A lesson on forgiveness appropriately ended the solemn message on humility. It had been
delivered in the presence of Jesus’ disciples who seemed to be fond of arguing. The connection
between the beginning and the ending of His sermon is very real, but it is not seen at first glance.
The thing that is condemned here is a vindictive spirit. It is one of the sins that is nurtured by an
ambitious spirit. An ambitious person is sure to receive many offenses, either real or imaginary.
He is easily offended and slow to forgive or forget a wrong that is done to him. Forgiving injuries
is not part of his way of life. He is far more comfortable when he seizes his debtor by the throat
and demands payment with the fierceness of thug.

The concluding part of Jesus’ message came about because Peter, usually the spokesman for the
Twelve, had asked Him a question: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I for-
give him? Up to seven times?” (Mt. 18:21). We do not know what ideas Peter had in his mind
when he asked the question. Perhaps he did not even know himself. The thoughts of the mind
are often mysterious and, in impulsive, unpredictable personalities, they are also prone to be
sudden. Thoughts shoot into consciousness like meteors into the upper atmosphere. They are
suddenly conceived and abruptly spoken with physical gestures accompanying them. This gives
some indication of the force with which they have taken possession of the soul. Let us leave
it this way: Peter’s question, no matter how it came to his mind, was relevant to the subject at
hand. It was closely related, in a spiritual way, to all that Jesus had said concerning humility and
giving and receiving offenses. It showed, on Peter’s part, an intelligent attention to the words of
his Master. It also demonstrated that he was conscientious about making his behavior conform
to the heavenly precepts by which, for the moment, he felt subdued and softened.

Furthermore, the question asked by Peter revealed a strange mixture of childlikeness and child-
lishness. He was adamant about the obligation he had to forgive others. For him to think about
practicing the duty as often as seven times toward the same offender revealed that he was a true
child of the kingdom. Only those who have minds full of grace are disposed to do that. It is very
easy to understand how he thought that pardon, if it was granted just so many times, would
exhaust his obligation and amount to something that was big-hearted and divine. Poor Peter. In
his genuine attempt to be so generous, he was like a child, standing on tiptoe to make himself as tall as his father or climbing to the top of a hill in order to get near the sky.

Jesus’ reply to His honest but unrefined disciple was commendable. It was intended to deal with Peter’s pride and to make him feel that the breadth of his charity was puny and insignificant. Echoing the thought of the prophet Isaiah (Is. 55:7), Jesus’ response tells those who desire to be like God that they must multiply their pardons: “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven” (Mt. 18:22). It is unfortunate that this kind of love is so rare! Christ’s thoughts are not man’s thoughts, neither are His ways common among mankind. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His thoughts and ways higher than those currently in vogue in this world (Is. 55:8-9). Many are reluctant to forgive a brother an unlimited number of times when he confesses his faults. They will not even forgive one time. Instead, they act in such a way that we can recognize them in the picture created for us in the parable of the unmerciful servant.

In this parable, where the smallest detail is full of instruction, three things are especially noteworthy: (1) the contrast between the two debts; (2) the contrast between the two creditors; and (3) the doom pronounced on those who refuse to forgive the small debt owed to them after they were forgiven the large debt owed by them.

The Two Debts
The two debts amount to 10,000 talents and 100 denarii. The proportion is approximately a million to one. The enormous disparity is intended to represent the difference between the shortcomings of all people toward God and those which may be charged to a fellow human being. This representation is acknowledged to be correct by all those who know human nature and their own hearts. Those who recognize the truth of this parable are helped greatly to be gentle and patient toward those who offend them. Yet the parable seems to be in error in this respect: It makes the unmerciful servant accountable for a huge debt that seems impossible for anyone to run up. Who has ever heard of an individual debt amounting to millions of dollars or British pounds? The difficulty is answered by suggesting that the debtor is a person of high rank, like one of the princes whom Darius set over the kingdom of Persia, or a provincial governor of the Roman Empire. Such an official could make himself liable very quickly for the huge sum mentioned here simply by keeping the revenues of his province as they passed through his hands instead of placing them in the royal treasury.

