



## Scripture & Sermon

Sept. 13, 2020

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Matthew 18: 21-35

**21** Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” **22** Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

**23** “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. **24** When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; **25** and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. **26** So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ **27** And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. **28** But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ **29** Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ **30** But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. **31** When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. **32** Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **33** Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ **34** And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. **35** So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

## Sermon

Let us pray,

*Loving and gracious God,*

*Thank you for this time to be together in our sanctuary that we love so much. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to dig into your word. Help us to hear*

*what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, amen.*

In the Bible, the word forgive appears 81 times, and the word forgiveness appears 124 times. That's so many times! You would think with it being talked about that much it would be pretty clear what it is all about! But it turns out that none of those 205 times the idea is brought up, are we told HOW to go about it. Lots of being told to do it, like a Nike ad, Just Do It! But unlike our how-to on Conflict Resolution from Jesus last week, there is no how-to for forgiveness. After doing some research on forgiveness this week, I can understand why! Forgiveness is super important, as the 205 references to it make clear, but it is complicated. Though it's important for everyone, it doesn't look the same for everyone in every situation. When I think of forgiveness, 2 vastly different scenarios come to mind: the first the classic moment when your young of two siblings or friends who get in a fight and then the parents make them stand in front of each other and say, "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you." Like either of those feelings are genuine! The other, are those stories that are told similar to the parable from the text this morning of an incredible forgiveness story, like when the kid whose parents were murdered forgives the murderer. Forgiveness can look so different because the way we interact with each other is so complex! We have friends, family, community, church family, coworkers, acquaintances, spouses. All those relationships look differently and bring about different situations and forgiveness can and should look differently depending on which it is. Some situations are perfect to follow "forgive and forget," which implies forgiving and moving on like nothing happened. Some situations require more significant reconciliation work. Some situations end up having something more like a continuum of forgiveness, something we work up to over time and healing. Some situations require us to forgive and let go, forgiveness allowing us to break the chains that bind us to the past harm. Some forgiveness allows us to find reconciliation and continue a relationship with someone, some allows us to find peace while a relationship comes to an end. Some forgiveness is equal to saying "it's okay" and some is saying, "It's not okay, and it will never be okay, but you are still a human worthy of relationship."

The reality is, that there is not a universal way to go about forgiving someone, Jesus couldn't have told us the five easy steps to forgiving someone and what that relationship should look like after. Today, we are looking at one passage that talks about forgiveness and gives us some things to think about when it comes to forgiveness as a part of being within the Christian community. This morning's passage of Matthew 18:21-35 comes right after last week's passage, so has some of the same context. It is included here as part of Jesus's response to the question: "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" The response so far told us all about what to avoid doing as a christian community. Don't be a stumbling block to children or the vulnerable. Don't hold

onto the parts of yourself that cause you to stumble. Don't ignore the person who falls astray. And last week, don't let a conflict fester, address it head on and have trust that God is with you when that happens. That last reminder leads us right into today's passage. Once again, the topic is raised, this time by Peter, as "if another member of the church sins against me." Like last week, this is advice for how to maintain healthy relationships within the Christian community. That does not mean that it doesn't work for other situations, but it is not meant to be universal for all situations. This caveat is quite important because the parable that Jesus tells makes forgiveness sound like a numbers game and that forgiveness erases the debt like it never happened. In certain situations, especially those where true and ongoing harm is happening, like situations of abuse, it is unhealthy and can lead to more harm if the pattern is to forgive and pretend to forget on repeat while more and more harm happens. This does not mean that forgiveness is not a part of that person's journey, but it is less likely to look like the King in the parable who forgives and forgets the debt and allows the relationship to continue on exactly as it was before.

