The Parable of The Unmerciful Servant can be found in Matthew 18:23-35. Initially, this servant is forgiven all his mountain of debt — a symbol for sin. However, later this servant is unforgiving to several of his own servants.

The master learns the servant was unforgiving in turn toward the servant’s debtors. In response, the master reimplies the prior debt of his unforgiving servant. The master then ordered the unforgiving servant to be sent to the same prison which the servant originally avoided by the master’s gracious grant of forgiveness. The master orders the servant to be tortured and tormented until he could pay the enormous (and hence unpayable) previously forgiven debt.

Jesus closes by saying this parable is how the Father will treat each of us if we are not forgiving.

Thus, the message is simple and easy to discern. When we have post-salvation sin of unforgiveness, and we do so repeatedly, the Master will be grieved, and send us to the same prison he had spared us from by graciously granting salvation. There we will be tortured and tormented to pay for our enormous (and hence unpayable) debt.

Luther agreed. Addressing the unmerciful servant directly, Luther says you “should have been... completely discharged from all thy debt, hadst thou...showed compassion to thy neighbor; but now God will not forgive thee, and besides will reckon as strictly with thee, as thou wouldst with thy neighbor.” (Quoted in Frederick Lisco, *The Parables of Jesus* (trans. from German by Rev. Fairbairn)(Philadelphia:1850) at 113, quoting Luther, *House-Pos.* 5.239.)
To those who say the unmerciful servant was never a believer forgiven by grace, the mature Luther says not so. It is directed precisely at a forgiven believer. In fact, Jesus’ point is to warn the forgiven who do not obey Jesus’ commands. Luther explains:

The punishment here spoken of is not for the heathen, or for the general mass, who never hear the word of God, but for those who with the ear receive the gospel, and keep it upon their tongues, but who will not live according to its precepts. (Luther, Church-Pos. 14-251, quoted in Lisco, The Parables of Jesus (trans. from German by Rev. Fairbairn)(Philadelphia:1850) at 114 (emphasis added),

The German evangelical minister, Lisco, similarly explained that as “God first exercised compassion” with us, He “afterwords desires and expects it of us.” Id., at 114. The servant’s subsequent unforgiveness “forfeits” God’s prior exercise of mercy. “The king does not break his promise; but the ungodly person frustrates the purpose of divine goodness.” Id. Lisco quotes the renown Bengel’s Gnomon as saying Jesus clearly means “they who have experienced grace ought most of all to be afraid of wrath.” The Master’s wrath in this parable means salvation is revoked.

Retroactivity Principle

In the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant in Matthew 18:23-35, Jesus tells us that our forgiving others is retroactively examined after salvation. In other words, Jesus explains that if after God has forgiven you a mountain of debt, you then turn around and later are not forgiving in turn, the penalty for your prior sin is re-imposed and you must pay for it in torment. Those are Jesus’ very words. Of course, we
cannot pay for our own sin and thus Jesus is threatening damnation if we should commit the sin of unforgiveness repeatedly even after initial salvation.

Parable Of The Unmerciful Servant

Do you recall whether in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant that someone forgiven a huge debt has it reimposed by God the Father? Read carefully the following quote from Matthew 18:23-34 in the KJV to answer the question:

(23) Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.

(24) And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents.

(25) 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.

(26) The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

(27) Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

(28) But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took [him] by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest.

(29) And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.
(30) And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.

(31) So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done.

(32) Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: (33) Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? (34) And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

Is this about how God will treat us? Jesus says emphatically yes, closing the parable as follows:

(35) So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

Thus, in this parable, Jesus tells a story of a servant who was forgiven a mountain of debt. Ten thousand talents represents a large fortune. The master originally was going to send the servant to prison as a consequence. After being forgiven and being spared prison, the servant still insists others pay their debts to him. He is not being forgiving in turn. Later, the Lord is “wroth” meaning either angry or grieved. He then orders the servant sent to the “jailers” to “torment him” until he pays the entire debt. (Matt. 18:28-35.)

Jesus explicitly says “this is how my Father will treat each of you” to make it clear this is an analogy to the way God the Father works with us. (Matt. 18:35.)

