

Matthew 18:21-35

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Preacher: James Maciver

[0 : 00] I'd like you to turn with me now to the passage we read in Matthew, chapter 18, and reading at verse 21. Matthew 18, at 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. Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

We always need the Lord's help for every duty and every responsibility that we have. And we need it in particular, and we are very much aware of our need of it in particular, when we come to deal with an issue that requires forgiveness.

Not just forgiveness to be given by us, but forgiveness as well to be received. Because there is in our hearts a reluctance naturally in regard to both.

A reluctance to receive, a reluctance also to give. See, as Lewis somewhere says, that forgiveness is an easy topic until you have something really to forgive.

[1 : 25] And then it becomes very difficult. And it's for that reason that we find so much in the Lord's own teaching on the elements of discipleship in regard to our need of help from Him, from His Spirit, from that power of God Himself.

And indeed, it is only possible to engage in forgiveness and meekness and having a pure heart by having, first of all, that great change, which we know takes place in our regeneration, in our conversion, in our being won to Christ by the Lord.

And today, as we look at these verses, we can see that Peter here comes with this question. We don't know what was behind this question, why he came with this question, but knowing, as you know from the Bible, something about Peter's character, it appears that he was somewhat frustrated.

It's very likely that he had some sort of relationship problem with somebody else. He's like that, isn't he, Peter? He comes very often to just speak things, and then he's got to sometimes rethink it and take things back.

And he's like that. He always has something or other that needs adjustment here and there, even though he's large-hearted and passionate about Christ and about discipleship, yet he still sometimes, as we all do, need correction and redirection.

[3 : 01] And for whatever reason, and whoever it was that caused this particular point to be raised by him, he's come to the Lord and he's asked, how many times should I or do I need to forgive my brother?

And then he said up to seven times. And I'm sure he thought that was really covering it pretty well, because that went beyond really what even the strictest sort of Pharisees required.

Seven times was pretty generous as far as Peter was concerned. But Jesus turned it round and said, No, not seven times, but seventy times seven.

And that really shows us that what we need to do in bringing things to Christ is one thing, but we have to be prepared for Christ's answer.

And when you see Peter carrying his question and his burden there to the Lord, well, that itself on a very basic level really tells us what we must do with our similar questions and our similar burdens.

[4 : 10] Because they come up all the time in our day-to-day relationships. How often do I forgive? What's required of me when it comes to forgiveness? Where do I take these problems?

How do I know the answer to these things? Well, I take them to the Lord. I take them to His Word. I take them in prayer to Himself. That's what Peter did. That's what Peter is reminding us of here.

We need to do with all our burdens, with all our questions, with all our uncertainties, with all the things that come into our relationships personally, and whether it's in church or in work or whatever else.

This is Peter giving us the lead as to what to do with them. But we have to be prepared to take the Lord's answer. We have to be prepared to take the teaching that He gives us and apply that in His terms.

Because while Peter is seemingly very generous in what he's suggesting to the Lord as an adequate response to his own question, the Lord is saying, No, that doesn't meet my standard.

[5 : 11] That's not going to find approval in my sight at all. I'm telling you, He says it's 70 times 7. In other words, the Lord is really saying to Peter, Peter, you don't put limits on forgiveness.

You don't actually draw a line in the sand and say, Beyond that I need not go if somebody demands that I forgive them or requires or requests my forgiveness.

If I've done it all these times, if it's the same person especially, if I get rather tired of all this, then I don't need to go beyond the line. The Lord is saying that's not the case. There is no line.

There is no definitive mark beyond which you are not required to go when you're dealing with the issue of forgiveness. And then the Lord added this parable of the unmerciful servant, as it's called there.

And that reminds us too of both what's in the statement of the Lord and the following parable. That, as we'll see, forgiveness is absolutely essential and integral to the Christian's life.

[6 : 21] Without forgiveness, there is no meaningful Christian experience or witness. And it doesn't just mean without receiving forgiveness.

There is no meaningful Christian experience or Christian confession or Christian life. It also means, and the Lord includes in the Lord's teaching, without the giving of forgiveness, without showing forgiveness.

forgiveness. Because, because, as we'll see, the Lord ties them together. The receiving of it from God on our part requires the giving of it on our part to others when we need to forgive.

And indeed, the receiving from others as well. But three things, just very briefly, to highlight the main elements in this very large and important subject. I'd like just to cover these three things.

