

Matthew 18:21-35 // From Forgiven to Forgiving

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 February 2025

Preacher: Jonathan Middleton

[0 : 00] Our reading this morning continues in Matthew's Gospel, which is on page 985 of your Pew Bibles.

This is the parable of the unmerciful servant. Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?

Up to seven times? Jesus answered, I tell you not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. 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.

At this, the servant fell on his knees before him. Be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay back everything. The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt, and let him go.

[1 : 25] But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. Pay back what you owe me, he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, be patient with me, and I will pay it back. But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. And the master called the servant in.

You wicked servant, he said. I cancelled 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?

In anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

[2 : 36] This is the word of the Lord. Let's be to God. Thanks so much, Lament, for reading. And great to see you all today.

Be great help if you keep your Bibles open at Matthew chapter 18. This is the last in our current series of Matthew's Gospel. We'll move on to something else next week. And the concluding part of chapter 18, Jesus is teaching about life in Jesus' new community, the church.

So why don't I lead us in prayer and ask for God's help. Lord God, we pray that you would speak to us.

We pray that you'd speak into each of our situations. We pray that the Holy Spirit would powerfully apply your word into each of our lives. And please, Lord God, would you be building and strengthening us together in light of the gospel's transformative power.

For we ask it in your son's name. Amen. Well, one of the greatest obstacles to healthy, functioning relationships is an unwillingness or an inability to forgive.

[3 : 54] And that's true, of course, in every sphere of life, in our workplaces, in our families, in our marriages. And it's certainly true in every sphere.

Unforgiveness leads to the breakdown of relationships. And I guess we could all think of different examples. But I could think of a situation in our wider family.

Two sisters who no longer speak to each other. Haven't done so for years. Neither of them willing to forgive the other.

Catastrophic relational breakdown. And where there's a lack of forgiveness, cracks are going to appear, causing divisions in families and dividing even nations apart.

And sadly, I'm afraid that the church, the family of God's people, is not immune. And even the most tightly knit communities can unravel where there's unforgiveness.

[5 : 11] Some of you will have experienced that from previous churches. Painfully so, I'm sure. Church families can be broken apart by people falling out and being unwilling to forgive one another.

People leave church because of it. So you can see that significant stumbling block for healthy, functioning, growing relationships in the life of the church is our refusal to forgive.

Well, Jesus is realistic. He expects that there'll be conflict. He expects that there'll be niggles and grievances and differences of opinion.

This side of Eden, he expects that there's going to be times when we hurt each other in what we say and what we do. Things that cause grievances.

That's inevitable. But it's how we respond. And Jesus is calling us to something better than the status quo of dysfunctional relationships.

[6 : 21] And so it's no wonder then that Jesus ends his teaching on relationships in his new community, which we've been thinking about these past few weeks in chapter 18, by teaching his disciples on this subject of forgiveness.

And it's Jesus' most extended teaching on the subject in the whole of the New Testament. Jesus is building his church, his new community, his eternal kingdom in and through us.

He's calling people to himself, reconciling people to himself, and reconciling us to each other. And Jesus knows that unforgiveness can stand in the way of a healthy, vital church.

And chapter 18, one of the major teaching blocks in Matthew's gospel, in chapter 18, the big emphasis is on life in Jesus' new community.

What it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus, what difference it makes to take up your cross and follow Jesus. And the chapter is structured around two questions.

[7 : 36] The first question asked by the disciples in verse one, who is the greatest in your kingdom?

Who is the greatest? And Jesus answers, hold on a minute, at this rate, you're not even going to get into the kingdom unless you become like one of these little children.

Then in our passage, the second question of the chapter, which is we're going to see from the sting in the tail at the end of the passage, it turns out it's another getting into the kingdom question.

Peter comes to Jesus in verse 21 and asks, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?

Peter gets that if someone sins against you and then comes seeking forgiveness from you, you should forgive them.

[8 : 37] He gets that. But what if they do it all over again? What if they sin against you, the same sin again? Well, Peter assumes that there must be some kind of upper limit and knowing Jesus, he's got a sneaking suspicion that Jesus is going to be super generous when it comes to mercy.

So Peter guesses high. Is seven times enough Jesus? Jesus answered, no, Peter, you're not even close.

Not seven, but 77 times. Now, it's not about keeping a tally. Jesus isn't saying that there's an upper limit. But back in Genesis 4, and I think if you were here last week, Martin maybe mentioned this in the sermon last week, but a lot of us were away for the rich weekend away.

