

**Parables of Jesus// Portraits of the Kingdom
Part Eight - the Unforgiving Servant**

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Matthew 18:21-35

As we have seen throughout our series, parables were meant to make people think. They are stories you can remember and take with you as you walk or do menial tasks and ponder the deeper meaning embedded in the story.

This parable teaches us how God expects his kingdom to be run in the area of forgiveness and unforgiveness. Forgiveness can be one of the harder concepts in Christianity to grasp.

Let's first appreciate how counter-cultural Jesus' parable was. The people listening to this parable when it was first told knew all about kingdoms. They were being oppressed by one as they listened to this story. They were keenly aware that kingdoms here on earth were all about conquering, and most often oppression, and subservience and expanding through violent power. Jesus' message was different. His kingdom was to be marked by radical and all-encompassing forgiveness.

I. Act One: Matthew 18: 23-27

In Act one of our story, we see a king who was sitting down to settle his accounts. The picture is of a just king that was simply calling for what was owed him. He discovered one of his servants owed a ridiculous amount of money - it was millions of dollars. More than anyone could pay in a lifetime. He, of course, couldn't pay the debt and the king could sell him and his wife and kids into slavery to repay the debt. The servant begs for patience with the equally ludicrous promise that he will pay it back. So, the master has pity on him, cancels the debt.

We could relate to the story by relating it to having our mortgage debt cancelled because we can't pay it but the example Jesus used was even more extreme than that.

Take Away #1. God Has Greater Capacity to Forgive You Than You Ever Thought Possible

Sometimes our view of God and his mercy is often very small. Jesus' portrayal of God is one of abundance, generosity and unimaginable forgiveness.

What is the debt?

In this parable, Jesus uses the metaphor of debt. Why does he do that? How can we owe God for things we've done wrong? On one level our modern-day English reflects this idea. When someone wrongs you, we say, "she owes me an apology." We have lost something in this hurtful exchange, and it needs to be paid for.

Definition of Sin: If you've been around Christian circles for awhile, you'll equate debt with sin. But what is sin? Doing something wrong? How when I do something wrong, does it equate to owing God something. For some of us, the definition of sin that we have picked up from culture is whenever I'm having too much fun and enjoying life – that is sin. Like super rich chocolate is sinfully delicious.

There are a few ways to define or describe what sin is.

1. **An archery term for missing the mark.** You are shooting at something, and you miss the bullseye. I can relate to that my intentions are often different than what I deliver.
2. **Sin is anything in thought, speech, or behavior which does not honor God or conform with his commands.**
3. **Sin could be described as placing my own wants and desires above God's wants and desires for me, for my neighbour, for the world.** The opposite of Your kingdom come – Let my kingdom rule. And when we do that, we will be stepping over the boundaries God sets for our interpersonal relationships – we will be crossing good boundaries that hurt others too. When people sin against us, they are crossing those good boundaries for relationships that God sets out and it causes hurt.
4. **Knowing to do good and not doing it.** And in James 4:17, sin isn't just what we do, say, and think that is dishonouring to God. It says, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

A broad summary could be that sin is taking matters into my own hands and trying to create my own happiness.

What to do with Our Sin Debt?

It doesn't surprise God that we have a backlog of sin debt that we don't know what to do with. All those things you've done wrong and don't know how to make right. All the ways we were aiming at something good and missed it – He knows the full weight and tally of it all. That's why the gospel is good news. Jesus came to free you from that debt. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us for all unrighteousness."

Jesus, the son of God, showcases God as merciful and invites us to experience his love and acceptance. Jesus came to personally deal with all that stuff and take it on himself. He pays our debt for us. This text tells us that God is in the business of releasing from debt – of freeing us, just like he frees this servant for what he could not pay.

God is a loving parent and knows his kids are going to mess up. He just wants you to come clean with it. He can handle anything you have done wrong. If you are holding the horrible feeling of your own sins and failings - be assured that God has unlimited capacity to forgive anything you have said or done. He is waiting for you to approach him.

Part of the beauty of this is sometimes the hardest person to forgive is ourselves. We knew better and know we messed up. God is saying – bring that too. Lay that down. I've paid for that.

II. Act Two: Matthew 18:28-30

Jesus gave us such a beautiful picture in the first Act of a God willing and able to forgive but we see our own tendency to want to want to take justice in our own hands - the guy in Jesus' parable *literally* takes it into his own hands as he violently apprehends this man.

I can read this parable and think – what a lousy person to turn around and demand from his fellow servant when he had just been forgiven. AND we also are a people that want people to pay when they do something wrong. People shouldn't just be able to get away with things.

