

Grace in the Synoptic Teachings of Jesus

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Grace is generally defined as “God’s unmerited favor toward humanity and especially his people, realized through the covenant and fulfilled through Jesus Christ.”¹ The idea of “unmerited favor” is generally highlighted in the definitions because it is perceived as the “essence of grace in biblical terms.”² For example, Charles C. Ryrie says it is “the unmerited favor of God giving His Son and all the benefits that result from receiving Him.”³ It is “favor or kindness shown without regard to the worth of the one who receives it and in spite of what that person deserves.”⁴ The Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez calls this “gratuitousness.”⁵

The vocabulary denoting grace is quite extensive in the Bible. The primary Hebrew root (*hnn*) and its derivatives appear about 160 times and generally point to finding favor from God or from a person.⁶ In concrete pictures, typical of the OT, it means “to bend down to,” and is suggestive of “a loving parent

¹*Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, (1987), s.v., “Grace.”

²Horace O. Duke, *Where is God When Bad Things Happen?* (Mumbai: St. Paul’s, 1999), 104.

³Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Victor, 1989), 156.

⁴Ronald F. Youngblood, gen. ed., *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. (Nashville: Nelson, 1986), 522.

⁵Gustavo Gutierrez, *Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), xi.

⁶Willem A. Van Gemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:203.

MULZAC: GRACE IN THE SYNOPTIC TEACHINGS OF JESUS

bending over a suffering child.”⁷ It is not an abstract idea since it “denotes the kind turning of one person to another as expressed in an act of assistance.”⁸

In the NT the Greek word *charis* appears 155 times, mostly in the Pauline literature (110 times),⁹ where it “is a central concept that most clearly expresses his understanding of the salvation event.”¹⁰ However, the vocabulary for grace is amazingly sparse in the Synoptic Gospels. The word does not occur in Matthew and Mark. In Luke it is found eight times: in 1:30 it points to Mary finding “favor” with God; in 2:40, 52, it denotes the acceptability of the child Jesus with God and people; in 4:22 it underscores the charming words Jesus spoke; while in 6:32, 33, 34 and 17:9 it means “thanks.”

Since grace is “the purest expression of God’s redemptive love”¹¹ and the biblical record underscores it “from creation to redemption,”¹² it is surprising that the word is not dripping from the lips of Jesus, the Savior of the world, who is described as being “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). However, although the “Gospels rarely use the word ‘grace,’ . . . its substance permeates them in the life and teaching of Jesus.”¹³ Indeed, “the idea of grace is prominent. Jesus says that he came to seek and save the lost. Many of his parables teach the doctrine of grace.”¹⁴

This paper explores the concept of grace in two of Jesus’ parables that place the emphasis on unmerited favor, not in the typical God-to-Person context, but in the Person-to-Person context. Indeed, the teaching is decidedly pastoral. These two are the parables concerning the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the Unmerciful Servant (Matt 18:21-35). They share the following similarities:

1. Both are introduced with an interrogative. They are Jesus’ responses to questions posed by His listeners. In the first, the query of the expert in the law

⁷Wayne E. Ward, “Grace,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills (Macon: Mercer UP, 1990), 347. Ward stresses the “divine initiative and human helplessness” and indicates the centrality of grace to the Exodus and the Cross. It is dynamically related to other theological concepts such as covenant, forgiveness, love, and salvation.

⁸Walther Zimmerli, “*Charis*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), Gerhard Friedrich, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 9:377.

⁹It is especially prevalent in Romans (twenty-four times), 1 and 2 Corinthians (ten and eighteen times, respectively), and Ephesians (twelve times). Outside of Paul’s epistles it is found primarily in Acts (seventeen times), 1 Peter (ten times), and Hebrews (eight times). Related words such as *charisma* and *charizesthai* are also chiefly Pauline. See H. -H. Esser, “Grace, Spiritual Gifts,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), 2:118.

¹⁰“*Charis*,” TDNT (1974), 9:393.

¹¹Ward, 347.

¹²*Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Grace.”

¹³*Ibid.*, 437.

¹⁴J. H. Stringer, “Grace, Favour,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 3d. edition, ed. I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: InterVarsity; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1996), 433.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

is, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”¹⁵ (v. 25) and more specifically, “Who is my neighbor?” (v. 29). In the second, Peter inquires, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (v. 21).

