

**Given Over to Torture?**  
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This morning's Bible passage from Matthew is preached from quite often. Or, at least there are scores of online sermons and magazine articles about it. It was even a hot topic at the Tuesday morning Bible Study group I attend with area ministers. As I was poring over a variety of perspectives on it I noticed a trend. The titles of the sermons and articles about it are things like "As we Forgive," "The Wisdom of Cancelling Debts," "The Arithmetic of Forgiveness," or "Seventy Times Seven."<sup>1</sup> All those titles--*and* their respective sermons-- focus on the aspects of forgiveness in today's story. They all lift up the grace of our good God. Now, it is arguable that this is precisely what a Christian minister *should do*. But, do you see the elephant in the middle of today's passage?

In the parable that Jesus shares with Peter, a servant or slave with an unpayable debt is brought before his lord, who is also a king. The lord deems that in order to settle the debt the servant, his entire family and *all their property* must be sold. Overwhelmed and desperate, the servant begs the lord for mercy. The king grants it, and releases the man. Upon his release, the servant encounters someone indebted to him. Does he extend mercy and forgiveness like his lord just did to him? No way. Instead, he grabs him *by the throat*, and ultimately has him imprisoned since he cannot pay the debt. Well, word of this reaches the lord to whom he is indebted and he is brought before the king a second time.

The lord derides the servant for acting without mercy when he received it himself. Then the elephant shows up in the passage, because it is then that "in *anger* his lord *handed him over to be tortured* until he would pay his entire debt."<sup>2</sup> And then, just to drive the point home, Jesus adds "*So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*"<sup>3</sup>

Is the God that Jesus preaches and embodies a God of wrath and judgment? Does a God, that some Christian scriptures claim to be the very essence of love, *give us over to torture*?

It is clear from the long and often bloody parade of Christian history that some Christians would shout an emphatic "yes!" to these questions. A Christian belief in God's love for all humankind has often been balanced with the understanding that God condemns unrepentant sinners. Such a view sparked many waves of crusades, and other holy wars. It enables adherents to see their opponents as less than fully human, worthy of death, and even deserving of unending torment. This basic mentality remains at the root of all war making today. Enemies are nameless "its," rather than the particular and lovable individuals fearfully and wonderfully knit in their mothers' wombs by a gracious God.

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to an alternate translation of "seventy seven times" of forgiveness from Matthew 18:22, which is supported especially by *Young's Literal Translation* of the Bible.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 18:34.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:35.

While it may be easy to believe that God is acting wrathfully in the occasional Bible story, I never find God behaving like that in my life experiences. Which is not to say that I don't suffer. We all do at one point or another. We all have times when our work doesn't go well, or our relationships falter or fail, or we have a bout of illness or personal injury that disrupts everything in our lives. Like any of us, I have had my share of all that stuff. *But* I don't blame it on God. I don't see God's hand in my suffering and setbacks, or in those of the world at large. Instead, I see God weeping with us in our pain, and mourning with us in our loss; just as surely as God celebrates with us in our joy and is present in our love.

The view some Christians hold of God as *all-powerful* places God at the root of suffering. If we understand God to be all powerful—if God has power over every single thing that happens-- then both good and evil must come from God. That would mean our suffering, too. This dim perspective was demonstrated in some of the responses to the Tsunami of 2004. It devastated the Asian coastline and left hundreds of thousands dead and more than a million displaced. It was described by people from a variety of religious backgrounds as God's judgment. Some believed it to be a punishment for allowing abortions to occur—namely those in America. Others took it as a dire warning of dreadful things to come; and still others as evidence that God was angry with laws supporting same sex relationships in areas as far away as Sweden where aftershocks caused some damage.<sup>4</sup> Can you imagine the ways they will interpret Hurricane Ike when all is said and done? Who will they decide is being punished then?

Friends, make no mistake: this is *not* the way I want any of us to understand God. Such a view runs contrary to the prevailing view of God in the Bible as Savior, Redeemer, and even Friend. But today's text raises a question about God's character. Did you notice that right after Jesus encourages Peter to forgive seventy-seven times—which, by the way may also be translated as seventy *times* seven times—the lord, representing God in the parable, forgives the servant exactly *once* before *giving him over to be tortured*. Once. Not seven times; not seventy seven times; not seventy *times* seven times. Just once. What are we missing in this picture?

It is important to take a closer look at the circumstances of the servant. His debt is listed as 10,000 talents, which would be anywhere from a few million to several trillion dollars today.<sup>5</sup> There is no way he can repay this debt, just like *we* will never be able to repay all we owe to God: our lives, our breathing, our good green world—these are all invaluable gifts. So, how does the servant *act* when, against all odds, he is forgiven this debt?

