

Matthew 18:21-35

SI: Jesus’ disciples asked him why he taught the crowds in parables but only explained the meaning of the parables to them.

Jesus replied, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.

So the primary purpose of the parables is to tell followers of Jesus Christ about God’s kingdom in this world.

What is it like to live under the gracious rule of Jesus Christ?

What does the Lord Jesus want us to understand and expect about life in the kingdom of heaven? What does he want us to believe about it?

What qualities does he want us to cultivate?

Those are the sorts of secrets Christ is teaching us.

INTRO: There are some interesting numbers at the beginning of this parable.

Peter asked Jesus:

Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me?

Up to seven times?

The Jewish rabbis of that day taught that you should forgive a person three times.

But not more than three times or you were being taken advantage of.

Peter obviously knew this rabbinic teaching.

He also knew that Jesus was always more merciful and compassionate than the disciples expected.

So Peter figured that if the rabbis said three times, Jesus was bound to say you should forgive more times than that, so he guessed seven.

Seven is an important biblical number, it's the number of perfection.

Instead of three strikes and you're out.

Peter suggested letting the person strike out twice and then giving them one more swing before you finally cut them off!

But Jesus replied

I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Some translations say seventy times seven, but 77 is almost certainly correct.

So where did the Lord get that number? Seventy-seven?

Probably from Genesis 4.

In Genesis 4 there is a very unsavory man named Lamech.

He has the distinction of being the first polygamist.

He brags to his two wives that he has killed a young man who injured him.

He says: If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech is avenged 77 times.

You hurt me, you insult me, you touch my stuff, I'm not going to just hurt you back seven times, I'm going to hurt you seventy-seven times.

For Lamech, the number is not literal. You can't kill someone 77 times!

It was a symbolic way of expressing a spirit of revenge.

A desire to make people pay.

When Peter asked Jesus if he should forgive a brother seven times he was being very literal. He really meant seven times!

Jesus, the rabbis say three times. Should we hike that number up to seven?

So when the Lord replies: No, 77 times, he takes the discussion out of the realm of literal numbers. Just as Lamech used 77 to express a spirit of vengeance,

Jesus is flipping that and using 77 to express a spirit of forgiveness.

In other words, the Lord is saying to his disciples:

In the kingdom of heaven, forgiveness is not about three times or seven times.

I want you to forgive people without calculation.

I want you to display a forgiveness that does not keep a record of wrongs.

I want you to lose track of how many times you extend grace to your brothers and sisters.

I'm calling for a forgiveness that runs so deep and is so comprehensive that it does away with all the lists and ledgers you tend to keep in your heart.

Let me back up for a minute. We've been studying Christ's kingdom parables.

Up to this point we've studied five of them and all five have dealt with big themes.

The spread of the Gospel through the world.

The growth of the church through the ages,

The simultaneous growth of the kingdom of darkness,

The certainty of judgment.

They give us the view from 30,000 feet.

This parable zooms into individual congregations.

It zooms into relationships between church members,

and ultimately right into the hearts of individual believers.

Jesus says in the kingdom of heaven brothers and sisters who are wronged by other brothers and sisters are to be patient with one another and extend mercy to one another and forgive one another.

This is a parable about the spirit of forgiveness in the kingdom of heaven.

Because you have been forgiven, you must forgive your brother from your heart.

Forgiveness is to characterize the kingdom of heaven.

Forgiveness is to permeate our hearts and the life of our church.

Let's look at this under three headings.

The motive

The goal

The warning

MP#1 The motive for forgiveness

I could also call this point the argument for forgiveness

A servant owes the king an enormous debt—10,000 talents.

A talent was the largest unit of currency, about 75 pounds of gold or silver.

10,000 was used in popular speech as the biggest number.

Don't try to use your calculator to figure this out.

This is a debt that was impossible to repay.

The king orders not just that all his property be sold, but that the man and his wife and children also be sold into slavery.

But the debt is so large and the loss to the king is so massive that this doesn't make a dent.

So he falls on his knees and pleads for patience that he will pay back everything.

Which is impossible. He can't even pay the interest.

It shows he doesn't realize the magnitude of his debt.

But in response to that plea the king extends mercy.

Then his same man goes out and finds a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii.

A denarii was the daily wage for a laborer. There were 6,000 denarii in one talent.

That will give you a sense of the disparity between those two debts.

The man can't pay. He makes the very same plea. Be patient. I'll pay it back.

But the first servant chokes him and throws him into debtor's prison.

The other servants witness this and tell the king, he calls the first man back and condemns him for his unmerciful behavior and has him imprisoned and tortured.

So in the end he's worse off than if he had just been sold into slavery.

Every Christian who hears this parable can't escape the force of the argument.

God has forgiven the great debt of your sin against him.

He has removed the mountain of guilt you have piled up.

