

Making CENTS of the Story

In telling the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus could have described one debt as “a whole lot of money” and the other debt as “relatively little money.” He did not do so. Rather, Jesus used very specific amounts of money in units common in that day. The problem for the modern reader is that we are not familiar with those monetary units.

Let’s do some math! (Feel free to use the calculator application on your phone.) By looking at the numbers Jesus cites and historical and current data we supply, translate each debt into modern equivalents. Then think of how these numbers affect your understanding of the parable.

Debt of the first servant

- a. The first servant owed _____ talents (bags of gold)? See Matthew 18:24.
- b. History tells us that one gold talent was about 20 years of salary in that day.
- c. U.S. statistics tell us that the annual salary of the average American is about \$50,000.

Therefore, the number of years the servant would need to work would be:

$$a \times 20 \text{ years} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}} \text{ years of wages!}$$

Therefore, the amount of the first servant’s debt in today’s money is:

$$a \times b \times c = a \times 20 \times 50,000 = \$\underline{\hspace{2cm}} \text{ today!}$$

Debt of the second servant

- d. The second servant owed _____ denarii (silver coins)? See Matthew 18:28.
- e. History tells us that one denarius (silver coin) was about one day’s wages in that day.
- f. U.S. statistics tell us that one day’s wage for the average American is about \$190.

Therefore, the amount of the second servant’s debt in today’s money is:

$$d \times e \times f = d \times 1 \times 190 = \$\underline{\hspace{2cm}} \text{ today!}$$

Dividing that amount by the yearly salary of \$50,000, the second servant owed what percentage of a yearly salary? _____

How do these calculations change your understanding of how easily the debt of the first servant could be paid back?

How do these calculations change your understanding of how easily the debt of the second servant could be forgiven?

With this more complete understanding, how would you summarize the message of this parable?