Genesis 4, humanity has spoiled God's pristine creation. And sin has entered the world, and Cain has committed the first murder.

Then Lamech, a descendant of Cain, he boasts about his vengefulness. And Lamech says, if Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech, 77 times.

[10 : 06] So do you see, Jesus is here deliberately using language that echoes that from Lamech. So he's saying in his kingdom, in Jesus' kingdom, it's a reversal of Lamech.

You know, a gut instinct when we get hurt by somebody can be to go on the attack. And that's the way of the world, isn't it? Vengeance is the way of the world.

But in Jesus' new community, what he's teaching here is, it's not about vengeance without limits.

That doesn't get you anywhere. It just makes things worse. It's about forgiveness without limits.

You can't put a number on it. There's no upper limit to forgiveness. And to paint the picture for us, the parable very visually, very powerfully makes the point.

First, it's about receiving forgiveness. And the power to forgive issues from our heart that is forgiven.

[11 : 11] Well, Rachel Denhollander is a Christian woman who was abused as a teenager multiple times by the USA Gymnastics team doctor, Larry Nasser.

And while still a teenager and wrestling through the devastating impact of this abuse, she wrote these words in her journal.

I choose to let go. I choose to trust God's justice. I choose to leave it in God's hands.

I choose to forgive. And then she later reflected. I closed the folder. I'd stashed my journal in.

I felt better. I'd handled it. I was fine. Two days later, I realized it wasn't that easy.

[12 : 21] How can we forgive? How can we forgive when the heart runs deep like that? How can we even begin to forgive?

See, forgiveness might be commanded. But forgiveness, it isn't easy. And where do we get the power then to forgive?

Look with me at verse 23. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

As he began the settlement, a man who owed him 10,000 bags of gold was brought to him. The meaning of the parable is pretty straightforward.

The king is Jesus. We are the servants being called to settle accounts. We are the ones who owe the king a massive debt.

[13 : 27] It is a massive debt. 10,000 bags of gold as the translation has it. 10,000 talents. Sorry. Talent being the largest unit of currency in the ancient world.

Equates to hundreds of billions of dollars or more than the GDP of 80% of the world's nations. An astronomical debt.

One commentator worked out that it would take the average worker 193,000 years to clear that debt.

I suppose that puts our student loans in perspective. The point is, it's such an enormous debt that no one could possibly pay it back.

Not ever. But that's where we need to begin. If we are to learn to forgive others, those who have wronged us, if we don't have any hope at all of that, then we first need to grasp the enormity of our sin and our debt before God.

[14 : 45] Now, that can be pretty hard to face up to. We tend to minimize the extent of our own sinfulness. When it comes to our own sin, we can tend to turn a blind eye to the darkness of our own hearts.

We might even think the debt is manageable. We can sort of handle it. You know, if we sort of juggle around interest-free credit cards and eventually we can work it off.

I think we can earn our way out of it by our good deeds or our religiousness. That's not how God sees it, though.

Our spiritual debt has been piling up for years. Every single thought, every single word, every single deed, every single action.

His assessment. God's assessment is that we've been weighed, we've been measured, and we've been found wanting. We've messed up big time. And before an eternal, infinite God, our debt is astronomical.

[15 : 57] Even a lifetime of good works and coming to church isn't going to pay it off. Verse 25. 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.

Of course, that's not even going to come close to scratching the surface. The man has no real resources, no real hope, and no other options.

And so he pleads mercy. Verse 26. At this, the servant fell on his knees before him. Be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay back everything. It's empty words.

He doesn't have the means to repay the debt. His situation is hopeless. And yet, verse 27. The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt, and let him go.

Well, isn't this extraordinary? I can't help but think what a compassionate and gracious and merciful king this is. The servant begged only for more time to repay him.

[17 : 19] But he was given mercy. His debt cancelled. Not in part, but the home. And he's set free.

The parallel is plain. It's a picture of what God has done for each of us if we're trusting in Jesus. We have rebelled against his divine authority.

We have personally rejected his love. We are sinners against a holy, infinite, eternal God.

Deserving, therefore, each of us infinite, eternal punishment. Our spiritual debt before this God is in the zillions.

It's unquantifiable. We simply don't have the resources to repay that kind of debt, to even begin to pay what we owe. But praise God for Jesus.

[18 : 23] Jesus went to the cross. He died to pay for the debt of your sins, our sins. And Jesus paid it all.

