

September 17, 2023
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 18:21 – 35 (Genesis 50:15 – 21)

GRACIOUS FORGIVENESS PURCHASED BY THE BLOOD OF JESUS.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

How often must you forgive your Christian brother or sister who sins against you? Perhaps you live by the motto: *“Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”* This human rational is, if someone deceives you once, it’s **their** fault. But if you allow them to deceive you a second time – it’s all **your** fault for trusting them again.

Peter thought he was being generous at suggesting that he forgive his brother seven times. Seven is the traditional number of perfection in the Bible after all. But Jesus’ response makes it clear that the sinful human understanding of forgiveness always falls short. Peter is willing to count up to seven. But:

“Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’”
(Matthew 18:21–22)

While it is true that seventy times seven equals 490, Jesus is not saying for you to keep a record of wrongs and once someone has accumulated 490 sins against you, the next one, you’re free to withhold forgiveness. No. As He often does, Jesus is speaking hyperbolically and the numerical total is **not important**. He’s declaring that forgiveness has **no numeral limit**. Forgiveness **does not** keep a record. There can be **no limit** to the forgiveness **given** and **received** between those who are His disciples.

It's not the first time Jesus has taught how a believer ought to forgive another. When teaching the disciples and the Church to pray, He says to pray to our Father in heaven to:

“... forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12)

Do you ever think about what that really means? It means: *“God, forgive me of my debts... forgive my trespasses – but only forgive them as far as I’m willing to forgive those who trespass against me.”* And to make that point clear, immediately following His teaching of the Lord’s Prayer He says:

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matthew 6:9–15)

Jesus reiterates this teaching to Peter and the disciples in our Gospel text and the bottom line is – disciples of Jesus **must forgive** those who sin against them. If you **don’t** – you **will not** forgiven. And if you’re **not forgiven** – you will suffer **eternal damnation**.

Jesus knows this teaching sounds impossible. He knows that God alone has the ability to pour out such grace in abundance. So He tells a parable to illustrate the *present* and *future* blessedness of the reign of God in Christ Jesus, as well as the disciple's vocation, your duty to bring salt and light into the world over which God is reigning. He's teaching us that *infinite forgiveness* flows from our Heavenly Father to poor miserable sinners such as you and me – and then – by the power of the Holy Spirit that *forgiveness* flows from you and me – out to others. As Jesus' disciples, you and I are to demonstrate our Christian identity by being gracious in our relationships with others.

In the parable, Jesus' illustration of the kingdom of heaven is describing the visible Christian Church on earth under the reign of God in Christ Jesus. He's talking to His disciples of all times, to you and me Christians here at St Timothy. In the parable He is not saying that the governments of the world should empty their prisons and let all the criminals go free from the debt they owe to society. No, they must settle their debt with society in what we Lutherans call the Kingdom of the Left. Yet, He is also talking to you and me in His Church in what we refer to as the Kingdom of the Right, which has Christ Himself as its Cornerstone, which He has bought and paid for by His very own blood on Calvary's cross.

In the Kingdom of the Left, the civil authorities have the power of the sword to restrain and punish evil in the world. But in the Kingdom of the Right, in God's Kingdom of Grace, the Christian Church has the power of the Gospel and Holy Spirit which creates faith and forgives sins, freeing the believer in Christ from the wages of their sin. You still must pay your temporal consequences... your debt to society, but you are forgiven all of the eternal consequences. (cf: Romans 6:23) And not only forgiveness for a limited number of sins – but each and every sin which is brought before the Lord in contrition and repentance.

Just like you and me and all mankind, the first servant in the parable doesn't deserve forgiveness – and that's why Jesus uses an astronomical number. The servant owes ten thousand talents. According to my Greek dictionary, it's a debt that would take a day laborer 60 million days to pay off. (BDAG, 988) There's no way possible for him to repay the debt. The servant prostrates himself on the ground before the king and pleads with him saying:

“Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” (Matthew 18:26)

The servant knows he cannot repay the debt. He's broke and helpless to repay anything. He begs for mercy and the king has *pity* on the servant. This *pity* is the same word used in the New Testament for the *compassion* of Jesus and the divine nature of His mercy. (cf: TDNT, 553) The king has compassion and forgives the servant's entire debt. Paid in full. No strings attached. He's free to go. How does this happen? To be sure, where there is debt – *someone* has to pay. The government can say they forgive your debt, but someone has to pay. In this case, the king paid the debt himself. He suffers all the damage. He takes the loss.

