

Pastor Joe Polzin  
 Matthew 18:21-35  
 “Forgiven and Forgiving”  
 Year A – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
 September 17, 2017

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

We pray it so often, we may miss what it means. It’s the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” And we love it, or at least the first part. God forgives us our sins. It’s why we love coming to church. We love to hear, we *need* to hear, God’s forgiveness through Jesus Christ for us. How *we* are released from our sins by God.

But, the rest of it, “as we forgive those who trespass against us”? How often to stop to think about *that*? And it doesn’t say, “as we *try* to forgive those...” or “as we *do our best* to forgive those...” No, it says, “as we forgive those who trespass against us.” We forgive. It’s what Christians do.

You know, Peter probably thought he was looking pretty good when he came to Jesus. As we heard last week, Jesus just gave an extended teaching on how to care for the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (18:1-20), which includes our needy brothers and sisters in Christ. And Jesus just talked about what to do when your brother sins against you.

So, Peter, struts up to Jesus and says to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (18:21) Seven times – a good, complete biblical number. Expecting that forgiveness will be needed more than once, Peter likely thought seven sounds pretty generous.

But Jesus corrects his misunderstanding once again, and tells him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times” (18:22). And there’s debate whether it’s seventy-seven times, or seventy *times* seven times, but it doesn’t matter. The point Jesus is making is you don’t keep count when you’re talking about forgiveness. And then, as he so often does, Jesus tells a parable to teach his disciples.

The story is straightforward. A servant who owed a king a large debt was brought before him. And Scripture says he owed 10,000 talents. Okay, there’s a lack of large exclamations going on in the sanctuary right now, so maybe we should talk about what a talent is. A talent is a measurement of weight, for currency, that was worth about 6,000 denarii. And a denarius was about a day’s wage, so one single talent was worth about twenty years of work.

This servant owed the king *10,000 talents*, which means he owed about 200,000 years of wages. To give you an equivalent in today’s currency, assuming the median household income for Michigan<sup>1</sup>, this servant owed the king 10.2 billion dollars. No wonder, when he couldn’t pay, the only thing left was that he would be sold off, along with his family and all that he had.

Except he pleaded for mercy. “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything” (18:26). And we always need to pay attention when something completely unexpected happens in one of Jesus’ parables, because that means the point of the parable is near. And what happens next was unthinkable. The master... had pity for him. And he didn’t even agree to the servant’s terms, to give him more time. Instead, he simply released him, and forgave him entirely of his debt.

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<sup>1</sup> \$51,000

Think of the oppressing burden that debt brings. Many of you may know that feeling all too well. Now, think of that weight of 10.2 billion dollars being completely lifted off you, forgiven, no strings attached. No further payments. Nothing. It must have felt incredible. One would barely know what to say or do next.

Well, almost immediately, it seems, the servant who had been forgiven all this debt goes out. And he finds a fellow servant, one who owed him 100 denarii, or 100 days of wages. About 17,000 dollars, compared to 10.2 billion dollars.

And notice the violence, the anger; “He began to choke [the other servant], saying ‘Pay what you owe’” (18:28). And just like *he did* not that long ago, the other servant fell to his knees and pleaded, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you” (18:29).

For the first servant, this was an opportunity, an opportunity to stand in the place of the master. But instead of showing extraordinary grace, like he had just been shown, he took it upon himself to exact every last dime from his fellow servant. And he had him thrown in prison, until he could somehow make the debt right.

Word didn’t take long for this to get back to the king, who summoned the servant. “‘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?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers [or, in the Greek, “torturers”], until he should pay all his debt” (18:32-34).

And as if Jesus’ point in the parable wasn’t clear enough, he ends with this, speaking directly to us, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (18:35).

Jesus doesn’t exactly mince words here, does he? And immediately our defenses go up. We begin to justify all our actions and feelings. “I forgive! Well, except that one person. That one person who always gets under my skin. That one person who has no regard for me. That one person who hurt me so badly. If you only knew, Jesus, that one time, that one person, you would understand why I don’t forgive them.”

But if you’re waiting for me to give you a pass, if you’re waiting for me to soften the blow, to tell you everything’s alright if we don’t forgive one another in every circumstance, you’ll leave here disappointed.

Jesus is clear. If we are living in such a way that we are refusing to forgive the sins of all others... if we are in a situation, where we have had extraordinary grace shown to us by God, but instead of using our lives as opportunities to share that grace with others... then we are to expect on the Last Day, when we stand before God Himself, to hear those same words, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all the debt of your sin... should not you have had mercy on your fellow brother and sister in Christ when they sinned against you?” (cf. Matt. 6:14-15).

