

“Don’t be a little sinner!” Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

The question that Peter asked Jesus is, indeed, a very practical question. How many times are we to forgive those who sin against us? Should we go as far as seven times? That is a very reasonable question. And we want to be reasonable people. We want to be clear about how we are supposed to live as Christians.

So, Peter asks and Jesus seemingly answers Peter’s question. But does He? What is it that He is saying, and how does it make sense? For what Jesus says answering Peter’s question is so much bigger than the question.

Today we will try to understand Jesus’ answer to Peter and what it means for our new lives in Christ, and what it teaches about our forgiveness. Jesus answers in a strange way, and the answer that He gives doesn’t help much with Peter’s question.

Instead it helps us to see our whole situation in a different light. Or we could say through different glasses. Peter asks: “How many times?” Jesus answers: “The Kingdom of heaven is like...”. What a great answer, isn’t it?

What is going on? This is important – Jesus is teaching us about the new reality of the Kingdom of God. What He is saying is that you, His disciples, don’t belong to this world anymore. Of course, we still live in this world, but our true citizenship and true loyalty belongs to the age to come. Having received the Holy Spirit you have already crossed the invisible border between this world that sinks in darkness

and is heading towards destruction, and the new world – where life never ends, never runs out, where there will be no more death, nor suffering, nor mourning. You have already received this new citizenship, this new identity as royal priests and holy people, as co-heirs of God's Kingdom together with Jesus, and this our new reality now should define how we live here and now.

This new reality, the reign of God, operates differently than this world. What Jesus does with His answer to Peter – He helps us to see everything from His perspective, as His fellow-heirs and citizens of God's Kingdom.

So, to make His point Jesus tells this parable about the Master and the servant. What are the points that the parable highlights? The debt of the first servant is huge, we can say unreal. Ten thousand talents are the weight of precious metals, silver or gold, as great as ten thousand men could carry.

The point is to show that such amount is unpayable. There was no way for the first servant to possibly repay this debt. No way! What does the Master do? He listens to the servant's pleas for mercy and ... mercifully forgives.

You know what it means to forgive someone's debt? The debt doesn't somehow magically disappear. It means that you are incurring the costs, that you are suffering the loss, that you are bearing the consequences of that person's actions, that you are enduring the pain yourself. So that you could forgive their debt.

This is what the Master did. He forgave the first servant. And how did the servant respond? He finds the other servant who owes him, and that is not a small amount, it is 100 days wages, count for yourself, and he demands him to repay the debt.

The second servant pleads for mercy, he promises to repay, and at least he could in theory repay to the first one, but the first servant wouldn't listen and throws him in prison. Can we justify what he did? Humanly speaking, yes, sure.

That's a big debt. If he hadn't just been forgiven by his Master so much more, then his actions would make sense. But he was forgiven... What Jesus teaches us with this parable is that we, as His disciples, don't belong to the old world anymore.

We now belong to His Kingdom and we were brought into God's Kingdom by someone paying all our debts. Debts, who were so great, that we could not possibly pay them on our own. Instead it was our Master, Jesus Christ, who did it.

Now whenever we encounter any situation where the forgiveness comes up, we can't just think about us and the other person. Should I forgive, or not? Do they deserve my forgiveness, or not? We need to bring our Master into the picture.

We need to remember the debt that we were forgiven. We need to remember what it cost to Jesus to grant us His forgiveness. How does all of this sound? I think it sounds quite good and logical, but there is a problem. Do you know what it is?

This parable implies that our Master has forgiven us huge debt, but ... do you feel like that? Do you feel that what God has forgiven you is such a huge deal that now, of course! it makes sense that you would forgive others?

I guess this varies from person to person. For those who are raised in good Christian households, and have grown up avoiding of being extremely stupid and making their own lives total mess and causing pain to others, and perhaps ruining their lives too, for them it may be quite hard to see – where is that huge debt?

For those who come from non-Christian background and who have made mess and havoc in their lives and harmed and hurt others, for them it is much easier. It is no wonder that prostitutes and tax collectors were drawn to Jesus and that His forgiveness really changed them and meant so much.

