

Theme: Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35 (EHV)

²¹ Then Peter came up and asked Jesus, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you as many as seventy-seven times. ²³ For this reason the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle them, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ Because the man was not able to pay the debt, his master ordered that he be sold, along with his wife, children, and all that he owned to repay the debt. ²⁶ “Then the servant fell down on his knees in front of him, saying, ‘Master, be patient with me, and I will pay you everything!’ ²⁷ The master of that servant had pity on him, released him, and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began choking him, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ ²⁹ “So his fellow servant fell down and begged him, saying, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’ ³⁰ But he refused. Instead he went off and threw the man into prison until he could pay back what he owed. ³¹ “When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were very distressed. They went and reported to their master everything that had taken place. ³² “Then his master called him in and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt when you begged me to. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ His master was angry and handed him over to the jailers until he could pay back everything he owed. ³⁵ “This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart.”

Forgiveness. What a wonderful word. What a blessed, comforting thought. We all want forgiveness. We want and expect others to forgive us. We want and expect God’s forgiveness for our many sins...it’s just that it’s very hard for us to give that forgiveness to others, isn’t it?

One Bible commentator wrote: *“In each of us lurks the pride that demands satisfaction for a wrong and considers it weakness to forgive. Before we are aware of it, a raging vindictiveness can take over in our hearts and drive out a humble remembrance of God’s forgiving mercy”* (Martin Franzmann, *Bible History Commentary*, New Testament, Volume 1).

This is, of course, not the attitude Jesus wants from us. As His followers an unforgiving attitude is not what we want either. We want to forgive like He forgives, and love others like He loves us. Easier said than done, right? The good news is with His help and His Holy Spirit working in our hearts He can lead us to see how much He has forgiven us and change our attitudes and re-form our hearts to forgive. We pray that He would lead us all to do this as we consider His powerful words in our text.

In Peter’s question, which opens our text for today he is essentially asking Jesus, “So, how many times are we supposed to do this?” **“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (v. 21).** Now, Peter probably thought he was being more than generous since in those days the Jewish rabbis typically taught that forgiving someone 3-4 times was enough. Jesus’ answer was probably quite shocking to Peter and the disciples (and to us!), **“Not seven times, but I tell you as many as seventy-seven times.” (v. 22).** This was a figurative way for saying, “Don’t even keep track. Show unlimited forgiveness.”

In order to make His answer clear to Peter, and to us, Jesus went on to tell a parable about a servant who owed the king **“ten thousand talents” (v. 24).** Now, sometimes it’s hard to know exactly how to convert these New Testament units of money into their modern day worth. You can probably find many different estimates as to exactly how much money this servant in the parable owed. One commentary I read said that this was a measurement of silver or gold, which in our day would be worth more than \$50 billion

dollars! The point is that it was A LOT of money. It was a debt that this servant simply could not possibly pay. This servant was about to lose everything—he, his family and possessions were about to be sold off. So he fell down on his knees and begged the king, **‘Master, be patient with me, and I will pay you everything!’ (v. 26)**. Amazingly, the next verse of our text tells us, **“The master of that servant had pity on him, released him, and forgave him the debt” (v. 27)**. Can you imagine what that would feel like to have a debt of over \$50 billion dollars ERASED!? Can you imagine the relief you’d feel having that massive debt lifted off your shoulders? The joy you’d feel from being miraculously debt-free?

Now what if after walking out of the king’s thrown room a friend of yours came along who owed you a decent amount of money, approximately . Could you imagine grabbing him by the throat and demanding, “Pay up, or else!”? No way! Yet that’s exactly what the servant did in Jesus’ parable: **“ But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii [which was approximately 100 day’s wages, or as some have estimated is the equivalent of around several thousand dollars; again the point is that it is an amount that is *insignificantly small* compared to the debt that the servant owed]. He grabbed him and began choking him, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ (v. 28)**. When this man’s servant fell down at his feet and begged him for mercy, just like he had begged the king, **‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’** we are told in our text **“But he refused. Instead he went off and threw the man into prison until he could pay back what he owed” (v. 29-30)**.

As you might expect, when the king heard about this ungrateful, unforgiving servant’s actions he was furious! **“Then his master called him in and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt when you begged me to. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ His master was angry and handed him over to the jailers until he could pay back everything he owed” (v. 32-34)**. Jesus’ last words there are actually a reference to the eternal torments of hell! He concludes our text with these words of warning, **“This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart ” (v. 35)**.

That’s the parable; now let’s apply it to ourselves. We, like the servant in our parable have an enormous debt before God, our King. It is a debt that is too large for us to pay. It is the debt of our sins. On our own we couldn’t even pay off one of the countless millions of sins that we’ve offended God with! That mountainous debt of our sins—even if it were just one sin, the Bible tells us—would earn us eternal punishment! There literally would be “Hell to pay!”

But God in His mercy completely erased our sin debt! Not one is left on our record! Not one “penny” of the wages of sin is left for us to pay! How? Because Jesus paid that incredible debt for us by giving up His very life as a sacrificial payment for all sins on the cross. The Bible tells us,

- ✦ **“[Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2) and**
- ✦ **“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.” (2 Corinthians 5:19).**

Why did He do it? Simply because He loves us! He wants us to live with Him forever in His heavenly kingdom. So He paid the debt we owed and saved us from the hell we deserved! Think about that incredible love! Think about that unlimited forgiveness! How does it make you feel to be “spiritually debt-free?” Pretty good huh? Like an eternal burden and weight have been lifted off your shoulders.

