

Matthew 18:21-35

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. You've got to give it to Peter. He wants to do the right thing. Jesus has been talking about what to do when a brother sins against you. There in the chapter that we're considering, chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel, in the previous section in verse 15, it begins with these words of Jesus, if your brother sins against you. We were thinking last Sunday evening about the teaching that we find there in that section. And Peter has been listening. He's concerned to do the right thing, to take on board the teaching that he has been receiving from Jesus. And he has a question, and I think we can give him the benefit of the doubt and say that it is a sincere and genuine question that is troubling Peter, or that in any case Peter needs or is looking for an answer to.

And the question is there in verse 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?

So that's a question that Peter has for Jesus. What do you make of that question? You know, we can interpret words on a page in different ways. And the tone of voice that is used, the context in which the question is posed, or what we imagine the context is, can really quite significantly alter how we understand, in this case, the question that Peter is posing. I wonder what you make of that question.

My starting point in thinking about the question is really to smile at the gritty realism that underlies the question. Peter knows his brothers. He knows his fellow disciples, and he is sure that one or two of them, and maybe he has a name in mind, are what we might call persistent offenders, and they will sin against him time and time again. He's already experienced that, and he anticipates that being a feature of life as part of the kingdom of heaven with his brothers and sisters. And so he's saying, well, what do I do when that happens? So there is this realism that underlies the question, how many times does he have to forgive? I wonder, and here I can do no more than wonder, I wonder if there might be a little bit of Peter trying to impress the master. Look at me. I'm willing to forgive up to seven times.

Isn't that impressive? Haven't I grasped what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven? I've grasped, Jesus, what you've been teaching about our righteousness surpassing the righteousness of the Pharisees, and that's what I want to do. I want to surpass what they do. I'm willing to forgive up to seven times. Apparently, the rabbis at the time that this was taking place, counseled against forgiving more than three times. They reckoned that three times was a reasonable number of times to forgive somebody who sinned against you, presumably in the same manner. And Peter, well, he's willing to go way beyond that, to more than double the accepted wisdom concerning how often a man should forgive.

[4 : 0 3] And Peter, spiritual man that he was, he even chooses a number laden with biblical symbolism of completeness. Seven times, Jesus is sure to be impressed by Peter and his question and the willingness that it indicates on Peter's part to forgive so many times. But of course, what we discover is that Jesus is less than impressed. In verse 22, we read, Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Now, to speak of seventy-seven times, or seventy-times-seven, as some versions translate the phrase that Jesus uses, is to speak of limitless times. And it is, by any measure, a big ask to forgive seventy-seven times, or limitless times.

And Jesus goes on to explain this demand that he makes of Peter and of us, and to illustrate this demand by means of a parable. And that's what we want to think about this morning, this parable that Jesus tells on this occasion. Now, a parable, as we know, is a story from everyday life. Those listening would have been able to identify with the characters and the context and the situation that's been described. A parable, a story from everyday life that serves to communicate or illustrate a spiritual truth. And the idea of a parable is to get across big truths, sometimes one big truth, or in

any case two or three related big ideas. And because that's the purpose of a parable, what we mustn't do, and what we often are prone to do, is to get lost in the details of the story, and maybe, in a manner that we think is very clever, apply the details in a way that was never intended.

It's a story intended to illustrate a big truth, or big truths. Now, the importance of that will become particularly apparent in this parable, as we'll see in due course.

Well, what we want to do is we want to tell the story, repeat, really, the telling of the story of the parable, but do so in three scenes. The parable divides, I think, quite easily, and obviously into three scenes. So, what we want to do is think of each scene, and at the end of each scene, apply or draw out the spiritual big idea that we find, and do that on these three occasions as we divide the parable up in this way. So, that's what we'll do.

Well, how does the parable begin? Scene one, there in verse 23, Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wants to settle accounts with his servants.

[7:18] The king decides that this is what he needs to do. He needs to gather his servants, those who owe him money for one reason or another, and he wants to settle those accounts.

