiful, and good, and right, even as the Lord sustains us, through it all. I hope that, when you take the long view of your life, you find that you like what you see. I hope that it gives you encouragement; I hope that you anticipate what will unfold will be well. The main thing for every Christian is to take the long view from where you are right now, as if you are at a table that the Lord has spread for you. There at your table, what can you see out of the windows of your life? Can you look outward and see the rolling years, green and growing? Can you behold the living waters spreading out in abundance? Can you look beyond that, to those greater mountains of challenge and accomplishment? Remember that, with the Lord, forgiveness, redemption, and sustaining grace are yours. It is clear. You can see forever.