

Matthew 18:21-35 EHV

Theme: Forgiveness That Knows No Limit

- 1) Is the forgiveness we receive.
- 2) Is the forgiveness we offer.

²¹Then 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?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you as many as seventy-seven times. ²³For this reason the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴When he began to settle them, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵Because 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!’ ²⁷The 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!’ ³⁰But 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. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴His 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.”

Peter’s question for Jesus was simple, one that all of us have in the back of our minds: “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me? It’s a valid question. Some people abuse our forgiveness, so shouldn’t there be a limit? Hence Peter’s follow-up question, *As many as seven times?*

²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you as many as seventy-seven times. In other words, **our forgiveness should know no limits**. 1) Such is the forgiveness we receive from God. 2) Such is the forgiveness God wants us to offer others.

Part One: Such is the forgiveness we receive.

Jesus told Peter a parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.” The king is God, and we are his servants. What do we owe God? Righteousness; that is, the perfect keeping of his law, which tells us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves.^a

²⁴When he began to settle them, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. What does the settlement signify? Any event like sickness, the death of a friend, or even the simple preaching of God’s Word through which the Holy Spirit moves us to evaluate our life in the light of God’s Holy Law. And what does the Holy Spirit reveal at such times? The magnitude of our sinfulness and the damnation we deserve.

The man in the parable owed ten thousand talents. In today’s terms, that would be over two billion dollars - an unpayable amount!

But is our debt to God that bad? Yes, it is. God demands perfect righteousness in deed, word, and thought. But we are unrighteous and sinful. And there is nothing we can offer God to pay for our sins. There is nothing we can do to redeem our souls from hell, as the Bible says: *the ransom for their souls is costly. Any payment would fall short.*^b

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.* The parable has the flavour of the time: if you owed an ancient, oriental king money, there was no such thing as filing for bankruptcy protection. Everything you owed – including your family and very self - would become the king's. Was that unjust? No, everybody knew what the consequences of not repaying a debt were, but the servant chose to ignore them. His careless living brought him to this point.

The same is true regarding us. Every person on this earth has God's law written in their hearts.^c Our consciences testify against sin, but we do not listen. God has every right to take everything away from us. He has every right to send us to hell because of the unrepayable debt of righteousness we owe him.

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!’* The servant is like the person in whom God's law strikes fear and begins to work repentance. Such a man cries out in genuine remorse, *“What must I do to be saved?”*^d The answer to that question is not found in what we can do for God, but in what God, our master, has done for us!

²⁷*The master of that servant had pity on him, released him, and forgave him the debt.*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, take time to meditate and marvel at this verse because it portrays the biblical doctrine of justification in all its beauty. What an amazing act of compassion! Out of sheer, underserved mercy, the master cancelled a 2-billion-dollar debt!!! The act is so incredible that it seems unbelievable, and yet it's true. How so? Because the king's announcement wonderfully describes what the Lord has done for us. Whenever we come before the LORD in repentance, He has mercy on us. Out of utter compassion, the LORD announces to us in the Gospel that He has cancelled our debt of sin in full. Nothing more needs to be added or done. We are free. Heaven is our home.

How can God do this for us? Did he simply forget about our sin? No, he did something more amazing than that: He sent His own Son into the world to pay our debt in full. Jesus earned the righteousness we need to stand before God by keeping God's law perfectly in our place. Jesus also took our sins upon himself and paid for them in full through his suffering and death on the cross. His resurrection proves that God the Father accepted his payment on our behalf. Therefore, God can say to you. “Your great debt of sin is completely forgiven. You are free.”

Oh, how wonderful is the forgiveness God shows us in Christ - it has no limit! Because our debt of sin has been paid for in full, we no longer need to fear death or what comes after it. Heaven's portals are opened to us. We are reconciled and welcomed to live with God forever. What an awesome gift! How can we ever thank him for it? God's Word tells us: by forgiving others the same way He forgave us.

Part Two: Such is the forgiveness that we offer.

²⁸*“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii. Who is the fellow servant? It is a fellow Christian who has sinned against us in some way. In today's terms, the fellow servant owed the forgiven servant a little over \$5000. Now, be honest, who of us wouldn't be tempted to confront a fellow Christian if they owed us \$5000 and did not pay up?*

He grabbed him and began choking him, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ How often don't we resemble this unmerciful servant? We, who have been forgiven by God so greatly, can often harbour hate and ill will in our

hearts against fellow Christians who sin against us. We demand respect and restitution – sometimes refusing to forgive them even when they beseech us for it.

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.* Holding grudges and refusing to forgive may be acceptable to the world, but not to the LORD who has forgiven the great debt you owed him. Whenever you refuse to forgive someone who repents, it is like you are throwing him into an emotional jail. You burden his conscience, making him suffer for a sin for which Jesus already paid on His cross.

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.* Such actions not only incur God’s anger, but they also distress fellow Christians – so much so that they go to God in prayer to correct the situation.

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?’*

Showing mercy is one of the greatest ways we can thank God for his forgiveness. The Lord himself says: *I desire mercy, not sacrifice.*^e By refusing to show forgiving mercy, we reveal a heart that does not truly appreciate God’s forgiveness – or even belong to Him, as St. John writes: *Everyone who does not do what is right is not from God, along with everyone who does not love his brother.*^f

What happened to the unmerciful servant? Jesus tells us: 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.*”

Jesus’ point is clear: if we don’t forgive others, especially our Christian brothers, we forfeit our own forgiveness.

Jesus’ words are scary, aren’t they? Why? Because I know I have not forgiven others the way the LORD has forgiven me. Isn’t that true of all of us? We may want to forgive, but our sinful nature so easily stirs up feelings of anger and self-pity within us that we just can’t do it. Yes, if our salvation was dependent on how well we forgave someone else, who of us could be saved?

Thank God, our salvation does not depend on how well we forgive others, rather our forgiving others is dependent on our salvation. What do I mean by that? Let me explain.

Let’s say someone sinned against me so grievously that I have a tough time forgiving that person. I am so angry that, try as I might, I just can’t seem to stop being mad. What should I do? I should go to the cross and confess my sinful feelings to Jesus in prayer together with my struggle. Yes, I should lay out everything I feel before Jesus and then, having confessed it all, look at his cross and remember what he did for me there – how he forgave all my sins, even my sinful anger that is unwilling to forgive. And, as I bask in the peace of Christ’s forgiveness towards me, I can ask him to help me to forgive and love my neighbour – remembering Jesus died for his sin too.

And, after having thus prayed, I can rise in peace knowing that the Holy Spirit will help me forgive my neighbour by directing my thoughts to Jesus. Like a full moon that is so overwhelmed with sunlight that it can’t help but reflect it to earth, the more you meditate on the great, forgiving love Jesus has for you, the more you can’t help but reflect it to others – forgiving them for Christ’s sake.

Brothers and sisters: Christian forgiveness knows no limits. We are the recipients of such forgiveness, and such is the forgiveness we offer. That is how the world knows that we truly are God’s sons and daughters through faith – all to the glory of God’s saving name. Amen.

^a Cf. Mark 12:30-31 & Romans 13:10

^b Psalm 49:8 EHV

^c Cf. Romans 2:14-15

^d Acts 16:30b EHV

^e Hosea 6:6a EHV

^f 1 John 3:10b EHV