The demands of forgiveness, or the demands made upon us for forgiveness, the challenges, the demands in that sense, the difficulties of forgiveness, and the delights of forgiveness.

[7 : 29] The difficulties of it are, such as we can see from Christ's example, and secondly, from Christ's teaching. Looking at it mainly in this passage, but in other passages as well.

Christ's example, first of all, sets a great challenge for us in regard to our thinking and our practice of forgiveness. Because what Jesus actually does when he forgives is to focus upon not just one sort of small section of a person's life or experience, but actually focuses on that person's whole well-being, or that person's whole soundness as a person.

Let me just draw your mind back to chapter 9, if you refer back just briefly to the beginning of chapter 9, where Jesus, they are coming into this area where he steps into the boat he crossed over, came to his own town, and some men brought to him a paralytic lying on a mat.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven. At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, This fellow was blaspheming.

Know their thoughts, Jesus said, Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven, or to say get up and walk? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

[8 : 58] Then he said to the paralytic, Get up, take your mat, and go home. And the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe, and they praised God who had given such authority to men.

Now here is a man who is brought to Jesus as a paralytic with a physical ailment. And yet the first thing that Jesus actually says in regard to this man is take courage or take encouragement.

Your sins are forgiven. And there would have been many people there, I'm sure, as there would have been today if it were happening today in our age, who would actually say about this incident, Here was somebody with this physical condition, with this debilitating condition, with all that is associated with that, and hearing Jesus actually saying, your sins are forgiven, people would say, that's not the kind of thing this man wants to hear.

That's not the kind of thing this person really should be told at this time. He can do without religion. He can do without things like guilt and sin and all of these sort of things.

What he really needs is somebody to deal with this physical problem. But that's not what Jesus does. He actually focuses on his spiritual need.

[10 : 19] But he focuses on his spiritual need in relation to his physical need. So that what Jesus is really seeing before him as Christ sees it, as he himself sees it, is a broken life.

A life that needs mended. A life that needs put together properly. And you can't, Jesus is saying, leave sin out of that picture of that person's broken life.

Because you can deal with the physical, you can deal with the mental, you can deal with the psychological, but it still leaves the basic problem of sin and what sin has caused.

And for Jesus, it's so important to bear the whole thing together, to put it all together, and to say, here is someone that needs mended.

And where does mending begin for him? It begins in forgiveness. It begins in Christ forgiving this man's sins. It didn't begin for him by getting up from his paralysis, by taking his bed and going home.

[11 : 33] That wasn't the beginning of his healing. That wasn't the beginning of making him whole. It began with Christ addressing his sin, the need of his soul. And that's how it is for you and for me and for every human being today.

Because that's what sin has caused in the broken lives, in the broken relationships, and the way that we need things put back together again. You have to trace it back to sin in some form or other because that is the root cause and that is the root problem.

And Jesus is addressing it constantly in his teaching and his practice. There is the example that Jesus gives us in regard to forgiveness, in regard to the life of this man that's there before him.

He focuses on the need for that person's life to be restored, for that person in his personality, in his life, in his whole being to be put back together properly.

Now you see, that's important when you and I think of forgiveness. Because sometimes, very often indeed, we think of forgiveness as something that doesn't quite need to go as far as really putting that person's life together again is concerned.

[12 : 48] But when you and I have something to forgive, remember that the need for forgiveness is dealing with something that's broken.

Something that has come to be shattered between us and somebody else. A relationship. And in order to have that mended, forgiveness is essential.

And the forgiveness that is essential is a forgiveness that aims at nothing less than the whole person being mended. I know that we can't put lives together.

It's the Lord that does that. But when I have something to forgive and when somebody asks me to forgive them, I don't do it reluctantly. Otherwise, it means I'm not really committed to that person's life being properly restored in relationship to me.

I'm not really committed to the whole relationship being mended 100%. For Christ, forgiveness means complete mending of the relationship.

[14 : 02] For Christ, forgiveness means being committed to putting things back together as they should be. Without actually leaving any part of it unmended.

And that's one of the great challenges. And that's where the demand for forgiveness when we need to forgive really comes. Now, it's the same in receiving forgiveness you could say that the same principle applies.

Because when we listen to the Gospel or when we're reading our Bibles, perhaps we're here tonight and we're not yet in the position of having received forgiveness. We've not come, perhaps, to Christ with our sin and really made a complete confession of our sin.

The way that we are required to confess. We're going to see in a minute things that God has put together well, here's something that God has put together. Confession of sin and forgiveness of sin.

