

“The Kingdom of heaven is like...” Matt 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!

How many times are we to forgive those who sin against us? It is a very practical question. You may have asked it yourself. Peter asks the question, and Jesus seemingly answers. But does He? Does His answer make sense? What is He really saying?

Today we will try to understand Jesus’ answer to Peter and what it means for our new lives in Christ, especially what it teaches us about forgiveness. Peter asks, “How many times?” Jesus answers, **“The kingdom of heaven is like...”** What is going on?

We might expect a simple answer: “Do this, don’t do that!” But Jesus wants us to open our minds and to understand that the Christian life is not simply about a list of “shall” and “shall nots.” Our new life in Christ is about something much greater. **“The kingdom of heaven is like...”**

Jesus is saying that you do not belong to this old age anymore. Of course, we still live in this world, but our true citizenship and our true loyalty belong to the age to come. Having received the Holy Spirit, you have already crossed the invisible border between this world that sinks into darkness and perishes, and the New Creation—where life never ends, where there is no more death, suffering or mourning.

You have already received this new citizenship and identity as God’s holy people, as royal priests, as co-heirs of God’s Kingdom together with Jesus. This new reality should now define how we understand and live our lives here.

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“The kingdom of heaven is like...” It operates differently from this world. Jesus helps Peter - and us - to see everything from His perspective, as fellow-heirs and citizens of God's Kingdom. Yes, yes, that is what you are.

So, Jesus tells a parable about a king and his servant. The debt of the first servant is enormous - ten thousand talents. The point is not to calculate the exact modern value, but to understand that this debt is completely unpayable. There is no way for the servant to repay it. What does the master do?

He listens to the servant's plea for mercy and mercifully forgives him. And we need to be reminded what forgiveness means. The debt does not simply disappear, and everyone walks away happy. When you forgive a debt, you incur the cost. You suffer the loss. You bear the consequences of another person's actions. You endure the pain yourself. This is what the Master chooses to do. He forgives the servant.

And how does the servant respond? He finds another servant who owes him one hundred denarii - certainly a significant amount, around a hundred days' wages. He seizes him and begins to choke him.

The second servant pleads: **“Have patience with me, and I will pay you.”** This servant could at least, in theory, repay his debt. But his pleas fall on deaf ears. He is thrown into prison. What do we think about this?

Humanly speaking, we might understand it. It is a big debt. He wants his money back. His actions would seem reasonable according to the old order of things. If... he had not been forgiven by his Master. But he had been forgiven. That changes everything.

What Jesus teaches us with this parable is that we, as His disciples, do not belong under the old-world order anymore. We belong to His Kingdom. And we were brought into God's Kingdom by someone paying all our debts. Debts so great that we could never possibly pay them ourselves. Our Master, Jesus Christ, has done it.

Whenever we encounter a situation involving forgiveness, we cannot simply think about ourselves and the other person. Not according to the old order anymore:

“Should I forgive?” “Do they deserve my forgiveness?”

Instead, we are to see the situation as people who belong to God's Kingdom. We need to bring our Master and what He has done into the picture. We need to remember the debt we have been forgiven. We need to remember what pain and suffering it cost Jesus to grant us His forgiveness. And then God's unfathomable grace toward us begins to shape our attitudes and actions toward others. Does that sound reasonable?

But there is a practical difficulty. This parable assumes that we understand how enormous our own debt is. Do we? Do you really feel that what God has forgiven you is such a huge debt that, of course, it makes sense to forgive others?

I suspect this varies from person to person. For those blessed to have been raised in good Christian households, receiving a loving and wise Christian upbringing, spared from many stupid mistakes and the consequences of making a total mess of their lives,

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they may wonder - where is the huge debt? "I have lived a decent life." For those who come from non-Christian backgrounds, who have made a mess of their lives and harmed others, it may be much easier to see the debt. It is no wonder that prostitutes, tax collectors and all kinds of sinners were drawn to Jesus, and that His forgiveness changed them so dramatically.

Remember Zacchaeus, the tax collector, and how God's grace made him humble and generous. Remember Saul, the persecutor of the Church, and how God's grace made him the devoted apostle to the Gentiles. Remember the prostitute in Luke 7. Jesus said that her many sins had been forgiven, and therefore she loved much.

