

## Matthew 18:21-35

## A lesson of Forgiveness, packed in a Parable

**21** 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?" **22** Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. **23** "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. **24** As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. **25** 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. **26** "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' **27** The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. **28** "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. **29** "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' **30** "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. **31** When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. **32** "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. **33** Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' **34** In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. **35** "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

"How many times do I forgive my brother?" (We sometimes think about the number of times someone has wronged us.)

"How can I ever forgive him *for that*?" (We know the damage, pain, hurt caused by someone's sin against us.)

It's obvious how the topic of "forgiveness" intersects with our daily lives. Do you have any questions about "forgiveness" rattling around unresolved? Could you use some encouragement when it comes to this? Let's dig into God's Word so that we might gain a firmer grip of His truth about this part of our lives: forgiveness.

My eyes are open wide right from the 1<sup>st</sup> line of our Gospel account. I hear Peter's question about forgiving a brother. Part of what strikes me most is something left unsaid. Peter says nothing about the individual coming and apologizing first. Peter's question begins at a point where: even without the person asking, the Christian forgives. That's a given.

The importance of this stands out in the context of Matthew ch.18. Please note. Peter didn't initiate the topic of forgiveness. This is a follow-up question. Jesus, in vs.15-20, was talking about when you or I go to a fellow believer and point out their sin. (We looked at that last Sunday.) That action is taken in order to help *them*. Peter digests this truth, and asks: "How many times do I forgive my brother?" Do you see the connection? Do you get how forgiving that person before approaching

them is so vital? If you're holding anything against the one with whom you're coming to talk, that's going to affect things (inside of you, and likely what comes out of you). The only way you will really be ready to help the other person is the starting point suggested in Peter's question: namely, that you forgive the person before they even ask for it.

Note a couple things, before going on: this forgiveness from you, the individual, is a separate issue from God's forgiveness to the individual. That's announced only where there is repentance. This forgiveness from you also is not to be confused with the consequences the wrongdoer may still face. Forgiveness does not equal no discipline or painful effects in the aftermath of the sin. For example: If trust is broken, it will take time to rebuild. In some cases, it might be irreparably damaged. That doesn't negate forgiveness. Those important points noted...

Our starting point for forgiveness to one another remains: the Christian forgives, even before they ask – even if they never ask.

Now, a little more context will carry us from Peter's question to Jesus' answer. Peter asks: "Should I forgive 7 times?" If you want to know what the other Jewish rabbis at the time answered for this same question, the answer is: 3 times. Peter's suggestion goes way beyond that: he takes their 3, doubles it, and adds 1 more ( $3 + 3 + 1$ ). "7 times?"

But Jesus' answer takes forgiveness beyond human figuring, to God's height – to God's realm.

Jesus takes Peter's 7, and multiplies it by 7, which he 10-folds [ $7 \times (7 \times 10)$ ]. Now, don't even try to figure this out mathematically. The meaning is: don't attempt a tally – just forgive a complete amount of times.

To take hold of that point a little more tangibly... imagine what it would have been like to try to keep such a large tally for each person's sins. {Pull out phone} They didn't have anything like this, to enter their contacts, & scroll through, & make notes. {Pull out a scroll} Would they have thought to carry a scroll with them? Keeping a column for each person they knew, with a heading for each type of sin, making tally marks as they went? Wait. This was a time when the average person wouldn't have even had such "paper" available – too costly. {Pull out broken pot pieces} So can you imagine trying to keep track on a collection of broken pottery pieces – commonly used as a person's "scratch paper" of their day? This is all absurd! Are you with me?

Jesus' point is obvious: Don't even try to keep track - keep forgiving your brother who sins against you – forgive every wrong. "*Love keeps no record of wrongs*" (1 Cor. 13).

I know the kind of questions that jar human minds at the sound of that. "That's just unreasonable, - isn't it?" "Too hard, - don't you think?" "There's got to be exceptions, - right?"

Every time God's will about forgiving others seems unbelievable to one of us – unbelievably difficult, unreasonable, or just too black & white – Jesus gives us the place we should turn. He takes us to the King. Jesus teaches us about God's forgiveness.

The servant has an “unable-to-be-repaid” debt. We don’t hear if the talents are gold or silver. If they are gold, the debt would be equal to 120,000+ years of hard labor. Even if they were silver talents, it would be 19,000+ years. We know what Jesus is picturing here. He is showing us the reality of the debt we each owe to God because of our sins against him. It should draw us to the conclusion: we are spiritually bankrupt, and have no way to offer God any payment to get out of our debt and the death sentence of hell it deserves.

