

### **Matthew 18:21-35**

Pentecost 15 + Proper 19A + September 13, 2020

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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Forgiven, Forgive.

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

We say around here that the law of God always accuses; and this week the law that Jesus teaches in this parable is just brutal. It's going to accuse you and it's going to show you your need for forgiveness. Here's the plan for this sermon: we're going to look at the parable, then the law, then the gospel. Sounds pretty Lutheran, yes? *Please* don't check out before we're done.

The parable is pretty straightforward. A king wants to settle accounts with his servants; and as he begins, he comes across a servant who owes him ten thousand talents. It sounds like a lot, and it's more than that. A talent is about, oh, twenty years' wages for a laborer; so ten thousand talents would be, what, 200,000 years of wages? If I do the math right, at minimum wage in Idaho, that comes to a little over 3 billion dollars. (And that's if this servant is only making minimum wage!) That's going to make a dent in any king's coffers, so the king orders the man to pay up. He can't, of course, so the king commands that the man, his family and his goods all be sold to recoup what he can. It'll be nowhere near three billion dollars, but the servant will know that he should pay his debts.

The servant begs the king, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." Let's be honest: the servant is *not* going to pay him everything. There's no way he can raise the cash. He's desperate. He's trying to persuade the king to reward him for good intentions that will never bear the fruit he's promising – and this after he's lost so much of the king's already! It's the equivalent of saying to the king, "I know I've been slapping you in the face regularly every day; but if you give me another chance, I'll work at slapping you across the face *less* often, and you've got to appreciate that." It's pathetic, really.

The king doesn't buy it: the servant can't work his way out of the debt, and he's not going to pretend otherwise. But here's the plot twist: instead of selling him into slavery, he forgives the debt. Writes it off. Tears up the bill. Done. Gone. Clean slate.

Jesus doesn't talk about the servant's collapse in relief, the drop in blood pressure and the joyful weeping that must come with that forgiveness; but you can bet that the servant – who was just begging for his life – doesn't say, "Sounds good," as he saunters out of the palace.

However, when he does leave, he finds a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii. A denarius is a day's wage, so this is more than three months' pay. If we're going with minimum wage around here, that comes to about six thousand dollars. It's not nothing. Unless, of course, you compare it to three billion dollars, in which case it *is* nothing.

But the forgiven servant can't let it go. His debtor says the same words that he used before the king: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything;" and realistically, it's possible. But the forgiven servant has no patience, so he has the man thrown into prison until he pays the debt. This, by the way, is not a good plan, since income opportunities in a 1<sup>st</sup> century prisons are ... minimal.

The forgiven servant apparently sees no contradiction or hypocrisy in what he has done. The king does: he summons the ungrateful servant and delivers him to the jailers; actually, the Greek says that he delivers him to tormenters. He's facing torment until he pays off the debt, and that debt is never going to be repaid. Getting tormented doesn't pay well: ask the parents of any three-year-old.

Jesus tells this parable after Peter asks Him, "How many times do I have to forgive my brother when he sins against me?," and Peter magnanimously offers seven times as a good number. Jesus counters with 77 times, but His real answer is, "Don't ever stop forgiving those who sin against you," and He tells the parable to give the reason why.

Why should you never stop forgiving others? Here's the law, and remember that it's brutal: you should never stop forgiving others because you have no excuse, because God has forgiven you so much more.

Look, part of the curse of sin is that you can't understand how holy God is, and you can't understand how holy you're not. You're conscious that He's better than you, but you think that there's this measurable distance so that you're like the dopey, loveable cousin that God doesn't mind hanging around with. That's not it at all. Have you ever met someone who just annoys you because of who they are – you see them from a distance and you already want to get away? That's you, the sinner, in God's eyes, apart from Christ. Everything you are and do is offensive to Him, another poke in the eye of your creator. Every sin adds to the debt. Don't take my word for it: take yours. Didn't you just say in the confession that you "justly deserve [His] eternal punishment"?

If that's not bad enough, then you have the gall to say, "If you'll just be patient with me, Lord, I'll get this debt paid off. I'll work my way out of this." That's bad, because there's no way that you're ever going to be able to pay off the debt, especially since it's growing daily by just you being you. It's even worse than that, though, because the Lord has paid off the debt with His Son's own blood so that you might be forgiven; and yet you're willing to push that away and stick with thoughts like, "I've got a right not to forgive so-and-so," and "I'll get this debt paid off by trying to slap the Lord across the face less than I was before, and I think He'll be happy with that."

Sometimes, the grudges you hold are ridiculous by human standards, and everyone can see it but you. Always, they're wrong before the eyes of God, because He has forgiven you so much more.

Before we stop with the brutal law, we need to add one more element; and this is where I beg the patience of those to whom it applies. Peter's question is about the *quantity* of sin: "How many times?" is his question. But the tougher element is *severity*: sometimes, it's not that someone sins against you repeatedly, but that they do great harm in their sin against your goods, your body, your mind ... your soul. I speak of physical or sexual abuse, for instance, or a terrible betrayal. The wound is deep, the healing will take a lifetime; you still hurt, and the thought of that individual triggers rage, adrenaline and fear before you even know what's happening. You need help, you need peace, you need comfort; and here Jesus comes along with the law and says, "You've got to forgive. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

If you take that seriously, then no one in this room is closer to despair than you. But no one is closer to grace, either; because, you see, you're the one most likely to be honest. You're the one most likely to say the truth, to say, "I can't. I can't forgive the one who's sinned against me."

That is an honest confession. Whether you get hung up on little grudges that show your sinful pettiness, or whether you're deeply wounded by another, "I can't forgive the one who has sinned against me" is an honest, godly confession. Now, finally, we're ready to move from this brutal law; because if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

It is true that the debt of sin you have before God is immense and unpayable. But it is also true that Christ has paid the debt. He's done more than say, "Let's pretend this never happened." He's borne the debt of sin to the cross and He's suffered the eternity of torment there already. It wasn't His sin – the sinless Son died in the place of sinners. How unfair! But God is not into double jeopardy: because Jesus has paid that price, He will not condemn you for your sin.

Christ has died for your sins, and that includes the times you cannot forgive others. If you're one who bears petty grudges, don't justify them. Admit that you're that petty and that it's wrong – confess it, because how foolish to go to hell because someone insulted you and you took it personally. Confess that you cannot forgive, and the Lord forgives you for that sin too; and by His grace, as you learn how great His gift of forgiveness, you will learn to forgive, too.

If you're one who has suffered great abuse or betrayal at the hands of another, God has help and healing for you. Honestly, the wound may be severe enough where there is not enough time in a lifetime to heal and forgive your tormentor. If that's honestly the truth, then be honest about it. If you cannot forgive even though you know you should, tell the Lord. If you don't want the one who hurt you to be forgiven, tell the Lord. Confess these things, because they are rotting your soul. Know that the Lord forgives you. Know that the you are not cut off from His mercy and healing until you are able to forgive. And know that the day will come when anger and pain and all other torment are former things that have passed away.

My friends, the Lord has forgiven you so much. He has died to make it so, and He is risen again to pour out His grace upon you. He gives His Word and His Supper this day in abundance so that you might be set free from all anger, all grudges, all pettiness, all bitterness, all sin. If you will not forgive, then do not come near His body and blood until you repent. If you cannot forgive, confess that along with the rest of your sins; and know that you depart this place not just as a servant with a clean slate, but as a beloved child of God who is welcome in the kingdom forever, with all debts cleansed away by the blood of Christ.

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