The one fits with the other. You can't have the second without the first one. And you see, our own natural tendency is that we would say, well, I acknowledge my need of forgiveness.

[15 : 15] I want to be forgiven. forgiven, but I don't want every part of my life affected. It can't be that way because forgiveness and the giving of forgiveness and the receiving of forgiveness is something that is itself designed to bring about wholeness, to bring about restoration, to bring about a completeness of healing, of salvation, of wholeness.

So, Christ's example is a demand for us. It's a great challenge for us. When we have something to forgive, we have to focus upon the complete restoration of the relationship.

But then, of course, there's Christ's teaching which puts together some things which are, as we said, very important for us. Teaching which, here and elsewhere, obviously brings in, as Christ well knew, conflicts in human relationships.

You often find even in the parables that there are these sort of things involved because Jesus sets His teaching in real life. This is not theoretical stuff. This is not stuff for university lectures and lecture theatres and stuff like this.

This is for life. This is really for life lived in this world. That's why the Lord is giving this teaching to His people. That's why He's saying this is what forgiveness is about.

[16 : 38] And in that, He brings up all these conflicts like there was between this man in the parable, this employer, this person who had these servants and wanted to settle debts with them.

And of course, there was conflict over that and there was conflict between the one whose debt was forgiven and one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denar. I will come to that in a minute.

But you can see that in that, in these relationships just as in our own, there are responsibilities, reactions, and responses.

And that's really what the whole problem is about because we get these wrong. And that's what brings the whole need of forgiveness so tellingly and forcibly into our experience.

And in these conflicts and these relationships and these tensions that exist in human life, the Lord is, in His teaching, not just saying, here are these conflicts, but also throwing up for us these connections.

[17 : 47] And the connection here is between forgiving and being, between being forgiven and forgiving. They're very closely linked.

He finishes the parable by emphasizing that for us. That unless you forgive your brother from your heart, then you shouldn't consider yourself forgiven or in warrant receiving forgiveness from God.

But you notice how the Lord sets out the ridiculousness, really, of our refusing to forgive if we have already had our sin forgiven.

It's ridiculous because of the great contrast of the difference between the first person described there as owing 10,000 talents to his king.

One talent was worth 20 years wages for an ordinary labourer in those days. One talent 20 years worth of labour, of wages.

[18 : 56] And here's a man who owes 10,000 talents. 10,000 times 20 years worth of income. That's what he owed.

That's what his debt was. That's what he had forgiven. That's what his king cancelled out. Something he couldn't possibly himself ever hope to actually achieve payment of.

That was a huge sum beyond any possible reckoning for him to forgive, to pay back. And that was forgiven. That was cancelled.

It was wiped out. Here his master is saying, that's it. I'll wipe the books clean. We won't think about it again. And Jesus really is saying to us, that's what it's like.

in having our sin, our guilt, our debt cancelled. It is an enormous debt. It's a debt so great that you and I cannot possibly measure it.

[20 : 03] Only God knows the size of it. The debt of our guilt. The debt of our sin against him. All of these things that come into that.

God, it's an enormous amount. It's so great that you can only begin to measure it by looking at how it was paid. And it was paid in the death of Christ.

It took the Lord's, God's own Son to come into this world and to die the death he died to pay for our sin.

That's how big it is. That's where you begin to get a glimpse of the size of it. That's why forgiveness is so precious to the Christian because forgiveness cannot be earned.

Forgiveness cannot be bought on our part. The debt is simply too great and our inability to meet it is too great. But it's been paid.

[21 : 10] And in forgiveness we receive the one who paid it. And we receive the benefits that come from his having paid it.

That's the great thing about grace. That it's free. That it's provided for us what we cannot provide ourselves. And Christ's teaching on this here is so interesting.

Here is this great debt that corresponds to or that's a representation of our great debt that we owe to God that we cannot pay but that Christ has paid for us.

And here is this man he's had that paid for him. He's had that cancelled. And he goes out and comes across a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii.

it's really a few pounds worth. And a denarii was about a day's wage. So it's about a hundred days wage.

[22 : 09] Wouldn't take long really even for a labourer to get it together in those days. but he completely refused to give this companion this friend this fellow worker any space of time to pay.

He took him by the throat. He threatened to kill him if he didn't actually pay this debt. The other man begged him be patient with me and I will pay you back. He refused.