Thus, Jesus clearly teaches that if after you have been forgiven all your sins, if you are not forgiving in turn to others, your prior forgiveness is revoked, and you will have to pay the entire debt of your own sin in hell.
Reciprocity Principle Stated Elsewhere

This principle is not astonishing. James says “judgment [κρίσις] without mercy” will be applied to anyone who “showed no mercy.” (James 2:13 KJV)

You are offered mercy so you will fear God, not fear him less. “But you offer forgiveness that we might learn to fear you.” Psalms 130:3-4 (NLT).

Jesus often stated this reciprocity principle directed at Christians. In Matthew 6:14-15 (KJV) Jesus teaches: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your father forgive you your trespasses.”

Thereby, in Matthew 6:14-15 Jesus makes our forgiveness expressly conditional.¹ Jesus does so by assuring you that you are not forgiven your sins if you do not forgive others. Thus, there is no denying Jesus threatens God sees a Christian’s actual attitude. God will withdraw forgiveness because of it. There is no covering of Jesus for a born-again Christian, as cheap grace fabulists argue, by which God cannot see we are unforgiving.

Likewise Jesus told us to pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” (Matt. 6:12.) In other words, we ask God to forgive us to the same extent we are being forgiving to others. Forgiveness is not one-time and permanently applied to all future conduct.

1. Defenders of cheap grace incredibly claim that you are still saved if God refuses to forgive your sins due to your unforgiveness. Charles Stanley — the two time President of the Southern Baptists, asks a rhetorical question about Matthew 6:15: “Does this mean that my failure to forgive someone who has wronged me will deprive me of my forgiveness God purchased in my behalf through Christ’s blood at Calvary?” (Stanley, *The Gift of Forgiveness* (Thomas Nelson, 1991) at 104.) Stanley goes on: “When Jesus says in this passage, ‘Then your Father will not forgive you your transgressions,’ He is not implying that our salvation is in jeopardy.” (Id., at 105). Only our fellowship supposedly will suffer. Thus, even though Jesus says God will not forgive your sins if you are unforgiving, Stanley incredibly tells you that God will save you despite not forgiving you.
Again, Jesus says in Mark 11:25-26 that our prayers for forgiveness from God are conditional on our forgiving others.

(25) And whenever you stand praying, be forgiving, if you are holding anything against anyone, so that also your Father, the [One] in the heavens, shall forgive you of your transgressions. (26) But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father, the [One] in the heavens, forgive your transgressions. (Mark 11:25-26 ALT.)

As Coffman, the famous commentator, says about this passage: “This prerequisite of all divine forgiveness of human transgression was most dogmatically stressed by the Son of God.”

Thus, in Matthew 6:12, Matthew 6:14-15 and Mark 11:25-26, Jesus is clearly saying we can only ask God to forgive ourselves to the same extent we have been willing to forgive others. Therefore, Jesus clearly is saying we are not free to be forgiven by God if we are unwilling to forgive others. Consequently, Jesus taught our forgiveness by God at all times depends on our forgiving others. It does not turn upon solely some prior act of regeneration, or a one-time forgiveness received or upon faith alone.

Therefore, it follows that nothing surprising is in Jesus’ parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Your initial forgiveness of a mountain of debt is revoked if you later refuse to forgive others. Jesus said the same thing in the three declarative statements quoted above.

In fact, what the parable says is the unmerciful servant did not understand the conditionality of his own forgiveness. As a result of unawareness of how the Master held a condition over the forgiveness, the servant violated the principle of

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being forgiving to others. As a result, the servant had his forgiveness revoked. Jesus wants us to understand precisely how this conditionality works: the unmerciful servant who does not forgive in turn is sent to the same prison he initially avoided, but this time to pay without mercy every last cent of his debt in torture and torment. If we do not forgive after being forgiven, we lose forgiveness. We will pay forever for our sins in the prison of hell. Jesus could not be clearer.

Matthew Henry: God Revokes Forgiveness To Non-Christians

One of the clearest ways of knowing the straightforward reading is best is to watch how cheap grace proponents (a) admit key aspects of the parable at odds with their doctrine and (b) fall over themselves in silly ways to escape the implication at odds with their doctrine. Matthew Henry provides us such an example. Henry incongruously claims this parable proves God revokes forgiveness to non-Christians. Yet, that means Henry claims that one can receive forgiveness and not be a Christian. That idea makes absolutely no sense. Yet, it shows you how far one must go to uphold cheap grace in the face of this parable.

