

**THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING AND UNMERCIFUL
SERVANT IN MATTHEW 18:23-35: ITS SOCIO-ECCLESIAL
IMPLICATIONS**

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Abstract

Many people want good things for themselves and even their families but they will not do so for others. This is a major problem in the society today. The parable of unforgiving /unmerciful servant portrays this. This paper examines the essentials of Christ's teaching on forgiveness. The paper indicated that the parable insists on the necessity of forgiveness as a pre-condition for receiving divine forgiveness and favour, and called attention to its social and ecclesial applications today. The method adopted in this study is historical and hermeneutical methods. This paper reveals that if compassion and forgiveness are widely accepted as a necessary life-style of each Christian, then extensive changes in the existing social, political and religious patterns in each human community should be attainable. Consequently, it suggests, that the Churches in Africa should make a permanent effort to be a credible sign of brotherhood in the community as implied in the parable. This will have a positive impact on the Church's evangelism. The paper concludes that servants who were spared should understand and be empathetic towards other servants.

Keywords: Parable, Unmerciful, Forgiveness, Servant, Social-ecclesial.

Introduction

The parable of the unforgiving /unmerciful servant is one of the parables peculiar to the gospel as recorded by Matthew. This parable is also very familiar because it has been used over and over in the church as a warning to the church members as to the kind of heart they have regarding Christian relationship. This usage by the church has also been fostered by the traditional interpretation and application

given across ages. It is my contention, however, in this paper that beyond the traditional interpretation and application given the parable, the message of the parable can be seen as more or less a warning to every Christian. This parable is necessary because of its socio-ecclesial implications. It points out that not merely that one should be ready to forgive, but that one should be ready to forgive again and again. The text goes thus:

23 Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; 25 and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; 33 and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart (Matt. 18:23-35 RSV).

A Brief Background to the Parable

In order to safeguard ourselves from wrong and strange interpretations we must listen carefully to the things which were said just before this parable was spoken. Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem for the last time. He was going the way to the cross. There was a debate going on among the disciples as to who would be the greatest in the kingdom of Jesus. This was not a proper question when the cross would be the central point of the kingdom. To show that their question really has no proper

place, Jesus sets a little child before them and tells them that they must become as little children to enter His kingdom.

He then taught them forgiveness. His children are always to be ready to forgive. Peter then asks his famous question: How often shall I forgive my brother? Seven times? Jesus tells him he must forgive seventy times seven time (Matt. 18:21-22). There is a parallel in Luke 17:4. The form of the saying in Matthew differs from Luke principally in that there is here no mention of the repentance of the offender. According to Manson (75:212) possibly it is taken for granted in the Mathew version. Whether the question-and-answer form is true historical reminiscence or creation of the Evangelist it is not possible to determine.

It is the Jewish teaching that the offender must repent, apologize, and make reparation for the wrong done. It is then the duty of the injured party to forgive him. The finest statement of the doctrine is in the *Testament of the XII Patriarchs*, Gad 6:2-3 as quoted in (Manson, 75): "Love ye one another from the heart; and if a man sin against thee, speak peaceably to him, and in thy soul hold not guile; and if he repents and confess, forgive him ...but if he be shameless and persisteth in his wrong-doing, even so forgive him from the heart, leave to God the avenging". The Taking of vengeance seven-fold represents the stage of desert justice anterior to *lex talionis* --an eye for an eye, a life for a life. In Gen 4:2 the song of Lamech runs: "If Cain shall be avenged seven-fold, truly Lamech seventy and seven-fold". The blood-feud is to be carried on without mercy and without limit. The reply of Jesus in v22 says: Just as in those days there was no limit to hatred and vengeance, so among Christians there is to be no limit to mercy and forgiveness.

Thematic Analysis of the Parable /Characters

The debtor

One of the main characters in this parable is the debtor. The understanding of this character is of utmost importance to the interpretation of this parable. This debtor was one of the servants of the king. The servants are probably not slaves or domestic servants but government officials (Manson, 1975). The term servant would cover court officials or ministers of the state, and provincial governors, as well as people in lower positions. These people are all to present their accounts to be audited. One

shows a deficiency of ten thousand talents, a colossal sum equivalent to about two million pounds (Manson, 1975).