2. Both deal with how a person treats another. Hence, they are in the concrete context of human behavior.

3. Both are triadic. In the first, the thieves, by having the same intent, are lumped together as one character; the priest and Levite, since they are both religious persons, form the second; while the Samaritan is the third.¹⁶ In the second parable, the king is the first character; the unjust servant is the second, while his colleague is the third.

4. Both deal with characters operating according to similar principles. In other words, the parables demonstrate similar philosophies of life as illustrated in the characters. These indicate how people live their lives.

5. Both deal with the idea of mercy. This forms the concluding issue for both parables.

The Good Samaritan: Grace in the Context of the Enemy

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.

¹⁵All scripture quotations are from the NIV.

¹⁶While the story is told from the perspective of the injured man, and he is the only person who appears in all scenes of the parable, he is also the only one who is passive. All other characters are active. Hence, we do not include the victim as one of the main characters.

MULZAC: GRACE IN THE SYNOPTIC TEACHINGS OF JESUS

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”
The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”
Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” Luke 10:25-37

The discussion here starts because a lawyer wants to test Jesus. He asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). It appears that his motive is negative because the word *ekpeirazein* (“test”) usually has such a connotation in the NT.¹⁷ Further, the aorist participle *ti poiesas* (“what must I do?”) “implies that by the performance of one thing eternal life can be secured. What heroic act must be performed, or what great sacrifice made?”¹⁸ This emphasis on doing something to gain eternal life points in the direction of merit by human action and achievement. Jesus directs the lawyer’s attention, most appropriately, to what the Law teaches. The man responds by quoting portions of the Law (Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18, respectively) to show that total love for God and one’s neighbor insures eternal life. Jesus answers with an imperative, “*Touto poiei*,” “Keep on doing so and you will live” (v. 28). The implication is that eternal life cannot be accomplished by merit, that is, from following a set of rules as the lawyer suggests.

Not grasping the implications of his own words, the lawyer seeks self-justification by posing another question: “Who is my neighbor?” (v. 29). The Jews believed that the neighbor could only be one who belonged to the covenant community, not an outsider.¹⁹ Already there is a hint that this definition is too limited, because the word for neighbor (*ho plesion*) quoted in Lev 19:18 means more than one who lives nearby or next door, for which *ho perioikos* would have been used.²⁰

Interestingly, Jesus does not directly answer the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” Instead, he turns it around and, by telling the parable,²¹ answers a different question: “Whose neighbor am I?” In other words, He teaches *how* one ought to behave neighborly. The story may have been “an account of an actual occurrence”²² and “is told from the perspective of the needs of the wounded man.”²³ This man, whose ethnicity is not mentioned²⁴ but is generally

¹⁷Cf. Matt 4:7, Luke 4:12, and 1 Cor 10:9.

¹⁸Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 313.

¹⁹The narrow scope of the definition of neighbor may already be noted in Sirach 12:1-4: “If you do good, know to whom you do it . . . and do not help the sinner.”

²⁰Cf. Luke 1:58.

²¹For a discussion concerning the classification or categorization of this parable, see John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35B (Dallas: Word, 1993), 590-91.

²²Glendenhuys, 311. Cf. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1940), 485, who writes, “This was no imaginary scene, but an actual occurrence, which was known to be exactly as represented.”

²³Nolland, 591. This is obvious since the wounded man is the only person who remains on the scene of action throughout the account.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

understood to be Jewish, was attacked by robbers who terrorized travelers on the notoriously dangerous road going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.²⁵ His desperate plight is captured in v. 30b: “They (the thieves) stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.” This verse also introduces us to the first character in the triad. Since the thieves all had the same intention they are grouped together. From their violent and vicious actions against this unsuspecting man they manifest a certain philosophy of life that says, “*I will take what you have.*” It is their actions, based on such a philosophy of life, which place the unfortunate victim in a state of emergency—indeed, in a life-and-death situation. His desperate need results directly from their atrocious and barbarous behavior.