Let’s hear what Matthew Henry — a clear upholder of the gospel of cheap grace — has to say. Henry is compelled to admit God revokes forgiveness in the circumstances that Jesus outlines and the servant ends up in hell:

How he revoked his pardon and cancelled the acquittance, so that the judgment against him revived (Matt. 18:34); He delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him..... he that would not forgive shall not be forgiven; He delivered him to the tormentors...the executioners of God’s wrath...[and] will be their tormentors for ever. He was sent to
Forgiven But Not Forgiving

Bridewell [i.e., a London prison] till he should pay all.

But in the next breath, Henry says this:

Our debts to God are never compounded; either all is forgiven or all is exacted; glorified saints in heaven are pardoned all, through Christ's complete satisfaction; damned sinners in hell are paying all, that is, are punished for all.

What Henry is saying (which becomes clearer later, as we will discuss), is this person whose forgiveness was revoked was never a Christian. Then, one must ask: how did he have all his sins originally forgiven? How can God completely forgive someone of all their sins, and that person not be a Christian? This is a puzzle that only gets worse as we continue to analyze Henry’s comments.

Henry then makes it clear later that God would never revoke a Christian’s forgiveness. This leaves us once more completely puzzled how in the parable the unmerciful servant can be forgiven all his sins initially to have them revoked later, but never have been a Christian. Listen now to how Henry BLATANTLY CONTRADICTS OUR LORD AND HIMSELF:

The danger of not forgiving; So shall your heavenly Father do. (1.) This is not intended to teach us that God reverses his pardons to any, but that he denies them to those that are unqualified for them, according to the tenour of the gospel; though having seemed to be humbled, like Ahab, they thought themselves, and others thought them, in a pardoned state, and they made bold with the comfort of it. Intimations enough we have in scripture of the forfeiture of pardons, for caution to the presumptuous; and yet we have security enough of the continuance of them, for comfort to those that are sincere, but timorous; that
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the one may fear, and the other may hope. Those that do not forgive their brother’s trespasses, did never truly repent of their own, nor ever truly believe the gospel; and therefore that which is taken away is only what they seemed to have, Luke 8:18.3

Henry says here that God “does not revoke his pardons to any.” But what did Henry say earlier was Jesus’ point? Henry initially said the passage reveals “how he [God] revoked his [the unmerciful servant’s] pardon and cancelled the acquittance, so that the judgment against him revived. (Matt. 18:34).” Henry is trapped in a self-contradiction.

Then Henry is telling us — and in this last quote does so several times — that Jesus must intend this unmerciful servant was never a Christian. How preposterous — a “servant” was forgiven all his debt of sin but we are supposed to believe he was never a Christian!

Then what is going on? Henry tells us that the servant merely thought he was forgiven everything. What on earth is Henry thinking! This is utterly silly. There is no wrong assumption by the servant about this issue as Jesus tells the parable. In fact, if the unmerciful servant had not been forgiven everything, then his master would not have been ‘wroth’ with him. It was only due to the injustice involved over such forgiveness which the unmerciful servant actually received that caused the Master to be ‘wroth.’ The master explains to the servant later that the servant should have forgiven as the master had forgiven the servant.

Henry is simply wrong. The master does indeed forgive the servant. In fact, every other servant of the unmerciful servant knew that to be the case as well. Based on that, they went to the Master and asked for intervention at the unfair-

3. Notice how the quoted passage does not support the assertion. Jesus’ words come to mind: “Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he thinketh he hath.” Luke 8:18 ASV.
ness of the Unmerciful Servant. ‘He was forgiven everything, but he won’t forgive us.’ It is therefore absolute nonsense to suggest what Henry suggests that the unmerciful servant was never really forgiven, but merely thought he had been forgiven.

Incidentally, the highly popular author, Max Lucado, in his book *In the Grip of Grace* (Word 1996), says the same thing. He simply tries to improve upon its presentation. Lucado claims that when we are saved we are made perfect forever. This supposedly means no subsequent sin can cause imperfection and loss of salvation. For this Lucado relies primarily upon the unsourced work of the Epistle to the Hebrews 10:14. (*Id.*, at 75.)

Thus, Lucado says Jesus could not possibly mean a saved servant can lose his salvation by later being unforgiving. Lucado concludes that therefore we must believe the unmerciful servant “doesn’t believe” he was forgiven. (*Id.*, at 153.) And because this servant never believes it, the unmerciful servant never considered it possible to lose his salvation. 