Reason for the Parable

Let's back up and look for a moment at the reason Jesus told this parable. The opening words of the story are "Therefore..." We can get into a lot of dangerous theological waters when we pull out one piece of scripture and don't look at the context it is set in. So, lets back up a bit.

In this chapter, Peter has just sat through a message about what to do when people wrong you. He quickly chimes up "Lord, how many times should I forgive? 7 times?"

Peter would have known the common Jewish teaching law that if you forgave 3 times, you have done your due diligence. Three times allows us to be generous in forgiveness and it gives the person a chance to change. Peter probably thought he was being magnanimous here in over doubling that number to 7. Jesus's response was not 7 times but 77 times - some versions say 70 x7

Unlimited forgiveness? The idea of forgiveness without boundaries doesn't seem right and would certainly result in relational chaos. Is that really the Christian way?

Take note in the passage right before this, Jesus gives instructions on what to do if your brother sins. Some clarity can be found in looking at what forgiveness *is* and *is not*.

What Forgiveness *Is Not*

1. **Forgiveness *is not* forgetting and letting it happen over and over.** We are clearly given instructions on what to do if someone sins. There is no precedent in scripture for letting someone sin against you or for sinning against someone and not asking for forgiveness. The scriptures do not condone physical, emotional, or verbal abuse. Ever.
2. **Forgiveness *does not* automatically repair the relationship.**
If trust has been broken, it takes consistency over time, plenty of empathy and tons of repair work. If someone is holding something against you, it may mean you have not humbled yourself enough to truly hear how what you did affected them – without defensiveness or minimizing what they went through. Yes, we need to be a people that offer forgiveness, but we also need to be a people that have empathy, and care and the ability to listen deeply.

3. **Forgiveness is not a magic pill that makes everything better.**

Feelings will linger and sometimes we wonder if we've actually forgiven someone if we still feel angry at times, or if it feels painful to think about. That's not the test of if we've forgiven. **The test is: am I trying to hurt the other person? Do I feel like they still owe me something?** Note in the parable Jesus told, the man began to choke his fellow servant, demanding he repay him.

What is Forgiveness?

This parable teaches, the test is: Am I trying to hurt the other person?

Forgiveness is the costly *decision* not to hurt the other person. It's a *decision* to seek their good, not their ill. It's a *decision* to "let them go," to not make them pay.

In the second Act of the parable, Jesus gives a picture of forgiveness that modern psychology has yet to improve on: "*Forgiving others means letting go of resentment and giving up any claim to be compensated for the hurt or loss we have suffered.*" (Psychology Today...)

How do we do that? How do we just let it go. The name for God's chosen people in the Old Testament is Israel. Israel means "Wrestles with God"; And this is our natural state as Christians - the now chosen people of God. We are wrestlers with God. And this can be our reality – you may need to wrestle with forgiveness.

77 times - Not a Metric but a Capacity

When Jesus said you need to forgive 77 times or 70x7, he is **not speaking to the metric** of forgiveness. Jesus is saying that through Jesus **you have been given unlimited capacity to forgive**. There is no number attached. When people hurt you, when someone does you wrong, with the Holy spirit indwelling your life, you have unlimited capacity to just let that stuff go. And that is good news – it is not up to me to conjure up good feelings or get better at stuffing down the hurt – I just need to access the capacity to forgive that was given to me in Jesus.

The good news of Christ is the unlimited capacity to forgive was a bonus package with your salvation. When you said "Jesus, I give you, my life." He gave you unlimited capacity to forgive. If it's been **poured into your life, you need to pour it out for others**. That's Jesus' main point in this parable.

Takeaway #2: God Has Placed in You an Unlimited Capacity to Forgive

III. Act Three – Matthew 18: 31-35

Part 3 teaches us that unforgiveness affects the community. Note the wording: his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were "deeply grieved" and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.

Deeply grieved. When someone in our community hurts someone else the hurt ripples out. Jesus is teaching hanging on to things not only affects you – it affects the community. If there is unforgiveness between us. It will affect us, and it will limit our capacity.

The final part of this parable is really sobering. “And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother from your heart.”

These are some heavy words. Jesus makes it clear that when you have been forgiven, not extending that forgiveness to others is serious business that will not be overlooked in his kingdom. Notice, the king wasn’t angry over the debt; the king was angry because the servant didn’t show mercy when he had been shown mercy. If it’s been poured into your life, you need to pour it out for others.

Summary:

1. God has unlimited capacity to forgive you.
2. Through the work of Jesus, you have been given unlimited capacity to forgive others.
3. If you refuse to forgive you are not only hurting yourself, but you are also causing a disruption in the community.

Jesus taught us to pray, “Let your kingdom come, let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” What is your part in making that a reality?