Verses 31 and 32 describe the second character in the triad. Since both priest and Levite are religious persons, they are grouped together. To Jesus’ listeners, the arrival of the priest would have signaled good fortune for the wounded man.²⁶ If anyone is expected to help a mortally wounded person, surely it would be one who works on behalf of “injured” people (at least, the spiritually injured). However, “this prime representative of the religion that, in the person of the lawyer, has just agreed upon the fundamental place of love hardens his heart and passes by on the other side.”²⁷

Then along comes a Levite.²⁸ As a religious person he would be expected to help, though that expectation would be lesser than that of the priest. But he too chooses not to get involved and passes by on the other side. The similar action of both religious figures demonstrates the same philosophy of life: “*I will keep what I have.*”

There is much discussion about the reason(s) why these two avoided the wounded man. It has been suggested that they were concerned for their own safety since the brigands sometimes had one of their own feign misfortune, and when some unsuspecting person stopped to help, then they would attack him.

²⁴He is described simply as *anthropos tis*, “a certain person.” Nolland, 592, says that even though the expression appears in the NT only in Luke’s writings (cf. 12:16; 14:2,16; 15:11; 16:1,19; Acts 9:33), it may not be distinctively Lukan.

²⁵The distance between both cities was about eighteen miles with a drop in elevation of approximately 3,300 feet or about 1100 meters. Jericho itself is roughly 800 feet (244 meters) below sea level. Because the focus of the story is on human need, details of geography and so forth are merely extraneous and therefore distracting.

²⁶At that time Jericho was a city of priests, and so it was not uncommon for priests (and Levites) to be moving between the temple in Jerusalem and their homes in the “city of palms” (Judg 3:13).

²⁷Nolland, 593.

²⁸Of the tribe of Levi, only direct descendants of Aaron could function as priests, charged with cultic responsibilities such as offering burnt offerings and supervising the people in worship. The other Levites served as priestly assistants, caring for the tabernacle and temple and performing other non-priestly duties.

MULZAC: GRACE IN THE SYNOPTIC TEACHINGS OF JESUS

The main reason posited, however, is a cultic one. In describing the priest's action (and the Levite by extension), Leon Morris says,

Since the man was 'half dead' the priest would probably not have been able to be certain whether he was dead or not without touching him. But if he touched him and the man was in fact dead, then he would have incurred the ceremonial defilement that the Law forbade (Lv. 21:1ff.). He could be sure of retaining his ceremonial purity only by leaving the man alone . . . He deliberately avoided any possibility of contact.²⁹

Regardless of the reason, we must realize that the focus here is not why the religious leaders refused to help, but on the fact that they did not help. By telling the narrative in this way, Jesus masterfully plots the story so as to have a heightened effect on the hearers. The role of these two religious personages is to create hope and then quickly dash it to the ground. To be sure, if these two do not help, who will? "The needy man's situation has now measurably worsened. Nobody else might come on the scene soon enough."³⁰ Further, by bringing together the priest and Levite, Jesus makes the drama even more intriguing. Certainly the priest is expected to help; but since he does not, it is not expected that the Levite will help, as Levites were subordinate to priests. After all, they were relegated to menial and secondary tasks in the temple. They were of lower rank than priests. So who then will help the fallen comrade? Will there be some miracle of divine intervention? Nolland puts it this way:

At this point the story is open to a number of possible developments. (Is it after all an anti-clerical story, and now an ordinary Israelite will come along and save the day? Will God intervene with angelic help and shame the religious figures? Is the story to be a tragedy in which the injured man's demise brings shame upon the covenant community?)³¹

Instead, Jesus now introduces the Samaritan. The listeners would have expected this Samaritan to do nothing for the sufferer. The historic enmity between Jews and Samaritans was well known. To be called a Samaritan was a deep insult,³² and both groups avoided contact with each other as much as possible.³³ There was much bad blood between them. Tractate *m. Seb* 8:10 captures the

²⁹Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1984), 189. Touching a corpse defiled a person (cf. Lev 21:1-3; Num 5:2; 19:2-3; Ezek 44:25-27).

³⁰Nolland, 594.

³¹Ibid.

³²When Jesus accused the Jews of refusing to believe in Him and therefore in God, they retorted with derision, "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?" John 8:48.