4. Origen in 225 A.D. said no one is sure who wrote the book of Hebrews. Tertullian in the 200s said he thought it was Barnabas. The verse at issue reads: “For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.” Heb 10:14 ASV. If sanctification turns on obedience, then this quote is consistent with Jesus. If sanctification does not mean obedience, and Lucado reads it right, what should we conclude? Certainly, Jesus says one who is forgiven all their sins is *not perfected forever*, and an examination is coming later for post-forgiveness sin, in particular the sin of unforgiveness. This is His clear point in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. What then of this passage in Hebrews which Lucado reads to the contrary? I would say that if Jesus *contradicts an unsourced letter that no one knows who wrote it*, which lacks any prophetic or apostolic credential, then we have utterly no basis to try to conform and twist Jesus’ words to fit a doctrine taught in this unsourced text. That seems a pretty obvious conclusion. We don’t presume Hebrews is authoritative, and then squash down the literal meaning of Jesus’ parable to fit such an unsourced work merely because long ago for reasons no one can explain the Epistle to the Hebrews was added to the New Testament.
ful servant supposedly never receives it. (That’s a non-sequitur.) Hence, he was a lost person supposedly who was merely offered forgiveness, but never took it.

Unfortunately for Lucado, there is utterly nothing to support the idea that the unmerciful servant did not receive complete forgiveness. Every other servant, including the master, believes it was previously given. This is the only reason the master was wroth with the servant. The servant had failed to act forgiving after the servant was (indeed) forgiven.

Yet, both Henry and Lucado have revealed the motivation of reading out of the Parable the true meaning of Jesus. They both don’t want Jesus to ever say a Christian has any responsibility to be obedient after salvation is granted. That would violate the doctrine of cheap grace. Thus, a clear parable of Jesus which refutes cheap grace doctrine simply must be crushed to serve their favorite gospel doctrine. There was no lengths to which these two gentlemen were not willing to go to defeat Jesus’ obvious meaning. They twisted and tortured the Lord’s word to fit their preconceived notions. Their ideas were sad efforts to defeat the Lord Jesus Christ’s clear meaning and purpose. Woe be to the ‘lying pen’ of the scribes! (Jer. 8:6-9.)

Wrath, Torment, And Prison Do Not Reflect Hell

Other cheap grace advocates are preposterous in different ways than Henry and Lucado. Others deflect the passage by explaining the torment and wrath and jail in this

5. I can be forgiven a debt regardless of whether I believe I have been forgiven. It can be done unilaterally, and does not require bilateral acknowledgment. As long as the Master believed it was forgiven, then it was forgiven. Therefore, Lucado’s logic is a non-sequitur.
passage are not in hell. These descriptions are supposedly merely symbols of earthly unpleasantness. They allegedly represent only earthly (temporal) punishment. The rationale for this reading is that the unmerciful servant supposedly will surely go to heaven because he received God’s initial grace and forgiveness.6

Is this revoked forgiveness only on this earth (temporal) but we remain forgiven in God’s heavenly balance sheet? Do we still go to heaven? No.

We are not merely at risk of some chastisement, yet we make it to heaven. Listen to Jesus: we have our initial forgiveness revoked, which results in prison, torture, and torment to pay ourselves for our huge debt of sin, so says our Lord Jesus Christ! Indeed, in the parable, you end up going to the same prison that the original forgiveness spared you from. (Matt. 18:28-35.) Thus, the prison can only be hell.

Let’s examine this with care.

Was The Prison Avoided Hell?

First, we know that hell was the original prison that the Master’s forgiveness spared the servant from because it was an eternal punishment for his debt. How do we know it was eternal? All commentators point out that 10,000 talents in those days would be billions of dollars in today’s world. No one servant could ever hope to pay that debt. Thus, the amount tells you the prison would be the servant’s eternal home. Commenting on the implication from the amount of talents, the German evangelical minister Lisco said, “he was

6. Thus, Dillow gets around this parable by ad hoc (just so) assertions in Reign of the Servant Kings, supra, at 384: “this passage is not discussing eternal issues. Temporal issues are in view. If we fail to forgive our brother from the heart, God will bring severe discipline on us in time and withhold temporal forgiveness for fellowship in the family.” Likewise, MacArthur in his Study Bible (1997) at 1427 makes the same ad hoc assertion: “This pictures severe discipline, not final condemnation.” Ad hoc statements are illogical because they lack proof.
adjudged to an *eternal* and righteous *punishment.*” (Frederick Lisco, *The Parables of Jesus* (trans. Rev. Fairbairn)(Philadelphia:1850) at 115.)