So, enough about what this passage is not saying, what does it tell us? One of the biggest things about this passage on forgiveness, in comparison to others, is that it comes after the passage about conflict resolution. These lessons being put together is surely no coincidence. The first lesson for when someone sins against us is to go to them and try to talk it out. First by yourself, second with someone else as mediator, and third with the whole community's help. The first step is to make it clear between the both of you what wrong has been done. As I said last week, it is much easier for the one who has been wronged to recognize they have been wronged, than for the person who did the wronging to recognize it. The first step when someone sins against you is to seek resolution to the conflict. This indicates that we are not just to forgive them without any of it being addressed between the two of you, and also, that the conflict needs to be resolved for forgiveness to happen. We may know that we will forgive, but we cannot forgive when the harm is still being done. Beyond that, we are unlikely to be able to truly forgive if we have not expressed our pain or attempted to work it out with the other person. The conflict resolution plan from last week indicated it was to seek repentance. Repentance is helpful to the process of forgiveness, but it is not always necessary. More generally, these two passages being together tell us that forgiveness is a part of a process toward reconciliation. Forgiveness does not equal reconciliation. Conflict resolution and forgiveness are major steps, but yet still are steps toward full reconciliation. Together, they point the trajectory of Jesus's lessons here toward the goal of reconciliation. As these are lessons pointed toward the Christian community, these important steps and the goal of reconciliation are so important to being a Christian community together.

To look at this pair of stories from another angle, the second being about forgiveness also gives more meaning to the conflict resolution lesson. By following up the conflict resolution lesson with one on forgiveness, we are reminded that seeking conflict resolution, head on, in that way, is to come from those who bring with them the attitude toward forgiveness as described in today's passage. Forgiveness, as described in this passage, is extravagant and beyond limits. Peter suggested that forgiving someone 7 times might be enough and Jesus responds that it should be 77 times, or some say the words mean seventy times 7. The exact number isn't as important here, as Jesus was likely trying to say, it isn't about a count. Forgiveness here is beyond all calculation. The parable backs this up. It tells of a servant, I know when I read the scripture it said slave, but those who know what the original language meant, this story is about a King and his subordinate official or servant. The debt that he incurred would have been by mismanaging the King's resources. It says that his debt was 10 thousand talents. It is not a realistic number. In that time, a "Talent" is the largest monetary unit, equal to the wages of a manual laborer for 15 years. So 10,000 of them?? If we were to take it literally, that amount of money would exceed the taxes for a year for all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria. There is no way this one servant mismanaged things this badly and it was just coming to light. Back then, 10,000 was used as a way to say, "the largest possible number." So, the disciples who heard this parable from Jesus first would have thought of it as the largest number of the largest money value. It is basically like when kids throw down a times infinity! To end an argument. As Jesus responded to Peter with 77 or 70 times 7, this number for the debt is to say it is beyond count, it is an unpayable debt. Thus, the King's response is more than basic forgiveness, it is an act of mercy.

In comparison, the servant gives us an example of what not to do. Despite the fact that the fellow servant's debt to him is microscopic compared to the debt that he was just forgiven for (1/600,000 to be exact), but not insignificant in its own right. 100 denarii was worth 100 days wages of ordinary labor. This is a high debt for people of their stature, but unlike the first servant's debt, the second's could be considered "Reasonable" or "payable." Despite just experiencing that great amount of mercy from the King, the servant demands repayment and has zero mercy for his compatriot. His reaction gets the attention of the rest of the servants who stand up against this injustice, this part tells us that forgiveness or lack thereof affects the whole community. Forgiveness is not just interpersonal, between those directly involved in the conflict, but it is communal. The King's response is to revoke the mercy he had shown the servant and make him face the consequences of the debt. The origin of the last two verses of this passage are debated by Biblical scholars. Many have come to the conclusion that the last verse or two are added by the author of the Gospel of Matthew as he wrote down the story, trying to make sense of it for his context of the early church. Throughout

this gospel we have seen Matthew try to make parables direct allegories for how God acts in the world, but those intentions from Jesus are not clear, nor sure. If we set those last two verses aside as Matthew's words, and not Jesus's, Jesus could have been trying to say, that in general, there are great consequences for not forgiving. Bringing those last verses back and considering what the message could be when thinking of the whole passage, perhaps it means that if we are not forgiving with our Christian community, then we are damaging our ability to experience God's forgiveness for us.

