

PARABLE VIII.

THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT.

MATTHEW xviii. 21-35.

A QUESTION of Peter's gives occasion to this parable, that question growing out of some words of Christ, in which He had declared to the members of his future kingdom how they should bear themselves towards an offending brother. Peter would willingly know more on this matter, and brings to the Lord his question: '*Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?*' Chrysostom observes that Peter, thus instancing seven as the number of times of forgiveness, accounted probably that his charity was taking a large stretch, these seven being four times oftener than the Jewish masters enjoined; grounding as they did the duty of forgiving three times and not more, upon Amos i. 3; ii. 6; and on Job xxxiii. 29, 30.¹ He extended their three to seven, no doubt, out of a just sense that the spirit of the new law of love which Christ has brought into the world,—a law larger, freer, more long-suffering than the old,—demanded this.² There was then in Peter's mind a

¹ Lightfoot, *Hor. Heb.* in loc.

² While this is true, there were yet deeper motives for his naming seven times. It is the number in the divine law with which the idea of remission (*ἀφεσις*) is ever linked. The seven times seventh year was the year of jubilee (*ἔτος τῆς ἀφέσεως*), Lev. xxv. 28; cf. iv. 6, 17; xvi. 14, 15. It is true that it is the number of punishment, or retribution for evil, also (Gen. iv. 15; Lev. xxvi. 18, 21, 24, 28; Deut. xxviii. 25; Ps. lxxix. 12; Prov. vi. 31; Dan. iv. 16; Rev. xv. 1); yet this only confirms what has been said; since there lies ever in punishment the idea of restoration of

consciousness of this new law of love; an obscure one, it is true; else he would not have deemed it possible that love could ever be overcome by hate, good by evil. But there was, at the same time, a fundamental error in the question itself; for in proposing a limit beyond which forgiveness should not extend, it was evidently assumed, that a man in forgiving, gave up a right which he might, under certain circumstances, exercise. In this parable the Lord will make clear that when God calls on a member of his kingdom to forgive, He does not call on him to renounce a right, but that he has now no right to exercise in the matter; for having himself sought and accepted forgiveness, he has implicitly pledged himself to show it; and it is difficult to imagine how any amount of didactic instruction could have brought home this truth with at all the force and conviction of the parable which follows.

'Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.¹ Therefore,'—to the end that Peter may understand the larger demands made on him by the new law of love—*'is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.'* This is the first of the parables in which God

disturbed relations, and so of forgiveness (Ezek. xvi. 42); punishment being as the storm which violently restores the disturbed equilibrium of the moral atmosphere. Gregory of Nyssa well (*Opp.* vol. i. p. 159): *'Peter observed, for it is an ancient rule of tradition, that the number seven is significant of a remission of sins, a perfect rest, whereof the sabbath, the seventh day from the beginning, is the symbol.'*

¹ Our Lord's *'seventy times seven'* of forgiveness makes a wonderful contrast, which has not escaped the notice of St. Jerome (vol. ii. p. 565, edit. Bened.), to Lamech, the antediluvian Antichrist's, seventy and seven-fold of revenge (Gen. iv. 24).—*Ἐβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ* is not, as Origen and some others understand it, $70 + 7 = 77$; for that would be rather *ἑβδομήκοντα ἑπτάκις*, but $70 \times 7 = 490$. In the famous letter of Innocent III. to the Patriarch of Constantinople, setting forth the paramount claims of the Roman See, the argument to be derived from this parable, and especially from these words, is not omitted: *'Thus the number seven multiplied with itself in this place, signifies the sum total of sins of the sum total of sinners, for only Peter can loose not merely all offences, but the offences of all.'*

appears as King. We are the servants with whom He takes account. This account, as is plain, is not the *final* reckoning, not therefore identical with the reckoning of Matt. xxv. 19; 2 Cor. v. 10; Rev. xx. 11, 12; but rather such as that of Luke xvi. 2. To this He brings us by the preaching of the law,—by the setting of our sins before our face,—by awakening and alarming our conscience that was asleep before,—by bringing us into adversities (2 Chron. xxxiii. 11–13),—by casting us into sore sicknesses¹ (Job xxxiii. 19–30), into perils of death; so that there is not a step between us and it (2 Kin. xx. 4); He takes account with us, when He makes us feel that we could not answer Him one thing in a thousand, that our trespasses are more than the hairs of our heads; when by one means or another He brings our careless carnal security to an end (Ps. l. 21; Acts xvi. 30). Thus David was summoned before God by the word of Nathan the prophet (2 Sam. xii.); thus the Ninevites by the preaching of Jonah (Jon. iii. 4); thus the Jews by John the Baptist (Luke iii. 3–14).