³³Cf. Luke 9:51-56 and John 4:7-9.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

inherent abhorrence, “He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like one that eats the flesh of swine.” Furthermore, Samaritans were placed at “the lowest degree of the scale [i.e., of racial purity].”³⁴ And along with other groups, Samaritans “shared . . . a hostile attitude toward Jerusalem.”³⁵

The impact is heightened by Jesus’ use of the contrastive conjunction: “*But* a Samaritan . . . came where the man was; and when he saw him he took pity on him” (v. 33). M. J. J. Menken has shown how Jesus deliberately positions the expression “he took pity” (*esplagchnisthe*) in a strategic way so that it explodes the impact of what He is teaching.³⁶ Whereas those who are expected to act with compassion toward the helpless victim deliberately refuse to do so, the one who is hated and despised deliberately stoops to help. Furthermore, he risks himself in doing so. This action defines compassion, “that which causes us to identify with another’s situation such that we are prepared to *act* for his or her benefit.”³⁷

The demonstration of such compassion is illustrated in what the Samaritan does for the injured man. He administers first aid,³⁸ provides transportation to a safe place, pays for the man’s immediate basic needs, and makes arrangements for any future attentions he may need. In so doing, the Samaritan demonstrates his philosophy of life: *I will share what I have*. It is in this sharing that love is exemplified. Therefore, the Samaritan’s philosophy and action in life indicate that he is fulfilling the ethical demands of the Law, that is, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev19:18). As such, he, an outcast, is closer to eternal life than those who count themselves as privileged members of the elect community. By their refusal to act on “the ethical demands of their own law,”³⁹ the priest and Levite have made themselves the (new?) outcasts. They are far from eternal life.

While the word “grace” is not used in the story, the idea of it is quite evident. From the perspective of the victim, grace is experienced. The sufferer does not merit favor, especially since Jewish fanaticism would prefer death rather than receive help from a Samaritan.⁴⁰ But by his very actions this Samaritan

³⁴Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions During the New Testament Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 352.

³⁵R. J. Coggins, *Samaritans and Jews: The Origins of Samaritanism Reconsidered*, Growing Points in Theology (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 142.

³⁶M. J. J. Menken, “The Position of *splagchnizestai* and *splgachna* in the Gospel of Luke,” *Novum Testamentum* 30 (1988), 111.

³⁷Nolland, 594 (emphasis mine).

³⁸Oil and wine were used for medicinal purposes in the first century. R. K. Harrison, “Oil,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 3d edition, ed. D. R. W. Wood (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1996), 844, says that oil was a “popular unguent application for bruises and wounds.” See too A. C. Shultz, “Wine and Strong Drink,” *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 5:938, who refers to a popular rabbinic saying, “Wine is the greatest of all medicines; where wine is lacking, there drugs are necessary.”

³⁹Nolland, 595.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

MULZAC: GRACE IN THE SYNOPTIC TEACHINGS OF JESUS

exemplifies graciousness, even in the OT sense of the word. Esser puts it eloquently,

The use of the word hen clarifies the meaning of “grace” in history and actions. *It denotes the stronger coming to the help of the weaker who stands in need of help by reason of his circumstances or natural weakness. He acts by a voluntary decision, though he is moved by the dependence or request of the weaker party.*⁴¹

In his conclusion to the parable, Jesus then asks the lawyer, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (v. 36).⁴² The answer is obvious. Indeed, “The *one* who had mercy on him” (v. 37a). Yet, the lawyer’s answer shows his deep-seated racism. By using a periphrasis he avoids putting the scornful word “Samaritan” on his lips and mutters a non-specific designation, “The *one* who showed mercy.” He denies ‘identity’ to the Samaritan. In this way the Samaritan, though a hero in the story, remains a non-person, still the object of scorn. But it is precisely the merciful acts of the Samaritan that give him identity. On Jesus’ lips, he is the real person, the one who is not hemmed in by narrow boundaries.

According to Jesus, the neighbor is anyone who addresses the needs of the other. Jesus emphasizes the concrete actions of sympathy, empathy, and compassion. This is the essence of grace. It is being neighborly to those in need. From the perspective of the desperate and disenfranchised, neighborliness is the choice to share what one has. When one loves God and people, such a choice, as exemplified in the Samaritan’s actions, demonstrates graciousness. In short, there “is no limit . . . to Love’s field of action.”⁴³ And when Jesus told the lawyer, “Go and do⁴⁴ likewise” (v. 37b), He also addresses the modern reader. We must be like the Samaritan who “shows us a compassion unrestricted by national, racial, or religious barriers.”⁴⁵

Philip Yancey records an incident that illustrates the attitude and philosophy of life of the Samaritan in contemporary society. He wonders aloud, “What would a Good Samaritan look like today in urban America?”⁴⁶ He answers by reporting his interview with Louise Adamson, who has dedicated her life to working with the poor and disenfranchised in Atlanta, Georgia. Her ministry is

⁴¹Esser, 116 (emphasis mine).