Remember the prostitute from Luke 7, and how Jesus commented on her actions. Her sins that were many had been forgiven and now she could love much, and forgive much. As Dr Luther said that “if you [only] see yourself as a little sinner, then you will inevitably see Jesus as a little Saviour”.

This is one of these hard truths that without the Scriptures we can't even know our sin, which means that we can't rely on our feelings, or even on our reason. We need to trust the Word of God and the Holy Spirit to enlighten us in the matter of our sinfulness and on how huge our debt is.

Still, let's spend a bit more time on this. What is sin? We could say that sin is anything that is contrary to God's good design for our lives. Let's look at just two aspects – our attitudes towards our God and the impact of our sinfulness to others.

The Triune God is our Creator and our Redeemer. To Him we owe everything. It should be the most natural thing to love Him with our whole heart and mind and strength, to fear to displease Him and to trust Him unconditionally.

Is that a fair description of our attitudes toward our Father in heaven? Not by any stretch... we are lazy even to listen to Him and to get to know Him. We are indifferent to Him and ignorant of and ungrateful for His unceasing care.

We are envious and coveting and never satisfied, desiring to control our lives and to do things our way. Disobedient and stubborn, rebellious towards our God and often loyal to His enemies. That is just about our attitude towards the holy God.

But then think about the next step, that our attitudes support and encourage similar attitudes in others; our unfaithfulness to God encourage others to do the same, and the chain of causes and effects goes forth and forth.

Which means that our failure to love and fear and trust our God spreads such rebellion further and further. We are responsible for that. And that's just a part of our debt. Now let's think a bit more about the impact of our sinfulness to others. Let's assume that we have never done anything that would qualify as something

really bad. (And at least in my life even that is not true.) But, let's assume. Now, have you ever rejected someone, mocked, ridiculed, betrayed, innocently slandered, or maybe deliberately hurt with your words and attitudes?

Or maybe you turned away and stood silent when you should have spoken up for others? It will be hard to find someone who hasn't done any of these. If there is someone, that may simply be a person with ... bad memory.

We may think, what's a big deal? Everyone does that... But now think about what impact these relatively "small" things could have on those who suffer them? You know how deeply words can hurt. You know how painful can be unjust attitudes.

Such things can easily scar, or even change our characters forever. Now think about the next step – you have sinned against someone, and you may not even remember it, but that person may be carrying that bleeding wound, or that scar in their heart for years and years.

What you have done may be defining how that person relates to others. They may be walking through life bitter and harsh and spitting their anger to the right and to the left, hurting hundreds of others. The ripple effect just goes on and on.

Further and further. Because of our sin... because of what we did... If we could clearly see the extent of damage and destruction that our sin has caused, and the scale of what we will be held accountable for, we would be paralysed by terror.

Now tell me, how can you repay such debt? How can you fix such harm done to God's people, when the impact of your sinfulness has spread far beyond your reach and your knowledge? Can we say: "Have mercy of me, Master, I will fix it!" We can't ... and thanks be to our Master Jesus Christ – we don't need to.

That is the Gospel. That Jesus Christ has taken care of our debts, of all of them. He has taken the losses upon Himself. He has paid the price and bore the pain. So that we can hear the life-giving words: "I forgive you all your sins!"

See, we don't need to worry that on the Last Day the true scale of the impact of our sinfulness will be revealed and we will be held accountable for all of that. We are free. We are forgiven. We can live as forgiven servants whose fates were changed by the mercy of our gracious Master.

Now we should try to imitate our Master in His undeserved mercy and in His unconditional forgiveness. This is how we can express our gratitude to Him, to whom we owe everything – our present and our beautiful eternal future.

Thus, when someone sins against us, let's not worry how much they owe us, or how many times we would need to forgive them. Let us lift our eyes to our Master Jesus, let's remember His grace, and let's be generous so that our forgiveness may glorify His name before all people, and His Kingdom would continue to grow.

Amen.