And he begins with the one who owes him the most. And this first servant owes the king big time. The amount that is mentioned here is a humongous amount. We're told in verse 24 that this man owed him 10,000 talents. Now, it's a thankless task to try and convert currency or amounts of money that are quoted in the New Testament and bring them into modern day. Perhaps in your Bibles at the foot, a suggestion is made as to what that might equate to. Certainly, the Bible I hear it says that is a million pounds. Now, others who have done the math, difficult exercise though it is two millennia later, have come up with a much larger figure. Just to give you an idea of the scale of this man's debt, a talent was the equivalent of 6,000 denarii. Now, I'm sure you've heard explained that one denarii was the equivalent of a man's payment for one day's labor. So, a laborer for one day's labor would be paid one denarii. Well, a talent was 6,000 denarii. So, do the math. We're talking about 20 years wages for a common laborer. But this man owed 10,000 talents. Now, if you do the math by bringing it into today and saying, well, what does somebody earn for one day's labor and do the sums, you get loads and loads of zeros. One study Bible I was looking at suggested a figure of billions of pounds, never mind one million pounds. Now, the point really is, and we don't need to get lost in the arithmetic, the point is that when Jesus even mentioned this figure, 10,000 talents, the impression that would have been created, the impact it would have had on his original audience immediately would have been, well, that is just a ridiculous figure. That is way beyond anything we could even imagine. How could anybody owe so much? How would it be possible to even find yourself in a situation of owing that much money? It's just so huge. That would have been the impact. We read 10,000 talents, and we say, well, that sounds like quite a lot of money. But the impact on those who heard would have been, well, that's just beyond anything we've ever heard of or could possibly imagine.

Now, not surprisingly, the servant can't pay. And the king orders, we read in the story, that he, the debtor, his wife and family, and all that he owns, be sold to cover. Now, this would cover in a minuscule part, his debt. Now, in those circumstances, what does the man do? Well, the man begs for forgiveness. Or in any case, he begs for time. Maybe implicit is him begging for forgiveness, but he certainly begs for time. We read there in verse 26, be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay back everything. How does the master respond to this plea on the part of his servant? Well, we read there in verse 27, the servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go. The language that

Jesus uses here of the master taking pity on him is language that speaks of a deep compassion, overcoming the master in the face of the man's plight. The very same language, the same words are used in the same gospel in Matthew chapter 9, when we read in verse 36, a summary statement of Jesus' attitude to those who he met. We read there in Matthew 9, 36, when he, that is Jesus, saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. And when we read that verse, it portrays, it gets across this picture of this deep compassion of Jesus.

[12:14] Well, this is the language that is used to describe the master as he sees before him this servant drowning in debt, incapable of paying what he owes, and he has compassion on him, and he cancels the debt, and he lets the man go. He does more than the man was asking for. The man had asked for time. Give me time, and I'll pay back everything I owe, however impossible that promise was or would have been to keep. Well, many lifetimes would have not been sufficient time

for this man to pay his debt. But the master cancels the debt. If it's millions of pounds or billions of pounds, whatever figure we want to suggest equates to the figure quoted here. All of it, all of it is canceled. There is not one penny left in the man's account that he owes to his master. What's that all about? Canceling millions or billions of pounds worth of debt. As I was thinking about the figures involved, and really what the figure is isn't particularly important other than to stress how huge a figure it was, my thoughts wandered to the great prime minister,

Alexei Tsipras, and I wondered whether there might be merit in Alexei sending a wee text to Angela, Angela Merkel. And when I say a text, I mean literally a text. Matthew 18, 27. Dear Angela, regards Alexis. Would that help? The poor Greek prime minister. Well, I think he's resigned at the moment, so he's not the prime minister, but he hopes to soon be the prime minister again. But the scale of the debt that we're talking about here is in that kind of ballpark. So this is the story that has been told. This is the first scene. The king wants to settle his accounts. He calls the first debtor. The debtor is entirely incapable of paying his debt, but it is canceled in its entirety. What is the spiritual truth that this scene of the parable is conveying? Well, it's clear enough. God is the king of the kingdom of heaven. We are all his servants. We are all hugely in debt to God. Our debt, your debt, is the accumulated weight of our sin, and it is immeasurable. The psalmist is right in speaking of his sins, as we sung in Psalm 40, as more in number than the hairs on his head. In the case of some of us, a lot more in number than the hairs of our head, but I think the picture is clear enough. Innumerable, the scale of our debt, to use the language that we find in Revelation of the sins that we are guilty of being heaped up to heaven. And each time I sin, each time you sin, each time you fall short of God's righteous demands upon you. The debt grows and grows and grows, and it is unpayable. There is nothing you can do to pay the debt or even to reduce the size of the debt. Nothing, nothing at all. Our situation is hopeless. Our only hope is mercy. The words of the hymn, Rock of Ages, capture our reality.