‘And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents.’ The sum is great, whatever talents we assume; if Hebrew talents, it will be enormous indeed;² yet thus only the fitter to express the immensity of every man’s transgression in thought, word, and deed, against God. Over against the Ten Commandments which he should have kept, are the ten thousand talents,—for the number is not accidental,—setting forth the

¹ Anselm (*Hom.* 5): ‘God begins to reckon when by the troubles of infirmity He brings men to their bed and to death.’

² How vast a sum it was, we can most vividly realize to ourselves by comparing it with other sums mentioned in Scripture. In the construction of the tabernacle twenty-nine talents of gold were used (Exod. xxxviii. 24); David prepared for the temple three thousand talents of gold, and the princes five thousand (1 Chron. xxix. 4–7); the queen of Sheba presented to Solomon one hundred and twenty talents (1 King x. 10); the king of Assyria laid upon Hezekiah thirty talents of gold (2 Kin. xviii. 14); and in the extreme impoverishment to which the land was brought at the last, one talent of gold was laid upon it, after the death of Josiah, by the king of Egypt (2 Chron. xxxvi. 3).

debts (see Matt. vi. 12) which he has incurred. So far as the letter of the parable reaches, we may account for the vastness of the debt by supposing the defaulter to have been one of the chief officers of the king, a farmer or administrator of the royal revenues.¹ Or, seeing that in the despotisms of the East, where a nobility does not exist, and all, from the highest to the lowest, stand in an absolutely servile relation to the monarch, this name of 'servant'² need not hinder us from regarding him as one, to whom some chief post of trust and honour in the kingdom had been committed,—a satrap who should have remitted the revenues of his province to the royal treasury.³ The king had not far to go, he had only 'begun to reckon,' when he lighted on this defaulter; perhaps the first whose accounts were examined; there may have been others with yet larger debts behind. This one 'was brought unto him,' for he never would have come of

¹ In the Jewish parable (Schoettgen, *Hor. Heb.* vol. i. p. 155), bearing some resemblance to this, the sins of men being there represented as an enormous debt, which it is impossible to pay,—it is the tribute due from an entire city which is owing, and which, at the prayer of the inhabitants, the king remits.

² Euripides (*Hel.* 276): Τὰ βαρβάρων γὰρ δοῦλα πάντα πλὴν ἑνός. 'Among barbarians all are slaves save one.'

³ Harpalus, satrap of Babylonia and Syria, besides the enormous sums which he had squandered, carried off with him five thousand talents when he fled to Athens from the wrath of Alexander (Grote, *Hist. of Greece*, vol. viii. p. 496). It was with exactly ten thousand talents that Darius sought to buy off Alexander, that he should not prosecute his conquests in Asia (Plutarch, *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.*); being the same sum with which Haman would have purchased of the Persian king permission to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom (Esth. iii. 9). The same was the fine imposed by the Romans on Antiochus the Great, after his defeat by them. When Alexander, at Susa, paid the debts of the whole Macedonian army, those were not brought up to more than twice this figure, though every motive was at work to enhance the amount (Droysen, *Gesch. Alexanders*, p. 500). Von Bohlen (*Das Alt. Ind.* vol. ii. p. 119) gives almost incredible notices of the quantities of gold in the ancient East.—The immensity of the sum may in part have moved Origen to his strange supposition, that it can only be the man of sin (2 Thess. ii.) that is here indicated, or stranger still, the Devil! Compare Thilo, *Cod. Apocryphus*, vol. i. p. 887, and Neander, *Kirch. Gesch.* vol. v. p. 1122.

himself; more probably would have made that 'ten thousand' into twenty; for the secure sinner goes on, heaping up wrath against the day of wrath, writing himself an ever deeper debtor in the books of God.