You can argue that someone has sinned against you so horribly wrong that there's *no way* possible for them to repay it; however, you cannot argue that their sin is something *so wrong* that God cannot pay for it. That's the point. Jesus has paid the price of all sins of all sinners of all times. He has paid them in full. He gave His life as a ransom for all mankind. (cf: Mark 10:45)

Think of the worst sin that someone has done against you and all pain and suffering has it caused you. Whatever you think they deserve for that sin – Jesus has already paid that debt. He endured God’s full wrath and punishment against that sin. Jesus took the place of that sinner and endured God’s righteous judgment of that sinner and of that sin. If you deny this fact, then you also deny that your sins can be paid for by Jesus’ blood and righteousness... and you deny that Jesus has paid for your sins.

The king has compassion and forgives his servant’s entire debt. He’s free to go... but where does he go? He goes out to his fellow servant who owes him, comparatively, hardly anything... only one hundred days wages. After hearing the same plea for mercy, he ignores the mercy shown to him by the king, and throws his fellow servant into prison, demanding that he repay what was owed.

The parable sets up the expectation that the first servant would forgive just as he had been forgiven. But that was not the case. And once word of his stubborn hardheartedness got back to the king, the king had him thrown into prison until he can repay his unpayable debt. Jesus closes the parable saying:

“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:35)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if you **refuse** to forgive those who sin against you... God **will not** forgive you your sins. If you want God to forgive you, you **must** forgive those who sin against you. But how can you forgive those who continually sin against you? It’s only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In our Old Testament text, we see the Holy Spirit at work in the life of Joseph. (cf: Genesis 50:15-21) He loved and trusted God. And by faith, he saw God at work, even when his brothers sold him into slavery... even when his brothers hoped that a life of slavery would kill him. He knew the brothers meant it for evil against him; however, God meant it for good. (Genesis 50:20) It was only by the Holy Spirit working faith within him that Joseph freely and lovingly forgave his brothers.

God calls you to forgive one another – unconditionally and always. It sounds impossible, but with God, all things are possible. (cf: Matthew 19:26) It’s something that only believers can do by faith, **even when you don’t want to**. God alone has the ability to pour out grace in such abundance – giving His infinite forgiveness that flows from your Father in heaven to poor miserable sinners such as you and me – and then – by the power of the Holy Spirit, forgiveness flows from you and me – out to others.

Will they sin against you again? Probably. And when they sin against you again... and again... forgive them. That person is a sinner just like you. And Jesus died for them just like He died for you... once for all. (cf: Romans 6:10) God forgives your sins because He gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (cf: Psalm 145:8)

While you were still a sinner, God took initiative, sending Christ Jesus to pay the wages of your sin and forgive you. His forgiveness is always first and foundational. It is never earned or merited, or in any way the result of anything in you or done by you. It's not enough that you know God has *offered* you the forgiveness of sins. The first part of the Christian faith is that the Good News of the Gospel and Jesus' forgiveness is *grasped and believed*. If you believe it, then you are freed from your sin and freed to forgive your neighbor and to bear fruits of the true faith in love and works towards your neighbor.

God doesn't need your works. The debt of your sin has already been paid in full. He has given you the Holy Spirit to create and sustain the faith that's within you. And He sees your faith and desires that you devote yourself to works of faith for the benefit of your neighbor. This is the second part of the Christian life: that by your forgiveness and works toward others, you show others that you have the true faith. It doesn't earn you anything toward your salvation or merit, but through it you thank and praise God for all He has done for you, loving Him as you pour out love toward your neighbor.

You and I deserve no more forgiveness than the first servant in the parable or anyone else for that matter. For our many sins we deserve nothing more than God's present and eternal punishment. But before the foundation of the world God saw the overwhelming debt of your sin and had compassion on you, sending His Son, Christ Jesus, to pay your debt in full. In his first epistle letter St John writes:

"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10)

For the sake of Jesus' suffering and death on your behalf, God's infinite forgiveness flows from your Heavenly Father to sinners such as you and me – and then – by the power of the Holy Spirit, that forgiveness flows from you and me – out to others without limit. Not just seven times, or seventy times seven – but every time.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.