

## IF YOU DON'T "GET IT," YOU DON'T GET IT!

by

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**Theme:** Until we understand our complete lostness and God's amazing grace, we can never understand forgiveness. When we do understand, God will enable us to draw on His grace and pass it on.

**Theme Text:** Matthew 18:23-27

**Presentation Notes:** The following is a transcription of a sermon preached at Sligo Church in Takoma Park, Maryland on September 25, 1999 for Family Togetherness Sabbath.

I can't help but come to Matthew 18:23-27 with my imagination in gear:

Jon slipped from between the sheets and tiptoed into the living room. He didn't want to awaken Liz, and he knew there would be no more sleep for him tonight. For too many nights he had been dropping into bed like a drugged man. Sleep came quickly at first, but exhaustion could numb his nerves only until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. And once awake, powerful internal stimulants rolled up his eyelids and kicked his brain into frenzied activity. After that there was no peace.

His mind raced as he opened his desk drawer and fingered the envelope. He didn't think Elizabeth had seen it. He didn't want her to see it. It was his worst nightmare. Foreclosure! He had never dreamed it could come to this.

Some nights he beat up on himself. Other nights he forced his mind to play its tapes over and over. He had a paper trail that marked exactly how he had gotten to this point. But this was still so incredulous. He was in debt almost as many figures as he had fingers. Five figures, six figures, eight figures, what did it matter any more? But he was no alcoholic. He had not squandered the family food money at the slot machines. He had always paid his bills. He was a respected churchman and citizen.

Hmph. Few knew how close to bankruptcy the family business had been when his father died and left him with the whole mess. He had had to take huge risks to save it. Only time would tell if he could pull it off. Then there had been Liz' accident, and Joe's unexpected acceptance at an ivy league college . . . Oh, never mind, there was no point rehearsing it all again. . . . But someone in government should do something about easy credit. A man can get in over his head without noticing what's happening. There should be a law. . . .

Jon pulled his robe around him and shivered as he threw his bankbook down on the desk. Nothing had changed there that bore reviewing! Now, he could check with his accountant about his accounts receivable. He knew there were some outstanding invoices. His creditors would just have to pay up. No more extensions. There was nothing to be gained by panicking. He just needed to slow down and take things one step at a time. . . .

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go" (Matt. 18:23-27).

I have chosen to stop at this point in the story on purpose. Of course you know there is more. The narrative as Jesus told it ends eight verses later. But I believe the last eight verses have gotten their share of prime time. So for the most part, I'm going to leave you to think about them for yourselves.

The *whole* story is pretty well encapsulated by an ad for the Washington Post newspaper that has run for months now in our city. The slogan is simple, and I've borrowed it for a title. "If you don't get it, you don't get it." Now, of course, the ad infers that if you don't subscribe to the *Washington Post*, you just don't know what's going on in the world. I think the message of Matthew 18 can be summed up by the same slogan. If you don't understand, that is, "get" the first half of the parable, you will probably relate to others just like the debtor Jesus told about. And the story concludes on a very serious note. The king's forgiveness is ultimately nullified because the debtor, who never understood what the king had done for him, refused to pass on the grace he had received. In the end, then, if you don't "get it," *you* don't get it!

But the bottom line of this sermon takes a positive twist: If we *do* "get it"—if we really understand the message of the first half of Jesus' story in Matthew 18—it will make all the difference in how the second half of the story plays out. I think this story can be read as one of those interactive dramas where the hearers participate in the development of the plot and in writing the end of the story. Ultimately, you alone will customize your personal ending to this one. I feel comfortable leaving you to respond as you will. For now, I'd like to focus our thoughts on what I believe is the climactic moment of Jesus' tale.

"The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."  
Hmmm. "If you don't "get it," you don't get it."

### **You don't "get it" until you figure out who the story is about**

We have become accustomed to hard luck stories. But most of them happen to somebody else, and we have conditioned ourselves to switch off the emotional impact of these stories with a flick of the TV remote control.

Sometimes hard experiences hit close enough to home to jar us into personal awareness. Once I attended a seminar on death and dying. I went there, I thought, to become more skilled in ministry to families confronting the death of a loved one. I never expected to be shaken to the core by the first activity proposed by the seminar leader. "What I want you to do first," he said, "is to write your own obituary. Decide how old you would like to be when you die, what you will die from, where you will die, where you will be buried, who will survive you, who will conduct the funeral services. . . ."