He has taken your selfishness, your pettiness, your stinginess, your impurity, your greed, your worldliness, your ingratitude, your rage, your grudge-holding, your meanness, your hypocrisy, your neglect of your faith—

In other words, he has taken your debt of 10,000 talents and he has forgiven it.

The Bible says he has separated it from you as far as the East is from the West.

He has buried it in the deepest sea.

He has cast it behind his back.

He has trampled it under his feet.

He has remembered it no more.

What have you done in response? You've continued to sin against him.

In fact, you've even sinned the same sins over and over.

You've taken his forgiveness and sinned some more.

And in spite of your repeat offenses, God has forgiven you completely anyway.

But now, a brother or sister sins against you.

What was his sin? Was he dishonest? Did he lie to you?

Well if he did, it was only 100 denarii's worth of lies.

You've been lying to God 10,000 talents worth.

Think of all the promises you've made to God that you have not kept.

You've promised to be honest, pure, content, generous, kind.

You've promised to be a better husband, father, church member, Christian but you haven't. You've lied to God himself.

And now you're miffed because someone lied to you? Who do you think you are?

Or do you feel someone has not shown you proper respect.

Maybe it's your own children who haven't given you the respect you deserve and who have treated your sacrifices for them with casual disregard.

And maybe you're right. They have dishonored you.

But what kind of son have you been to your Father the King?

How many times have you dishonored him by treating his name and his gifts with casual disregard?

How many times have you disappointed God by being a bad son or daughter?

He sent his own Son to die for your sins and he begs you not to keep doing them, but you've gone back over and over to the same old slop and vomit.

And now you're in a huff because someone has dishonored you?

You could make the same argument and trace the same reasoning if someone stole from you, or if someone was cruel to you, or was thoughtless of you.

What has anyone ever done to you that you in some way have not done much more seriously to God?

This is the motive and the argument for forgiveness in Christ's parable.

Compare sins committed against you with the greatness of your sins against God.

Your carelessness, your repeat offenses, your hard-heartedness—
and look with amazement at his compete forgiveness.

Search yourself in light of that and you will be humbled to the dust.

MP#2 The goal of forgiveness

The goal is that having felt the force of this argument, you forgive you brother from your heart.

The goal is a forgiveness that runs so deep and is so comprehensive that it does

away with all the lists and ledgers you tend to keep.
When Francis and Edith Schaeffer went to Europe after WWII to start their missionary work, they met some German Christians who told them about something that happened in their church.
Shaeffer later mentioned this in one of his books.

Here's what happened.

When Hitler took over, the way he tried to control the church was to order all the different groups and denominations to merge into one national church.

There is Christian denomination in Germany called the Brethren.

The Brethren split over Hitler's order.

Half of them accepted it and half of them refused.

The ones who submitted had a much easier time of it through the war.

But gradually, this forced organizational union with liberal churches wore down their own doctrinal beliefs and their spiritual sharpness.

On the other hand, the group that stayed out remained spiritually strong, but there was hardly a family in which someone did not die in a concentration camp.

So what happened after the war? Let me read it to you from Shaeffer's book.

Now can you imagine the emotional tension? The war is over, and these Christian brothers face each other again. They had the same doctrine, and they had worked together for more than a generation. Now what is going to happen? One man remembers that his father died in a concentration camp and knows that these people in the other group remained safe. But people on the other side have deep personal feelings as well.

Then gradually these brothers came to know that this situation just would not do. A time was appointed when the elders of the two groups could meet together in a certain quiet place. I asked the man who told me this, "What did you do?" And he said, "Well, I'll tell you what we did. We came together, and we set aside several days in which each man would search his own heart." **(Now here is Shaeffer speaking again, he says)** Here was a real difference; the emotions were deeply, deeply stirred. "My father has gone to the concentration camp; my mother was dragged away." These things are not just little pebbles on the beach; they reach into the deep well-springs of human emotions. But these people understood the command of Christ and for several days every man did nothing except search his own heart concerning his own failures and the commands of Christ. Then they met together. I asked the man, "What happened then?" And he said, "We just were one."

That's beautiful

Forgiveness from the heart means without legal hairsplitting.

It means without adding requirements that must be met.

It means without holding back part of ourselves to be safe.

Instead, it's doing in our own imperfect way what God has done for us—

Separating this offense as far as the east is from the west.

Casting it behind our backs.

Remembering it no more.

You might say that is impossible, and it is. But nothing is impossible with God.

This is a supernatural work of God's spirit in us to forgive our brothers this way.

We're going to recite the Apostles Creed before communion.

One of the lines is: I believe in the forgiveness of sins.

Think about that for a minute.

One of the key pillars of the Christian faith, as essential as believing in the virgin birth or the resurrection or the second coming is that God forgives the sins of every person who comes to him in Christ.

How do you know you really believe in the forgiveness of sins?

It's possible to have intellectual belief but not true faith.

Here's how you know if you really believe in the forgiveness of sins.

