

## CHAPTER IX

### *The Marks of Discipleship (II)*

#### FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING

##### THE PARABLE OF THE TWO DEBTORS

"And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Teacher, say on. A certain lender had two debtors: the one owed five hundred shillings, and the other fifty. When they had not wherewith to pay, he forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him most? Simon answered and said, He, I suppose, to whom he forgave the most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged. And turning to the woman, he said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thy house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath wetted my feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. Thou gavest me no kiss: but she, since the time I came in, hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but she hath anointed my feet with ointment. Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little. And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven. And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that even forgiveth sins?"

(*Luke 7:40-49*)

##### THE PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

"Then came Peter and said to him, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, who would make a reckoning with his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, that owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not wherewith to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And the lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out, and found one of his fellow-servants, who owed him a hundred shillings: and he laid hold on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay what thou owest. So his fellow-servant fell down and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay that which was due. So when his fellow-servants saw what was done, they were exceeding sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord called him unto him, and saith to him, Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou besoughtest me: shouldst not thou also have had mercy on thy fellow-servant, even as I had mercy on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due. So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts."

(*Matthew 18:21-35*)

## CHAPTER IX

#### FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING

### *The Parable of the Two Debtors* *The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant*

The full mind of Jesus concerning forgiveness has not been understood; or, if understood, not courageously expounded. We think we know Him better than our forbears; we claim "the rediscovery of Jesus." We have rescued His social gospel, for instance, from the oblivion to which it was consigned by a disproportionate individualism in religion. We preen ourselves as His true interpreters. Then some word of His, long known by rote, affrights us by its sudden newness; and we wonder if we are more comprehending than the twelve, or if we can follow any better than they the flaming meteor of His thought. Ever and again the realization strikes us that His truth, if we dared apply it, would rend the fabric of our age.

Part of His message about forgiveness has not lacked proclamation. That God's pardoning grace is full and free has been preached—with such jaunty irreverence at times, and with such reckless ignoring of its Divine cost and human conditions, as to make it cheap. But what of the felt need of pardon which must precede forgiveness, and the sense of gratitude which must follow it? Jesus addressed Himself to that question in the Parable of the Two Debtors. And what of our own willingness to forgive? On that score the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant has teaching so new, so little heeded as to prompt again the question, "Have I been so long time with you, and dost thou not know me?"

### *The Parable of the Two Debtors*

Jesus was dining at the home of Simon the Pharisee. Neither high rank nor low barred the outgoing of His friendliness.

Simon appears to have been typical of his caste; but his willingness to entertain Jesus, though with condescension, betokens a measure of open-mindedness. He was at least curious about the new Teacher. Suddenly, during the dinner, a woman of notorious name is found anointing the feet of Jesus with costly balm. Thus arose a situation as dramatic as the most dramatic sense could crave. Behold the three players in the drama.

There was Simon, curious, half-friendly, patronizing, whose loveless virtue knew no humility. Unconscious of moral lack, he had no reverence either for perfect heaven or for broken earth.

There was Mary,<sup>2</sup> of generous but unstable emotion, who, falling into fleshly sin, had become sin's slave. Yet she hated herself for her bondage. She hungered for her lost purity, without hope until she saw Jesus. The caste of Simon had not saved her from despair; as they passed her in the street, they had drawn holy ropes of condemnation tight about them lest they should catch her leprosy. But Jesus had saved her. Standing on the edge of the listening crowd,<sup>3</sup> she had felt His love. Through Him God's peace had fallen in healing on her driven and self-tortured soul.

There was Jesus held in this interplay of varied moods and motives.

Access to Simon's house was easy. The rules of hospitality in the Orient were surprisingly free. Strangers could come and go during the progress of a meal; and cushions were provided for them against the wall, so that they might recline there and converse with the guests. But that Mary should come—a woman whose reputation was the village scandal—was an unbelievable temerity. Yet she came to Jesus, and, as she was about to anoint His feet, she burst into tears. The weeping was all unperposed; the mingled memory of her shame and His

<sup>2</sup> The weight of scholarship is against the view which would identify the Mary of this story with either Mary of Bethany who anointed Jesus before His passion (see Matthew 26: 6, Mark 14: 3, John 12: 3) or with Mary of Magdala (see Luke 8: 2). The three women appear dissimilar in character, and it is quite improbable that Luke would confuse two women so unlike as Mary of Bethany and the Mary of this story. The fact that a Simon appears in both anointings argues little. There are eleven Simons mentioned in the New Testament. See "I.C.C." (Luke), p. 209.

