

MISSING THE POINT

When I was growing up, the church talked a lot about salvation. Some churches still do. Like most of you, I go through whole days not directly thinking about how much I need salvation. More's the pity. But it doesn't take very much going wrong to remind me. A little disease ... a little job loss ... a little trouble on the freeway ... a little anger or war or riot ... racial tension ... coming to church in the early morning and finding folk sleeping on our patio – it doesn't take much before my heart starts whispering, "Lord, save us."

Sometimes we get "put off" from great old words and concepts by the ways in which some people use or abuse them, but that is not a good enough reason to abandon all truth. Salvation has long been the primary concern and purpose of the Christian church. Only, some people do not realize how salvation is woven into all of our efforts and all of our days in ways large and small. If we associate salvation with a television evangelist but not with a mother nursing her baby or a superintendent taking extra time to explain the job to a new and frightened employee, then we no longer comprehend our own language.

If, then, *salvation* is the primary concern and purpose of the Christian church, *reconciliation* is how it happens. Reconciliation is the methodology. "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.*" (II Corinthians 5:19) I no longer bridle one bit at calling Jesus my Savior, but I happen to think we would all be better off (that is, clearer) if our *favorite* title for Him had been Reconciler instead of Savior.

For all the people and places and situations in our world that need salvation – and not only in some big or final sense – the only hope for any of them is in reconciliation. No matter what problem you contemplate or face, reconciliation is the key issue. Reconciliation is the only genuine hope for a solution. We are often forced to settle for temporary truces and promises to not increase the damage. That only buys us more time, in the hope that the future will provide some new possibilities for reconciliation. It doesn't matter whether we are thinking of the Middle East, or the unbelievable carnage of strife and mistrust in the workplace, or the last problem you had with your oldest child – reconciliation is the only hope for salvation.

Speaking of which: As a being, are you on the side of reconciliation, or are you on the side of estrangement? This is a major question of life. If we are not asking this question, we are confused about what is going on, and what it all means. If we *are* asking this question, we may not like all the answers that come out of it, but the patterns and powers we feel going on all around us do indeed have rhyme and reason.

Whether it is a child at play, a mechanic working on an automobile, a diplomat embroiled in Middle Eastern affairs, or you talking to another human being you really care about, it is reconciliation the soul seeks. It is harmony the soul is working and longing for. Do not be deceived – all the rest is glitter that is not gold. The mind fears destruction and seeks security, and from this come greed and anger and all the evil of humans who focus on fear rather than faith. But it is reconciliation and harmony that the soul longs for.

The great symbol story of “The Beginnings” tries to make it clear. Adam and Eve – humanity – were thrown out of harmony and peace when they discovered they had minds and wills of their own. Exercising their new-found autonomy (separateness), they encountered all the curses of estrangement: humans against God, humans against nature, humans against each other. The history of the world ever since has been revolving around whether or not we can ever find a WAY back into harmony with our Creator, back to peace with our God ... or are we doomed to spend the rest of our time here, and maybe more in realms beyond, in the anger and loneliness and despair of separation (sin)?

For Christians, of course, Jesus is the Christ – the Great RECONCILER – who has come to lead us out of the curses and back to harmony with God. To do this, He has to fly straight in the face of all the powers of estrangement, maintain His own WAY of reconciliation and love, *and* survive (emerge victorious/resurrection) ... or we cannot trust Him enough to follow Him out of our ways of estrangement and back into love and LIFE.

With that backdrop, here is a story *from* Jesus: A king wishes to settle accounts with his servants. God is the king. You are the servants. We never get anywhere with Jesus’ stories unless we climb into them. This is not a spectator sport; this is not told for mere amusement. You are the servants. You can try to be the king for a while, if you like; any way you get into the story will help you to understand it better. But after

a while, being the king will not match. So you either have to be the servants, or climb back out of the story.

In the midst of this process (called “life”), one servant is brought before the king. It does not greatly matter, but Jesus’ hearers would have assumed that the story was talking about a servant who was one of the king’s high-ranking officials. In any case, if you want to stay with the story, you have to climb in deeper now. You are this very servant. You are the one singled out. You are the one who owes the king ten thousand talents.