The amount this servant owes is stupendous. It is always foolish to try to set a present-day value on these sums named in Scripture because the values are so changeable. But, 10,000 talents, whether of silver or of gold is one of the largest sums used in Scripture. The Book of Revelation speaks of 10,000 times 10,000. A talent was about the largest piece of money used. Only 29 talents of gold were used in the building of the tabernacle (Exodus 38:24). The costly temple which Solomon built used 3000 talents of gold and seven thousand talents of silver (1 Chronicles 29:4-5). This indicates clearly that the debt owed by this servant was indeed overwhelming. Adeyemo (2006) asks, how could any one official borrow so much money? How could anyone be so foolish as to lend so much? He said, such a debt could only have accrued in much the same way that the African debt burden has accrued, that is by charging interest, and then charging interest on interest.

The question naturally comes to mind: Who can be so deeply indebted to another? Only a "servant" who has high position so that he can collect taxes which belong to the king. This king would now reckon with his servants! This man was brought to him — he doesn't come willingly because he knows how great the debt was and he was afraid. The king orders him and his family and his belongings to be sold. This is, of course, not to pay up the enormous sum owed because it would not begin to approximate that figure. But, it was punishment for debt! Such punishment was common in that day, especially among the gentiles. Even in Israel people were sold because of debts they owed, but the laws of Israel forbade them to become slaves and on the year of jubilee they were to be set free. Nothing unusual takes place here (Durken, 2008).

However, when this servant realizes what was happening, he fell to his knees, beseeches his lord for time and promises to pay the entire debt. This would be impossibility. No matter how hard the man might work, no matter how many years would be given him, such a debt simply becomes larger with time because of the - interest! There is no possibility that he will be able to keep this promise.

The king's mercy

The king realizes this. He now goes far beyond what his servant had asked. He doesn't ask repayment but forgives that entire debt! It is as though it had never been. It is erased! It is marked paid in full! That is forgiveness! We speak about this matter too lightly. He forgives out of his *compassion*. There is nothing in the servant to move the king toward forgiveness. He is kind and is moved with compassion. He is merciful.

Having experienced this forgiveness on the part of the king, this servant should also be filled with a spirit of compassion. He should now exhibit a forgiving spirit to anyone who would owe him anything. Surely, one who has received mercy should be able to show mercy. Surely, one who has been forgiven much will love much. But, this man is the *exception*.

The unforgiving servant

This servant now finds a fellow-servant. Notice, here the relationship is entirely different than between the other two. There it was a king — servant relationship here it is servant-servant. While his own debt was almost incalculable, his fellow servant owes him only 100 shillings — a very small sum. No man owes another man a great sum! Instead of being moved with compassion toward this poor man he takes him by the throat. He chokes him and demands immediate payment. How is it possible? This poor man using the same words he himself had used to the king asks for time and promises that he will pay him all. This is true! He will be able to do it! But he has no patience with him and casts him in prison.

The other servants of the king have come to know what has transpired. News travels fast. Especially such astounding news that the king has forgiven him ten thousand talents. Now they see what this man has done to his fellow-servant. We do not read that they are angry, but that they are exceedingly sorry! They let the king know what has happened.

The judgment

Once more the man is brought into the presence of the king. But, now the situation is quite different. Now he is greeted by the words, "Thou wicked servant!" It was required of him that he should show some of the spirit of the king to his fellow

servant. He did the opposite! As a result, he is now cast into prison, into the inner prison. He is given over to the tormentors. This is the only time this expression is used in Scripture. He is not only kept in ward; he is severely punished. This is to go on until he has paid all. That will never happen!

There are many pitfalls in the interpretation of this parable. One should realize that every part may not be explained. Even though Jesus says at the close that His heavenly Father will do as this king has done, it does not mean that He will ever revoke the forgiveness He has once granted His children. The other servants bring the deeds of this servant to the attention of the king. They represent no one. No one has to bring anything to the attention of our God. The main point of this parable is to teach men to forgive one another, which has been made possible through the forgiveness they have received of their God. Must I forgive my brother seven times? This is the answer.

The forgiven must forgive

The answer is given in a graphic way in order that we realize how important it is that we have a forgiving spirit. Christ taught us to pray: *"And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."* Seemingly this needs elaboration. Jesus now teaches in unmistakable language how important it is. If we do not forgive one another, God will not forgive us.

But, is this the picture of the child of God? Is the child of God like this servant who refuses to forgive a fellow-servant? Do we act as though we are not the recipients of grace? We may resemble David when he had sinned against Bathsheba and her husband. He was indeed a child of God, but, when Nathan told him the parable of the rich man with many sheep and the poor man with one lamb which the rich man stole, David said: Such a man is worthy of death! Where was his demonstration of the grace which he had received? That grace must be renewed to us again every day. If it is not, we look more like the world than the people of God.