⁴²Jesus’ skill in communicating is magnificently demonstrated here. The lawyer is met on his own grounds. As an expert he must consider if the priest and Levite, though scrupulously adherent to the Law, really keep the Law. Is their ceremonial and puritanical idealism justified in the situation? And if so, how could their abject refusal to help a victimized person qualify them as being law-abiding, since the Law required them to love their neighbor like themselves?

⁴³Glendenhuys, 314.

⁴⁴Jesus uses the present tense *poiei*, “keep on doing” or “do constantly” with the idea of life-long commitment.

⁴⁵Nolland, 597.

⁴⁶Philip Yancey, *Finding God in Unexpected Places* (Nashville: Moorings, 1995), 67.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

called the “Jericho Road Ministry.” She says, “How would anyone go about scheduling a Jericho Road ministry? You just walk down the road and look for victims.”⁴⁷

The Unmerciful Servant: Grace in the Context of Forgiveness

This parable illustrates grace in the context of forgiveness. It is introduced by two questions posed by Peter: “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (v. 21). Peter’s question is appropriate because Jesus had just been talking about forgiveness (vv. 15-20). In that discourse, He said nothing about the number of times you should forgive someone who wrongs you. Hence, Peter’s queries. It would seem that since seven represents the perfect number, then seven instances of forgiveness would be superlative. Jesus answers that one should be willing to forgive seventy-seven times.⁴⁸ This wide contrast clearly dwarfs Peter’s assumption and puts the matter in bold relief. Forgiving someone a mere seven times is not even the minimum. Certainly, what Jesus is teaching is that forgiveness should be limitless, even infinite. To illustrate this He tells the parable.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

⁴⁷Ibid., 72.

⁴⁸The LXX uses the same expression (*hebdomekontakis hepta*) in Gen 4:24: “If Cain avenged seven times then Lamech seventy-seven.” See too Robert Hanna, *A Grammatical Aid to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 39, who believes that the expression “actually means ‘70 times (and) 7,’ and not ‘70 times 7. . . .’” The NIV says it may also be interpreted as “seventy times seven.” This really puts the idea of limitlessness in perspective.

MULZAC: GRACE IN THE SYNOPTIC TEACHINGS OF JESUS

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” Matt 18:21-35

This is one of the Kingdom parables, since Jesus likens the kingdom to “a king who wanted to settle accounts⁴⁹ with his servants” (v. 24). It is closely connected to the same genre of parables in Matt 13 that deal with the Kingdom of heaven (13:11, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47). Kingdom parables often deal with the actions and behavior of the residents of the Kingdom. This parable is no different. This is underlined in that the king is about to settle accounts with some of his subjects.⁵⁰ The parable is clearly triadic, with the main characters or actors being the king, the first subject, and the second subject. The first subject appears in all scenes of the story, which is told from his perspective. The “story is concise and artistic,”⁵¹ as seen in its structure depicting a series of encounters or scenes between the main characters:⁵²

- Introduction: The king decides to settle accounts with his subjects (v. 23)
- I. The king and the first servant (vv. 24-27)
 - A. The servant’s huge debt (v. 24)
 - B. The decision to force payment (v. 25)
 - C. Plea for mercy (v. 26)
 - D. The king cancels the debt (v. 27)
- II. The first and second servants (vv. 28-30)
 - A. The servant’s small debt (v. 28b)
 - B. Decision to force payment (v. 28c)
 - C. Plea for mercy (v. 29)
 - D. Refusal to cancel the debt (v. 30)
- III. The king and the first subject (vv. 31-34)
 - A. The servants’ report to the king regarding his first subject’s behavior (v. 31)
 - B. The king’s rebuke (vv.32-33)
 - C. Reversal of the canceled debt (v. 34)
- Conclusion: Jesus’ application of the parable (v. 35).

