

## Matthew 18:21-35

Peter uses the word “forgive,” but he really has something else in mind. “*How often,*” he asked Jesus, “*will my brother sin against me and I forgive him?*” What he really means to say is, “How often do I have to put up with him?” Forgiveness has a poor memory. If I’m keeping track of how many times I have forgiven my neighbor, I haven’t forgiven him at all.

I’m going to ask you a question...it’s kind of a trick question: Have you ever been wronged by someone? More specifically, if you are married, has your spouse ever hurt you? If you have children, have they ever sinned against you? Has a member of the congregation ever said or done something to you that was wrong? Has your pastor ever offended you? If your answer is anything but “No,” then it’s possible that you have not forgiven them, because forgiveness has a very poor memory. To forgive means that the wrong, the sin against you, never even took place.

I suspect that you and I don’t forgive each other as much as we put up with each other. Somewhere, and I don’t mean on the bathroom wall, or in the garage or basement, we have a chart that keeps track of who did what to us. It’s probably just in our head; but it’s there. We remember. We remember who wronged us, what they did, how they did it, and when they did it. The where and the why isn’t as important, not as important as the who.

Jesus tells a parable in response to Peter’s question. A servant is brought in who owes his king then thousand talents. That’s well over six or seven billion dollars. This isn’t a city, or a state, or a nation. This is one man, a lowly servant, who owes seven billion dollars! He is about to be sold into slavery, when he falls to his knees before his master. And then he tells a blatant lie. “*Have patience with me and I will pay you everything.*” Right! Seven billion dollars? Never! And the master knows this, but he doesn’t care. He wipes his servant’s debt clean. More important to the master than getting his money back, is showing mercy.

In the parable, the king and master is God and we are that servant. The debt of our sin is so great--whether we are two years-old or ninety two--that we can never pay it. But we don’t see it that way. We think we can. We think that being kind to our neighbor, or cleaning up the messes our children leave behind, or driving the speed limit, or coming to church with our offering will make a dent in the debt that we owe God. We think that we can eventually pay our debt of sin.

The master in the parable did not forgive his servant’s debt because the servant fell to his knees before him. If anything, that only made it worse. The servant was mocking his king, treating his massive debt as a small thing by saying that he would be able to pay it all back. Just so, God is angry when we pretend that our works of love, our acts of obedience will pay off the debt of sin we owe. We mock Him with such an attitude. We make light of our debt of sin with such nonsense. The master in the parable forgave his servant’s debt, not because he fell to his knees, but in spite of it. He forgave his debt because he took pity on him.

Here is the Gospel truth dear fellow debtors. God forgives us, not because we do something, but because Jesus did everything. Out of pity, God sent His Son to pay the massive debt we owe. Jesus was sold as payment for us. He suffered an eternity in hell as He hung on the cross. This is the debt we owed. For us to pay our debt of sin, we would have to be thrown into hell forever.

Nothing less than that will touch our debt. Whether we think we are pretty decent people, or whether we know that we are poor, miserable sinners, the only payment sin deserves is the suffering of hell. Jesus paid it. He paid it for each and everyone of you. Whether you believe it or not, He paid it for you. And God, for His sake, forgives you.

So why did that servant in the parable end up in the prison until his entire debt was paid off? Since the master wiped his debt clean, why did he later throw him in prison to pay off his debt? It's because the servant refused to show the same mercy to a fellow servant. One hundred denarii, that's all his fellow servant owed him. This little debt could be repaid. One hundred days of work would cover it. A denarius a day was the standard wage. But the wicked servant refused. And by his refusal to show mercy, he was rejecting the mercy his master had given to him. And so his own debt fell back upon him to be paid.

This is the only reason why anyone goes to hell. Not because of sin. Jesus became the full payment for every sin. No one is thrown into the eternal prison because of sin that they have done. They are thrown there because they refuse the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. It's called unbelief. And it lives within the hearts of everyone who refuses to forgive. The servant in the parable refused to forgive and he was thrown into prison, and he would never get out.

This is why the devil works so hard in marriages, families, and congregations to create hard feelings. He wants us to hold grudges. He wants us to become offended, to get mad and stay mad. He wants us to act like Peter--to put up with others, but only to a point. The devil wants us to remember who did what to us way back when.

God has no such memory. When God forgives, He forgives...period. And God forgives you. He doesn't check His memory bank and say to Himself, "Oh, that's right, I remember what he said back there...I recall what she did!" God has no such memory banks. All He remembers is that Jesus went to the cross for you. All He recalls is that you are baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection.

God doesn't forgive you because you forgive others. He forgives you for Jesus' sake, and that's why you forgive others. If God did not forgive, neither could we. But He does. And so we cannot help but forgive each other. It's who we are. We are little forgivers shaped by the mercy of our Lord because He lives in us forgiving others through us.

Let me revisit that question I posed earlier. "Have you ever been wronged by someone?" Because of who you are--God's forgiven people in Christ--the answer you give will be shaped by the cross: "If someone has wronged me, whoever they are, it's not important. What is important is that God forgives. He forgives me for Jesus' sake. How can I, therefore, do anything less than forgive anyone and everyone who sins against me!" Amen.