Through Jesus's response to Peter and then the lesson from the parable we have learned a few things about the kind of forgiveness Jesus is asking us to have amongst each other in Christian Community. First, taking on an attitude of forgiveness means not keeping a count, or score keeping, of the forgiving. When we keep a count of either or both indiscretions and forgiven indiscretions, are we truly forgiving? Keeping count can lead to bitterness if you feel you have had to forgive WAY more times than they have had to forgive you, no matter how true that is. It can also lead to a desire for vengeance to make the tables even. This is important for big issues, but is especially important for little things. When we keep count of every little indiscretion and do not approach them with an attitude of forgiveness they add up and compound and can lead to a bigger issue. We can help quiet those urges to hold on and keep count, despite saying we had forgiven, by attending to Jesus's advice to resolve conflict. If you feel like you need to hold onto the indiscretion, you probably have not resolved the conflict with the other.

A second take-away from Jesus's lesson on forgiveness, is that it is not just about us as individuals, but the way that forgiveness impacts the way the whole community. The forgiveness Jesus discusses here is for the purpose of restoring community. It is for keeping the community healthy and getting to focus on the important work of building God's kingdom more than the things that come between us. I am sure that you can tell when people are at odds within our church communities and have recognized the difference it makes on the moral of the whole.

A third take-away from this lesson on forgiveness comes from the very last phrase of the passage. It says, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, **if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.**" Here, the passage clarifies that we are supposed to be forgiving "from our hearts." This implies that there is forgiveness that is told that is not from the heart. This reminds me again of that scene of two kids who got in a fight who are then forced to look each other in the eye and say the phrases, "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you." Saying we forgive someone when we haven't actually gotten there, or pushing ourselves to forgive someone because we know we are supposed to, but not because actually doing the internal work to truly forgive the other, is just as bad. Forgiving from the heart, instead of in words only, is a commitment to figuring out what your relationship can be for the future. It orients the forgiver toward

the future instead of being stuck in the past. This line also points toward the idea that forgiveness is not just a one-and-done moment, it is not like a switch we just turn on and that's it. Forgiveness is a process and is something that we continue to choose every day. That could be easier for small things, but is important when we tackle forgiving something big.

To summarize, forgiveness amongst us in Christian community does not keep score, happens within and for the whole community, and must be from the heart. So where is God in all this? Last week's passage ended with a reminder that was important for encouraging us to take on Conflict resolution, but it also leads us into this next lesson. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." God is with us always, but particularly in those moments where we are with our Christian community, and God does not go away when there is conflict. God is with us and the Spirit works through us when we are working on conflict resolution and they continue with us in the process of forgiveness.

But God does more than be with us when it comes to forgiveness. God also gives us the best example of the power of forgiveness as God forgives us. God forgives us so we should share the same grace with each other. Though we ought not make a direct connection between the King and God, as God does not revoke our forgiveness like the King did, the King does remind us of the grandiose level of God's forgiveness. God forgives us WAY more than we would ever forgive each other. Which is real good news, because we need God's forgiveness way more than we need each other's. There is nothing too big or bad to withhold from us God's forgiveness. That is true mercy and grace. God never sees what we do and decides that we are a lost cause. Never decides that we cannot be in relationship with God. Never decides that we are not worthy of love. God can forgive us so extravagantly and uniformly because God is all powerful and all knowing. Meanwhile we have to figure out forgiving humans while dealing with the complexities of being human. God is committed to each of us and gives us forgiveness, and reminds us of that forgiveness in stories like these and the movement of the Spirit so that we know we can always come to God with whatever is going on in our life and God will help us through it. It can also help us forgive ourselves, which can sometimes be the hardest part of all. We may never measure up to God's level or speed of forgiveness and grace, but God's example reminds us of how we should strive to forgive each other. To forgive beyond what is typical. To forgive without keeping score. To forgive without expecting reward. To forgive from the heart. Let us all do the work to make forgiveness a foundation of being in Christian community together.

Let us pray.

*Gracious and forgiving God,*

*You are the perfect example of so much for us. You show us such unbelievable and undeserved mercy and grace and you teach us, from experience, the power of forgiveness. You show us that we are never beyond forgiveness or relationship with you and you call us to bring that attitude of forgiveness toward our church family. Please help us to realize when we are keeping score, when we need to talk an issue out, and what forgiveness should look like based on the situation. Give us the patience, mercy, wisdom and strength needed to commit ourselves to a different kind of community gathered in your name. Let us remember to do this work or receive reminders when we start to slip. We pray all of these things in your son's name, Amen.*