

Matthew 18:21-35

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Paid in Full

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 18:27: "And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

As a king settles accounts with his servants, this one is a doozy. The servant owes him ten thousand talents. One talent is about 20 years' wages for a laborer: by today's numbers, if the servant is only making minimum wage, he's in debt to the tune of a little over 529 million dollars. That's a lot of money – the number has gotten so big that few can truly comprehend how much it is. It doesn't matter how it happened. The money is spent and the money is gone. And since the servant cannot pay, the king orders that he be sold, along with his wife and his children, into slavery. That's not going to recoup \$529M, I'm pretty sure, unless the guy has got *a lot of kids*. The king's order is more about justice and making a statement: if you cannot settle your debt with the king, there's a serious price to be paid.

The servant falls on his knees and implores the king, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." Note the words: the servant says, "Have *patience* with me," not "have *mercy* on me." I'm guessing that he has no idea how he could ever pay off this debt. I'll bet he knows he can't. He's simply scrambling to stall, to live as long as he can before the hammer falls. He's trying to eke out a few more weeks or months of relative freedom before his debts catch up with him. They will catch up with him – they already have! Now he's just trying to put off the penalty as long as he can.

It's not that much of an improvement: even if the king is foolish enough to be patient with him, you know what debt does. It haunts you. It owns you. It dictates what you can and can't do. It will leave this man constantly wondering when the king will run out of patience and the judgment will arrive. But the best the man can do is put off the due date as long as possible. So, "Have patience with me," he begs the king, "and I will pay you everything."

Plot twist: the king is not patient. Far better, he's merciful. The king forgives the debt. He writes it off as if it's no big thing and sends the man on his way. This is a strange king compared to most: he is far more concerned about the welfare of his disappointing servant than he is about his own wellbeing.

The servant is released! It's a fresh start! He's not haunted by some coming judgment day, nor is he scrambling to figure out how to make the first of many, many, *many* payments. The debt is gone, forgiven by the merciful king. It's as if it never was.

The servant *should* be overjoyed; oh, but he has a mean spirit. He encounters a fellow servant soon afterwards, one who owes him 100 denarii – by today's standards at minimum wage, let's call it about \$6000. That's not nothing, but it's a drop in the bucket compared to what the servant's just been forgiven. The servant seizes his debtor, chokes him and demands payment; and his fellow servant responds, "Have patience with me and I will pay you."

Those words ought to make the servant relax his grip on the man's throat, for they are the same words that he has just spoken to the king: and in response, the king exceeded his request and forgave his enormous debt completely. One would hope that the servant has learned

from the king's mercy, but one also recognizes that we're talking about sinners who aren't real big on re-educating their sinful nature.

The ungrateful servant has no patience, and even less mercy. He has his colleague imprisoned until he should pay off his debt. I daresay that this decision is not a financial one, because it's going to be tough making any sort of cash in a cell. No, the ungrateful servant does this simply because he's offended that someone has done him wrong.

But eyes are watching. Other servants report what they've seen to the king. The king calls his ungrateful servant before him, and says, "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?" Again, behold this king: he's still not concerned about the debt he has incurred by forgiving – he is angry that one of his servants is imprisoned for so much less. Because of this servant's wickedness, the king puts him back on the hook for his entire, enormous, un-payable debt. More than that, he delivers him to the jailers – actually in the original Greek, he delivers him to the jail's torturers: the implication is that he faces torment until he pays off the entire sum. It doesn't mean he's going to earn it by having his sins purged from him by suffering. It means that he's not getting out of jail.

On that happy note, end of parable.

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Jesus tells this parable in response to Peter's question, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" In human terms, seven times is pretty generous, is it not? Yet Jesus tells this parable to demonstrate how Peter's idea of forgiving seven times is terribly mean and small. All human ideas of forgiveness are.

I cannot emphasize enough how important that question is for your faith: how often should you forgive one who sins against you? And just as importantly, why should you forgive the one who sins against you? As Jesus answers these questions in the parable, it is so vitally important to note that He grounds His answer in His mercy for you. Why should you forgive others? Because you have been forgiven so much.

