

## Matthew 18:21-35

A king, says Jesus in His parable, wishes to settle accounts. It's time to pay up. One servant is brought in who owes his king ten thousand talents. In today's money, that would come to over a billion dollars. The king knows this servant cannot pay that amount, so rather than command him to pay what he owes, he orders him to be sold with all that he has. The servant has no leverage, no defense, no ace up his sleeve. He has been dreading this moment. Surely he has lost much sleep over it. We're not told how he could have been in debt to this extreme extent; we're just told that he was.

What would you do? This servant falls to his knees: "*Have patience with me,*" he implores his king, "*and I will pay you everything.*" He may as well plead insanity, because it would be insane to believe he could ever pay back what he owes. The only way this servant can escape being sold is for his king to show mercy and forgive his debt. The king knows it and the servant knows it.

And so he does. He forgives his debt. Not ten percent of it. Not half of it. Not even 99% of it. All of it! The whole thing. It's all erased. Across this servant's ledger book it now reads: Paid in full. He is free to go. Not even one cent, anymore, does he owe his king.

You are that servant, and so am I. What you and I owe to our God, our heavenly King, is utterly beyond our ability to pay. The debt we have incurred because of our sinfulness is so large that all He can do is to hand us over to be sold into eternal suffering and torment. And whatever we say in response is not good enough. We have no defense for our sinfulness. From day one you and I have broken all of God's commandments. We have no excuse; no means to right our wrongs. It's time to settle our account, and the word of the Law looms over us. "*No one is righteous before God...and the soul that sins shall die;*" separation from God and all that is good forever.

But Jesus teaches us to get down on our knees and pray in this way: "*Forgive us our trespasses.*" Dear Father, forgive my debt, not because I can eventually pay it off; forgive me all the debt of my sin, dear Father in heaven, purely out of grace and mercy.

And He does. He forgives your debt. Not part of it. Not most of it. All of it! The whole thing. It's all erased. You are completely forgiven. Across your ledger book it reads: Paid in full.

Jesus paid off your debt. You couldn't, nor could I. Jesus didn't have to; He wanted to. He was sold into the suffering and torment that awaited us. Jesus paid the full price. It cost Him everything. His precious blood poured out of His holy wounds and ran down the cross for you, for me, for everyone. Every sinner is in debt, but Jesus redeemed every sinner from hell.

That's the good news. Here's the bad news. That servant in our parable goes out and finds a fellow servant owing him one hundred denarii. About \$15,000 in today's money. That's a good amount of cash. What does he do? He seizes him, chokes him, and says, "*Pay what you owe!*" The poor man pleads in the exact same manner as the one choking him had pleaded. "*Have patience with me and I will pay you everything.*" And he probably could. It would take time, but he could pay off that amount of debt.

But the one who is owed money refuses. He puts the man in prison until his debt is paid. Now that's stupid. How can this man pay his debt while sitting in a jail cell? Where's the sense in this? There is none. The first servant doesn't care about the money. He is angry at the poor man. He wants him to suffer in jail even though he will not get his money back. Wow! That's shocking. But this is the parable as Jesus tells it.

Is this second part intended for us? Yes. You and I are the servant who was forgiven his large debt. This is how God deals with us. Now, how do we deal with others? Do we, out of a grateful heart, forgive them, or do we refuse to forgive?

Who is that fellow servant in your life...the one who owes you one hundred denarii? It may not be who you think it is. Not your friend with whom you have words now and then, but sooner or later you patch things up. That fellow servant is that person you can't stand. Your ex-husband or ex-wife, who took you for everything you had. It's your dad or mom who walked out on you and refused to be a parent to you. It's your brother or sister who crossed the line one too many times and now you're not on speaking terms. It's that hard-core conservative, if you're a liberal, or hard-core liberal, if you're a conservative, who makes you so angry you could spit nails. It's that church member who never pulls their weight around here, and you've had it with him or her.

You see, we think we're entitled to choose the ones we forgive. Just as Simon Peter thought he was entitled to limit the number of times he forgave, we set our own limits: who we forgive, how often and when we forgive, even what we forgive. "I'll forgive most of what he did to me, but not all of it. He isn't even sorry for what he said! Why should I forgive him completely?" "She ruined my life! No one, not even God, can expect me to let go of that!"

But God already did. He already forgave that person completely. Jesus took all their sin, every bit of it, to His cross. Now listen to this very carefully: to not forgive someone is to deny and to reject the cross where forgiveness was won for all sinners. To not forgive is to want the one who wronged us to sit in a jail cell; to suffer the torment of hell forever. It's to tell someone, "Jesus didn't pay for what you did to me!" But this is a rejection of the Gospel, and this is far worse than any sin someone could do to us.

Think of this...the only thing in the entire parable which makes the king angry is his servant's refusal to forgive. Is the king angry at the huge debt his servant owed him? No. He is angry when his mercy that was shown to his servant is mocked and rejected. And he throws that wicked unforgiving servant to the jailers, who are cruel and who torture their victims, and that servant will never get out. "*So also My heavenly Father will do to every one of you,*" says Jesus, "*if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*"

Is it any wonder why the Scriptures warn us not to let the sun go down on our anger? If you are angry with me, with a fellow servant here, with an ex, with a parent, with a neighbor...come and speak to that sinner (yes, that person is a sinner just as you are), come today before the sun sets. There is no forgiveness, says Jesus, for the one who refuses to forgive another. Do you and I want to go to sleep tonight with that sentence hanging over us?

Now let's end with good news. God's mercy toward you causes you to show mercy to others. When the Holy Spirit works in your heart, causing you to believe the truth of the cross, the truth of what your Baptism means, that God has completely forgiven you, you cannot help but forgive the one who sins against you.

Everyone take a deep breath. Now hold it. Keep holding it. Don't exhale yet. In fact, don't exhale at all! Just keep holding your breath. You can't do it. When you breathe, you must exhale. This is how our bodies work. Well, this is how the church works. When we breathe in God's forgiveness, we must forgive others. We cannot but exhale God's forgiveness for those who sin against us. The next time someone sins against you; I mean really makes you mad, really hurts you, hold your breath and remember that you cannot help but exhale. Since you breathe in God's mercy here at the Communion Table, here in the word of Absolution, you will - you can't help but - show mercy to everyone else.

"*Forgive us our trespasses,*" Jesus teaches us to pray, "*as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" Do you need help forgiving that person in your life who has hurt you, who keeps hurting you, who has hurt your loved one? Then remember the large debt of your sin God has completely forgiven out of mercy. Look at the cross. See Jesus' blood paying for your sins, and also for the sins of that person who has sinned against you. Then get down on your knees and pray, "Father, forgive me...as I forgive those who sin against me." Amen.