But, look at this – take a peek at the 1<sup>st</sup> words (the reply) of the servant in the parable. What is the way the servant immediately suggests for dealing with the debt? “Just delay the repayment. Give me more time, and I’ll come up with a way to repay every last bit I owe.”

I want us all to just pause here, and soak in what we are seeing. This is the way that people always think, if they come up with their own answer for dealing with the debt of sin. It’s delusional! You heard the numbers Jesus used in the parable to make this clear. And yet, look at the first human reaction to the debt. The first thing the sinner imagines is: *I can* pay off the debt, if given enough time.

And you and I would still be stuck in that self-deceiving thinking, if our gracious King had not brought us to His truth about forgiveness.

What is God’s way for dealing with our debt of sin? The answer to that question is the center of this parable. It is also the central truth upon which our Christian faith is founded.

The servant suggests to the master: “I’ll repay you; just give me time.” The king doesn’t even entertain that notion. Instead, without delay, the king gives his verdict. Here is God’s way for dealing with our debt of sin – here is the only way for the sinner to have his debt removed and be set free from his punishment. The King forgives the debt. He removes it. Completely.

The debtor didn’t even make such a request. The king came up with the idea. The action comes solely from the heart & mind of the king. And the king will have no repayment, in whole or part. The debt is forgiven. Period.

*“... as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us.” “He does not treat us as our sins deserve” (Psalm 103).* God’s justice did demand that payment be given to appease his justice. And so... God the Son stepped in to make payment. The debt of sin is removed from our shoulders because... it was carried upon his. He lived without ever sinning. He carried our sins to the cross, and suffered the hell they deserved. This is the grace of God. He has paid for our freedom. And through faith in Jesus, we are forgiven.

Now – with God’s forgiveness in view – what about our initial question? What about : “how often should you or I forgive our brother?”

When we are wronged, it’s natural – did you catch what I did there? I said “natural,” meaning from our sinful nature –... When you or I are wronged, it’s a natural reaction to think: I want a system for

dealing with sin that exacts from the wrongdoer payment or punishment for what I've lost or suffered.

Jesus' parable redirects our thinking. "Is that really what I want for a way that the debt of sin is dealt with? If my God, my King, would deal with me in that way, where would I end up?" The parable closes with an answer to that question.


The wicked servant in the parable went back to his own way. This servant shows an absolute disregard for what the king had done for him. He refuses to forgive. He demands repayment. Grace is rejected. The king, in the end, simply deals with him on the basis of the standard to which he clung – the system he wanted in place for handling debts.


"When you declare that you will not forgive... is this not the same as saying, 'O God, as I am your debtor, so I also have a debtor; since I will not forgive him, do not forgive me?'" (Luther's Works, vo.42, p.66)

Let's make sure there is no confusion. This is not a matter of: your forgiveness leads God to forgive you. Just the opposite – it's the other way around. Jesus' parable is clear on this. It shows what all of the Bible teaches: your King & Lord has already forgiven you and me our unable-to-be-paid debt of sins – 100% no strings attached, totally undeserved. By this, God upends our old way of thinking. We see, we – his redeemed people by grace – appreciate, and we give thanks for how he has forgiven us. And that moves us to offer the same kind of forgiveness for the relatively few (in comparison) sins committed against us by others.

Of course, anytime we begin to imitate God (Eph.4:32-5:2), we quickly and often realize our inadequacy. But that doesn't lead us to excuse our sins (anger, ill-will, an unforgiving spirit). We confess them. And relieved of their burden, freed from our sin's guilt by Jesus' forgiveness, we are moved to forgive. We forgive like him.

That doesn't mean we are perfect at it. Which one of us never struggles when it comes to forgiving someone else? We will struggle. So struggle! Fight with the strength God gives. That strength comes from hearing:

 *"Forgive as the Lord **forgave** you. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another" (Colossians 3:13).*

 *And as we heard earlier in our service: "Forgive each other, just as **in Christ** God **forgave** you. ... Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 4:32-5:2).*

This parable is another place the Holy Spirit gives us the news of God's love and forgiveness, and with that – by that – gives us the heart & mind & strength to forgive others. Amen.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me: Bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: he forgives all your sins. Bless the Lord, forever. Amen. (See Psalm 103 – the Psalm in Sunday's worship)