We know this prison is hell for a second reason. When the Master revokes the forgiveness, and reinstates the debt, the Master sends the servant for *torture* at the jailers’ hands at that prison. We know torture and torment are associated by Jesus elsewhere with *hell,* not earthly chastisement. (Luke 16:28; Rev. 14:11, hell described as place of “torment”.)

Lastly, the logic of the parable requires this prison to be hell. Once the prior forgiveness is revoked, the servant is sent to this prison. Since it originally symbolized hell, it must still be hell by the end of the parable. This matches the fact the master’s revocation was in *wrath.* Also the amount at stake was enormous, and no human could possible pay the debt if re-imposed. Finally, the master’s action of revoking the prior forgiveness makes hell the only logical result. Without forgiveness by God, where could we possibly be but *hell?*

In other words, trying to equate this prison to chastisement on earth does not wash. The enormous load of debt is put back on the person *first.* If mere chastisement were involved on earth, and we remain saved, Jesus would not say the huge load of the prior debt is *re-imposed.* Nor would Jesus mention *wrath, torment, prison* and *non-forgiveness* as the *final state* of the unmerciful servant. Those descriptions are all depictions clearly designed by Jesus to tell us HELL is this servant’s fate. This is why this passage is a clear dilemma for cheap grace. Salvation is contingent. Here, it hangs in the balance on whether you are *later* forgiving after you are forgiven.

Furthermore, that is the meaning behind the reciprocity passages. *See,* Matthew 6:12, Matthew 6:14-15 and Mark 11:25-26, discussed *supra* at page 249 ff. If you fail to forgive as you were forgiven, then your sins will not be forgiven. These are *all express threats of revocation of forgiveness by God offered to you.* There is no missing therefore the point of the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. This is an end-of-sal-
Forgiveness loss of forgiveness. As James says—“judgment without mercy” is imposed on those who showed no mercy. (James 2:13.)

James has it right. All those who contradict Jesus and James are bringing a blatantly false gospel.

James R. Davis Gets It Right

The correct views by old German evangelicals — the mature Luther and Lisco — of this parable have ended up in the dust bin. The only modern revival of a straightforward reading comes from James R. Davis. He is one of the most prolific Christian sermon writers today. Davis provides a sermon summary of the Unmerciful Servant. His conclusion is based on a straightforward application of the parable:

This parable teaches that forgiveness can be revoked.

James 2:13 [reads] “because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (NIV)

All forgiveness is conditional; the condition in every case is dependent upon the forgiven continuing in faith and obedience.

Jesus said, that having received grace, one must show grace or he will fall from grace.

Davis goes on and says that clearly Jesus intends us to understand the unmerciful servant ends up in hell:

Final punishment of the unmerciful and unforgiving.

He forfeited his wife and children.

7. See http://www.focusongod.com/sermon.htm
Concluding Remarks: The Broad Way Of Cheap Grace

It would have been impossible for him to repay
the debt while free, even less of a chance now.

He shall have justice without mercy; *he shall always be paying; yet he shall never pay off
the debt.*

That's what *hell* is about.

Accordingly, Davis is reading the elements of the parable with straight-forward spiritual meanings. There is no imagined thought-processes of the unmerciful servant. There is no speculation about a forgiveness that was not real. There is no effort to superimpose preconceived doctrines. Nor are there wild assumptions that forgiveness can be experienced by a person who remains lost (and a non-Christian) after forgiveness, as Henry claimed.

Instead, Davis summarizes Jesus just as the passage reads: the servant who is forgiven everything but later is unforgiving has that forgiveness revoked, to pay for his sin forever in torture and torment in the prison of hell.