Not the labor of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands. Could my zeal no respite? No. Could my tears forever flow? All for sin could not atone. Thou must save, and thou alone.

Our only hope is that God would have compassion on us and cancel our debt and free us from all its obligations. And that is what God is willing and able to do. The gospel, the good news concerning Jesus Christ, is all about God in Christ, paying the debt for us. Our debt has been paid in full by Jesus.

[16 : 51] Paul, in writing to the Colossians, uses the very picture of the debt that we bear and how it is covered by Jesus. And let's just read what he says in chapter 2 of that letter in verses 13 and 14.

And you who were dead in your trespasses or your sins, God made you alive together with Christ, having forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. All paid, all canceled by the death of Jesus in our place. Brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow citizens of the kingdom of heaven, do we begin to grasp the enormity of the cross? We begin to grasp the enormity of God's grace and forgiveness. If I can slightly paraphrase words of Tim Keller describing the good news of the gospel, we are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we could ever imagine. And yet, at the same time, we are more loved and forgiven in Jesus

Christ than we could ever dare hope. These two dramatic realities that come together in the gospel are huge debt, but coming alongside it, God's huge capacity and willingness to forgive and to cancel our debt in and through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. Perhaps this morning you still have to settle your accounts with God. You still haven't dealt with the debt that is yours. What will you do? How will you pay that debt? And you can't pay that debt. You have nothing to bring to the table. You have nothing to bring in a negotiation with God. There's no package that can be cobbled together where you bring from your part make certain commitments, make certain commitments, and somehow you can earn debt reduction or debt relief.

There is nothing you can do. You are burdened with a debt of sin that is unpayable. All you can do and all that you must do is cast yourself upon the mercy of God, and He will forgive you, and you have His Word on that. In the first letter of John in chapter 1, in verses 8 and 9, we're told, if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Let's move on to scene 2 of the parable. The forgiven servant leaves the palace and finds, possibly seeks out, a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii. There we read that from verse 28

onwards in our passage. Now, the sum that his fellow servant owed, the forgiven servant, it was not an insignificant amount. It wasn't just pennies. It was a hundred denarii. But just to put that in context, and here we don't need to come up with a modern-day figure. We can simply compare the two on their own terms.

[20 : 45] To put that in context, a hundred denarii was one six hundred thousandths. That's a difficult one to say. One six hundred thousandths of the debt that had been cancelled of the forgiven servant. And what does the forgiven servant do when he finds or seeks out the one who owes him? Well, we're told he grabbed him by the neck and he demands to be paid back every last penny.

His fellow servant, in words that are strangely familiar, begs for patience and assures him that the debt will be paid. But the forgiven servant refuses, and his debtor is thrown into prison until the debt is paid.

He acts towards him without mercy and with a spectacular cruelty. Now, it is just a story. But even as we consider and contemplate the story, it generates a real sense of indignation. I'm sure if you told this story to a child and asked them what they make of the unforgiving servant, you would find some choice words being spoken. We all recoil from the evident injustice of what is being played out before us. It's just ugly.

Well, what is the spiritual truth that this scene of the parable is conveying? Well, again, it's simple enough. We who have been forgiven generously are to forgive generously. We who have been shown mercy are to show mercy. It makes sense. How could it be any other way? It is to be for us the natural or the reasonable, certainly, response to all that we have received that we would forgive others. And, of course, forgiving others serves so many complementary purposes in our lives as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Let me just suggest four purposes that all intertwine together of forgiving.