Whoa! It took me fifteen minutes just to put my name down on the paper. Things all of a sudden took a great leap from the safety of preparation for ministry to families a-way out there, to real life where I am confronted and scared by my own certain death.

You "get it" in Jesus' story only when you go nose to nose with the reality that every reader of the

story must write in his or her own name for every reference to the man who owed 10,000 talents. Let your own name ring in your ears as you read:

*As the king began to settle accounts with his servants, a woman named Karen who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since she was not able to pay, the master ordered that her husband, Ron, her two sons, Jeff and Jon, and her daughter-in-law, Pam, her house in Takoma Park, her '93 Honda Accord, and all her household and personal belongings be sold to repay the debt.*

That we're the ones in trouble is clear enough in Scripture:

Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all human beings, Paul explains in Romans 5:12ff.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "All we like sheep have gone astray" (Is. 53:6).

"For everyone looks out for their own interests" (Phil. 2:21). "There is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:12), adds Paul.

Jeremiah amplifies: "[For] the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jer. 17:9).

You just don't get it until you internalize this truth. There is no escaping it. This story is not about some fool who got himself into trouble we never would have gotten ourselves into. It's not a story coming to us by satellite from some remote region in a snippet on the evening news. My name is written into this story in bold letters. Do you see your name written there?

You begin to "get it" when you experience a sense of complete lostness in your own merits, not only at the level of your intellect, but of your emotions as well.

### **You don't "get it" until you comprehend the magnitude of the debt**

Ten thousand talents. \$10,000,000 U. S. dollars. Any good Bible commentary will give you the equivalent, and the math is easy. Hour-time employees may have an easier time "getting it" than the Fortune 500 league who may be tempted to think paying up is at least doable, thank God, due to their ample resources. But no matter what your net worth, you may not "get it," if you only make the simple 1:1000 arithmetic conversion. Ten thousand talents was twelve and a half times the annual tax debt of all five Jewish provinces to Rome! (Seamands, 1991, p. 26). An exorbitant tax debt which stirred the hearts of the enslaved to insurrection.

Another way to get a handle on the magnitude of the debt, is to think about it in terms of a person's lifetime earning potential. If the man worked at Roman wages for 65 years and applied every cent he earned to his debt, he could pay off one talent in a lifetime. He owed 10,000.

You don't "get it" until it breaks over you that not even Bill Gates or the Sultan of Brunei can pay. The debt is impossible! Jesus deliberately made it astronomical so there would be no excuse for not "getting it"! The king has every right to take everything we have and put us in jail and throw away the key. There is nothing we can do to redeem ourselves! But amazingly, we don't "get it"! As Robert Capon in his profound trilogy on the parables puts it:

From the dim beginnings of our history right up to the present day, there is not a man, woman, or child of us who has ever been immune to the temptation to think that the relationship between God and humanity can be repaired from our side, by our efforts (Capon, 1988, p. 28).

We miss the foundational truth that God will not, in the end, save "some minuscule coterie of good little boys and girls with religious money in their piggy banks, but all the stone-broke,

deadbeat, overextended children of this world whom he has set free in the liberation of his death" (Capon, 1988, p. 29).

Only those who feel the desperateness of their situation can really hear the words of the king and unclasp their hands to receive.

**You don't "get it" until you've made eye contact with the King and heard Him speak to you—really heard him**

Most of us hear, but we don't listen. I do it all the time. I hear you talking to me, but my mind is spinning with a million other things. And if you engage me at all, I'm probably thinking about what I'm going to say in response. Sometimes we even come into a conversation with our minds set. Ron and I have a few "re-run" dialogues that are so predictable we are tempted to number them and call out the numbers whenever the subject comes up. We know we both have our minds made up on these issues. We know exactly what each of us is going to say, and nothing is likely to change. Numbers could save us a lot of time and energy!