As Dr Martin Luther said, **"If you see yourself as a little sinner, then you will inevitably see Jesus as a little Saviour."** This is one of those challenging truths that, without the Word of God, we cannot fully know the magnitude of our sinfulness.

We should not rely merely on our feelings or even on our own reason. We need to trust God's Word and the Holy Spirit to enlighten us about our sinfulness and the greatness of our debt. So, what is sin, what makes up our great debt?

We could say that sin is anything contrary to God's good design for our lives. To see how great our debt is, let us briefly consider two things: our attitude toward God and the impact our sin has on others.

The Triune God is our Creator and our Redeemer. He is the One who sanctifies us. To Him we owe everything, our very being, every minute of our lives, our daily bread, everything. It should be the most natural thing to love Him with all our heart, mind and strength; to fear displeasing Him; and to trust Him unconditionally.

Is that what we do? Not by any stretch. We are too lazy even to listen to Him. We are indifferent to Him in our hearts. We seldom have time to express gratitude for His unceasing care. How little do we trust Him! And what happens next?

Our lack of love, fear and trust affects others. When we fail to pray, confess, serve and witness, our lukewarmness encourages other Christians to become slack, and our witness to the world fails. The chain of cause and effect continues. The consequences of our failure to love and trust God spread further and further. We all are responsible for that. **I am. And you are.**

Now think about the impact of our sinfulness on other people. Perhaps you have never done anything that you would consider explicitly immoral. But have you ever rejected someone, mocked or ridiculed someone, betrayed someone, slandered or gossiped about someone, or deliberately hurt someone with your words or your attitudes?

Have you ever turned away or remained silent when you should have spoken up for someone or warned someone? It is hard to find anyone who has never done these things. If there is someone, perhaps the explanation is simply... just a bad memory.

We may think, **"What is the big deal? Everyone does that."** But think about the impact these supposedly "small" things can have on those who suffer them. You know

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how deeply words can hurt. You know how painful unjust attitudes can be. You may even remember something someone did to you. Such things can scar people, sometimes changing their character. Now consider the next step. You have sinned against someone, and you may not even remember it. What a big deal?!

But that person may carry that bleeding wound or scar in their heart for years. Perhaps for the rest of their life. What you have done may have shaped their character and now affects how that person relates to everyone else. They may walk through life bitter and harsh, spreading their anger and hurting others. The ripple effect of your sin continues. Further and further...

Because of what we did or failed to do. If we could clearly see the extent of the damage and destruction our sin has caused, and the scale of what we will be held accountable for, how terrified would we be?

Now tell me - how can you repay such a debt? How can you repair the harm done to God's beloved when the consequences of your sin have spread far beyond your reach and knowledge? Can we just say, **"Have mercy on me, Master. I will fix it!"**?

No! We cannot. We rightly deserve our Master's wrath and punishment. But thanks be to our gracious Master, Jesus Christ! He has provided a way out for us. This is the Good News. This is the Gospel. Jesus Christ has taken care of our debts - all of them. He has taken the losses upon Himself. He has paid the price and borne the pain.

He has done all of this so that you can hear these new, life-giving words: **"I forgive you all your sins. They are forgiven. Your debt is gone. I paid it."** Regardless of how much we have messed things up in our lives, we do not need to fear that on the Last Day the full scale of our sin will be revealed, and we will finally have to pay for it ourselves. **You are free.** A new reality has dawned. **The Kingdom of heaven.**

You are forgiven. You can live as a forgiven servant whose fate has been changed forever by the mercy of your gracious Master. Now what? How does this shape our lives, our attitudes and our actions?

The Spirit of God helps us imitate our Master in His undeserved mercy and abundant forgiveness. The Spirit helps us comprehend how much we have been forgiven. The Spirit creates in us grateful hearts that desire to see God's Kingdom grow. And the Spirit changes us so that we desire to extend this life-giving forgiveness to others—even when it costs us dearly.

Because we begin to realize how much our forgiveness cost Jesus. Therefore, when someone sins against us, let us not begin by asking how much they owe us or how many times we must forgive them. That is the old order. It is too small for you.

You belong to the Kingdom of God. Lift your eyes to your Master, Jesus. Rejoice in your debt forgiven. And pray that the Holy Spirit enables you to be so generous in forgiveness that when others experience your mercy, they could only exclaim: **"So this is what the Kingdom of God is like! Praise be to God!"** Amen.