The picture of the debt which our Lord gives us in this parable is also telling. There are those who believe that our debt cannot be great seeing we are the children of God. These understand neither the law nor themselves. Our debt is enormous! Our

sins are more than we can count. *"Ten thousand talents"* does not overstate our indebtedness. At the same time, the amount owed us is small. It is scarcely worth mentioning. It is spoken of in the parable as *"a hundred shillings."* We think others owe us so much! This makes it difficult for us to forgive. This parable puts things in proper perspective.

Socio-Literary Analysis of the Parable

Structure and social context

The parable is located at the end of the Fourth Discourse (Matt. 18) where there is a series of regulations for life in the Christian community. Ladd (1960) noted that the presence of the Kingdom of God in the person, ministry, and teaching of Jesus provokes the historical life-setting of the parables. Jesus gave information about the Kingdom through pictures of a variety of findings, by persons of a variety of qualifications and situations. However, Deidun (1976) on a more specific note argued that the parable is a practical exhortation to forgiveness within the community and that far from arbitrarily restricting its theological scope, Matthew gave it the only application that made sense in his setting. Deidun did not clarify on the 'setting'. Commenting on the setting, Fenton (1963) argued that the original setting of the parable may have been Jesus' teaching about the last judgement. Fenton's view may not be totally wrong, but it is doubtful.

A critical analysis of Matthew 18 shows that the chapter can be divided into two parts (18:1-14, 15-35). It is only the first half (vv. 1-9) of the first part that has a parallel in Mark and Luke. Both parts conclude with a parable (vv. 12-13; 23-34), and with a summary statement added by Matthew himself (vv. 14, 35). The subject matter in the first part is the 'little ones' of the community (cf. Mk. 9:35-50). This theme explains all the omissions of the Markan details and the new Matthean formulation thereby showing something of the theological interest of the Evangelist. Accordingly, Matthew uses the parable of the 'Lost Sheep' (vv. 10-13) to stress the responsibility of those stronger members of the community over against the weaker ones (18:10, 14). The second part (vv. 15-35) treats of true brotherhood. By adding vv. 15-18, Matthew shows anew his great concern for a real brotherhood in which nobody is given up or abandoned. Precisely the basic theme of vv. 15-18 is care and fraternal reconciliation. He puts weight on this perspective by taking up the parable of the Unmerciful Servant which stresses the necessity of forgiveness in the brotherhood of the Church.

Moreover, Matthew's use of his favourite preposition, 'therefore' (v.23) to introduce the parable serves as if it were a conclusion drawn from what precedes.

It, therefore, becomes easy to identify certain basic problems which were critical for the community during Matthew's life time and to which the parable addresses itself. There is evidence of internal tension within the Matthean community. The reference made to the 'little ones' of the community is highly suggestive and may refer to a probably included the poor, the outcast, the despised, the sick to which Matthew refers to elsewhere in Matthew 25:31-46. It perhaps points to the neglect and contemptuous treatment of the less privileged due to the arrogance of 'some' within the community (vv. 1, 10). Basically, such an attitude caused a scandal in the Church and many particularly the 'little ones' may have felt some disappointment in their faith in Jesus.

We have referred to the 'arrogance of some' which requires further comment. Precisely, there is a growing scholarly consensus that Matthew's Church was a 'city-church', in which many of the members were affluent Christians from the upper class of society. It has been observed that references to money and economic matters provide a good insight into Matthew's community. In this regard, Kingsbury (1978) has argued that the three terms representing the three highest monetary denominations, namely, 'silver', 'gold' and 'talent', occurred in Matthew's Gospel more than twenty-eight times as compared with the single use of the word 'silver' by Mark and the fourfold use of it in Luke. Our text makes reference to 'talent' the highest monetary denomination and the 'servant' could not possibly be a reference to a poor man. We suspect that the 'servant' represents a man of substance whose social status in society guarantees him such trust that could attract such enormous loan.

Admittedly, such background of wealth can make us appreciate in a better light the implication of the sayings in which the 'disciples' are warned not to 'despise of one of these little ones' (v.10) and reminded that 'it is not the will of my father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish' (v.14). furthermore, this background of wealth makes it possible for Matthew to appropriate Markan Jesus' warning against riches and the rich in Matthew 13:22 (cf. Mk. 4:19), and to sharpen the word of Jesus at Matthew 19:23 so that the difficulty in entering the kingdom of God is predicated not merely to 'those who have means' but also to the 'rich man.' The implication is that the socio-economic factor indicates that Matthew's community had already settled down and established itself in the world and that it was materially

well-off but with the strong and wealthy among them apparently in danger of neglecting the care of the poor and weak in their midst (vv. 10, 14).