Look at the way you forgive other people.

Is your forgiveness willing, cheerful, and heart-felt?

Do you see opportunities to forgive wrongs done to you as a way of loving God for forgiving you and cancelling your enormous debt?

I read a line in a sermon this week that I immediately reacted against.

I thought when I read it that it had some truth, but it was terribly exaggerated.

But I couldn't quit thinking about it. The preacher said:

You and I ought to love to be sinned against. We ought to welcome such offenses. We ought to value them and be grateful for them as almost priceless gifts. Not that we love to see anyone sin, but because we ought to be hungry and thirsty to forgive others and to forgive them over and over again, and by so doing show the Lord and other people that we regard the forgiveness of sins as the greatest reality in the world.

Three strikes you're out is a much more sensible policy!

But Jesus wants us to learn to forgive our brother from the heart

When we do that, we imitate God in his mercy and grace.

That's the goal of forgiveness.

MP#3 The warning against unforgiveness

I struggled in writing this sermon because one of the rules of a three-point sermon is that the third point is the most important point.

That's what my homiletics professor, Dr. Bryan Chapell, taught me in seminary.

He said that if you have a three point sermon, the first point is forgotten,

the second point gets covered up, but it's the third point that carries the impact. That's what your congregation goes home with.

So this was my struggle.

Should I make the second point of my sermon my third point?

You have to admit the second point of this sermon was uplifting and inspiring. I told you that great story by Francis Schaeffer about the German Christians. I read that great quote about hungering and thirsting to have opportunities to forgive other people. Wow!

That would have been great way to end this sermon on an upbeat note.

Quote a hymn or poem about forgives and we're done.

But here's the thing about this parable that I couldn't escape.

The whole thing is a warning.

Jesus could have told the parable differently.

He could have said that when the servant was forgiven 10,000 talents he went and found the man who owed him 100 denarii and kissed him and said, Brother, I have been forgiven much and I forgive your debt. Rejoice with me! And so you too will be joyful if you forgive your brother from your heart.

But Jesus didn't tell it that way.

The last line of his parable is actually a threat.

In anger his master turned 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 from your heart.

What does that mean?

When someone wrongs you, you want that person to pay.

Wrongs and offenses are a kind of debt. You feel you are owed something. But what is the payment for a moral wrong that is done against you? If someone wrecks your car or breaks your window, the payment is clear—it's a monetary debt.

What's the payment for lies, meanness, or disrespect?

The only way the person can really pay for a moral wrong is by suffering. He has to suffer at least as much as you have suffered. And he has to know he is suffering because of what he did to you.

He has to be turned over to jailors and tortured until he has paid back every cent. There are ways we try to make people suffer, especially by reminding them in subtle or not so subtle ways that we still remember what they did to us.

But when you focus on how this person deserves to suffer for what he did, you become the one thrown into jail and tortured. You'll be tossing and turning at night, replaying the offense in your mind, and the thought will come to you that he's sleeping soundly. Torture. Other people will tell you their good news and it will remind you of what this person's actions denied you. Torture.

When you think about it, Jesus' warning is very easy to understand. Even wise unbelievers recognize the truth of this on a psychological level. They understand the therapeutic benefits of letting things go, so to speak. But the Lord Jesus did not tell this parable for psychotherapy. His warning is not just that we will lose sleep and become bitter. His warning is that you will miss the kingdom of heaven.

In the old hymn *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*, there's stanza that goes like this:
Upon the cross of Jesus mine eye at times can see
The very dying form of One who suffered there for me:
And from my stricken heart with tears two wonders I confess,
The wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.
The hymnwriter says that the crucifixion of Jesus brings to her mind the two great wonders of the Christian faith.

What are the two great wonders?

1. Redeeming love. Love that pays debts. That's what redemption is.
2. My unworthiness. My great debt. My inability to pay my debt.

The warning of the parable is that if you are a Christian but you don't forgive your brother from your heart, you won't grasp those two wonders. You won't understand your unworthiness, because you'll be focusing on the sin of this other person instead of the mountain of your guilt. And because of that you won't understand God's redeeming love, because you'll be focusing on the payback you are owed instead of the great debt paid by Christ.

Who do you need to forgive from the heart?

Maybe it is a Christian brother or sister in your own church or family. Maybe this person has actually said they are sorry and asked for forgiveness. And maybe you've even said the words: I forgive you.

But the offense is still there in your heart. You find yourself dwelling on it and getting bitter.

They don't understand how much it hurt me.

They got my forgiveness and now they are taking this too lightly.

Well, you don't understand how much you've hurt your Heavenly Father and your Savior Jesus who died for you.

And you've gotten his forgiveness and you take it much too lightly.

Yes, it's hard. You are absorbing the debt rather than making that person pay.

But that's exactly what Jesus did for you, and if you ask him, he will give you the grace to forgive this person 77 times.