'But forasmuch as he had not 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 sale of the debtor's wife and children rested upon the assumption that they were a part of his property. Such was the theory and practice of the Roman law. That it was allowed under the Mosaic law to sell an insolvent debtor, is implicitly stated, Lev. xxv. 39; and from ver. 41 we infer that his family came into bondage with him; no less is implied at Exod. xxii. 3; 2 Kin. iv. 1; Neh. v. 5; Isai. l. 1; Iviii. 6; Jer. xxxiv. 8-11; Amos ii. 6; viii. 6. The later Jewish doctors disallowed this severity, except where a thief should be sold to make good the wrong which he had done; and in our Lord's time a custom so harsh had probably quite disappeared from among the Jews.¹ Certainly the imprisonment of a debtor, twice occurring in this parable (ver. 30, 34), formed no part of the Jewish law; and, where the creditor possessed the power of selling him into bondage, was wholly superfluous. 'The tormentors' also (ver. 34) have a foreign appearance, and dispose us to look for the scene of the parable among the Oriental monarchies, and not in the Jewish commonwealth, where a more merciful legislation tempered the rights of the rich and the strong. For the spiritual significance, this of having nothing to pay expresses the utter bankruptcy of every child of Adam as he stands in the presence of a holy God, and is tried by the strictness of his holy law (Rom. iii. 23; Job xlii. 5, 6). The dreadful command that he shall be sold and all that he has (cf. Ps. xliv. 12), is the expression of God's right and power altogether to alienate from Himself, reject, and deliver over into bondage, all those who have thus come short of his glory (Ps. xliv. 12); that by a terrible but righteous sentence

¹ Michaëlis, *Mos. Recht*, vol. iii. pp. 58-60.

these, unless this sentence be reversed, shall be punished by everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his power.

'*The servant therefore,*' hearing the dreadful doom pronounced against him, betakes himself to supplication, the only resource that is left him; he '*fell down, and worshipped him.*' The formal act of worship, or adoration, consisted in prostration on the ground, with the embracing and kissing of the feet and knees. Origen bids us here to note a nice observance of proprieties in the slighter details of the parable. This servant '*worshipped*' the king, for that honour was paid to royal personages; but we shall not find that the other servant '*worshipped*'—which, as between equals, would have been out of place,—he only '*besought,*' him. His '*Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all,*' is characteristic of the anguish of the moment, out of which he is ready to promise impossible things, even mountains of gold, if only he may be delivered from his present fear. When words corresponding to these find utterance from a sinner's lips in the first conviction of his sin, they testify that he has not yet attained to a full insight into his relations with God; but has still much to learn; and this chiefly, that no future obedience can make up for past disobedience; since that future obedience God claims for his own, and as nothing more than his due. It could not, therefore, even were there no fault or flaw in it, and there will be many, make compensation for the defects of the past; and in this '*I, will pay thee all,*' we must detect the voice of self-righteousness, imagining that, if only time were allowed, it could make all past shortcomings good. This goes far to explain the later conduct of the suppliant here. It is clear that he whom this servant represents, had never come to a true recognition of the vastness of his debt. Little, in the subjective measure of his own estimate, has been forgiven him, and therefore he loves little, or not at all (Luke vii. 47). It is true that by his demeanour and his cry he did recognize his indebtedness, else would there have been no setting of

him free; and he *might* have gone on, and, had he only been true to his own mercies, he would have gone on, to an ever fuller recognition of the grace shown him: but as it was, in a little while he lost sight of it altogether, and showed too plainly that he had 'forgotten that he was purged from his old sins' (2 Pet. i. 9).

