

# **It Shall Be Made Known**

## **Matthew 18:21-35**

### **September 13, 2020**

There are few more benefits to being married to a flight attendant than free standby flight privileges. Occasionally, you also get to hear some rather interesting stories of the things that happen on flights. A flight attendant was working First Class, and there was a very nicely dressed man who she had served several alcoholic drinks. He asked her to give him another drink, and she politely explained that he had reached the limit. With fire in his eyes, he raised his voice loudly, "Lady, do you have any idea of who I am? Do you know who I AM?" She simply walked away, got on the intercom, and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, there is a man in first class who needs your assistance. He says that he does not have any idea who he is."

The word I want to focus on today is "Entitlement." I thought about that word when I again read this parable from Matthew's gospel. Perhaps you will see also why that word came to mind when you hear it. There was a king, who had a servant (possibly a governor or part of the kingdom), who had incurred an enormous debt. The servant owed the king millions of dollars. The king called the servant to give an account, and when he could not pay the legal debt which he owed, the king did what kings always did then: he ordered the governor/servant and all his family to be sold into slavery so a portion of the debt could be paid. But the servant got down on his hands and knees and begged for the king to have mercy. "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back." He said this even though doing so would be impossible. Something completely unexpected happened at that point. For some reason, this king had mercy. Not only did he not sell the man and his family into slavery, or even set up an installment plan so that a portion of the debt might be repaid. Instead, he simply forgave the whole debt. This action by a king at that time would be unheard.

Just as this man, this governor, is leaving the palace a free man, he runs across one of his servants, who owes him a relatively small debt. He grabs him by the collar, throws him down, and demands that this servant repay his debt. The servant uses the same words that the governor had used with the king, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back." If it were a larger debt, he could sell this man and his family into slavery, but the amount is too small for that. It is an amount that can be repaid, but instead, he throws the man into jail.

The news of what this man did quickly spread until someone informed the king. What he thought he did in secret, and that did not matter, was made known. The king is enraged, and he confronts the governor with what he has done. 'You worthless servant!' he said. 'I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. You should have had mercy on your servant, just as I had mercy on you.' To no one's surprise, the servant was thrown into jail until every penny was repaid.

It is essential that we hear this story not as an allegory about God and us, but as a good story about real life. That is the way those whom Jesus told this story would have heard it – as an intriguing story. They would be completely amazed that a king would ever do such a thing as forgive someone that much debt. This is just not how kings act. But this king shows

remarkable mercy and love to a subject that does not deserve it. It is an act of astonishing grace. Some new possibility has presented itself that no one could have expected.

As shocking as the king's amazing act of grace was, what comes next was equally shocking. We understand that this governor has every right to collect on a debt that an underling owes him. This is the way the world is supposed to work. Someone borrows money, and you are absolutely entitled to repayment. If they fail to pay you on time, it is your right to do what it takes to make sure they do. It is your fault if they default.

However, the event of the king's amazing forgiveness radically changes our expectations. In the world, the king is entitled to collect from his lesser servant. In light of the extravagant grace shown by the king, that entitlement is no longer the operating principle. The king's act of grace makes the act of the governor to punish a much smaller debtor utterly and unimaginably ridiculous. What has been given to this governor transforms our expectations of how he should now act in his own life. He was entitled, but now an act of grace has taken away any assumed privilege of entitlement.

The story is a tragedy. A man who has been given an amazing gift fails to allow that gift to transform his life and change his way of seeing the world in which he lives. As tragic as the story is, the original listeners of Jesus would have been satisfied with the ending. Any other ending would feel completely unrealistic and unsatisfying. Our sense of justice is satisfied. The best movies end with the bad guy getting what he deserves, and so does this parable.

This is one of the first scriptures I ever preached in theology school, and I focused then on the unimaginable forgiveness of the king. But this time, I found myself thinking about the forgiven servant's unwillingness to forgive. The man's actions are incomprehensible. How is it possible for a human being who was given such mercy to be unable to show that mercy in return to someone else? I am tempted to think this story is rather unrealistic until I realized that this story is all too real. As unbelievable as it is that a forgiven man does not forgive, it is unfortunately exactly the way we often live our lives. It is puzzling that we are the way we are, and I wondered how we can be that way, and then that word came to me: entitlement.