Now think about the times that others have sinned against you. Sometimes people can hurt us pretty badly and sin against us many times, over and over again. Those sins against us are not a small amount. We might even consider them to be “several thousand dollar sins.” But how big is the “debt” of their sins against you compared to the mountain of sins that God forgave you in Christ? Who are we to be bitter, angry, and vengeful demanding “payment” for other people’s against us, when God has forgiven our \$50 billion dollar sin debt? That’s what Paul was pointing to when he wrote these words in Ephesians, **“Get rid**

of every kind of bitterness, rage, anger, quarreling, and slander, along with every kind of malice. ³² Instead, be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ has forgiven us.” (Ephesians 4:31-32 EHV).

“Yes, pastor, but you don’t know how badly I’ve been hurt...or wronged...or mistreated!” Yet, Jesus tells us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Think of the story of Joseph from our Old Testament reading for this morning: He was mistreated, abused, even sold into slavery by his own *brothers* and eventually spent years in an Egyptian prison! Yet, in the end he not only forgave His brothers but was kind and generous to them and provided for their families (**cf. Genesis 50:19-21**). Why? How could he possibly do that? Because he knew and appreciated the incredible love and goodness God had shown him in his lifetime. He saw how God had turned the evil that had been done to him around for good and raised him to second in command of all of Egypt so that he could save his family (and in fact the line of the Savior, Jesus) during the years of famine.

“Yes, pastor, I can forgive them, but I’ll never forget!” Again, Jesus tells us to forgive as we have been forgiven. God Himself, the One who knows all things and could never “forget” something if He didn’t *want* to, shows us that truly forgiving “**from [your] heart,**” as Jesus says in our text, includes forgetting! God’s love for us is so full and so free that He really does *forgive and forget* our sin. He tells us in His Word,

✝ **“As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12).**

✝ **“I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:34).**

If God Himself can forgive *and forget* our sins who are we to say that we can’t or *won’t* when others sin against us?

“Yes, pastor, but what if they aren’t even sorry for what they’ve done to harm me. Surely Jesus doesn’t require me to be forgiving towards them then?” Still, Jesus tells us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Did Jesus wait for us to be “good enough” or “worthy” enough or “sorry” enough before He paid the full debt of our sins on the cross? No! The Bible tells us,

✝ **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).**

✝ While nailed to the cross paying for sins He didn’t commit Jesus cried out, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).**

Remember, that that death Jesus died on the cross paid for the sins of “**the whole world**” (1 John 2:2)—for everyone. That means He paid the debt of sin to purchase full and free forgiveness for EVERYONE! Even for those who don’t believe in Him; for people who are not “sorry” or repentant of their sins; even for the soldiers who were not “sorry” that they crucified Him on that cross! Now the tragic thing is, those who do not repent of their sins reject that forgiveness Jesus has already won for them and they bring on themselves that condemning debt of sins that was already paid for. The fact is, Jesus was willing to die to give even them forgiveness! Who are we to say we refuse to forgive anyone who sins against us? That’s what we pray each time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, “*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*” (**cf. Matthew 6:12; Luke 11:4**).

If we refuse to forgive Jesus warns, then our Heavenly Father will likewise not forgive us. Why should we expect Him to if are not willing to be merciful and forgiving to others? We are acting like that unmerciful servant in the parable. We are showing by our unforgiveness that we do not appreciate or value the forgiveness He has given us. It shows a lack of love for God and a lack of faith in His forgiving love. The devil wants us to imagine that we can derive a certain satisfaction from holding a grudge or even trying to get revenge. He wants us to believe that we are somehow justified in doing this. But such an unforgiving spirit is spiritual poison, which harms us most of all and threatens to destroy us completely and eternally!

Thankfully—and amazingly—Jesus died to take away even our sins of unforgiveness! Thank God He did or we would all truly be lost and condemned! Isn't that just one more reason to have a loving, forgiving heart toward others—even if they've sinned against us? The Apostle John urges us, **“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11)**. When we forgive we are the ones who are blessed!

It's easy to talk about forgiveness in this parable. It's easy to see the truth in the story and say, “That's absolutely right!” But it's harder to return that love in our lives. It is a struggle to forgive. It's hard to show love when someone has hurt us so badly. It's hard to move on and forget the sins of others, and we often can't just forget by waking up one day with all of the memories gone. We have memories and the hurts take a long time to erase.

But think of how essential it is to forgive each other in *any* relationship. I tell couples in my pre-marriage classes with them, “The three most important words you will say to each other in marriage are not, ‘I love you,’ but, ‘I forgive you.’” But not just in marriage, in all of our relationships, especially the deep ones, the important ones: between families, between friends, between fellow Christians and fellow church members, between pastor and church members—we need to be forgiving toward each other. We are sinners living, working, and worshipping with fellow sinners. We are going to sin against each other at times. At times we are going to let each other down, hurt each other, make each other mad and offend each other.

With the Gospel of Jesus Christ, with prayer, and time that the Holy Spirit uses to work in our hearts, the forgiving spirit grows and the hurts do begin to fade and we can move on. I can forgive you, you can forgive me, and you can forgive each other. Whatever the wrong, the hurt, the sin. We can give forgiveness. After all, think of how much forgiveness Jesus has given us! Amen.