However, at the earnestness of his present prayer, '*the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.*'¹ The severity of God only endures till the sinner is brought to acknowledge his guilt; like Joseph's harshness with his brethren, it is love in disguise; and having done its work, having brought him to own that he is verily guilty, it reappears as grace again; that very reckoning, which at first threatened him with irremediable ruin, being, if he will use it aright, the largest mercy of all; bringing indeed his debt to a head, but only bringing it to this head, that it may be for ever abolished (Ps. ciii. 12; Jer. 1. 20; Mic. vii. 19). That, however, must be first done. There can be no forgiving in the dark. God will forgive; but He will have the sinner to know what and how much he is forgiven; there must be first a 'Come now, and let us reason together,' before the scarlet can be made white as snow (Isai. i. 18). The sinner must know his sins for what they are, a mountain of transgression, before ever they can be cast into the deep sea of God's mercy. He must first have the sentence of death in himself, ere the words of life will have any abiding worth for him.

Such abiding worth they have not for the servant who, crying for mercy, has himself obtained it (Wisd. xii. 18, 19).

¹ Compare Chardin (*Voy. en Perse*, vol. v. p. 285): 'Disgrace in Persia is infallibly accompanied by the confiscation of property, and this loss is a great and terrible misfortune, for a man is stripped of all he possesses at a moment's notice and has nothing to call his own. His property, his slaves, and sometimes even his wife and children, are taken from him. Eventually his prospects brighten. The king makes known his pleasure concerning him. His family, some of his slaves and his furniture, are nearly always restored to him, and after a time he is often received back into favour at court, and once more takes office.'

'The same servant went out,' that is, from his master's presence, 'and found,' on the instant, as it would seem, and while the memory of his lord's goodness should have been fresh upon him, 'one of his fellow-servants, which owed him an hundred pence.' May we press this 'went out,' and say that we go out from the presence of our God, when we fail to keep an ever-lively sense of the greatness of our sin, and the greatness of his forgiveness? So more than one interpreter;¹ yet I cannot see more in this than what the outward conditions of the parable require. He is said to go out, because in the actual presence of his lord he could not have ventured on the outrage which follows. The term 'fellow-servant' here does not imply equality of rank between these two, or that they filled similar offices;² but only that they stood both in the relation of servants to a common lord. And this sum is so small, 'an hundred pence,' as the other had been so large, 'ten thousand talents,' to signify how little any man can offend against his brother, compared with that which every man has offended against God;³ so that, in Chrysostom's words, these offences to those are as a drop of water to the boundless ocean.⁴

The whole demeanour of this unrelenting creditor toward his debtor is graphically described: '*He laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying,*⁵ *Pay me that thou owest.*'

¹ Thus Theophylact: 'For no man that abideth in God is without compassion.'

² Such would have been *δμόδουλος*, this is *σύνδουλος*.

³ The Hebrew talent=300 shekels (Exod. xxxviii. 25, 26). Assuming this, the proportion of the two debts to one another would be as follows:

10,000 talents : 100 pence :: 1,250,000 : 1.

⁴ Melancthon: 'For this reason is the sum set down as so great, namely, that we may know that in the sight of God we have truly many and great sins. If thou wilt look into thy life thou wilt easily find many; for great is the carelessness of the flesh, great our negligence in prayer, great our distrust, and many our doubts of God. So also diverse lusts roam within us without limit.'

⁵ Erasmus: 'Ἐπιγρυεν, he dragged him violently by the throat, is the phrase for one who forcibly drags another to prison or before a judge.' Ἄγειν is the more classical word.

Some press the word in the original, and find therein an aggravation of this servant's cruelty, as though he was not even sure whether the debt were owing or not.¹ There is no warrant for this. That the debt was owing is plain; he found, we are told, '*one of his fellow-servants, which owed him an hundred pence.*' Any different assumption would mar the proprieties of the story, would turn the edge of the parable, and we should have here a vulgar extortioner and wrong-doer. But such a one the law would have sufficiently condemned; there would have been no need to speak for this a parable of the kingdom of heaven. The lessons which it teaches are different; lessons which they need to learn who are not under the law, but under grace; and this chiefly—that it is not always *right*, but often the most opposite to right, to press our *rights*, that in the kingdom of grace the *summum jus* may be the *summa injuria*. This man would fain have been measured to by God in one measure, while he measured to his fellows in another. He would fain be forgiven, while yet he did not forgive. But this may not be. A man must make his choice. It is free to him to dwell in the kingdom of grace: but then, receiving grace, he must show grace; finding love, he must exercise love. If, on the contrary, he pushes his rights as far as they will go, if the law of severest justice is the law of his dealings with his fellow-men, he must look for the same as the law of God's dealings with him, and in the measure wherein he has meted, that it shall be measured to him again.