Entitlement. *It means the fact of having a right to something.* It may be a guaranteed right like a warranty on a television; a legal right, like to be paid for our work; a constitutional right of free speech, or to practice our religion. It's not a bad word in and of itself. Our world operates on this idea of having entitlements. We depend on the world operating this way. Psychologically speaking, a person who has little sense of entitlement will have a very hard time with self-worth and getting ahead in life. As a counselor, I have supported many people in learning to stand up for themselves and asking for what they need and have a right to.

But there is another meaning. Entitlement can be rights and privileges that I have that other people do not have and should not have. I have either earned these privileges by my hard work, or I may have simply been born into it; either because of my sex, race, income, sexual orientation, or status. Entitlement can become an attitude that justifies my having power over others who do not have it and keep other people in their place.

Ask Bill Beaton, who is from Scotland, about the aristocracy of the landed gentry of merry old England or Scotland. Remember the PBS *Downton Abbey* series? Those who lived on the top floors had rights and privileges that were given to them by birth that those who lived downstairs as servants never had or could have. Privileges that cannot be taken away and are taken for granted.

When I served a church in the Mississippi Delta in the 1980s, it was assumed the black people in that community were there to serve the well-being of the white folks. Why? Because it had always been that way. The attitudes that existed since slavery were still in place. Black folks are inferior and in need of the patronage of white folks. Once, after worship, when it was time to get the crops in, one farmer was running behind and needing help. I heard him say to another church member, "Do you mind if I borrow one of your negros?" I heard it with my own ears.

Of course, this is not just something that happens in the South. Just this past week, I read an article about a couple who were removed from a New York City ferry after refusing to wear a mask and ranting about Black Lives Matter, government control, and what they described as discrimination against white people in America. The wife said, "If we were black, I can guarantee you that guy would never come out and told us to put a mask on." Her husband chimed in, "Right, because black lives matter."

Our having someone point out to us that we have assumed rights and privileges that other groups of people do not have can be difficult to hear. When people rise up and demand to be equals, we are naturally tempted to say, "Thank you very much, we rather like the way things are, and why don't you stay where you belong."

If you ever doubt this, just see what happens when you attempt to deal with the zoning in a suburb so that low-income housing can be built. This is true even when they want to build those houses in what is usually a commercial district. See what happens in liberal California when there are proposals for multi-family homes meant to overcome a gross shortage in homes for middle and lower-income people.

Our parable turns our world upside down. It flips our perspective on how we have become accustomed to seeing who we are and how we live. We can no longer live in a world of entitlement and white privilege or class privilege or any other sort of privilege when we come to realize that we have all received an enormous gift of grace and forgiveness. Your birth into this world was a windfall. You did not ask for this gift of life. You certainly have done nothing that made you deserve that gift. And all of your life, you have been given and dependent upon endless acts of grace. A person who imagines themselves as self-made is playing the fool and is completely blind to the countless moments of grace and dedication of others in their lives.

Our gospel reading gives us two choices of how we can live. We can continue to live with an attitude of this world where we are entitled, and others are not, or we can live in the Kingdom of God, where the grace and goodness of God transform the dispositions out of which we live our lives. We can wake up in the world of entitlement and live with an attitude that "life owes me" and "I deserve this or that" and have little regard or thought for anyone but

those in my entitled group. Or we can wake up each day in the Kingdom of God and take a deep breath, relax our hearts, and give thanks for the air that we breathe and see the many gifts of grace that surround us. In the Kingdom, we no longer live preoccupied with what life owes us, but with what we have received and how we can pay that forward, especially to those who have been kept down-and-out by the powerful and entitled people of this world. Our parable turns our world upside down. It flips our perspective on how we have become accustomed to seeing who we are and how we live. We can no longer live in a world of entitlement and white privilege, or class privilege, or any other sort of privilege, when we come to realize that we have all received an enormous gift of grace and forgiveness. Your birth into this world was a windfall. You did not ask for this gift of life. You certainly have done nothing that made you deserve that gift. And all of your life, you have been given and are dependent upon endless acts of grace. A person who imagines themselves as self-made is playing the fool and is completely blind to the countless moments of grace and dedication of others in their lives.

One day it shall all be made known. That is what our parable tells us, warns us to keep in mind. In the end a forgiven servant who was given an extravagant gift ends his life in tragedy, as he missed taking in how good God has been to him. He missed what it means to live out of love, mercy, and grace. Open our hearts now to the goodness of the Lord and live in the freedom, the gratitude, the generosity of God's Kingdom. Amen.