In addition to the above, there were the tensions occasioned by lack of understanding and forgiveness in the community (18:22). Matthew's conception of the Church is that of a loving family in which the common faith and the mutual concern of the Church allow problems to be addressed and resolved in the context of love and care. In such a fellowship, unity provides a fertile soil for the spirit of God to work. But this unity was in jeopardy due to tensions occasioned by the arrogance of some who were powerful and wealthy, neglect of the poor, and lack of understanding and forgiveness. Precisely such tensions provided the context for the parable of the Unmerciful Servant.

The interpretation of the parable

The parable is peculiar to Matthew and therefore capable of disclosing Matthew's theological interest and the Church understands of itself. The question of fraternal reconciliation and care had been raised in 18:15. Here every effort is to be made to bring the erring brother to repentance, first in private, then before a few and finally before the whole Assembly of God's people. If he should remain impenitent, he must be excluded from the Church whose decision will be the decision of God. In Matthew 18:21-22, Peter then raised a new question. What in Luke (Lk. 17:4) appears as a simply saying on forgiveness becomes a dialogue between Jesus and Peter, the Church leader. If the Church is to excommunicate its unrepentant members are the individual Christians also to cut themselves off by refusing to forgive those who persistently sin against them? Peter's seven times' (v 2) may represent an attempt to exceed Jewish regulations which stipulate forgiving one's brother a maximum of four times. Jesus himself recommends 'seventy times seven.' The numbers 'seven' and 'seventy times seven' are used in Genesis 4:24 concerning vengeance. But the unlimited revenge of primitive man in the Old Testament has given way to the unlimited forgiveness of Christians in the New Testament, but it does not carry with it the unlimited opportunity to sin. Emphatically what Jesus does here is to show that the spirit of genuine forgiveness recognizes no boundaries. It is a state of heart, not a matter of calculation. One might as well ask, 'How often must I love my wife, my husband, my children, etc.?' As to ask, how often shall I forgive? Everyone immediately senses that when Jesus said 'up to seventy times seven', he did not mean exactly 'four hundred and ninety times.' Clearly what he meant was, forgive without

ever stopping. In order to insist on the necessity of this forgiveness in the church, he referred to the parable (vv. 23-25).

This particular story exhibits some difficulty. It begins with a king but the transaction in the narrative suggests a wealthy merchant and his servant rather than a king. The order verse 34 is more like that of an oriental tyrant than a private person. Lastly, the first sum of money owed is huge, while the second is quite small and negligible. This bold contrast may be a deliberate exaggeration for the sake of dramatic effect.

Nevertheless, scholars do not doubt the authenticity of the parable which emphasizes the need for forgiveness and care, and its eschatological consequence for the hearers. But some scholars have claimed that the parable is a later Christian dramatization of some briefer utterance of Jesus like, 'Blessed are the merciful' (Matt. 5:7) or 'the petition for forgiveness in the Lord's prayer' (Matt. 6:12). Whatever it is, the fact remains that the story is illustrative of some aspect of the character of the kingdom of Heaven. The transaction is between a king and his servant (v 23). The 'servant' with whom the king is about to settle accounts must have been Roman officials or people of high social standing whose duty it was to collect the royal taxes in their several domains and to deliver these large sums to the king at the proper time. They could not have been 'slaves' or 'poor people'.

Kipper (1977) in examining the value of 'talent' in the Matthean parable rightly concludes that ten thousand talents was an enormous sum that no ordinary individual could hope to repay. There is sum that no ordinary individual could hope to repay. There is scholarly consensus on this. But how did the man come to owe so large a sum? Had he been pre-empting the king's treasury, that is, the tax money that had been collected from the province and should have been kept in safe place until the king asked for it? Or is the man guilty of squander mania? The parable does not answer this question. It is unimportant. The point of interest is that when the man appeared before the king he was completely penniless being burdened with a debt of ten thousand talents. Kipper indicates that the parable illustrates God's pardon of so enormous a debt. He rightly notes that the sum owed the servant himself was insignificant by comparison. According to Oriental custom, the whole family of the man is sold into slavery if he is unable to make repayment of debt. In the Jewish society, the selling of insolvent debtors was nothing unusual and it is even mentioned in the Old Testament except that the wife of the man is not sold into slavery but may accompany the husband into bondage (Ex. 22:3; Lev. 25:39, 47; II Kings 4:1; Neh.