⁴⁹“Settling accounts” has undertones of judgment. Cf. Luke 16:1-8 and 19:12-27.

⁵⁰Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 270-71, finds several hints that this parable deals with Gentile characters. However (to get ahead of ourselves), we must note that the punishment exacted by the first servant for non-payment by the second follows an OT—and, hence, Jewish—background.

⁵¹Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 468.

⁵²For a similar outline see Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B (Dallas: Word, 1995), 536-37.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

In the first encounter, the servant has an astronomically high debt. The use of the word *daneion* (“loan,” a *hapax legomenon*), together with the extraordinarily excessive debt, suggests that the relationship between the king and subject is that of a royal contract with a tax collector. Hence, these servants should not be seen as slaves but as officials who managed the administrative affairs of the state.⁵³ The debt is described as *murioi* (“myriad”) which “is a deliberate hyperbole pointing to a debt that was so high that it was practically incalculable.”⁵⁴ It meant that the servant was absolutely incapable of repaying such a large sum.⁵⁵ Owing to this the king ordered that the servant and his family, together with all their possessions, be sold as repayment (v. 25). In so doing the sovereign is following a well-established tradition.⁵⁶ It is obvious that even this is meager and insufficient. The point here is that the servant is not in a position to repay the debt. Although he has power and influence,⁵⁷ he is in an impossible situation. To avoid the shame and loss of freedom from being sold into slavery he throws himself on the mercy of the king. “Be patient with me,” he begs, “and I will pay back *everything*” (v. 26). Again, even this is insufficient. Further, the plea approaches even a comical dimension with the promise to repay everything. The sum is so gargantuan that even if the servant were to repay for several lifetimes it would be impossible to satisfy the loan. Despite these factors, the king accepts the plea for mercy. In fact, he goes beyond the man’s request. Instead of allowing him the opportunity to repay as requested, the king “took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go” (v. 27).⁵⁸ In short, the record is completely expunged. The servant has nothing to commend him to the monarch, and despite his best promise it is impossible for him to erase his indebtedness. It is only the compassion and leniency of the potentate that saves the servant. In short, the king expresses grace. His philosophy in life is: “*I will share what I have.*” And this motivates the act of grace: unmerited favor to the undeserving. Donald A. Hagner describes it as such:

⁵³Archibald M. Hunter, *The Parables Then and Now* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 67.

⁵⁴Hagner, 538. Luz, 471, says, “In Greek *murioi* is the highest possible number”

⁵⁵Josephus reports that in 4 B.C.E., Archelaus, ethnarch of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria, did not collect that much money in taxes for all of his territory combined. “The money that came to Archelaus as yearly tribute from the territory given him to rule amounted to six hundred talents.” See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities 17.11.4* (trans. Ralph Marcus, LCL, 8:521). In other words, this servant owed far more than the GNP of that vast area.

⁵⁶See 2 Kgs 4:1; Neh 5:3-5; Isa 50:1; and Amos 2:6; 8:6.

⁵⁷Robert F. Capon, *The Parables of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 46.

⁵⁸The expression *to daneion apheiken auto* has the idea of total absolution. Luz, 472-73, highlights the effect of such forgiveness, “The slave himself would never have dared to ask for so much. The amount of the gift is fantastic for both the readers of the gospel and for Jesus’ hearers. Today we would express it only in the millions, or even billions.”

MULZAC: GRACE IN THE SYNOPTIC TEACHINGS OF JESUS

In response to the plea of the servant for clemency in the form of time to repay the enormous debt, the sovereign responds with nearly unimaginable *grace* in the full dismissal of all indebtedness. It is not difficult to hear the echo of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins in this verse.⁵⁹

In the second encounter, the forgiven servant meets a colleague who owes him a mere one hundred denarii. This is minuscule in comparison to the debt he himself has owed and from which he has been so recently released. Suddenly he is enraged and treats his associate with violent hostility,⁶⁰ demanding, “Pay back what you owe me!” (v. 28). The man offers a plea that is almost identical to the one made earlier by his assailant, “Be patient with me, and I will pay you back” (v. 29). The only difference between both pleas is that the latter omits the word *everything*. In short, his debt is so small that it is ridiculous to even suggest that he needs time to repay everything. That is assumed. This makes the first servant appear in an even worse light. He promises to repay everything but he is really unable to do so. And now he refuses to give the same leniency to one who, given time, can repay more than the everything (100 denarii) that is owed.⁶¹ He who has just experienced grace now acts in un-grace. He lives by the philosophy, “*I will keep what I have.*” He has just received forgiveness, but now selfishly keeps that same gift to himself.