It was in vain that '*his fellow-servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all;*' unconsciously using exactly the same words of entreaty which he, in the agony of his distress, had used, and, using, had found mercy. '*He would not; but*

¹ The εἴ τι ὀφείλεις, which reading, as the more difficult, is to be preferred to ὅ τι ὀφείλεις, and which is retained by Lachmann, does not imply any doubt as to whether the debt were really due or no: but the conditional form was originally, though of course not here, a courteous form of making a demand.

went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt ;' dragging, as we may suppose, his debtor with him till he could consign him to the safe custody of the jailer ; refusing, in Chrysostom's words, ' to recognize the port in which he had himself so lately escaped shipwreck ;' and all unconscious that he was condemning himself, and revoking his own mercy. But such is man, so harsh and hard, when he walks otherwise than in a constant sense of forgiveness received from God. Ignorance or forgetfulness of his own guilt makes him harsh, unforgiving, and cruel to others ; or at best, he is only hindered from being so by those weak defences of natural character which may at any moment break down. He who knows not his own guilt, is ever ready to exclaim, as David in the time of his worst sin, ' The man that hath done this thing shall surely die ' (2 Sam. xii. 5) ; to be as extreme in judging others, as he is remiss and indulgent in judging himself ; while, on the other hand, it is to them ' who are spiritual ' that St. Paul commits the restoring of a brother ' overtaken in a fault ' (Gal. vi. 1) ; and when he urges on Titus the duty of showing meekness unto all men, he finds the motive here—' for we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures ' (Tit. iii. 3). It is just in man to be merciful (Matt. i. 19), to be *humane* is *human*. None but the altogether Righteous may press his utmost rights ; whether He will do so or not is determined by altogether different considerations, but He has not that to hold his hand, which every *man* has, even the sense of his own proper guilt (John viii. 7-9).

' So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done.' It is not in heaven only that indignation is felt when men thus measure to others in so different a measure from that which has been measured to them. There are on earth also those who have learned what is the meaning of the mercy which the sinner finds, and what the obligations which it imposes on him ; and who mourn in their prayer when this is greatly forgotten by others round them. The

servants were 'sorry;' their lord, as we read presently, was 'wroth' (ver. 34); to them grief, to him anger, is ascribed. The distinction is not accidental, nor without its grounds. In man, the sense of his own guilt, the deep consciousness that whatever sin he sees come to ripeness in another, exists in its germ and seed in his own heart, with the knowledge that all flesh is one, and that the sin of one calls for humiliation from all, will rightly make sorrow the predominant feeling in his heart, when the spectacle of moral evil is brought before his eyes (Ps. cxix. 136, 158; Rom. ix. 2; 2 Pet. i. 7); but in God the pure hatred of sin,¹ which is, indeed, his love of holiness at its opposite pole, finds place. At the same time the sorrow which is here ascribed to the servants is not, as Bengel has well observed,² without its own admixture of indignation. As the servants of the king here, so the servants of a heavenly King complain to Him, mourn over all the oppressions that are wrought in their sight: the things which they cannot set right themselves, the wrongs which they are weak to redress, they can at least bring to Him; and they do not bring them in vain. '*Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant*'³—this, which he had not called him on account of his debt, he now calls him on account of his ingratitude and cruelty—'*I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant even as I had pity on thee?*'⁴ The guilt which he is charged with is, not that, *needing mercy*, he refused to show it, but that, *having received mercy*, he remains unmerciful still (cf. 1 John iv. 11). A most important difference! They, therefore, who like him are hard-hearted and cruel, do not thereby bear witness that they have

¹ On the language of Scripture, attributing anger, repentance, jealousy to God, Augustine has good remarks (*Con. Adv. Leg. et Proph.* i. 20; and *Ad Simplic.* ii. qu. 2).

² 'Often the word λύπη (sorrow) denotes indignation as well.'

³ Bengel: 'He had not been called so on account of his debt,'—a remark which Origen and Chrysostom had already made.

⁴ See Chrysostom, *De Simult. Hom.* xx. 6, an admirable discourse.

received no mercy: on the contrary, the stress of their offence is, that having received an infinite mercy, they remain unmerciful yet. The objective fact, that Christ has put away the sin of the world, and that we have been baptized into the remission of sins, stands firm, whether we allow it to exercise a purifying, sanctifying, humanizing influence on our hearts or not. Our faith apprehends, indeed, the benefit, but has not created it, any more than our opening of our eyes upon the sun has first set the sun in the heavens.

'*And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him*'—according to that word, 'He shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy' (Jam. ii. 13). The king had dealt with him before as a creditor with a debtor, but now as a judge with a criminal. '*The tormentors*' are those who, as the word implies, shall make the life of a prisoner bitter to him; wring out from him the confession of any concealed hoards which he may still possess; even as there are '*tormentors*' in that world of woe, whereof this prison is a figure—fellow-sinners and evil angels—instruments of the just yet terrible judgments of God.¹ But here it is strange that the king delivers the offender to prison and to punish-

¹ Grotius makes the *βασανισταί* (tormentors) merely = *δεσμοφύλακες* (jailers), and so Kuinoel, who observes that debtors are given to safe keeping, but not to tortures. This is not accurate. Thus in early times there were certain legal tortures, a chain weighing fifteen pounds, a pittance of food barely sufficient to sustain life (see Arnold, *Hist. of Rome*, vol. i. p. 136; Livy, ii. 23), which the Roman creditor might apply to the debtor for the bringing him to terms. In the East, too, where no depth of apparent poverty excludes the suspicion that there may be somewhere a hidden store, where too it is almost a point of honour not to pay but on hardest compulsion, the torture would be often used to wring something from the sufferings of the debtor himself, or from the compassion of his friends. In all these cases the jailer would be naturally the '*tormentor*' as well (see 1 Kin. xxii. 27); so that '*tormentors*' may well stand in its proper sense. Cf. 4 Macc. vi. 11. Had this wicked servant merely been given into ward now, his punishment would have been lighter than it should have been, when his offence was not near so enormous as now it had become; for then he was to have been sold into slavery.

ment not for the evil which he had just wrought, but for that old debt which had seemed unconditionally remitted to him. When Hammond says, that the king 'revoked his *designed* mercy,' and would transfer this view of the transaction to the relation between God and sinners, this is one of those evasions of a difficulty by help of an ambiguous expression, or a word ingeniously thrust in, which are too frequent even in good interpreters of Scripture. It was not merely a *designed* mercy; the king had not merely *purposed* to forgive him, but, as is distinctly declared, '*forgave him the debt.*' It has been ingeniously suggested that the debt for which he is now cast into prison, is the debt of mercy and love, which, according to that pregnant word of St. Paul's, 'Owe no man anything, but to love one another,' he owed, but had so signally failed to pay. Few, however, would be satisfied with this. As little are the cases of Adonijah and Shimei (1 Kin. ii.) altogether in point. They, no doubt, on occasion of their later offences, were punished far more severely than they would have been, but for their former faults; yet for all this it is not the former offences which are revived that they may be punished, but the later offence which calls down its own punishment; not to say that parallels drawn from questionable acts of imperfect men, go but a little way in establishing the righteousness of God.

The question which seems involved in all this, Do sins, once forgiven, return on the sinner through his after offences? is one frequently and fully discussed by the Schoolmen;¹ and of course this parable occupies a prominent place in such discussions. But it may be worth considering, whether difficulties upon this point do not arise mainly from too dead

¹ By Pet. Lombard (*Sent.* iv. dist. 22); Aquinas (*Sum. Theol.* pars iii. qu. 88); and H. de Sto. Victore (*De Sacram.* ii. pars, 14, 9: *Utrum peccata semel dimissa redeant*). Cf. Augustine, *De Bapt. Con. Don.* i. 12. Cajetan, quoting Rom. xi. 29, 'the gifts of God are without repentance' (*ἀμεταμέλητα*), explains thus the recalling of the pardon which had once been granted: 'Debts once forgiven are again claimed, but not, as formerly, as debts, but as the subject-matter of ingratitude which they have now become,'—which is exactly the decision of Aquinas.

and formal a way of contemplating the forgiveness of sins ; from our suffering the earthly circumstances of the remission of a debt to embarrass the heavenly truth, instead of regarding them as helps, but weak and often failing ones, for the setting forth of that truth. One cannot conceive of remission of sins apart from living communion with Christ ; being baptized into Him, we are baptized into the forgiveness of sins ; and the abiding in Christ and the forgiveness of sins go ever henceforward hand in hand, are inseparable one from the other. But if we cease to abide in Him, we then fall back into that state which is of itself a state of condemnation and death, and one on which the wrath of God is resting. If then, setting aside the contemplation of a man's sins as a formal debt, which must either be forgiven to him or not forgiven, we contemplate the life out of Christ as a state or condition of wrath, and the life in Christ as one of grace, the one a walking in darkness, and the other a walking in the light, we can better understand how a man's sins should return upon him ; that is, he sinning anew falls back into the darkness out of which he had been delivered, and, no doubt, all that he has done of evil in former times adds to the thickness of that darkness, causes the wrath of God to abide more terribly on that state in which he now is, and therefore upon him (John v. 14). Nor may we leave out of sight that all forgiveness, short of that crowning and last act, which will find place on the day of judgment, and will be followed by a blessed impossibility of sinning any more, is conditional, in the very nature of things so conditional, that the condition must in every case be assumed, whether distinctly stated or not ; that condition being that the forgiven man continue in faith and obedience, in that state of grace into which he has been brought ; which he who by this unmerciful servant is figured to us here, had evidently failed to do. He that will partake of the final salvation must abide in Christ, else he will be 'cast forth as a branch and withered' (John xv. 6). This is the condition, not arbitrarily imposed from without, but belonging to the very essence of the salvation itself ; just

as if one were drawn from the raging sea, and set upon the safe shore, the condition of his continued safety would be that he remained there, and did not again cast himself into the raging waters. In this point of view 1 John i. 7 will supply an interesting parallel: 'If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.' He whom this servant represents does not abide in the light of love, but falls back into the old darkness; he has, therefore, no fellowship with his brother, and the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ ceases from him.

It is familiar to many that the theologians of Rome have drawn an argument for purgatory from the words, '*till he should pay all that was due,*' and no less from the parallel expression, Matt. v. 26; as though they marked a limit of time beyond which the punishment should not extend. But the phrase is proverbial, and all which it signifies is, that the offender shall now taste of the extreme rigour of the law; shall have justice without mercy; and always *paying*, shall yet never have *paid off*, his debt.¹ For since the sinner could never acquit the slightest portion of the debt in which he is indebted to God, the putting that as a condition of his liberation, which it is impossible could ever be fulfilled, may be the strongest possible way of expressing the everlasting duration of his punishment. When the Phocæans, abandoning their city, swore that they would not return till the mass of iron which they plunged into the sea rose once more to the surface, this was the most emphatic form they could devise of declaring that they would *never* return; such an emphatic declaration is the present.

The Lord concludes with a word of earnest warning: '*So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye*

¹ See Gerhard, *Loci Theoll.* loc. xxvii. 8. Chrysostom: 'That is to say perpetually, for he will never pay it off': and Augustine (*De Serm. Dom. in Mon.* i. 11): 'Until thou payest. . . I must believe that He is alluding to the punishment which is called eternal.' So Remigius: 'He shall ever be paying, but never pay in full.'

from your hearts¹ forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.' 'So'—with the same rigour; such treasures of wrath, as well as such treasures of grace, are with Him: He who could so greatly forgive, can also so greatly punish. 'My heavenly Father'—not thereby implying that in such case He would not be *theirs*, since they, thus acting, would have denied the relationship; for our Lord says often, 'My Father' (as ver. 19), when no such reason can be assigned. On the declaration itself we may observe that the Christian stands in a middle point, between a mercy received and a mercy which he yet needs to receive. Sometimes the first is urged upon him as an argument for showing mercy—'forgiving one another, as Christ forgave you' (Col. iii. 13; Ephes. iv. 32); sometimes the last, 'Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy' (Matt. v. 7); 'With the merciful thou wilt shew thyself merciful' (Ps. xviii. 25); 'Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven' (Luke vi. 37); while sometimes the other and more menacing side of the same truth is urged, as in this present parable, and in words recorded by St. Mark, 'But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses' (xi. 26; cf. Jam. ii. 13); and in the same way by the Son of Sirach (xxviii. 3, 4), 'One man beareth hatred against another, and doth he seek pardon from the Lord? he showeth no mercy to a man who is like himself, and doth he ask forgiveness of his own sins?' And thus, while he must ever look back on a mercy received as the source and motive of the mercy which he shows, he looks forward as well to the mercy which he yet needs, and which he is assured that the merciful, according to what Bengel beautifully calls the *benigna talio* of the kingdom of God, shall obtain, as a new provocation to its abundant exercise. Tholuck has some good remarks upon this point:

¹ Ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν = ἐκ ψυχῆς, Ephes. vi. 6; 1 Macc. viii. 27; to the exclusion, not merely of acts of hostility, but also of all *μνησικακία*, or remembrance of wrongs. H. de Sto. Victore: 'That he may neither wreak vengeance in act, nor keep back malice in his heart;' and Jerome: 'The Lord added, from your hearts, that He might dispel all pretence of a feigned peace.'

'From the circumstance that mercy is here [Matt. v. 7] promised as the recompense of anterior mercy on our part, it might indeed be inferred that under "merciful" we are to imagine such as have not yet in any degree partaken of mercy; but this conclusion would only be just on the assumption that the divine compassion consisted in an isolated act, of which man could be the object only once for all in his life. Seeing, however, that it is an act which extends over the whole life of the individual, and reaches its culminating point in eternity, it behoves us to consider the compassion of God for man, and man for his brethren, as reciprocally calling forth and affording a basis for one another.'¹ And a difficulty which Origen suggests, finds its explanation here.² He asks, *where in time* are we to place the transactions shadowed forth in this parable? There are reasons on the one hand why they should be placed at the end of this present dispensation; since at what other time does God take account with his servants for condemnation or acquittal? while yet, if placed there, what further opportunity would the forgiven servant have for displaying the harshness and cruelty which he actually does display towards his fellow-servant? The difficulty disappears, when we no longer contemplate forgiveness as an isolated act, which must take place at some definite moment, and then is past and irrevocable; but regard it rather as ever going forward, as running parallel with and extending over the entire life of the redeemed, which, as it is a life of continual sin and shortcoming, so has need to be a life of continual forgiveness.³

¹ *Auslegung der Bergpredigt*, p. 93.

² *Comm. in Matt.* xviii.

³ Fleury has a fine story, illustrative of this parable (*Hist. Eccles.* vol. ii. p. 334). Between two Christians at Antioch enmity had sprung up. After a while one of them desired to be reconciled, but the other, who was a priest, refused. While it thus fared with them, the persecution of Valerian began; and Sapricius, the priest, having boldly confessed himself a Christian, was on the way to death. Nicephorus met him, and again sued for peace, which was again refused. While he was seeking that peace which the other withheld, they arrived at the place of

execution. He that should have been the martyr was here terrified, offered to sacrifice to the gods, and, despite the entreaties of the other, did so, making shipwreck of his faith and of his soul ; while Nicephorus, boldly confessing, stepped in his place, and received the crown which Sapricius lost. This story runs finely parallel with our parable. Before Sapricius could have had grace to confess Christ, he must have had his own ten thousand talents forgiven ; but refusing to forgive a far lesser wrong, to put away the displeasure he had conceived on some infinitely lighter grounds against his brother, he forfeited all, *his* Lord was angry, withdrew from him his grace, and suffered him again to be entangled in that kingdom of darkness from which he had once been delivered. We are further reminded well that the unforgiving temper, apart from all outward wrong, itself constitutes the sin of the unmerciful servant. So Augustine (*Quæst. Evang.* i. qu. 25) : 'He would not forgive ; . . . by this we must understand that he held such feeling towards him as to desire his punishment.'