

One of the clear messages in the gospel is that man has an incredible capacity to veer off a road that is plainly marked. The continual struggle between Jesus and the Jewish Leaders should show us that it is essential to approach God with our heart and not just our mind. The story of the Good Samaritan, the story of the woman at the well, as well as many others should make it very clear what God really wants.

The parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35) is a great example of how some people just cannot "get it"! You see that a man was forgiven a great debt, but then would not forgive someone who owed him much less. This man was given a personal experience with the magnitude of the grace of God, but he missed the real point entirely. After being forgiven his debt, he went out immediately and used his freedom to oppress others. We might consider a modern day version of this parable, taken from a slightly different perspective:

*Once there was a man who was burdened with sin. Upon hearing the gospel, he responded and accepted the grace poured on him by the Lord. He was freed from the guilt of his sin, but he was not fully able to understand that he was free from the law. He became a great champion of a particular scheme of worship and behavior, seeing his salvation as though it were by being able to be good enough to deserve salvation. He was very oppressive to others who were "weaker" in their faith, and insisted that they believe according to his "truth" or be cast out of the group. No one outside of his group could, of course, be saved.*

This man had been confronted by God's Grace in conjunction with his own sin, but he refused to acknowledge the fellowship of anyone who did not believe exactly as he did. This man was converted, not into being a Christian, but a churchman. Many times those who are thus converted become the most aggressive champions of what amounts to essentially a manmade law. The churchman is just as bad as the unmerciful servant.

This situation happened again and again in the Old Testament. The prophets spoke of this problem in this way, "The Lord says: 'These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.'" (Isaiah 29:13) And Jesus referred to this many times in the New Testament, for he kept encountering the same situation. Some people, it seems, never learn.

Perhaps it is because some people cannot learn. I find myself just giving up on people, because I feel that they have some impregnable barrier to understanding the true Goodness of God. How long should I beat my head against the wall? As Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12, there are some who refuse to love the truth. What they are left with is a lie; and they are happy with that. It is the old idea of people who harden their hearts and can no longer understand. Even Paul eventually gave up on the Gentiles (Acts 18:6)!

Those who can't "get it" are like those who can hear but don't understand. This is why Jesus spoke in parables (Matthew 13:13). This is why He said so many times, "He who has ears, let him hear (Matthew 11:15, 13:9, 13:13, 13:43). If we are children of God, we will listen (John 8:47).

But not everyone is that impervious to God's Grace. This grace is powerful enough to soften our hearts and make us fully responsive to what God really wants from us. In the parable, God not only offers His grace and asks us to accept it, He expects us to understand it enough to enable us to pass it on. We must act with grace to others or lose the salvation that we have gained. That is what the parable is all about.

*'For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. (Matthew 13:15-17)*