I think the first thing we can say is that it is itself the act of forgiving, the forgiving spirit that ought to characterize us ought to characterize us. It is itself evidence that we have experienced forgiveness. And that very experience of forgiveness empowers and enables us to forgive others.

[23 : 14] So, it serves as evidence of what we have experienced. But it also provides us with an opportunity to show our gratitude to God in a singularly appropriate way. When we think of what God has done for us, the great debt that He has canceled, how can we show our gratitude? Well, what more appropriate way than we, in turn, forgiving others? So, it's evident. It's an opportunity. But the parable also, I think, makes clear. And here we have to be careful of not drawing out from the details of the parable.

But I think we can legitimately draw from the parable that forgiveness is also a duty, incumbent upon those who have been forgiven. Notice how the master in the parable uses the language of duty and obligation. In verse 33, and we'll come to this final scene in a moment, but notice what he says, shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? The idea is clear that this is a duty upon you in the light of what you have experienced. Then also, forgiveness serves as a powerful testimony to others, to the grace and power of God in our lives. I'm sure some of you were struck, as I was, by the words of Vincent Uzoma, a supply teacher who was stabbed in Bradford just a few weeks ago with a kitchen knife by one of his pupils. I think this was back in June. It was only a couple of weeks ago that the court case that resulted from that assault concluded. And the victim, Vincent, spoke after the conclusion of the case. And I'm sure many of you saw his words on the news. And he said this, as a Christian, I have forgiven this boy who has inflicted this pain and trauma on me and my family.

I pray he will make use of the support provided to him to become a changed person. It's very powerful to hear this man who had been so horribly wronged speak in these terms as a believer in Jesus Christ.

It was powerful and moving. But I think it also raises an important issue that we do need to touch on in this matter of forgiveness. And it's related, but maybe a slight tangent. Can we forgive those who do not ask for forgiveness or even acknowledge their guilt? In the parable, there's no question of either servant denying their guilt, denying their debt, and both in a measure ask for forgiveness. But what of those who do not ask? We might reasonably make the point that even God doesn't forgive those who refuse to confess their sins. If we confess our sins, God is just and gracious and true to forgive us our sins. But we need to confess our sins. Indeed, the parallel passage in Luke's gospel throws very helpful light on this question. If we just turn to Luke chapter 17 and verses 3 and 4.

Luke 17 verses 3 and 4. You'll notice at the beginning of the chapter that the teaching that is being

recorded here is the same as the teaching recorded in our passage in Matthew are certainly very related. So, I think it's reasonable to describe this as a parallel passage. And notice what Jesus says here. So, watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him. And if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day and seven times comes back to you and says, I repent, forgive him. So, there's the same ethos of forgiving time and time again. But it's made clear by Jesus that an integral part of this is the one who has wronged you coming and acknowledging their guilt, their sin, and seeking your forgiveness. And in those circumstances, then yes, you are obligated.

[27 : 38] And it should be your desire to grant forgiveness. It's clear that the offending brother has to repent and ask for forgiveness. In the matter of forgiveness, we might say it takes two to tango.

Now, does that mean that we are off the hook with regard to those who do not ask to be forgiven? Well, I don't think we are off the hook, if that's the right language to use. We are to have a forgiving disposition towards all. It ought always to be our desire to forgive. And yet, forgiveness in its full extent can only be completed, can only be consummated, if you wish, when it is requested, granted, and received.

These elements need to be present. You can't have full forgiveness when there's only one party participating. Now, the disposition, yes, it ought to be ever-present. What about the man that we've mentioned who was on the news a couple of weeks ago, Vincent Uzoma? He said, I've forgiven the boy.

Now, as far as I know, and there may be information that I'm not privy to, but as far as I know, the lad who stabbed him showed no remorse, made no request to be forgiven. What do we make of the forgiveness that was granted? Well, I take the words of my brother as words that speak of his love and forgiving spirit towards his attacker, and we thank God for that love and forgiving spirit.