<sup>3</sup> That Mary had prior acquaintance with Jesus seems to be clear not only on the ground of probability but also in the word of forgiveness in v. 48; "Thy sins have been and remain forgiven." The verb is in the perfect tense.

mercy broke the seal upon her eyes. Spontaneously she released her tresses—an act considered immodest—and, so shielded, she kissed His feet again and again,<sup>4</sup> and used her hair to wipe away the flood of contrite tears. There is not a more affecting scene in the Gospels.

The effect on Simon was instant. He spoke within himself, "If this man were a prophet . . ." It had occurred to him that Jesus might be a prophet, but now the surmise was impossible. A prophet would have known this woman's character, and would have indignantly disowned her clinging homage. Either He did not know her,<sup>5</sup> or He was morally insensible; and by either alternative, so Simon reasoned, His claim to be a prophet was belied. But Jesus quickly proved His power to read not only Mary's character but Simon's thoughts: "Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee." It was so seriously spoken that Simon answered with some instinctive deference, "Teacher, say on." Against that tense and dramatic setting Jesus told the little Parable of the Two Debtors:

There were two debtors. One owed five hundred pence and the other fifty.<sup>6</sup> When they had nothing with which to pay, the money-lender—far more genial than most in his trade—absolved them both. Which would love the creditor the more? Which, when they passed him on the street, would greet him with more grateful cheer?

Simon answered the question half superciliously: "I suppose he to whom he forgave most." Jesus confirmed the answer. "Thou hast answered right"—almost in the Socratic manner, as though Simon had been led into a fatal admission. Why did Mary love intensely, and why this lavish outpouring of her love? Because she had been forgiven much! Why did Simon love penuriously? He had been forgiven little!

The Christian message of forgiveness is here—never more

<sup>4</sup> *Kai kataphelci*—"continued to kiss affectionately."

<sup>5</sup> It was a necessary gift or power in a prophet that he should be able to read character. See Isaiah 11: 3, 4 and 1 Samuel 9: 19.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce suggests that the smallness of the sums may indicate the prevalent poverty of Judea, and quotes Hansrath ("History of New Testament Times") to the effect that Jesus frequently used the images of creditor, debtor, usury, and debtors' prison. (*Op. cit.*, pp. 243, 4 footnote.)

compassionately spoken. Whether the sin of Mary was more blameworthy than other sins is not the primary question. It was blameworthy enough—though Jesus treated guilt of emotional excess with less sternness, it would seem, than guilt of Pharisaic pride or of deliberate calculation. He had pity for a harlot, but withering invective for “whited sepulchers.”<sup>7</sup> But Mary’s sin was not condoned; it was with full cause that her name was a shadowed password. Yet she found forgiveness. Jesus made her feel that she could rise above her evil past and her bonded present. This is the perennial, redeeming hope of the gospel.

But the emphasis of the story is not mainly on forgiveness as a saving assurance, but rather on the relationship between forgiveness and love. The measure of forgiveness received at God’s hands and the measure of consequent love are in direct ratio—such is the crux of the parable. Then goodness is under penalty? Then it were wisdom to “continue in sin, that grace may abound”?<sup>8</sup> No, because the measure of our forgiveness rests upon another factor, namely, the measure of our *conscious need* of forgiveness. Mary *felt herself* overwhelmingly in debt, and her love was commensurate with her conscious need of pardon. Simon, on the other hand, was not deeply penitent, not sharply stricken by remorse; and so, since he deemed his sins slight, his slight forgiveness issued in slight love. Yet Simon did not lack sufficient sin! Who among the sons of earth suffers any such lack? His very complacency, his indifference to the wreck and woe of such as Mary, were sin enough. He lacked a *consciousness* of sin, the writhing of a moral sense which has seen the White Throne.

