

# THE TRUTH ABOUT FORGIVENESS – MATTHEW 18:21-35

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



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

Do you remember that one time, with that one person, who did that one thing, and it made you really, really upset? Chances are there’s a time, a place, a person you can remember who did something that made you upset. One of those times for me was with a kid in grade-school. Looking back he probably had ADD, but I just thought of him as so annoying. It wasn’t that he did any one particular thing, it was that he did all of those pesky things that just grind on you. It was incredibly difficult to even think about forgiving him.

Perhaps there’s an incident like that from your childhood, perhaps there’s a person like that where you work or hang out, perhaps (and I’m going out on a limb here) there’s even a person like that for you right here in this room. It can be extremely difficult to look at that person and think, “I have to forgive him too?” We’re all asking ourselves the question that Peter was bold enough to put out, **“How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?”** Forgiveness is one of those things that Christians are always wondering about. What does it mean? What doesn’t it mean? When is it appropriate? This morning we see THE TRUTH ABOUT FORGIVENESS.

1. It has its limits
2. But God doesn’t

Jesus told one of his famous parables to explain THE TRUTH ABOUT FORGIVENESS. It is the parable of the unmerciful servant. In this parable we see the limits of God's forgiveness and the limits he expects of us.

The parable starts with a king who is settling accounts with his servants. The story then continues with one particular servant. He had accumulated a debt of 10,000 talents. Now there's much speculation as to how much 10,000 talents was. A talent was usually tied to a measure of gold, sometimes as much as 55lb/talent. If we use nice round numbers and were able to get gold at a bargain, we would be paying \$1,000 per ounce. If we do a little math, that equates to \$16,000 per pound of gold, and a talent would then be over \$800,000. You can see how a talent was worth a lot of money, but this one servant had accumulated a debt of 10,000 talents. This was more than the tax owed on the whole land of Palestine. How this man accumulated the debt we are not told. But this man's case was absolutely hopeless. A worker normally took 9 years to earn a talent. Even if we were to assume this man was an exceptional man earning one talent per year, it would still take him 10,000 years!

There's no wonder this servant fell on his knees and begged the king to give him more time. The king knew time was not the issue here, but the sheer amount owed. But the king had mercy. In fact the word used is a special word that describes the deep, down love and mercy that God shows to us. He cancelled the debt and let the man go. The kind of love needed by that king to just cancel that debt is enormous. That's THE TRUTH ABOUT FORGIVENESS, it has its limits in the love of God, the love God showed to us as sinners.

We then get into the meat of the parable of the unmerciful servant. This servant had just been forgiven a debt of millions of dollars, been spared from a life of slavery for him and his family, and what's the first thing he goes out to celebrate? He goes out by finding one of his servants who owes him some money. Jesus says this debt is only 100 denarii, a pauper's sum compared to the previous debt. In our terms it might be about \$1,000, not a small sum, but still a debt that many Americans would only wish that they had.

We see exactly what this unmerciful servant learned from his king in the way he treated his fellow servant. We see this unmerciful servant learned nothing from his king. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded his money right then and there. The fellow servants response is the exact same as the unmerciful servant, groveling at his feet, begging for mercy and more time to pay it off. But the unmerciful servant did not have pity, he did not have mercy, he did not have that deep down love that his king showed him. Instead, he tossed the man into prison until he paid the last penny.

THE SECOND TRUTH ABOUT FORGIVENESS and its limits is to forgive only as often as God forgives you. The unmerciful servant had been forgiven by his king this enormous debt, and he could not even find mercy in his heart to forgive his fellow servant. The unmerciful servant had every legal right to extract payment, but he had no moral right.

**“When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.”** It didn't take long before word got back to the king of what had transpired. He demanded the audience back with the unmerciful servant and asked for

an explanation. **“You wicked servant, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you.”** The unmerciful servant had nothing to say, he had nothing he could say. **“In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed.”**

THE THIRD TRUTH ABOUT FORGIVENESS is that it is limited by the complete way God forgives us. In the parable, the king completely forgave the debt of the unmerciful servant, he ate the loss himself. Had the unmerciful servant been paying attention to Jesus or this sermon, he would show that same complete forgiveness to his fellow servants as had been shown him. But he didn’t.