And I’ll be honest with you. It’s terrifying. It’s the weight of God’s Law crushing the scampering sinners that we are. And we have no way out. So, what are we to do? How can we be sure that we do not end up like the wicked servant, being handed over to the prison of hell, and to our torturers?

Jesus explains back in the parable. The analogy isn’t too hard to follow. The gracious king represents God, who forgave us, his servants, an insurmountable debt—the debt of our sin, our natural state of rebellion and rejection of God. No matter how hard we could have tried, or how long we could have worked at it, we *never* would have been able to make our sins right with God. The debt would never have been paid. Which leaves us with one outcome, being left as

slaves to sin and, at the end of time, being handed over to our torturers, the prison of hell, which we deserve.

But the king, God, had mercy. He heard our pleas, and sent His Son. And He didn't set up a payment plan for us. Jesus was the payment. Jesus's precious lifeblood shed on the cross, paid the debt for our sins, and for the sins of the whole world. And the King gives this to us for free, no strings attached. The heavy burden of the debt of sin was lifted off of us, so that we, for the first time, were free, free to live in the light of Jesus Christ, and the light of his Gospel.

But this is what the servant in the parable rejected. He rejected the joy and the bright light of life within the Gospel. He rejected the king's forgiveness when he didn't allow forgiveness to flow through him. Because when it came time for him to forgive another's debt, he now was a mirror for God, and instead of allowing the sweet rush of the Gospel grace that stems from God to reflect through us to others, he turned back to the Law, and turned back to the darkness that demands that satisfaction be made for the sins against us.

When we take ourselves out of the light of the Gospel, we are left only with the Law. And that Law, if we use it to demand satisfaction from others, is the same Law that demands that we are held accountable to God for the debt of our sin. That's how it works; we can't have it both ways. When someone sins against us, we respond with Gospel, not Law. We forgive, even though it may be the seventy-seventh, or even seventy-eighth time, because we know that in heaven, God is not counting our sins against us.

One we may ask, "What do I do, then, when I haven't been forgiving as I should? What will God do with me?" And the answer is, living in the light of the Gospel does not mean we're perfect at forgiving. This side of heaven, we are simultaneously saint and sinner, we still have our old sinful selves to contend with on a daily basis.

Now, it would be a mistake to use that as an excuse for why we aren't doing what we should. "Well, I'm a sinner, so it's alright if I don't forgive you." No, rather, it means that when we recognize we have sinned, we repent. We call sin what it is: evil. And our extraordinarily gracious King, when we confess our sins, is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (cf. 1 John 1:9).

And by the power of the Holy Spirit, we bear fruit in our lives in keeping with repentance. Which means we make right what we had done wrong, and that means working towards forgiving our brothers and our sisters.

There's a common objection that we can have, which is, "But I don't *feel* like I can forgive them." And this is not something to take lightly. Sometimes, people hurt us so badly, the wound is so deep, or the pain has been so frequent, that we cannot in our wildest imagination conceive of forgiveness.

And here, it's going to be helpful to make a distinction. There's a difference between *feeling like* forgiving, and *deciding* to forgive. We are called as Christians to *decide* to forgive one another, even when we don't *feel* like it. Our sinful nature compels us to want to hold on to the hurt someone else has caused us. We want to hang on that pain, hold that grudge, maybe even retaliate in some way. After all, they deserve it!

Forgiving them means *deciding* to release them from what they may deserve, and offering them what they don't deserve, which is the Gospel grace and forgiveness. It's what we saw in our Old Testament reading, when Joseph, who had every right to destroy his brothers after their father's death, answered their plea for mercy, and he said, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?" (Gen. 50:19). In a way, he *was* in the place of God. But not to exact revenge and

make them pay. Rather to show them grace, as God does. To forgive the unforgiveable. Isn't that what God has done with us?

Living in the light of the Gospel doesn't mean we'll always feel like forgiving. It doesn't mean we'll even be able to forget. Sometimes there's no such thing as "forgive and forget." And it doesn't mean that there might not be some healing that needs to take place once forgiveness is given.

But living in the light of the Gospel shows us that the God who satisfied the Law on our behalf by sending His Son Jesus, who paid all our debt, has made a decision to forgive us, not counting our sins against us (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:19). And as a result, He has invited us to extend the light of grace and forgiveness to others. Not perfectly, after all, we still daily need His forgiveness for our sins. But we share this Gospel grace joyfully, sharing with one another the great reality we have living in the extraordinary grace won for us by our King, Jesus Christ. In his name.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.