Concluding Remarks: The Broad Way Of Cheap Grace

Charles Stanley in the next quote will invite us to go on the broad way that leads to destruction. He will directly teach contrary to Jesus’ teaching in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Stanley will open a seductive and easily reached doorway. This door will take us down a path which leads directly to the very pit of hell. Stanley writes:

But a man or woman who has been rescued once from a state of unforgiveness *need not worry*. For once 100% of a man’s or woman’s sins have been forgiven, *the potential for being unforgiven has been done away with.* The risk factor is zero. There are *no more fires* from which the believer needs to be saved.
Unfortunately for Stanley (because teachers will pay the consequence of false teaching), there is one more fire to be saved from after initial forgiveness by God. It is the pit of hell, including torment, which Jesus says we avoid by being forgiving after we are forgiven. Yet, Stanley’s message is inviting you to enter into that flame by telling you to disregard what Jesus just taught you. Stanley says you are forgiven and going to heaven even if you later are not forgiving. The dangers of Stanley’s way are obvious because of Stanley’s frequent denials of Jesus’ very blunt words.9

Stanley is not alone in opening up this seductive door to Christians. Stanley is joined by Matthew Henry. And by Max Lucado. These three men are all of great renown and respect. Yet, they are all false sirens calling you to the wrong path.

There is no excuse if you take the path they offer. For Jesus is extremely blunt in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant: servants who are forgiven everything but turn to unforgiveness will suffer wrath, torment and imprisonment forever. Yet, Stanley, Henry and Lucado say to Christians ‘don’t worry’... ‘be happy.’ But Jesus says to His followers:

\[(14) \text{For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. (15) But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.}\]

\[(\text{Matt. 6:14-15 ASV.})\]

Jesus warned us of the ways of the likes of Stanley, Henry and Lucado:

\[(13) \text{Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. (14) For narrow is the gate, and strait-}\]

9. See for example Footnote 1 on page 249.
Concluding Remarks: The Broad Way Of Cheap Grace

... the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it. (15) Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves. (Matt. 7:13-15 ASV.)

Thus, forgive others right now as Jesus directed because God’s forgiveness of you depends on it.

### Example of Believer Lost Due to Unforgiveness

Some deny Jesus in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant is warning believers. They cannot imagine a believer can ever fall into hell’s grip due to unforgiveness. Yet, we actually have an example in the Book of Acts that a believer became lost due to unforgiveness. We have proof that a believer (Simon Magus) fell into hell’s grip specifically due to the sin of unforgiveness.

In Acts, Luke tells us about Simon, a sorcerer. He is also known in history as Simon Magus (Simon the Great One.) “Everyone, from the least to the greatest, often spoke of him as ‘the Great One—the Power of God.’” (Acts 8:10.)

Meanwhile, Philip was a deacon preaching in Samaria where Simon had practiced sorcery. By Philip’s preaching, many were led to Christ: “But now the people believed Philip’s message of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, many men and women were baptized.” (Acts 8:12.)

Philip then also preached to Simon Magus. Luke records Simon too became a believer and was baptized:

Then Simon himself believed and was baptized. He began following Philip wherever he went.... (Acts 8:13.)

Later we will learn that Simon Magus came to suffer from bitterness. Luke tells of Peter and John healing people. Simon offers to pay for such power, is rebuffed, and then Peter comments that Simon is in the grip of “bitterness” and is (thereby) held captive by sin. We read in Acts 8:18 ff.
(18) When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power. (19) “Let me have this power, too,” he exclaimed, “so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!” (20) But Peter replied, “May your money be destroyed with you for thinking God’s gift can be bought! (21) You can have no part in this [ministry] [Greek, logos], for your heart is not right with God. (22) Repent of your wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps He will forgive your evil thoughts. (23) for I can see that you are full of bitterness [pikria, acridity, bitterness] and are held captive by sin.” (24) “Pray to the Lord for me,” Simon exclaimed, “that these terrible things you’ve said won’t happen to me!” (NLT, “bitter jealousy” changed in verse 23 to “bitterness”)

The word pikria translated as bitterness is comparable to the unforgiveness of the unmerciful servant.

Marvin Vincent defines pikria or pikros as a “bitter frame of mind.” (Word Studies In The New Testament.) Simon Magus suffered from bitterness and as a consequence was not right with God. Yet, he previously believed and was baptized.

Thus, Simon Magus is a perfect example of a believer who suffered hell-gripping unforgiveness. Hence, the story of Simon Magus shows us how a believer can commit unforgiveness and the consequence: his heart became no longer right with God. He was no longer just — justified — in God’s eyes. Simon Magus’ later doctrine about goddess figures was blatant heresy, proving he remained lost to the end: “The ecclesiastical writers of the early Church universally represent him as the first heretic, the ‘Father of Heresies.’” 10