5:5; Is. 50:1; Amos 2:6; 8:6). The proceeds must go toward paying the debt. The word used in the original (pay, payment) indicates that the debtor must 'give back' what he owes, that is, he must 'pay off' his obligation in full. This was actually impossible because his debt was huge.

The study has earlier indicated that there is no textual evidence to show what exactly happened to the money. It is not even clear whether the man embezzled the money or probably misused it entirely for his own comfort to the neglect of the poor around him. We do not know. But we suspect that there is some relationship between the text and the story of the rich young man which follows in 19:16-30. Onwu (2002) reiterate that the 'servant' may have been of reasonable social status as to have attracted a loan of such a huge sum of money. Nonetheless, the fact that the man prostrates himself shows his desperation (v.26). The man is crushed by the realization of the severity of his impending punishment. He does not deny that he owes the huge amount; either does he try to explain how he got into this terrible predicament. He was probably aware of the fact that excuses would have been unhelpful. It is important to note also that he does not offer to make at least a down-payment on his debt. He did not make such an offer because he had nothing. The man simply begged and asked for patience and promised to pay 'everything' even though he knew the promise was incapable of fulfillment (v. 34).

The verb *makrothumeo* (v.26) (have patience) and its cognates are used in the Septuagint (LXX) with reference to God's patience in giving further opportunity for repentance before judgment (Ex. 34:6), but in our context it is further opportunity to effect a repayment. The king does not take up the promise of repayment (v. 27). Precisely the result of the prayer for mercy and the recognition of the complete helplessness of the servant moves the master to show mercy. In other words, the king does much more than show the patience asks for: he forgave the debt completely. The term 'debt' (= Gk: *daneion*) is found only here in the New Testament and it means strictly 'loan'. The word used to describe the king's attitude to the servant is 'pity' or 'compassion' represented by the Greek word *Splangchnistheis* (v.27). It is used in the New Testament as a distinctive characteristic of Jesus in preaching, healing and feeding the hungry (Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). Admittedly, to limitless debt there can be no solution except limitless compassion. The master shows himself truly master by wiping out the entire debt with a sovereign act of grace.

Though the parable seems to be an exhortation to forgiveness, it is primarily a parable of justice qualified by mercy (18:33). We note that when the first servant

approaches the master for remission of debt, he thinks the way to free himself from the predicament is to satisfy the demands of strict justice: 'I will pay you everything.' (18:26). But the master forgave him out of compassion – representing grace (v.27). Unfortunately, while the master's mercy changes the man's situation, it does not change the man himself. Indeed, when it was the servant's turn to show mercy, he instead treated his colleague in terms of strict justice (vv.28-30). He experiences a gift without the conversion which comes with having received a gift. The one difference is that now the promise of repayment is actually possible because the sum of money owed was very small. But the forgiven official would not forgive his colleague and by that very fact, the pardoned servant becomes the wicked servant. He loses the mercy he received because he will not pass it on to another. The master replaces the decree of mercy with a condemnation to torture which must be endless because the debt is unrepayable. Precisely, the duty of the servant to show mercy and forgiveness is not dependent on ordinary human feelings, but it is linked directly to the amazing character of the generosity shown to him: 'as I had mercy on you' (v.3). This, in a sense, is the real point of the story and the key to the obvious allegorizing, namely, that the unforgiving will be excluded from God's mercy (v.35) and those who receive God's forgiveness must show the same forgiving attitude to others. Accordingly, this implies that the parable is not necessarily an example of how one should forgive but about the condition necessary for forgiveness, namely, the realization that one can be merciful and forgiving because one has received mercy and forgiveness. Precisely the reception of grace puts one under a heavy responsibility (cf. Amos 3:2; Deut. 24:17-18).

In the context of Matthew's theology, 'the just' are those who meet the demands of their fellow men and women because they live in a covenant relationship with a Lord who has shown them mercy. The Christian in Matthew's day could not win God's forgiveness; but he could lose it by refusing to extend it to a brother. It is this theme of 'brother' or 'these little ones' which gives the parable its ecclesial interpretation and relevance in verse 35. 'Compassion' is a motivating factor in forgiveness which is an important element in man's salvation factor in forgiveness which is an important element in man's salvation wrought by God in Christ. A pure act of mercy has made us all free sons of the Father of Jesus and therefore we are all brothers and sisters in the 'Church' in which Jesus dwells as Saviour and Lord.

