

# The Prisoner

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*“Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?” — Matthew 18:33*

Each year we are commanded by God to keep the Day of Atonement. The great overall message of that day focuses on how we will finally achieve “at-one-ment” with the Father and Jesus Christ.

In fact, one of the foremost reasons we have been called is to learn our part in God’s kind and compassionate plan to reconcile the whole of mankind to Himself. Our Creator’s kindness and compassion are evidenced in Psalm 102:19-20: “For He looked down from the height of His sanctuary; from heaven the Lord viewed the earth, to hear the groaning of the prisoner, to release those appointed to death.” It is further made clear by Christ’s own words:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed. (Luke 4:18)

God’s gracious desire for reconciliation is a common theme throughout the Bible. In Genesis 17:8, He declares His will to be the God of Abraham’s descendants, and in Revelation 21:3, He expresses His intention to dwell with men. Christ also expresses that same desire during His final evening as a mortal man in His prayer to the Father just prior to His arrest:

Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are . . . that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. (John 17:11, 21)

This oneness must go beyond mere agreement on our part. It involves thinking the same way God does and being motivated by the same love that moves Him to take the actions He takes. This thinking must color our approach to everything—all aspects of our lives. This oneness is what God intends for us. What an indescribable honor it is to be invited by the King of all creation to become His true sons and daughters!

## A Crucial Element

We can deepen our understanding of this honor by looking at one crucial element that atonement with God must include: forgiveness.

Without forgiveness from God, we would be little more than the walking dead, if He even allowed us to walk at all! In fact, without His recurring forgiveness, a continuing relationship with Him would be impossible.

What is forgiveness? *The American Heritage College Dictionary* defines it this way: “to excuse for a fault or an offense, pardon; to renounce anger or resentment against; to absolve from payment of (a debt, for example).”

Christ’s Parable of the Unforgiving Servant can teach us a great deal about forgiveness:

Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.” (Matthew 18:21-27)

To clarify, this servant owed the king 10,000 talents—an immense and practically uncollectible amount, likely in the millions of dollars or beyond in today’s value—which we might liken to the enormous and unpayable debt that we, as servants before our eternal King, have accrued. Whenever we sin, even after we are converted, we come under the death penalty until we repent. Upon our repentance, we receive forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ, and the death penalty is removed. The atoning blood of Christ is a very precious commodity—capable of paying for all the sins of humanity.

Such forgiveness is the reason we need to find and maintain the proper perspective regarding the enormous price continuously being paid—the colossal debt being forgiven—on our behalf. Hence, we return to the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant:

“But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.” (Matthew 18:28-35)

Is it not odd that this man could have his fellow servant thrown into prison for a relatively small debt (as little as \$20 in today’s money)? We should be thankful to live in a more forgiving culture!

## **The Prison of Our Heart**

Today, however, there is another way that a fellow-servant can be cast into prison regardless of the laws of the culture. We can easily incarcerate someone within the confines of our own hearts and even throw away the key. It is likely that each of us has someone confined within our own heart's prison even today.

The late Lewis B. Smedes, a professor of theology at Fuller Seminary, is credited with saying: "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."

When we imprison someone in this manner, we subject ourselves to the burdensome duty of keeping him there. So instead of one, we now have two prisoners that keep each other imprisoned day in and day out, but only one of them has the key.

We have the *offender* as well as the *offended*. Assuming that most people do not purposefully look to offend, particularly within the church, the offender was probably clumsy or foolishly inconsiderate in his approach to the offended. Or perhaps he possesses, or has displayed, a character flaw that the offended feels is completely unacceptable (e.g., a betrayal of some sort).

Or maybe the offender disregarded the direction given in Galatians 6:1: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a *spirit of gentleness*, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" (emphasis ours).

To avoid offense, we must remember our humility and our place whenever we are inclined to point out a fault to a brother or sister. The same advice holds for the giver as well as the receiver of a rebuke. Criticism is always difficult to give without offending or to receive without taking offense. Be always mindful that our Creator received rebuke without retaliating. No one has ever been imprisoned in *His* heart!

When we do offend a brother, we are tempted to approach him and immediately ask for forgiveness because we dislike being regarded unfavorably. Remember, our godly purpose is to restore the relationship, if possible, because that is what God wants to see. If we pressure our friend into forgiveness, have we accomplished God's will? Consider well the adage: "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."

### **Restoration Begins with God**

This is why God should be the very first from whom we ask forgiveness. We can ask Him to help us understand the severity of the damage we have caused and for the proper level of contrition, humility, and patience to help repair and restore the relationship. We can ask God to open the heart of our offended brother so that he willingly accept our apology and readily extend his forgiveness.

We can liken this request for the opening of our brother's heart to a request for the opening of his heart's prison doors, too easily slammed shut by an unforgiving attitude. Instead of having two (or even more) persons confined behind the doors of an intractable grudge, we experience the joy and the freedom of reconciliation. The relationship is restored, a good witness has been made, growth has occurred, and God is glorified.

On the other hand, if we have been offended, instead of giving into the temptation to strike immediately back—to seek vindication—we should also begin by going to God in prayer for

humility, empathy, and mercy. We can ask God to help us understand why the unfortunate deed was done and how we can find a pathway to forgiveness. We can ask for clarity of thought, which is so often missing when anger and offense are present.

If a rebuke was the cause of offense, we should consider Solomon's words in Proverbs 27:5-6: "Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful." We should always ask God to enable us to give our offending brother the benefit of the doubt at a time when it would be easy to doubt his loyalty. Chances are, the offender feels as pained as the offended.

In these troubled and emotionally charged times, a true friend may feel a need to risk a special friendship for the good of the other. We should always be mindful that God may send us a vital message of correction or rebuke through someone other than our minister or someone we regard as having legitimate authority. We should be prepared to accept criticism, legitimate or not, from any person that God sends across our path. And perhaps, only a true friend would, could, or should point out to us a weakness or fault that no one else might even see or care about.

Whenever we are wronged, especially by a brother, we should strive to avoid becoming so inflexible that we slam shut the doors of animosity against him. The consequences of such a decision—to withhold forgiveness—particularly from a brother who sincerely asks for absolution and reconciliation, can be both devastating and eternal in scope for us. The wrong mindset can lead to a sinful attitude that is in opposition to God, keeping us locked inside a bitter prison of enmity and preventing our entrance into His Kingdom.

Therefore, regardless of whether we are the offender or the offended, let us never forget our constant need to first be forgiven and reconciled with God.

Let us never forget our need for the spirit of humility, which can only come from Him, to lead our efforts toward genuine restoration and reconciliation.

Let us never forget our need to throw open the doors of our heart's prison to release all, including ourselves, who have been confined within the walls of animosity for too long.

Let us never forget our need to imitate Jesus Christ, as He came to free those who are imprisoned, to "heal the brokenhearted . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18).

It is a difficult way, but it is the only way to eternal life and oneness with the Father and His Son.