So when you trust in him, your sins are nailed to the cross. Your burden of debt is wiped clear.

So Jesus is saying, here's how you learn to forgive those who wrong you. You first need to experience forgiveness. You first need to receive forgiveness from God.

There's a song that goes, our sins they are many, his mercy is more. So when I begin to realise the extent of my forgiveness in Christ, then I'll be able to view the wrongs of others against me in light of my own wrong before God and the mercy he's shown me.

How can I forgive? Jesus' answer, the power to forgive issues from a forgiven heart.

[19 : 42] Okay, so just before we move on to the second point, I think it's worth us separating out forgiveness on the one hand and trust and reconciliation on the other.

Trust and reconciliation are rooted in forgiveness, forgiveness. But forgiveness doesn't necessarily issue and result in trust and reconciliation.

So if someone doesn't agree about the wrongness of their sin, that doesn't prevent you from forgiving them. But it is going to be an obstacle for reconciliation.

And in some situations it would be unwise to restore that relationship to the same level of trust as it had been before.

I think of a godly Christian lady whose first marriage was a disaster, a toxic relationship. Not from St. Silas, but she had gotten married against the advice of her family.

[20 : 54] And unfortunately as it turned out the instincts of her loved ones proved right. The man turned out to be a manipulative, coercive liar, verbally and emotionally and financially abusive.

Well, she was able to genuinely forgive him from her heart. But that did not mean her going back to him.

What is the strength to forgive come from? First, receive God's forgiveness, then you'll be able to forgive from a forgiven heart.

Second point, extending forgiveness. An unwillingness to forgive stems from an unforgiven heart.

Well, it's said that not forgiving is like drinking a poison and expecting the other person to die.

And certainly studies have shown that failure to forgive can harm us physically as well as spiritually. Holding on to bitterness can eat us up, can devour us from the inside out, as it were.

[22 : 15] But there's no doubt there's temptation. temptation. If you've ever been wronged by someone who's supposed to love you, someone close to you, someone you trusted, then that heart can run deep.

And we can be tempted to hold on to the anger and resentment towards them. We might even want the other person to experience something of the pain that we've felt.

But actually a lack of forgiveness keeps us tied to the person who's wronged us, tethered by ropes of bitterness.

And bitterness, let me say, is like a concrete that sets heart in your hearts. Jesus wants his new community to be better than that.

But verse 28, when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. That's a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him.

[23 : 25] Pay back what you owe me, he demanded. We're meant to notice here the similarities, so both servants have a debt to pay, and the contrasts between the merciful king on the one hand and the newly forgiven servant on the other.

And it's a stark contrast between what the two servants owe. A denarius was a day's wages. So just imagine that somebody owes you three months salary.

That's not to be sneezed at, it's going to take a bit of a big hit to write that off. And you're not going to do that without a second thought. If it's 50 quid, you might.

But this isn't your lunch money. It's a large enough sum. However, it is peanuts compared to the debt that he's just been released from.

Pales into insignificance compared to that. So you'd think, wouldn't you, that this first servant would have been overjoyed, relieved by the burden being lifted, the unbearable weight of unimaginable

debt being wiped clean.

[24 : 42] Instead, he's on the war path, throttling his fellow servant as he seeks to extract every last penny, showing no mercy whatsoever.

Verse 29, his fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, be patient with me and I will pay it back. And again, we're meant to see the parallels here, visually, both servants fall to their knees, verbally, what they say is almost identical.

But this time, the plea is met with a different response in verse 30. But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

God's grace in my own life. He comes from a forgiven heart, from an appreciation that we've been forgiven far more in Christ than we'll ever have to forgive one another.

So a stubborn unwillingness to forgive suggests that I'm unmoved and unchanged by God's grace in my own life.

[26 : 04] And so if you go on refusing to forgive, then that's going to be deeply displeasing to the king.

In verse 31 it says, when the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged. Then the master called the servant in, you wicked servant, he said.

I cancelled 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?

In anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. The other servants are appalled at the first servant's behaviour.

The master agrees. So let's feel the shock of this. It's not the servant with the outstanding debt who ends up in jail, but the forgiven one who refuses to forgive.

[27 : 18] Friends, an unforgiving heart is a terrible thing. it's wicked. You wicked servant is the king's verdict. It's an attitude that imprisons us.

And ultimately it is fatal. Verse 35. This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

heart. It's a shocking statement. Unless we forgive, we will not be forgiven.