You are God's creation; and in addition to creating you, all that you have is a gift from a gracious, merciful God. You are to make use of what you have, and who you are, in service to Him. When you misuse God's gifts for other things, you are spending them on ungodly things. Thus your sins are your debt before God: in fact, when Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, His version there prays, "and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Your debt is too great for you to pay, because you cannot regain holiness anymore than one can buy back virginity or pay to make it so that a past sin never happened.

You have been forgiven so much. The Lord is patient with you: but far more than that, He is gracious and merciful. The Lord has forgiven your debt of sin – even the debt of sin you have not yet incurred. He didn't just write it off. He paid it for you. He suffered the wrath, the judgment, and even the torment for your sin on the cross. At His crucifixion, He suffered the debtor's prison of hell in your place. Risen again, He doesn't say, "I've died so that you can re-finance your debt and maybe get it paid off eventually." He says, "The debt is paid." In the absolution, the pastor doesn't say, "I extend your payment plan." He says, "I forgive you," because the debt is gone as if it never was.

Because He has forgiven you so much, you are set free to forgive others. Even the sins that seem pretty big and leave a scar are still little in comparison to all that God has forgiven

you. As a Christian, Peter's question should never even occur to you as long as you understand how much you've been forgiven. But you grow weary of forgiving. Everybody does. It's easy to forget how much you've been redeemed. It's easy then to deny forgiveness to others, because you think you deserve better.

Heed the warning of the parable: you cannot hold grudges against others and expect God's forgiveness. To do so is to say, "I deserve to be forgiven, and they do not." That is not what faith says. That's a statement of unrepentant pride. It also probably means that you're being driven by other unrepented sins, like anger, bitterness and the like. That's why failure to forgive others condemns you like any other unrepentant sin.

On the other hand, you do not earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others. You do not chip away at your debt of sin by forgiving others for their sins against you. The joy here is not foremost that God is patient, but that He is so gracious: He has already forgiven your debt at the cross. You don't forgive others so that God *might* forgive you. You forgive others because God *has* forgiven you.

To fail to forgive others is a sin that destroys faith and rots souls. To forgive others is to reflect the enormous forgiveness that Christ has shown to you. That said, we must address a couple of issues lest we still get the wrong idea.

What if you can't forgive? What if the sin is so great and the wound is so deep that, no matter how much you want to forgive, you cannot do it? Jesus doesn't give an exception, no matter how terrible the sin against you. He gives you something better: grace. Where you cannot forgive someone, confess that sin to the Lord. Trust in His forgiveness for you. Continue to confess the sin, because the devil will keep using it to foster bitterness and destroy your faith; and pray for the one who has hurt you so. Perhaps in time, you will be able to forgive; in the meantime, entrust yourself to the Lord who promises grace and mercy for you.

Should you forgive the one who is not sorry? After all, forgiveness is for those who repent, not for those who don't. This is true, but that does not give you license to bear a grudge against another. Rather, your forgiveness for them might be stated this way: "Whether or not you're sorry, I forgive you in that I do not hold your sin against you; but I cannot cleanse your soul because I haven't died for your sin. I pray that you repent before God, so that you might know His forgiveness and have eternal life." Your forgiveness serves as an illustration of God's forgiveness; and perhaps it might move the sinner towards repentance.

Remember too that forgiving is not the same as trusting. A sinner will often whine, "If you truly forgave me, you'd trust me." But while forgiveness is given, trust is earned. They are two different things.

How many times should you forgive others? As soon as you're looking for a maximum number, you're on the wrong track. Instead, confess your anger, your grudges, your pride, your bitterness and everything else that makes you want to withhold forgiveness. Confess them and rejoice in this: God is patient, but even better He is merciful. He has paid your enormous debt in full at great cost to Himself. Again and again, with each absolution and Holy Supper, He gives you the joyful news that you are released, set free, for your debt is paid. Why do you forgive others? Because you know and cherish these words from your Lord: "I forgive you *all* of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen