

One of the more frustrating parts of Bible study for many people is the conversion of weights and measures. Throughout scripture we have all sorts of measurements. Palms, spans, cubits, mils, and parasangs for length. Searahs, adashahs, gerises, and amahs for area. Eggs, logs, kavs, seahs, ephahs, and leteks for volume. The terms can be truly mind numbing. And the math required to convert them into feet and acres and gallons often feels not worth doing.

Money is no exception. The conversion to dollars of Biblical money is an imprecise science at best. Mostly because money in the ancient world was usually a unit of weight. Specifically, a weight of gold or silver. So when I talk about buying something for a shekel, I'm talking about using a silver coin that weighs one shekel. About half an ounce.

And how much is that worth? Well, in the ancient world, about three and a half days labor at their equivalent of minimum wage. So roughly \$175... maybe. But you see what I mean? It's a lot of math, a lot of estimating, a lot of cultural equivalences. But it's important. Because sometimes the numbers in a scripture reading are key to understanding the message.

That's the case in our Gospel lesson. Jesus tells a parable about two men who owe large sums of money. One man has his debt forgiven, but he turns around and refuses to forgive the debt of the one who owes him money. It's a clear, powerful message no matter what.

But it's the numbers that really make it stand out. Because the first man, the one whose debt is forgiven, he owes an absolutely absurd amount of money. A talent is not simply a gold coin that weighs a few ounces. It's a gold brick that weighs over two pounds. Its value isn't measured in terms of a day's wage. It's measured in terms of a year's wage. Specifically, one talent was worth about 20 years of labor. Which means this man's debt of 10,000 talents could be valued at somewhere around \$3 billion.

This man doesn't just owe a little credit card debt. Or even a mortgage. He's at federal deficit levels. He could have every bit of his assets repossessed and have himself, his wife, his children, his grandchildren, his aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and every relative all the way to his 10th cousin five times removed sold into slavery. And he still wouldn't be able to pay off this debt.

But he doesn't have to. Despite the size of his debt, it's forgiven. Why in the world would anyone forgive a debt that size? Well, kindness, for one. Grace. Mercy. Love. All true. But what purpose would it serve?

Maybe the better question is, what purpose would demanding repayment for the debt serve? I mean, he owes money to the king. To a king who's obviously wealthy enough to loan out \$3 billion to someone who can't pay it back. The king doesn't need this money. And so he looks at this servant and decides that it would be better, it would be more profitable for everyone, if this servant learned the value of forgiveness.

In a sense, the king in this story is the king of two kingdoms. A physical kingdom in which he and these servants live. But also the king of a spiritual kingdom. In which things like grace and mercy and forgiveness are more important than money and greed and profit. And though he's already king over this servant in the physical kingdom, he wants to be king over this servant in the spiritual kingdom as well. He wants this servant to join him in a place where forgiveness is priceless.

But the servant doesn't get it. He refuses to enter the king's spiritual kingdom. He looks at the forgiveness given to him and sees only an opportunity for more profit. "Aha!" he thinks. "I'm free of this debt. Now I can really start to make some money." So he goes to the second servant. The second servant owes him a hundred denarii. A denarius was worth about one day's wage. A hundred denarii? About \$5,000.

\$5,000 isn't chump change. But it's a reasonable debt. With a little time and effort, you can repay \$5,000. But the first servant isn't just unforgiving. He's greedy and impatient and cruel. He would rather choke this man and throw him in prison than show an ounce of grace and mercy.

He's completely missed the king's point. And while he may still be a servant of the king in his physical kingdom, he's proven himself an enemy of the king in his spiritual kingdom. And so the king decides to be king in the physical kingdom where all debts must be repaid in full. He has him thrown in prison. Until he can come up with \$3 billion and repay every dime.

It's a powerful parable. All the more so because of how often it plays out in the real world. And we see it playing out to some degree or another in both of the scripture lessons that accompany it this morning.

The first is the story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph's brothers have been the worst brothers since Cain murdered Abel. Because although they didn't kill Joseph, they certainly tried to. Stripped, beaten, left to die in a pit, and then sold into slavery. Joseph has every reason to hate his brothers with every fiber of his being.

And frankly, the Bible indicates to us that he's not real fond of them. When they show up in Egypt and don't recognize him, he toys with them a bit, with lies and threats. Even after he reveals his identity, he does so mainly for his father's benefit. And afterwards, he keeps his brothers at arms length.

But then his father dies. And the brothers realize that if Joseph still hates them, without their father protecting them, there's nothing to stop him from getting revenge. And so they go to him. Plead with him. Lie to him. "Please, Joseph! It was the dying wish of our father that you would forgive us." No it wasn't! All of Jacob's final words are recorded in Genesis 48 and 49. No where does it say anything like that.

But Joseph doesn't care. He asks his brothers, "Am I in the place of God?" Well, Joseph, yeah you are. Because he's in the position of the king in the parable now. And he chooses to do the same as that king. He could take vengeance on his brothers. Throw them in prison for just as long as he was in slavery.

But what would that accomplish? God blessed Joseph with power and prosperity. And that can never be taken away. What good would it do anyone to hate his brothers? Wouldn't it be better to teach them forgiveness? Joseph is a leader not only over Egypt. But in God's spiritual kingdom as well. And he leads his brothers in forgiving one another.

Which is the very lesson that Paul is trying to teach the Romans. Because after 14 chapters of the most sublime theology ever written, Paul has to settle an argument about food and holidays. There are some among the Roman Christians who think they must keep kosher and celebrate all the Jewish festivals. There are some who think they don't. And this stupid little argument is tearing their church apart.

Because they're all wrong. Both sides of the argument. No, they don't need to keep kosher or celebrate the Jewish festivals. Paul makes that clear when he refers to those who think they do as "weak in faith" and "weak people." But that's beside the point.

So they're wrong. Who cares? It's not worth fighting over. Whatever you do, be convinced in your own mind and let it go. Don't destroy your congregation trying to convince each other about something that just doesn't matter.

Because when you do, you become the servant who demands \$5,000 when he's been forgiven \$3 billion. When you do, you forget the fact that, by your daily sins of thought, word, and deed, you strip and beat and kill your own brother, Jesus Christ. And yet constantly receive his grace and mercy.

When you do, you leave the spiritual kingdom of God, and you live only in the physical kingdom of God. And in the physical kingdom of God, debts must be repaid. And vengeance is swift. And eternal imprisonment is a very real option.

But not in the spiritual kingdom. In the spiritual kingdom of God, forgiveness is frequent and freedom is eternal. And the Lord who died for us and lived again is Lord over us whether we live or die. Whether keep kosher laws and Jewish festivals or not.

You argue over something because you think you're right. And maybe you are. But you're also very wrong. You're wrong for a multitude of other reasons. And yet God forgives you. Just as He forgives this person you're arguing with. Just as he forgives you for arguing with them.

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of forgiveness. If you want profit and vengeance and just to be right, well then the world has lots to offer you, but it all leads to death. God's kingdom has no profit. No vengeance. Not even the satisfaction of winning an argument. But it's ruled by a king who forgives. And teaches us to forgive. That we may live forever in his kingdom. Amen.