What is Jesus saying here? He's not saying it to undermine our Christian assurance. He's not suggesting that we need to earn our salvation by forgiving others.

that's not the gospel. Jesus isn't saying we must forgive others in order to be saved. Rather he's saying if you've received God's forgiveness, then you're going to be marked by a forgiving attitude and disposition towards your brothers and sisters.

[28 : 38] A truly forgiven heart enables us to forgive others. think of it this way. Holding apples in your hands doesn't make you an apple tree, but it is a characteristic of apple trees to bear apples.

Forgiving others doesn't make you a Christian, but Christians do forgive. the fruit of a forgiven heart is a forgiving attitude towards others.

In our personal relationships then, the Christian community, this new community that Jesus is building, it's to be in stark contrast to that of the world. It's not to be a place where resentment lingers, it's not a place where we're to harbour bitterness, it's not to be a whiff of unforgiveness.

But what that means for us is that we need to love one another enough to have those tricky conversations. If someone sins against you, are you willing to go and lovingly point that out?

That's what we thought about last week. You do that with sensitivity and humility and wisdom and above all prayerfulness.

[30 : 07] Or if somebody at St Silas comes to you over the next few weeks genuinely seeking your forgiveness for something they've hurt you about, how are you going to respond?

The Christian community is to be characterised by unlimited forgiveness grace and mercy.

Every individual in the community is to reflect God's character, compassionate and gracious, abounding in love, taking the initiative to forgive one another, to forgive those who wrong us.

Community therefore in which we cultivate healthy, functioning, growing, gospel-transformed relationships. Can you picture that?

Can you imagine that? A loving, forgiving community like that? That's the church that we're called to be, that's the kind of church we want to be at St Silas.

[31 : 14] Not burying our heads in the sand of a relational discord, but loving each other enough to have those necessary, difficult, healthy conversations.

A community of forgiven sinners forgiving one another. Community of grace. We're going to have to draw things to a close, but we said at the beginning forgiveness isn't easy.

I want to be sensitive to the fact that in a group of people this size there will be some of us here today carrying wounds that run deep, scars that run deep.

And if that's you, I want you to know that God sees you and God knows you, knows what you've been through.

And Jesus, who suffered at the hands of evil men, Jesus loves you. Forgiveness is not brushing the sin under the carpet.

[32 : 24] It's not pretending that you're not hurt. It's not saying there's no consequences to sin and it's not about making excuses for sinful behavior. Rachel Dan Hollander began her journey of forgiveness by writing in her journal, I choose to forgive.

Years later, she was the first survivor to bravely come forward publicly with allegations against Larry Nassar.

And she was the last of the eventual 156 survivors to speak in court. Forgiveness didn't mean letting him off the hook.

Addressing the judge, she spoke of the need for justice. I ask that you hand down a sentence that tells us that what was done to us matters. That we are known, that we are not worthless, but worth the greatest measure of justice available.

But what she then said to the man who had abused her and so many others is quite extraordinary. I'll quote her at length. She affirmed her belief in the God of the Bible as one who rightly punishes evil and yet who graciously offers mercy.

[33 : 51] So turning in court to address Larry Nassar directly, she said, the Bible you speak of carries a final judgment where all of God's wrath is poured out on men like you.

Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that's what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found.

And it will be there for you. I pray you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God which you need far more than forgiveness from me though I extend that to you as well.

she doesn't end with a message of condemnation but by pointing her abuser to God's mercy and forgiveness where did Rachel Den Hollander find the strength and the power and the resource to forgive a man like that a man who'd hurt her like that it comes from first knowing the forgiveness from God in Jesus unforgiveness is the stumbling block to flourishing relationships it leads to broken communities it leads to broken churches Jesus is calling us to be something better than that a flourishing community a community of forgiven sinners forgiving each other we want to be a community marked by grace power to forgive issues from a forgiven heart and that's why Jesus leaves us with a warning because he loves us and he cares so deeply about the community he's building in anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed this is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart let me pray and then I'll hand back to

Derek oh lord god the soul crushing weight of our sin is astronomical cycle we thank you that in sending jesus to pay our debt you took the initiative to forgive us we thank you for the grace of the gospel lord god help us to forgive those who have wronged us from forgiven hearts heal those who are struggling and suffering with deep wounds help us to take the initiative and not shy away from difficult situations difficult conversations would you minister grace and restoration where it's needed by your spirit among the community that christ is building here at saint silas that we would be marked by compassion and mercy and grace towards one another we ask in the name of our dear saviour christ jesus amen thank you