He had the man thrown in prison until he could pay the debt. And then of course you know the rest of the story, the parable for yourselves. Well, the Lord is saying, just think about it. Whenever you have something to forgive someone else for, however enormous it seems in our own eyes, it's like that.

It's even smaller than that. It's microscopic compared to what Christ has forgiven us. us. And he's connecting the two together in such a way that will hopefully keep this in our minds constantly, that when forgiveness is demanded of us, we should immediately say, well, how can I refuse such a small issue when I compare it with the great debt that I've had cancelled by my God?

That's what he's saying to us. That's where Christ's teaching sets out the demand for forgiveness. Sets it out in a way that shows how in the immense debt that's been paid for us, it's entirely illogical.

[23 : 50] Indeed, it's immoral for us not to forgive when we are required to do so. Secondly, the difficulties of forgiving, of forgiveness.

Difficulties accepting and difficulties of applying. This man just wouldn't face up to his responsibilities.

He just wouldn't accept the ridiculousness of a situation that refused to pay a tiny amount when he himself had had such a great debt covered over and cancelled.

But that's our heart speaking. That's your heart and mine. This reluctance, this resistance, this kind of thing that you know is in yourself and I know is in myself, when it comes to something like forgiveness, when it comes to something like confessing our sin in order to receive forgiveness, you know there's a reluctance there.

You know there's something there that holds you back. you know that there's something there that really resists the idea of coming clean with God and coming into his presence and confessing that sin that you know is yours and confessing it to such an extent that wants God to actually cover it all and wipe it all clean and give you a new life.

[25 : 14] I know that reluctance, you know that reluctance, it's there. And we have to acknowledge that it's there and it's part of what we have to confess and it's something for which we need the help of God himself in dealing with it.

It's difficult to identify, to accept, to close in with an acceptance of the root of our problem.

It's always somebody else's fault. God, it's always if only it were different in some way or other. But Christ is pointing us to what's in here.

To this reluctance that is due not to somebody else, but to my sin, to my sinful heart, to my bias towards refusing forgiveness and refusing to give forgiveness.

And it's to that that Jesus is really addressing our minds in the difficulties of forgiveness. We can't forgive without his help any more than we can receive forgiveness without his help.

[26 : 32] We have to identify what makes forgiveness necessary for us, for us to receive it and for us to give in return. And what makes it necessary for us, of course, to receive it, as we've already seen, is our sin.

And you know, it's a strange thing, but most people converted will be able to say this and should, if not everybody, that during the time that they acknowledged there was something wrong in their lives, that there was something in need of being restored and mended and put right, or perhaps it was really a consciousness of sin and the seriousness of sin or the guilt of sin, whatever.

But prior to coming to the Lord and coming to know the Lord and coming to conversion and coming to the Lord's forgiveness of their sin, there is this reluctance, there is this resistance, and yet there is at the same time this acknowledgement of a basic unhappiness without it.

And you'll find many people in the world like that today. They'll say, I don't want to become religious. I can see the life of some Christian people that they're very content, that there's satisfaction in their lives.

I'd like to have that. I don't have it in my own life, but I don't want to go all the way with this religion thing so that I will come to live in such a way as committed to Christ and to going to church and to pray meetings and to all of these sort of things.

[27 : 59] Well, the Lord is saying it's either one thing or the other. There's no partial forgiveness. The Lord doesn't say, I'll forgive half your sins today and you can leave the other half to next year.

Christ deals with completeness. Whenever you think of Christ's teaching and the difficulties of forgiveness and the demands of forgiveness, that completeness is always there.

Either we are committed to Him or we're not. Either we're committed to forgiveness or we're not. Either we're willing to receive it all for the whole of our lives or we're not. Either we're committed to giving it or we're not.

For Christ, there are no sections or partialities or incompleteness in those things. For the Lord, it's one thing or the other. You cannot, he says, serve God and mammon.

You cannot have your heart half here and half there. And so you bring that with you into the element of forgiveness as well. The difficulty of accepting it.

[29 : 01] The difficulties of us coming really to make a confession of our fault. And that's true not just between ourselves and God, it's also true between ourselves and other human beings.

It's always destructive of our own pride, of our own sense of self-worth, self-sufficiency to actually have this put to us, that we are at fault.

fault. And that we need to accept that fault in order for things to be put right. And that of course goes into the element of giving or applying forgiveness as well.

And again the problem is highlighted for us in the passage, in the parable, we've covered some of it before. but it's really a sense of not appreciating what he had already received, isn't it?