“For none, O Lord, has perfect rest  
For none is wholly free from sin:  
And they who fain would serve Thee best  
Are conscious most of wrong within.”<sup>9</sup>

Jesus proceeds to lay bare in Simon’s life the need to which

<sup>7</sup> See a discussion of the list of cardinal virtues and vices in connection with the interpretation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, p. 195, 196.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 6: 2. There is only one answer to Paul’s question, and he himself makes it: “God forbid.” Yet love and forgiveness are in direct ratio and causal union. The antinomy has frequently been discussed. *Vide, e.g.*, a chapter on redemption in Dr. G. A. Gordon’s “Aspects of the Infinite Mystery.”

<sup>9</sup> Henry Twells, “At even, ere the sun was set.”

his self-righteousness had made him blind. The phrases bite. Simon had grown no rank weeds—he had been too arid!—but he had grown no flowers. Mary’s nature was rich soil and had brought forth poisonous weeds in dark profusion, but her garden was not bereft of beauty. The courtesies<sup>10</sup> are a test of the generosity of character.

“For manners are not idle, but the fruit  
Of loyal nature and of noble mind.”<sup>11</sup>

Let the test be applied to Simon and Mary—however Simon may resent the comparison! “Thou gavest me no kiss upon my cheek”—a common sign of oriental welcome; “but she has not ceased to kiss my feet”—token of lowliest homage! “Thou gavest me no water for my feet”—in patronizing condescension even that most customary act of hospitality had been neglected; “but she has given me the water of her weeping!” “Thou gavest me no oil for my head”—and oil was plentiful and always at a guest’s disposal; “but she has anointed my feet with costly balm.” The items of hospitality seem of small significance, but the aridness or generosity of a nature is revealed in them; and Mary, in Simon’s house, had done the honors to Simon’s guest.<sup>12</sup>

There is enough of sin in any Simon to prompt the penitent cry, which, then answered, issues in its turn in fullness of devotion. The master spirits in every age have had moments of such consciousness of guilt that their confession has been with strong crying and drops of blood. St. Paul was, in his own eyes, the chief of sinners,<sup>13</sup> and St. Francis, when told by Brother Masseo that “all the world runs after thee,” replied that there was nowhere “a greater, more miserable, poorer sinner than I.”<sup>14</sup> Sensitiveness to sin is one side of that shield

<sup>10</sup> The courtesies meant more and still mean more in the Orient than in our western world. See Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Tennyson, “Guinevere.”

<sup>12</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 31, asserts that Jesus would not thus upbraid Simon in his own house. “Would He pillory His host as stingy, at his own table?” Perhaps the application of the parable was spoken by another voice than His at another time. Yet Jesus, when offence was given to “one of these little ones,” could speak with flaming wrath; and on this occasion Mary was being pilloried by the contempt of the whole table, and His concern was for her. We are inclined to believe that the objection is not sustained.

<sup>13</sup> I Timothy 1: 15.

<sup>14</sup> J. Torgensen, “St. Francis of Assisi.”

whose other face is sensitiveness to the undimmed radiance of God. Mary knew her own darkness, and thereby proved that she had seen the light "in whom there is no darkness at all"; but Simon, blind to his own stain, was blind to heaven's purity.

"Seest thou this woman?" Nay, Simon had not seen. "Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little."<sup>15</sup> Did Simon yield to the strong yet tender rebuke? We may cherish the hope, for there is no mention of his murmuring. As for Mary, she heard her Master change the words of the oriental salutation: He said, not "Go in peace," but "Go *into* peace." What mercy and hope are in the change! Our eyes follow her as she goes from grace to grace, from glory to glory, ever deeper into that peace which is too deep for understanding, until, folded in light she passes beyond our mortal sight.

#### *The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant*

Has the Church seriously faced and courageously preached the assertion of Jesus that Divine forgiveness and human willingness to forgive are joined together? What can a reverent mind say of a pardon so indiscriminate as to require only that a man walk down a sawdust trail and shake hands with a preacher? If forgiveness is so cheap, wrong-doing cannot be so costly! If pardon is by "wave of hand," sin cannot be heinous! Should we not study the conditions of forgiveness, among which the will to forgive is always and necessarily included?