Rather than receiving the gift of forgiveness graciously, the servant turns on the first person he sees who owes him money. He proceeds to attack him. He grabs him by the throat. That's very specific, isn't it? He doesn't just attack him, he grabs him by the throat. He symbolically cuts off communication with the other servant. This is further demonstrated when he does not listen to his pleas for forgiveness and instead imprisons him. The frightening fate he escaped through mercy he now foists upon another.

Through these actions, the wicked servant steps outside of the circle of grace. He is willing to receive mercy, but not to extend it. He renders a judgment to give another indebted soul over to

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.religioustolerance.org/tsunami04c.htm> for exact quotes.

<sup>5</sup> "Ten thousand talents": According to Blomberg, something like a few million to several trillion dollars. Literally "*a myriad of talents*". Courtesy of Chris Haslam, [montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/apr24l.shtml](http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/apr24l.shtml).

torture and imprisonment.<sup>6</sup> His lord responds by giving him over to torture, too. Jesus makes sure that we know that God will do so, too if we do not forgive our brothers and sisters. Why would God do that to cherished and beloved children?

Well, I don't think that God *does* as such. I am not saying the Bible is wrong. Rather it is subtle. I think it reveals something very real from day to day life that it may not be obvious at first. While it is easy to imagine that this parable may refer to the life to come, it is rooted in the everyday realities of the culture of the Bible. Not in an imagined future realm, but in the now of Jesus' day. I think that the parable reveals exactly how human beings tend to treat each other, even in our times.

When the servant is forgiven by the lord he *hordes* the grace he receives. He keeps it to himself instead of spreading it around. We do that all the time, don't we? We take pride in our own blessings instead of sharing them with those around us. Can you imagine how badly off the second servant in the parable must have been? The first servant owed millions or trillions. He must have been incredibly indebted. Yet, the second servant is indebted *even to him!* He must be the poorest of the poor. So, the first servant turns his back on him, cuts off communications and through his actions gives him over to torture.

Imagine how many poor people there are in the world right now. Yet here we all sit in the wealthiest country in the world, and our government, *which we all have a role in electing*, by and large does nothing for them. I will never understand how Christian people—including myself on occasion-- can turn their backs on beggars on the streets, either. Jesus said "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."<sup>7</sup> Yet, our laws and customs give the poor over to torture by running them out of public parks at night, and shooing them away from public spaces in the day while giving enormous corporations seemingly endless tax breaks. To say nothing of war, gender bias, homophobia, racism, and the countless other ways we give one another over to torture.

By turning our backs on our sisters and brothers, we give *ourselves* over to torture, too. We cut ourselves off from relationship with other children of God who were also made in God's shining image. This keeps us from relating to God fully. This isolates us. This shrinks our worlds to be increasingly about us, rather than being about God. This is the instant karma that we receive for limiting the reach of God's expansive grace. What goes around comes around—not in the life to come, but right here and now. God does not will it so much as observe it happening among us while trying to lure us away from it with unending whisperings of grace. If we do not accept God's offer of grace, we give ourselves over to our own human mess of smallness and sin.

Is the God that Jesus preaches and embodies a God of wrath and judgment? No, even though Jesus may use exaggeration to make a point, as I feel he does in today's reading. Sadly, we human beings do have talents for both wrath and judgment. Luckily, God has showed us a way out of that. Does our God, that some Christian scriptures claim to be the very essence of love, give us over to torture? No, but we certainly have a variety of ways we give each other over. The lesson from this parable is to accept forgiveness fully. We can only do that when we extend it to others. Grace is not a personal possession, but a shared one. It is for everyone. We gather here in community to witness to it and

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<sup>6</sup> It was common practice to torture imprisoned debtors to determine if they or their family members were holding out.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:42.

kindle it so it spreads through this world like the vines of God's garden. We share God's grace when we visit sick neighbors. We do it when we help the poor—on city streets and those among us. We share God's grace when we recognize that each and every one of us is a member of God's family, no matter how *we* might like to judge them as otherwise. When we do those things, we stand firmly within God's circle of grace, and find it is drawn around the whole world. Then we can stop blaming God for the ills of the world, and work with God to spread healing and grace wherever it is needed. Then we will stop giving one another over to torture and hell will be no more. Not on earth, or in the life to come, or anywhere but in the dim shadows of ancient memory. Come Holy Spirit, come, and help us to make it so sooner rather than later.

Amen.

**Matthew 18:21-35, from the New Revised Standard translation of the Bible**

<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. <sup>23</sup>"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup>When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup>and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup>So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' <sup>29</sup>Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup>But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup>Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup>And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup>So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."