Jesus had in mind some such unscrupulous minister of state who was guilty of the crime of embezzlement. This seems to be certain when we remember what the occasion was for His message at the end of this parable. The disciples had argued among themselves about who would be greatest in the kingdom. Each one of them was ambitious and wanted to obtain a place of
distinction. So, their Master allows them to look at the conduct of someone who is great. Yet
this man is not concerned about faithfully doing his job. Rather, he is only interested in his own
personal benefit. This is a paraphrase of what Jesus said to them: “Look what men do who
long to be great! They rob their king of his revenue, abuse the opportunities that are theirs
because of their position, and make themselves rich. And while they create scandals by
neglecting their own obligations, it is in their character to demand an exact payment from any
poor soul who may have innocently become their debtor - not by fraud, but by misfortune.”

Understood in this way, the parable faithfully represents the guilt and criminality of those who
are motivated by the spirit of pride. They deliberately make self-advancement their primary
goal. This class of people is by no means small. These kinds of people are great sinners. They do
not only come short of the glory of God, which is the true chief end of man, but they deliber-
ately rob the Lord of that which is owed Him. Thereby, they call into question His sovereignty
and deny their accountability to Him for their actions. By the spirit which motivates them, they
say every moment of their lives, “Who is Lord over us?” It is impossible to over-estimate the
magnitude of their guilt.

The Two Creditors
The contrast between the two creditors is no less striking than the one between the two debts.
The king forgives the enormous debt of his governor who has no principles. He does so by
receiving a simple promise to pay. The forgiven governor relentlessly demands that the poor,
unfortunate subject pay the petty debt of a hundred denarii [one six-hundred thousandth
(1/600,000) part of the cancelled sum]. He closes his ears to his petition to delay the payment,
though he himself had successfully presented the same petition to his sovereign lord. Here,
also, the parable seems to be presented in too strong of a way. The great creditor seems lenient
to excess. For surely the kind of crime the governor had been guilty of ought not to go unpun-
ished. And surely it would have been wise for him not to take his promise of future payment
too seriously, since it was made by a man who had already squandered such a large sum. He
had no boundaries, was extravagant and, therefore, had nothing with which to pay! This great
debtor, who was also a small creditor, seems incredibly inhuman. For even the meanest and
most greedy scoundrel would be ashamed to be involved in collecting such a small amount of
money. It is difficult to believe that he would seize the poor fellow by the throat, drag him into
prison, and force him to lie there until he paid up.

The illustration is, without a doubt, extreme. Yet in both parts of the parable, it aligns with truth.
God does deal with His debtors, as the king dealt with the governor. He is slow to anger, displays
great kindness, and turns from the severe justice He has threatened. He gives people time to
repent. In His providence, He delays in bringing judgment by accepting promises to change,
although He knows full well that they will be broken, and that those who made them will keep
on sinning as before. This is the way He dealt with Pharaoh, with Israel, and with Nineveh. He
deals the same way with all whom He calls to account by causing them to feel remorse in their
consciences, by visiting them with sickness, or by having them be apprehensive about death.
When they are passing through a repentant mood, they may exclaim, “Lord, have patience with
me, and I will repay You all.” He grants their petition, knowing that when the danger or the
repentant mood is over, the promise they made that they would change would be totally forgot-
ten. Truly it was written in the ancient past, “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor
repay us according to our iniquities” (Ps. 103:10).