The more you and I appreciate and value and love what we receive from God in forgiveness, the more likely it is that we will be forgiving, that we will actually act in forgiveness towards others.

[30 : 21] The more likely we are to do that, the more we appreciate the forgiveness we've received. So you've got to study forgiveness, you've got to look into it, look into the things that it contains, the things that are related to it, and the teaching of the Bible on it.

The more you do that, the more I do that, the more forgiving we will be, the more ready to let go of our reluctance, because the world is full of, let's face it, the world is full of grudges, full of revenge, full of ideas of getting your own back, hence violence, murder, terror, eye for eye, tooth for a tooth.

That's completely, completely the opposite of the Christian life. And the Christian life at its essence has this element of forgiveness, not getting even, not holding a grudge, not wanting revenge, but what he mentions at the end of the passage, this is how my heavenly father will treat each of you, unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

That's where the problem lies, and that's where the solution begins. It has to be from the heart. What comes out of us in our behavior is from the heart. What comes out of us in forgiveness as well is from the heart.

It's the heart that receives the forgiveness of God, it's the heart that's changed through the forgiveness of God, and therefore that changed heart gives in return and bestows and shows forgiveness.

[32 : 00] That's why he's emphasizing it has to be from the heart. Not the kind of thing that says, right, I forgive you. You've asked my forgiveness, that's it, but I don't want to see you again. It's forgiveness from the heart.

Genuine, serious, wholehearted, not reluctant, but Christ-like because God was not reluctant when he forgave your sins.

And that's the pattern that sets how we are to forgive from the heart. The forgiveness we receive comes straight from the heart of God.

the forgiveness that we receive is marked, made in heaven, made in the depths of God's love and forgiveness.

And that's why ours must be a reflection of that. It's difficult, hugely demanding. We always, or most frequently, get it wrong and wish ourselves to be still prone to sin in this area.

[33 : 18] But nevertheless, that's where we find out inspiration and our example in the Lord himself. Just closing, the delights of forgiveness, demands of it and the difficulties, but the delights of it as well.

Just let me say two things. There's a great delight in being a blessing to others as well as in receiving a blessing or in being blessed.

Because receiving forgiveness really means a release. Remember the psalmist in Psalm 32, which we're going to sing in a minute. He's saying until this time that he made his confession to God and received God's acceptance and forgiveness, he's saying, I was like somebody just crushed under a great weight.

He needed release. He needed a sense of freedom and being set free from these constrictions, from these terrible conditions of soul that he was in as he mulled over his sin and his need of forgiveness.

But when he made his confession, everything opened up. And everything then led him into these bright sunlit fields where he could enjoy fellowship with God.

[34 : 46] That's the same in the other direction. When we give, when we show forgiveness, it brings release, it brings renewal, it brings rejoicing, it brings delight, not just to ourselves, but to the relationship.

to the restoration of a meaningful relationship again. And that delight, that great freshness, that wonderful fresh air in our personal experience, is such a crucial thing for every Christian to know, for every human being to know.

And forgiveness is at the heart of it. Forgiveness is a great thing. It's an essential thing. It's an indispensable thing for a Christian.

And we value today that forgiveness. And we value it especially because we trace it back to the person who forgives.

forgiveness. And just as forgiveness in human terms is impossible to understand or even to impossible to think about without it being given by a person to another person.

[36 : 12] It's an interpersonal thing. So is the forgiveness of our sins. It's a personal thing between a human being and God.

And great though the forgiveness is, the greatest thing of all is God himself. As the psalmist put it as we sang in Psalm 130, if you Lord were to mark iniquity, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you so that you may be feared. Let's pray. O gracious and eternal God, we give thanks that there is abundance of pardon with you, that you are the one who calls us to yourself for forgiveness, that you are the one who brings to us in the message of your word a great call towards that forgiveness.

We give thanks today that you have shown to us such great love and pity and compassion in coming to forgive our sin. in providing for us such a great atonement in the person of our Lord that would provide for us the basis of our forgiveness.

We bless you today for the example that you give to us in regard to how we need to forgive others. We thank you today for the way that you have connected together the forgiveness we receive and the forgiveness that we are to show.

[37 : 47] we pray that we may carry these things into our practice that your word will come to lodge more and more in our hearts that the principles and values of it might dictate our way of life.

Bless us now throughout this day we pray go before us and accept us forgiving our sin and receiving us for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.