We have to stop here for a minute. It is only a slight glitch. We do not use “talents” as a measure of money anymore, or denarii either. But Jesus uses the amount of money to highlight the drama and to bring the story into focus. And since you are this servant, naturally you need to know how much you owe the king.

The best way to get the impact of the story clear is to translate from situation to situation. We know that a denarius was commonly considered a day’s wage in Jesus’ time. A common laborer could earn one denarius by putting in an honest day’s work. So we cannot compare that with the wages of doctors or lawyers or plumbers or bus drivers; you might accuse me of gross exaggeration. We will imagine something humble, like ten dollars an hour for forty hours a week. Of course, a laborer in Jesus’ day would have worked six days a week from dawn until dark to make the equivalent of the forty hours of wages, but the comparison is as close as we are going to come.

At this rate, our laborer (you) would earn \$20,800 a year. It would take you a little over 15 years to earn the equivalent of one talent (\$312,000). But you owe the king *ten thousand* talents – \$3,120,000,000! Jesus is suggesting a debt greater than all the wealth of King Croesus himself (after whom Midas was patterned – not the muffler; the king). If you had no expenses (every dime you made was pure profit) and never missed a day’s work, it would take you 150,000 years to pay back your debt. Now we can start to feel the flavor of Jesus’ story. Of course, a high-ranking official like you would have many people under you, as will be hinted at later. You have both their resources to draw on and their debts to consider – just like in real life.

How did you ever get so far in debt? How could you possibly owe so much to the king? Well, of course, this king is God. So you start out

with life itself, and all the abilities and gifts and inherent worth that have been designed into you. God made that investment in you just for openers. Then there is all the energy it costs to sustain you in life every moment that you breathe. The sun must shine, the earth must spin, the whole fabric of nature must operate. You do not owe it all, but some small portion of it is truly overhead – part of the expense to keep you in life. And then there are all the other support systems: other people you use more than you help; wear and tear on the angels. Then there are the extra charges. For example, prayer requires God's time and attention over and above normal costs, plus whatever extra time and energy it costs to answer your prayers. What is God's time worth per hour, in comparison to your doctor or lawyer or psychologist?

As you know, there are different accounting systems. Some people say that God does not charge us anything for life, only for the damages. That is, we do not owe for the sun and the rain, only for the ways in which we personally work against the system and cause havoc. In this view, we only incur debt when we think or act against the harmony of God's will and purpose. When we fight against the design of God, we cause damage, and that wreckage continues and increases until we have a change of heart and turn to live in ways that cooperate with God. In other words, we only go into debt for the ways we are not perfect – the ways we are not perfectly in tune with the way God made us and wants us to be.

No matter how you do the accounting, the story says you owe ten thousand talents. If you cannot see that, you cannot hear this story (yet). If you do not owe anybody anything, you can look out the window and enjoy your perfect serenity and peace, while the rest of us wrestle with this story.

Those of us who stay in the story now go before the king. And because the debt is so great, we are about to lose everything – we are going to be sold, along with spouse and children and everything we have. It will not pay off the debt, of course, but the full amount of our worth will be paid against the debt, and we will all be enslaved forever.

Again, circumstances have changed somewhat. My wife and children could no longer be sold into this kind of slavery if I could not pay my debts. But I still understand about being under slavery to things, to systems – to a world that has lost all light and purpose as far as I am concerned.

So, at least in the story, we fall on our knees and beg for patience, pleading for more time. *“Be merciful and I will pay you.”* How can we possibly hope to ever pay such a debt? It is not a matter of rational planning; it is pure emotion. I do not want my loved ones to suffer so grievously for my sins. And I do not want to lose all hope for my own life and future. Even when we cannot imagine any escape, sometimes we still entreat whatever powers there may be for more time.

Please note that in this story (at least), we are not unrepentant. We do not complain that the debt is a mistake or unfair. We do not act defiant. We claim full desire to make restitution, if only we can have sufficient time. Therefore, the conditions for forgiveness are fulfilled: We have made request. We desire reconciliation. We want to make things right.