It can be very easy to look at this parable of Jesus and think that we have a better grasp of what forgiveness is. Maybe if we remember “the limits” of forgiveness it can help us in our own lives of forgiveness. We are only limited by the love God has for us. We are only limited to forgive as often as he forgave us. We are only limited to forgive as completely as God has forgiven us. And really this is the exact thing we pray in the Lord’s Prayer too – Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

But when people hurt us and sin against us a natural reaction is to retaliate, to get even. We don’t take our neighbors words and actions in the kindest possible way. Instead we take them in the worst way – when someone pulls out in front of us, we think they meant to do it. When someone promises to call us and they don’t, they really don’t like us. When one Grace site seems to get preferential treatment over another. In some cases people might truly be intending us harm, in other cases not.

But it doesn’t matter the intentions someone has for us, it doesn’t even matter the extent of the harm or sin done to us. The limit of God’s forgiveness is to forgive them anyway. And some people think it’s just as simple as that. Just forgive and forget. But that’s easier said than done. Even if by some superhuman effort we are able to look past someone’s sins, we will continue to remember them. Let’s face it, we cannot forgive as God forgives. We act more like that unmerciful servant than we care to admit. Maybe not by throwing people in jail or beating them up for what they’ve done, but anytime we have held a grudge – maybe someone stole our favorite toy as a child and now we’re scarred, maybe we were made fun of playing sports or in school, maybe we just got laid off from a job. There’s all sorts of things that make forgiveness so hard to do.

We all want to be like Peter – just forgive a finite number of times and that’s it, no more. But God doesn’t ask for that. He asks for us to forgive, just as he has forgiven us. And no matter how many times we have forgiven someone else for the sins they have committed against us, we still have not forgiven enough. We have not forgiven as he has forgiven us. We might try to excuse it and say we don’t need to forgive, but God’s Word is pretty clear. And our very words condemn us. **“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”** We are basically asking God to not forgive our sins. We are basically asking God to condemn us for our sins. Because we have not reached the limit to which we can forgive.

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But in the realm of forgiveness, God is king. Not only is he representative of the king in the parable, he is king of our hearts and lives. THE TRUTH ABOUT FORGIVENESS is that God has no limits. God is not limited to forgiving us only as long as we forgive others. That would make God’s forgiveness

conditional, which it is not. God not only forgives our lack of forgiveness, but he forgives all of the debt that we have piled up against him.

Sometimes we don't really realize how large a debt of sin we have accumulated. We can always make excuses, we can always think it is smaller than it is, and ignoring it doesn't make it go away. But our debt of sin far out numbers the debt of the unmerciful servant in the story. We can't even begin to fathom the debt of sin we have, let alone start to pay it back. We may not have committed the horrible crimes of murder, domestic violence or stealing. But we have committed many of those sins in our minds. If we look all over Scripture we can see the mountain of our sin piling up against God. The psalmist says, **"If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?"**

Our debt is beyond hopeless, there is no way we can pay off our debt. So what is our creditor's reaction to that debt? Our God shows us compassion, he forgives us of our debt. It wasn't because he saw something good in us, or that we somehow moved him to pity. It was purely by his grace and mercy, this was something that he wanted to do. He didn't just take that debt off the books, he took the price of that debt on himself, he placed it on Jesus Christ, and released us from the debt. Where there once was a debt of sin, it has been wiped clean.

Our God's forgiveness is limitless, because his love is limitless. Love keeps no records of wrong. The forgiveness our God gives us is like a weight lifted off of our shoulders. We are no longer burdened by the law. It is because of the grace and mercy that we have been shown, that we can now show that to others. It is because of Christ's forgiveness that we are able to forgive.

Forgiveness doesn't come naturally for us. But we can thank our God that it comes naturally for him. His forgiveness has no limits. **"As far as the east is from the west, he has removed your transgressions from you."** This is THE TRUTH ABOUT FORGIVENESS. Our God has forgiven our un-payable debt. This means we can forgive those who sin against us. This doesn't mean we forget what they've done, it means we don't count it against them. Praise God for the wonderful TRUTH ABOUT FORGIVENESS. Amen.