This parable may be one of those situations. The man's mind is set when he walks into the throne room. The king, he believes, is a "bean counter," concerned with rigorous accounting and exacting full payment to the penny. He perceives him as something on the order of Santa Claus who has made his list, checked it twice, and knows the poor sap in front of him is naughty, not nice. The debtor's mind is racing to stay ahead, to organize his thoughts parallel to anything the king comes up with. But everything he hears is filtered through the mind set he brought into the room with him. And he already knows his bottom line. He'll make a persuasive plea for more time. When you think about it, it's ludicrous! When a lifetime of labor won't touch 1/10,000th of the debt, what difference will time make? Now, whether the debtor is too stupid to have figured that out, or whether he hopes, as Capon puts it, his honest face and earnest pleading will render the king "kindhearted or softheaded or both," we don't know (Capon, 1988, p. 28). But this much is clear.

After the debtor unloads his speech, he never hears a word the king said! Tragically, he leaves the presence of the king with the same mind set he brought in. He goes out, thinking to himself, "Whew! He bought my line. Gave me what I asked for. Now I better be about making collections so I can make payments. He'll never fall for this twice!"

But stop! Really listen:

"The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."

Do you "get it"?

**You don't "get it" until you know how much cancellation cost the King**

When we think of the meaning of Christ's sacrifice for us, some of us think with John and Paul of the sacrifice He made to become human, to step out of the circle of the Godhead and become flesh and live among us. From our limited human understanding, I've heard it likened to a prince being willing to be kissed and become a frog rather than the other way around. To be sure, joining the human race was a huge step down! An incredible sacrifice!

Christ Jesus, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and . . . humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6-8)

And for what! Only to be ridiculed, rejected, and murdered by His own. But this perspective alone does not fully comprehend the nature of His sacrifice.

Sometimes we focus on the gruesomeness and anguish of the crucifixion. It was a horrifying way

to die! But neither does this awareness create the complete picture of the sacrifice Jesus made. Christ's accusers were after more than a horrible death when they shouted "Crucify Him!" And they knew exactly what they were asking for. In Deut. 21:22-23, the Scripture gives us insight into what they were really after.

"Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse."

This verse is picked up by Paul in Galatians 3. In his discourse on the mess the human race is in and what has been accomplished for us in Christ, Paul writes:

"Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law. . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'" (Gal. 3:10, 13).

In Isaiah 53, the prophet uses phrases like,

"The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all" (vs. 6).

"The Lord made his life a guilt offering" (vs. 10).

"He poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors" (vs. 12).

The implications of all this are further spelled out by Paul in Hebrews 2:9.

"He suffered death so . . . he might taste death for everyone."

Christ was willing to be eternally separated from His Father, to die forever, to reconcile the human family to God. This was the supreme sacrifice He believed He had made when He cried out in His humanness, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" Yet his declaration, "It is finished," marks willful assent to His own eternal death, that we might choose life.

No, you don't "get it" until it breaks over you what debt cancellation has cost the King!

**Until you "get it," you're in no shape to be about in the world**

Until you "get it," you'll surely go about wrecking havoc in people's lives, and there will certainly be nothing winsome about your witness. Ultimately, you're the one who will reap the biggest consequences. If you don't "get it," you don't get it. That's the end of the story.

It is a sad fate for those who choose it. But don't miss this. The good news of the story is that it doesn't need to be your fate. It doesn't need to be anybody's fate. From the day Jesus offered up His perfect life in death and was raised to heavenly places by His Father, no one goes unforgiven because their debt is impossible. Everyone's is. That's a given. But the debt is paid in full. God, in Christ, has provided exact change! The only ones who go unforgiven are those who can't bring themselves to unclasp their hands and receive God's incredible forgiveness and let the good news transform their relationships with Him and everyone else.

Hear it one more time. Give yourself over to it. Let your heart sing. The good news is that in Christ the impossible debt, which hangs like a millstone about each of our necks, has been forgiven! Canceled! Obliterated! Swallowed by the ocean floor!

". . . at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. . . . While we were still sinners, Christ died for us . . . . When we were enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:6, 8, 10).

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

Shout it from the mountaintops! Sing and clap your hands and awake the world with your cymbals and tambourines! The good news of Jesus' story is that, in Himself, we have been set free for new beginnings, with God and with one another! And the rewriting of the end of the story in our lives and in our families and in our congregations can begin—all because WE "GET IT"! Praise be to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

### **References**

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