

Th224 Sin and Atonement: The Restoration of Relationship

Lesson Th224-24 Atonement: Man Cannot Restore His Relationship to God

What happens when someone owes a debt they cannot pay? Throughout history, those who could not pay their debts were thrown into prison. This was true also in England.

The warden of Marshalsea prison in London, England, was a cruel man. He had purchased the right to run the prison from the Knight Marshal. He could charge prisoners for the room they slept in and the food they ate. It was the 1700s in England and times were hard. Many of the prisoners in Marshalsea prison had not committed a crime. They merely had debts that they could not pay. Can you imagine being put in jail simply because you did not have the money to pay a debt that equaled one week's wages? But that was the way it was in England in the 1700s. You would be thrown into prison and remain there until you or your family paid your debt. What made matters worse, the warden would be charging you for your room and the awful food you ate. Thus your debt grew daily. Many of the poor who entered the Marshalsea prison died there, deeper in debt at their death than on the day they entered the prison.

Now the warden had slowly gathered a small fortune running the prison. He lived simply and saved his profits. His parents had been dead for many years and he was an only child. His wife had died giving birth to his only child, a boy named Xavier. But his son had set out to sea as a young man, to seek his fortune. The warden had not seen or heard from him in decades. So with no one but himself to worry about, the warden had lived comfortably while creating his fortune.

It was just another day. The warden stood at the gate to the prison as the constable brought him a new batch of prisoners. As each prisoner was brought forward, their name was read and the amount of their debt was recorded in a ledger. The prisoners hung their heads in despair. Many had streaks of tears on their faces. But the warden did not care. He would increase his fortune as each person was added to the jail. He smiled broadly whenever he heard that one of them had a huge debt. This meant that the man would be imprisoned for a long time, giving him huge profits.

The warden glanced at the face of the next prisoner and then looked down at the ledger. Shocked, he looked back up into the bearded face of a man he barely recognized. Then the constable read the name and debt, "Xavier, 2,632 pounds, 12 shillings, and 6 pence." The warden stared in horror into the desperate eyes of his only son. The debt he owed was enormous. It was equivalent to the lifetime income of the average worker. This was a debt that would be impossible to pay. Even if his son were allowed to work at a full salary, he could never earn enough to pay his debt. His son had no family or friends capable of paying his debt for him. Xavier was destined to live out the remainder of his life in terrible conditions, and to die alone in prison.

He looked into the eyes of his only son. It had taken the Warden decades to slowly build his fortune. He was the only one who could pay his son's debt. But it would take every penny of his fortune. He would even have to sell his own home in order to pay the debt.

What do you think the warden did? Do you think he was willing to sacrifice everything he owned to pay his son's debt? What would you do?

Jesus told a parable about forgiveness. Matthew, one of Jesus' original twelve disciples, wrote down what he heard Jesus say. Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven!" (Matt 18:21-22).

The Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a certain king who decided to settle accounts with his servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that the debtor be sold—along with his wife and children and all that he had—in order to pay the debt.

The slave fell down before his master and begged him, "Please be patient with me, and I will repay it all." Then his master was filled with pity for him, and released him and forgave him the debt.

But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few dollars. He seized him and began to choke him, saying, "Pay back what you owe!"

His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. "Be patient with me, and I will repay it all," he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, "You wicked servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?" Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

Jesus concluded, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (Matt 18:23-35).

In this parable Jesus teaches us many truths about forgiveness. The underlying truth is that all of us owe a debt to God we cannot ever pay. In the parable the servant owed the master millions of dollars. This is more than he could earn in a lifetime. Just like that servant, all of us owe a debt that it is impossible for us to pay. We deserve a great punishment. We know from our previous lessons that "the wages of sin is death." But God has made a way for all of us to receive mercy while satisfying the debt. We will learn about this in our upcoming lessons.

But in this parable of Jesus, his main point is that if God will forgive us, we should forgive others.

This lesson is **important** because it explains the concept that each person owes a debt of sin that they are incapable of paying themselves. Living a good life, doing good deeds, even being a good person, are not enough to pay the debt we owe.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that unless God himself pays our debt, we will all die in our sins and be sentenced to eternal separation from God.

Let's **review** this lesson—

1. Jesus told a parable about a servant who owed his master a great sum of money. What did the master do when the servant said he could not pay? [Pause 5 seconds.]
 - A. If you said that the master forgave his servant the debt, you are correct.
2. Is it possible for people to pay the debt of sin they owe? [Pause 5 seconds.]
 - A. If you said, No, it is impossible for people to pay the debt of sin they owe,” you are right.
3. What is the sentence that every person faces for the debt of sin they owe? [Pause 5 seconds.]
 - A. If you said that everyone faces death and eternal separation from God, you are correct.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to watch this lesson at least three more times until you can tell Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving debtor. Then find someone and discuss with them this parable. Make sure to not only discuss the concept of forgiveness, but also that the debtor was unable to pay his own debt. This is very important that everyone realize that living a good life or doing good deeds cannot pay the debt that is owed.