The message of Jesus in this regard is unequivocal. "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."<sup>16</sup> . . . "Forgive us

<sup>15</sup> On this verse has been built the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation by love, as distinct from the characteristically Protestant doctrine of salvation by faith. Whatever truth there may be in the Roman Catholic doctrine *per se* (and some day we shall learn of conflicting theological views that truth is more often reached by their synthesis than by their opposition), that doctrine is not taught in this parable. A theory cannot be established on an abbreviated phrase or on the juxtaposition of words. The teaching here is "much love is the consequence of much forgiveness" as the concluding phrases of v. 47 and the clear purport of the whole parable manifestly show.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 6: 14, 15.

our debts as we forgive our debtors."<sup>17</sup> (How can we pray that prayer so glibly?) . . . "So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts."<sup>18</sup> The message is too frequent and spoken with too sharp an emphasis ever to be denied. It comes close to home. There may be irenic souls who cherish no grudges and nurse no bitterness. In one of Gladstone's early letters to his wife he remarks, "I seem hardly to have any daily pressure . . . no strokes from God; no opportunity of pardoning others, for none offend me." But such unruffled goodwill is rare. Most men have opportunity for the exercise of forgiving grace, and, if the offence is slight, most men are ready to forgive; but stern rebuffs are remembered with resentment and sometimes with revenge. Thus the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant strikes deep as it gives warning that our unwillingness to forgive one another bars the door against God's willingness to forgive us.

The parable arose from Peter's question: "How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Till seven times?" The Jewish law appears to have required forgiveness until three times.<sup>19</sup> Presumably it allowed a man who had forgiven his enemy three times, to regard him thereafter with implacable hostility. Perhaps Peter with his "till seven times" was eager to appear magnanimous.<sup>20</sup> Jesus swept the suggestion aside, and asserted that forgiveness is not cheese-paring arithmetic but an overflowing spirit: "I say not unto thee until seven times; but, until seventy times seven."<sup>21</sup> The parable is spoken to illuminate the command.

The leading character is a man who being left in charge of a king's realm proved so unfaithful to the trust that at the day of reckoning he owed his ruler ten thousand talents. Even one talent was a considerable sum. The total annual taxes of Judea, Idumea, Samaria, Galilee and Perea amounted to only

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 6: 12.

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

<sup>19</sup> See "I.C.C." (Matthew), W. C. Allen, p. 199. The Jewish rabbis quoted such passages as Job 33: 29, Amos 2: 6, as their authorities in teaching this threefold forgiveness. Therein is a curious revelation of the rabbinical mind.

<sup>20</sup> Or perhaps he was echoing Jesus' words as recorded in Luke 17: 4. Seven, it must also be remembered, was a sacred number.

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Moulton thinks this phrase is deliberately in the language of Genesis 4: 24 which breathes out revenge "until seventy times seven."

eight hundred talents.<sup>22</sup> It is written of Amaziah<sup>23</sup> that he hired "a hundred thousand mighty men of valor" as trained levies in war for "a hundred talents of silver." All the gold used in the ark of the covenant was worth less than thirty talents.<sup>24</sup> By any reckoning, ten thousand talents was a fabulous debt—about two million dollars. The debtor might plead his resolve to pay "all," but he could not possibly fulfil the vow. His only hope was that his royal master "being moved by compassion" might forgive him. So it befell in the story. The king's clemency saved him and his family from that slavery into which, as utterly insolvent debtors, they might lawfully have been sold.