The part played by the unmerciful servant is not entirely without precedent, no matter how
infamous and inhuman he may be. However, its comparative rarity is implied in that part of
the parable which represents the fellow-servants as shocked and grieved at his behavior. They
reported him to their Master. It would not be hard to find originals of this dark picture, even
among those who profess the Christian religion. They believe in the forgiveness of sins through
the blood of Jesus and hope to experience all the benefits of divine mercy for His sake. In fact,
these are precisely the people who, according to the parable, are supposed to commit the crime
of unmercifulness. The demanding creditor meets his debtor just as he comes out of the pres-
ence of the king after craving and receiving forgiveness for his own debt. This feature in the story
immediately can be applied specially to believers in the gospel. It points out the enormity of
their guilt. All such people, if not really forgiven, at least consciously live under a reign of grace
in which God is assuming the attitude of one who desires all to be reconciled to Himself. And
for that purpose, He proclaims a gracious pardon to all who will receive it. In people who are in
this sort of situation, their spirit of unmercifulness is peculiarly offensive. It is even shameful in
an unbeliever, because the light of nature teaches that it is the responsibility of everyone to be
merciful. So this inhuman harshness, as portrayed here in a Christian, is absolutely abominable.
Think about it! He goes out from the presence of the King of grace. He rises up after examining
the blessed gospel which tells of One who received publicans and sinners, even the chief of sin-
ers. Then, he walks out of the house of prayer where the precious gospel is proclaimed - even
from the communion table which commemorates the love that moved the Son of God to pay the
debt for sinners. He meets another person who had done some small wrong to him, seizes him
by the throat, and aggressively demands payment. If he does not pay, he will be thrown in prison
or worse. May the most gracious Lord not righteously say to this person, “O you wicked servant!
I forgave you for all of that debt, because you came to me. Should you not also have compassion
on your fellow-servant, even as I had mercy on you?” What can this scoundrel expect since he
showed no mercy? Judgment - to be delivered over to the tormentors in order to be imprisoned
and tortured without hope of release until he has paid his debt in full.
Judgment Pronounced

In the closing sentences of His discourse, Jesus solemnly assured His disciples that this very doom awaited all who harbor an unforgiving spirit, even if they themselves were the guilty parties. “So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart” (Mt. 18:35). These are stern words which lay down a rule that is applicable to everyone - no one is exempt, not even people who are favored. If partiality were allowed, people like the Twelve would certainly receive the benefit of it. But the law is spelled out with direct, emphatic reference to them, as if to say that in this matter there is no partiality. As harsh as the law might seem, Jesus is careful to indicate His gracious approval of its being enforced with rigorous justice. For that purpose, He calls God the Judge by the endearing name, “My heavenly Father.” It is as if He is saying, “The great God and King does not seem to Me to be overly stern in decreeing such penalties against the unforgiving. I, the merciful, tender-heart Son of Man thoroughly sympathize with such judicial severity. I should solemnly say “Amen” to that doom pronounced, even against you if you behaved in a way that deserved it. Do not think that because you are my chosen companions that violations of the law of love by you will be overlooked. On the contrary, because you are great ones in the kingdom, as far as privilege goes, you will be expected to comply with its fundamental laws. Non-compliance will be most severely punished. To whom much is given, much will be required. See to it, then, that you forgive every person of their trespasses - really forgive, not just pretend to forgive. Forgive from your very hearts.” Jesus educated His disciples with severe plainness in His speech so they could truly be great in His kingdom - great, not in pride, pretension, and presumption, but in loyal obedience to the commands of their King, especially to this law of forgiveness. He insisted on forgiveness earnestly and frequently (Mt. 6:14-15). We cannot help but say here, at the close of our exposition of the discourse on humility, that if the Apostles did not rise above their small passions in the days to come, it was not the fault of their Master in neglecting their training. “With holy earnestness” - to quote the language of a German scholar (Theodor Keim, 1825-1878) - “springing equally out of concern for the new community, zeal for the cause of God and of people; more precisely, for the essential truths of the new religion of divine grace and of the brotherhood of mankind, Jesus sought to ward off the dark shadow of petty, ungodly feelings which He saw creeping stealthily into the circle of His disciples, and under whose still more extensive and harmful influence, after His departure, He could not but be apprehensive.” We cannot believe that all this earnestness had been manifested in vain. In the end, the disciples were finally thoroughly seasoned with salt (Mk. 9:49-50).