Jesus deliberately contrasts these first two scenes to put the action of grace into bold relief. This also heightens the impact of the story on the listeners. Let us note the following contrasts:

Scene 1 (vv. 24-27)	Scene 2 (vv. 28-30)
Large debt	Small debt
Unpayable debt	Payable debt
Promise to repay but really cannot	Promise to repay and can
Response of the king	Response of the first servant
Philosophy of the king	Philosophy of the first servant
Undeserving of forgiveness	Deserving of forgiveness
Mercy	No mercy
Grace	Un-grace

The impact on the listener is clear: treating another person without grace, especially when one has just received grace, indicates hard-heartedness and cold evil. It betrays an inner inhumanity. Even the “minimum” of forgiveness is not

⁵⁹Hagner, 539; cf. Luz, 472-73.

⁶⁰According to Hanna, 39, “The imperfect tense is descriptive in *epnigen*, describing the debtor as ‘choking him in his rage.’”

⁶¹Hagner, 539, indicates that a denarius was about one day’s wages. There were about 6000 denarii to one talent, and the first servant owes about 10,000 talents. In other words, the first servant is forgiven a debt that is about 600,000 times greater than what he is demanding of his associate.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

attained. Little wonder that in the third encounter (vv. 32-34), the other servants report this incident to the king, who immediately summons the unjust servant. The king reminds the unmerciful servant that he has received grace (v. 32) but has not shown grace, so he deserves to be characterized as “wicked” (v. 32a). This leads to his rhetorical question, “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” (v. 33). This interrogative places the emphasis squarely on treating others as one would like to be treated.⁶² In short, just as the king willingly gives to the undeserving servant, because of his grace, so too the unmerciful servant should have been willing to share what he had just received. Instead, he has refused. In treating his colleague in this way he is destroying the kingdom. To be sure, “failure to forgive excludes one from the kingdom, whose pattern is to forgive.”⁶³ Such cannot be tolerated. Hence, no one is saddened when the king rescinds the earlier pardon (v. 34).⁶⁴

In the final verse Jesus points out that the measure by which we forgive others is the same one the heavenly Father uses when we ask for forgiveness. The application is poignant. So back to Peter’s original query concerning the number of times we should forgive a person who wrongs us. The answer is found in our reflection on this question: “How many times do we want God to forgive us?” Unlimited. Though undeserving of forgiveness, we would like grace extended to us time and time again (even seventy times seven). The point of the parable is “that the spirit of genuine forgiveness recognizes no boundaries. It is a state of heart, not a matter of calculation.”⁶⁵

Conclusion

Although these two parables do not mention the word grace, they certainly illustrate the premium placed on grace in the teachings of Jesus. Indeed, true religion is seen in how we treat each other. Grace enables us to be a neighbor and help even those who treat us like the enemy. This is what the first parable teaches. The second teaches us that grace enables us to forgive others even as we would like to be forgiven by God. In both, it is our concrete actions toward other human beings that are important. To neglect the fallen and disenfranchised is to be like the priest and Levite whose religious formalism kept them cold and detached from serving humanity. To be unforgiving is to be as wicked as the first servant whose selfishness made him heartless. But to serve humanity and be

⁶²Cf. “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). The same is true of forgiveness. Cf. Matt 6:12, 14-15; Luke 6:37.

⁶³Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:406.

⁶⁴This verse is identical in content to v. 30. It signals retributive justice in that exactly the same punishment that the wicked servant meted out is now measured on him. Since it is impossible for him to repay the debt, it means that his imprisonment will be permanent.

⁶⁵William Hendrickson, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 704.

MULZAC: GRACE IN THE SYNOPTIC TEACHINGS OF JESUS

forgiving are the best illustrations of what it means to have grace. The word does not need to be on our lips, but its essence must be the guiding principle in our hearts and must be reflected in our treatment of people.

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