But it does fall short of forgiveness in the full sense, not through any fault on the part of the aggrieved party of Vincent Uzoma, but it falls short of forgiveness to the full extent because of that missing element of genuine repentance on the part of the one guilty.

[29 : 38] So, what's the deal for us? Do you forgive as you have been forgiven? Do you show mercy as you have and continue to be shown mercy? Let's move on to the final scene briefly. The master hears of the cruelty of his forgiven servant and calls him to account. Fellow servants are appalled by what they see.

They can see how incongruous it is that this man who has been forgiven so generously would deny forgiveness to one who owed him so little. It just doesn't make any sense. And so, they go and they report this to the master. He calls the one he had forgiven to account. The master is furious. He rightly upbraids the servant for his wickedness and cruelty, and the master is in no doubt that the mercy received by the servant placed upon him a duty of mercy to others. Shouldn't you have had mercy, he says. But the story doesn't end there. This is where the story gets difficult and messy.

The master, in anger we're told, turns the unforgiving servant over to the jailers, literally the torturers to be tortured. And if that were not difficult enough as part of the story, Jesus then declares in the final verse that in like manner his heavenly Father will treat those who fail to forgive from the heart. Now, what is the spiritual truth that this final scene of the parable conveys? Are we to conclude that God approves of and makes use of torturers should we get Amnesty International onto his case and get a petition going? This is where we need to understand that this is a parable, and that we're not to deem every detail of the story as of huge significance. In the words of one commentator, relating to this reference to the unforgiving servant being sent to the jailers to be tortured, he says this, and I think it's a legitimate conclusion, that the torturers are part of the scenery of the parable. Something that would have been familiar to his hearers, that would have resonated with them, something they could have understood and bought into. They said, yes, that's what would happen. That's what would happen in real life. They're part of the scenery of the parable. Their inclusion in the story does not require us to conclude that God sanctions torture and brutality.

That said, we ought not to dilute the very real vigor and harshness of the picture being painted. To fail to forgive is profoundly serious and has profoundly grave and serious spiritual consequences. God will punish those who fail to forgive. God will withhold forgiveness from those who fail to forgive. Now, Jesus had already made that abundantly clear in his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

[33 : 06] In the Lord's Prayer, as we commonly call it, forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And then he goes on to say, for if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Are we to conclude then that forgiveness is a good work with which we earn God's forgiveness? By no means. The order in the parable is clear enough. We are forgiven first, and then, as evidence of and in gratitude for our forgiveness, we forgive others. As James reminds us, faith without works is dead, or no faith at all. And the work that faith produces is the spirit of forgiveness. A stubborn and persistent failure to forgive calls into serious and legitimate question if we have ever truly received or experienced God's forgiveness. And that is a sobering thought and an even more sobering reality. Well, let's draw things to a close. Our God is a forgiving God.

He generously forgives all who come to Him confessing their sins. Have you done that? Have you done that in your life? Have you recognized the huge debt that you cannot pay, that you cannot deal with, that you cannot reduce? Have you come to God confessing your sin and asking Him to forgive you? You need to do that.

And for those of us who, by grace, have been enabled and have received God's full and free forgiveness, we have been forgiven much, and we are to love and forgive much. The kingdom of heaven of which we are citizens is the community of the forgiven, and all our relationships as fellow citizens are to be marked by forgiven. We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we could ever imagine. And yet, at the same time, we are more loved and forgiven in Jesus Christ than we could ever dare hope. Let us live and forgive in the light of this wonderful reality. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for what it tells us concerning Yourself, how it makes so wonderfully clear to us what kind of God You are, and of Your love and grace and Your generosity in forgiving us all our sins, in canceling the totality of our debt, of setting us free from its burdensome obligations that we are incapable of meeting. We do thank You for Your limitless mercy towards us that is rich and deep and beyond measure. And as we recognize as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and also as we relate to those who are outside of the kingdom, that they would be marked by a forgiving disposition and indeed a readiness to forgive as that is required and as that forgiveness is sought.

Help us then, we pray. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.