The Implications in the Contemporary Life

The relevance of this parable to life in the Church and the society cannot be missed. In Africa, pluralism and lack of forgiveness have tended to jeopardize 'brotherhood.' In the Church 'brotherhood' is a basic ingredient of fellowship and members all share the bonds of an everlasting covenant. Times have become more complex with the passing times, but the principles of association never changes strangely, today we hear more about fractionalization of the Churches, religious crisis, favouritism, ethnicity, political instability, and broken marriages. Opinions for their causes differ and may range from religious enthusiasm, intolerance, selfishness to lust for power. The possibility of an inner tension cannot be ruled out and if this is accepted then lack of understanding, care and forgiveness become critical in the context.

In this regard, the need to be reminded about the subsidiary lessons of the parable in our talk about our religious life become significant. Here the text makes clear that we are God's debtors (v. 23 cf. Rom. 3:23) and we are not able to pay our debts (v.25 cf. Rom. 3:20). Nevertheless, this debt must be paid (vv. 23, 24 cf. Rom. 3:19; 5:18). By means of divine grace the debt was cancelled (v. 27) but Paul talks about it in terms of Christ's atoning sacrifice (cf. Rom. 3:24; Matt. 20:28). People can only be certain that their debts are cancelled if they themselves cancel the debts of those who are indebted to them (v.35, cf. Matt. 6:13, 14, 15).

According to Onwu (2002) in Africa, the basis for any claim to self-righteousness does not exist. Its polytheistic beliefs encourage the battle of the gods for the sake of self-advantage. Its traditional social and religious organizations emerge from a cosmology that is competitive, oppressive and exploitative. In its pursuit of economic and political ambitions, human beings lose their centeredness and sacredness. They become pawns, agents, ladders and numbers to be used but not persons any more. In most African nations, personhood does not exist. Social injustice, tribalism, insensitivity, oppression, maltreatment of widows, broken marriage and caste systems diminish African humanity and erode African brotherhood.

The preservation of the parable reveals Matthew's concern to deal with such specific human problems and to build a community of people with forgiving hearts. Earlier in the Gospel, Matthew has shown that reconciliation between brothers through forgiveness is a necessary precondition for God to accept the person's gift to Him at worship (Matt. 5:23-25). Similarly, forgiveness has been recommended in

place of retaliation (Matt. 5:38-42). By implication these texts portray God as God of forgiveness.

Thus, the parable reawakens in the individual the need to re-examine the different aspects of our life in which we have wronged others and in which others have wronged us but we have failed to forgive them. The basic lesson of the parable becomes critical, namely, that responding to others with constant forgiveness is a sign of our gratitude to God who has not only forgiven us our sins but has also graciously made us His children through Christ. By implication, to refuse a brother the forgiveness which has made us sons is to rupture the family bond of the holy family, to break the lifeline of mercy binding us through Jesus to the Father and to face the condemnation of the last judgment. This application is in line with Matthew's thought. The forgiveness demanded of Christians is one positive means of making the 'care' and 'love' of the 'little ones' in the Christian community possible. This also guarantees unity which provides a fertile soil for the spirit of God to work (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:1). Precisely the church was created by the mercy of God made present to us in Jesus. The Church can continue to exist as a holy family only if the men and women who are made brothers and sisters by this divine mercy continue to exchange it not with an external ritual gesture but from the heart (v.35). That is Matthew's last word on life and discipline in the Church and unless the contrary is proven, one cannot doubt its continual relevance in the Church and society today.

Conclusion

The paper has stated that the parable is located in the context of internal tensions occasioned by the arrogance of some who were powerful and wealthy, neglect of the 'little ones' and lack of understanding and forgiveness. We indicated that the parable insists on the necessity of forgiveness as a pre-condition for our receiving divine forgiveness and favour, and called attention to its social and ecclesial applications today. Consequently, we suggest, first, that the Churches in Africa make a permanent effort to be a credible sign to the vision of a reconciled brotherhood in the community implied in the parable. This will have a positive impact on the Church's evangelism. Second, by making 'forgiveness' a basic life-style of the members of the Church in each locality, corporate worship and corporate prayer will become more meaningful to all who work for the vision of one brotherhood in Church and society. There will be greater happiness and a feeling of a sense of individual fulfillment when we gather to worship our God, celebrate his presence, and intercede for the world.

Precisely, if compassion and forgiveness are widely accepted as a necessary life-style of each Christian, then extensive changes in the existing social, political and religious patterns in each human community should be attainable. In other family and community stability and promote peace and progress in Church and society.

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