Of course, there is no thought on our part of *actual* forgiveness. Under the conditions of the story, such a thought is unimaginable. The debt is too great. Nobody would think of forgiving a sum so large. All economics would have to be completely revised if such amounts could be written off. Who could possibly be wealthy enough to forgive such debts?

And so, as usual, Jesus’ parable hits with unusual force. If you had been there when Jesus first told this story, you would have heard the shocked silence and then a gasp from the entire crowd as the words sank home: *“Out of pity for him, the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.”* *Forgave* him? All ten thousand talents?! My God!! That’s real science fiction, and they had never even *heard* of science fiction. It is called GRACE.

We need to pause here for a moment – maybe for about ten thousand years of dancing in the streets. Can you imagine?! What will it be like when this servant gets home to his wife and children? Will they be able to believe him? It is unimaginable. He does not get the extra time he begged and pleaded for. He does not get a reprieve. He gets forgiven! He does not owe it anymore. It is gone. This weight that repressed and depressed and totally defined his life ... it is gone! He is free. Absolutely everything is new. It is all different from what it was. If he does one single thing to make one single penny from now on, it is his. He can make plans again. He can dream dreams again. He can even think again about giving gifts to those he loves.

Are you still in this story? I think Jesus must have paused to let the hearers enjoy and savor the moment for a bit. But nothing of what we have just pictured is in the story. There are no words of thanks, no gratitude to the king, no celebration. We have a phrase we often use for talking about the grace and love of God. We say, "It's too good to be true." This man could not believe it.

Instead of going to blazing light and joy, the story remains in total darkness because the man could not comprehend – would not believe – what the king had done for him. It was too good to be true, and so he flat-out would not believe it. It never registered in his mind or heart. It never broke through all the fear and pain. This man never accepted his forgiveness. And so he lost it before he ever experienced it.

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Now Jesus goes on with the story. Having been forgiven ten thousand talents, a friend of yours who owes you one hundred denarii comes to you. A denarius, remember, is worth about one day's wages. So your friend owes you about four months' worth of work or, on the same pay scale we used before, about \$10,000. That is not something any of us would like to lose. If we invest \$10,000, even in a friend, it hurts if we never get it back.

And now the story hits full force. The king's offered forgiveness has only made you more desperate. Because you were called before the king, you are more aware than ever of the great gap between what you are, and what you need to be to be acceptable in the king's presence. It is staggering! You were so stunned at seeing the true size of your debt that you never really heard the *word* of forgiveness. So you are now more determined than ever to crack down on yourself, to save yourself, to reduce the debt. Naturally, you crack down on everyone around you also. No more lenience! Get every nickel and penny of credit you can get, from anybody who owes you anything. "I gotta get more! I gotta be right! I gotta get perfect!"

But things are not normal anymore. Having been forgiven the \$3,120,000,000, you are now determined to prosecute your friend to the full extent of the law for the \$10,000 he owes you. He owes you .0001 percent of what you owed the king.

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Again I suspect that Jesus paused to let it sink in. Having just been forgiven \$3,120,000,000, we are now going to prosecute others who owe us \$10,000? It is too ironic for comprehension. And then, for some of us at least, the story sinks deep into the heart. Is that not exactly how we have been doing it? We really do owe God the three billion, and God really has offered us grace and forgiveness. So what are we doing about those who annoy or owe us? Are we on the side of reconciliation, or are we on the side of estrangement?

Now the story continues, and you are called back into the presence of the king. And the king looks you straight in the eye and says: “You wicked servant!” You missed the point. What are you going to do with \$10,000 in my kingdom? You don’t owe anything – why are you still trying to collect?! Well, since you like it your way better than mine, you get all the weight of your debt back again. You owe the three billion again. You get to live in the hopeless prison of a reality you see and refuse to let go of. And you will stay there until you have paid for every last penny of it. It is your own attitude and response that keep you chained. Have it your own way. End of story.

But then, back in the real world, Jesus laid down the story, picked up the Cross, and canceled the very debt He was talking about. He forgave us each the billions that we owe. Some of us still find that too good to be true. So we still go about collecting complaints, counting injustices, and demanding payment from each other – instead of saying “Thank You” to our King, and dancing in the streets, and inviting everyone to see and claim the forgiveness that frees them from their enormous debts.