Why did Jesus instance "ten thousand talents"? A smaller sum would not only have served the purpose of the parable but increased its verisimilitude. But—is our human debt to God payable? Can we ever "make good" our sins? We think they have spent their force and then we stumble over some new havoc they have wrought. "Ten thousand talents" is true to psychological fact. If the Church neglects that truth, then fiction and the drama preach it and become our evangelists. The "Second Mrs. Tanqueray"<sup>25</sup> deplors the fact of her failure to escape the consequences of an early misadventure: "The future is but a door into the past." Macbeth confesses that moral solvency is hopelessly beyond his reach:

"Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red . . ." <sup>26</sup>

"Ten thousand talents" justly describes not only our bankruptcy of soul, but also the measure of Divine compassion. Forgiveness is defined by the dictionary as "to give up resentment or claim for requital for an offence or wrong." But God's forgiveness is of another kind. He is above resentment. He makes no "claim for requital." His pardon is a sorrowing

<sup>22</sup> "Century Bible," *in loco*. A slave in the "flower of his youth" could be bought for one talent (see Hastings' "Bible Dictionary," article on "Money").

<sup>23</sup> II Chronicles 25: 6.

<sup>24</sup> Exodus 38: 24.

<sup>25</sup> In Sir Arthur Pinero's play of that title.

<sup>26</sup> Shakespeare, "Macbeth."

over those who by their wrong are self-deceived, and a sharing of the shame and consequence of wrong with intent to redeem. Such forgiveness is not easy. A cross was raised to silence the blasphemy that forgiveness is easy. "Ten thousand talents" hints the dire cost of forgiveness.

The second scene of the parable reveals the debtor of ten thousand talents in the rôle of creditor. There was a man who owed him a hundred shillings. The obligation was not two million dollars now, but twenty. It could have been met, granted a reasonable respite. But though the large debtor had just been blessed by a compassion which cancelled his overwhelming liability and though the small debtor pleaded his case in identical entreaties to those which he had used, he took him by the throat and flung him into prison.

Mercy received ought to issue in mercy shown. Wrongs we suffer should weigh with us as negligible compared with wrongs we commit.

"Earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,  
Though justice be thy plea, consider this—  
That in the course of justice none of us  
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy;  
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
The deeds of mercy."<sup>27</sup>

Our concern for our sins, if it were sincere, would leave small zeal to demand justice for our injuries. The sins would appear as "ten thousand talents," and the injuries as the sixtieth part of one talent. But imagine any party in a labor war minimizing injuries received, and remorsefully confessing sins! Imagine a nation so occupied in contrite sorrow for its "reeking tubes" and "frantic boasts" as to have no heart to protest its "rights" against affronts. So far are we from being the true interpreters of Jesus, that His counsels still seem wildly quixotic.

The closing scene in the drama of the Unmerciful Servant is darkness unrelieved. Every stroke in the picture is of angry doom—the king's uncontained wrath on finding that his erstwhile debtor had played the hard-hearted creditor, his unsparing condemnation, and the stern fate he finally pro-

<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare, "Merchant of Venice."



nounced: "And his lord was wrath and delivered him to the tormentors."

This description of the fury of the king is not to be construed as true to the nature of God. The closing verse is indeed emphatic: "So also shall my heavenly Father do unto you"; but only a gross literalism could assign the vindictiveness of the parable's conclusion to the ways of heaven.<sup>28</sup> The scenery of the story is not to be treated as though it were inerrant symbolism. We need not believe that God deliberately revokes a pardon once granted, still less that He consigns debtors to a vengeful torment. It is we ourselves who, by our unforgiving spirit, bar the door against Him who is always ready to forgive—such is the parable's piercing truth. Forgiveness implies one to receive as well as one to give. Forgiveness flows in upon us when life is reopened to the dealings of God, but no life is open to God which bitterly nurses its resentments. Such a life revokes its own pardon.

"Revenge is sweet," but the sweetness is short-lived. Soon revenge becomes acrid and miserable. It drives deeper the chasms of cleavage; it makes of every foe an implacable foe; it turns the days to gall. While God stands at the door in mercy and knocks, revenge broods over injuries and magnifies them, and so becomes deaf to God's knocking. Revenge is not sweet; it is burning poison. Revenge delivers itself to the tormentors.

But there was One who into earth's brackish waters of enmity and hate poured a crimson flood to make them sweet. Never was any man more unjustly smitten. The world He loved drove nails into His hands and feet. Yet He prayed, "Father, forgive them." The servant is not above his Lord!

<sup>28</sup> G. H. Hubbard, *op. cit.*, p. 141, rightly issues this warning.