Matthew 18: 21-35 (ESV): The Unforgiving Servant

**Main point:** Forgive others because we ourselves have been forgiven an impossible debt.

**Open with a short prayer, inviting God to teach us.**

**Background:** Jesus is teaching his disciples about sin and temptation.

**Focus of the study:**

21 Then Peter came up and said to Jesus, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” 22 Jesus said to Peter, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

23 “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When the king began to settle, one servant was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 25 And since this servant could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

28 But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until his fellow servant should pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.

32 Then his master summoned the first servant and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ 34 And in anger his master delivered the servant to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

**Questions:**

1. **Up to this point in the story, Jesus has been teaching about the importance of reconciliation. What does Peter ask Jesus?**
   a. v. 21: “How many times should I forgive my brother? As many as seven?”
   b. Jewish tradition valued forgiveness, but many teachers at that time advocated forgiveness as a RULE: specifically, up to three times per year for deliberate sin.

2. **So how might Peter be feeling about “seven” times?**
   a. Super generous, above and beyond

3. **Why would someone want to find out about the limit of forgiveness?**
   a. We think there must be a limit – we can’t keep forgiving ... can we?
   b. We may want to be justified in holding onto anger and bitterness.
c. We want to know the RULE: what do I have to do to be right? (Pride, self-righteous)

4. And how does Jesus answer?
   a. v. 22: “Not seven, but seventy-seven”: turning the OT revenge ethos (Genesis 4:24) on its head
   b. Is Jesus being literal? Actually count someone’s sins, up to 77?
      i. No; using exaggeration to make a point. True forgiveness doesn’t keep a tally.

5. Culturally, I wonder how the disciples felt about this extreme posture of forgiveness?
   a. Amazed, stunned!

6. So Jesus tells this story. What happens at the beginning?
   a. A king is settling accounts, collecting money for debts he is owed.
   b. One servant owes ten thousand talents. How much is that?
      i. A talent = sometimes translated a bag of gold. A talent was considered to be worth about 20 years’ labor: So how much does this guy owe?? 200,000 YEARS OF WAGES, up to 100 million denarii
      ii. What is the likelihood that this guy will be able to pay that debt??
         1. Zero. It is an absurd, impossible amount.
      iii. What is the penalty??
         1. Sell everything, including his family, to pay it off.

7. What does the servant do?
   a. v. 26: Begs to be given a little more time: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything!” Huh, is that realistic??

8. What does the master do?
   a. v. 27: Has pity on the servant and forgives the debt – wipes it away. The servant is free.
   b. How do you think the servant must have felt at that point?

9. But … what happens immediately afterwards? Who does the servant run into?
   a. A fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii.
      i. What is a denari? ONE DAY’S WAGE
      ii. So this second servant owes what? 100 days of wages. What is that by comparison to what the first servant owed to the king??
      iii. But the first servant does what?
         1. Seizes his fellow servant, chokes him, demands payment.
      iv. What has the first servant forgotten??
         1. The grace extended to him just a few minutes ago!

10. What does the second servant say? Does this sound familiar?
    a. v. 29: Exactly the same words that the first servant used with the king: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.”

11. But what does the first servant do? What happens?
    a. v. 30: Refuses to have pity; throws the guy in prison.
    b. v. 31: Fellow servants, distressed, report him to the master.

12. And what does the master say?
    a. v. 32-33: “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me? Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”

13. What is Jesus’ point?
    a. We need to forgive our brothers and sisters, or we will not be forgiven.
    b. A hardened heart that has no compassion cannot truly receive compassion.

14. So how often should we forgive the truly repentant? Why?
    a. Unlimited, because we ourselves have been forgiven an impossible debt.
b. “The point Jesus is making is about having a heart that forgives, a heart that is not counting, a heart that does not keep a record of wrong, a heart that has nothing to do with keeping rules, but expresses love.”

- Ask for prayer requests for today.
- Close in prayer, naming people and needs listed.
- End with a song, e.g., first verse of Amazing Grace

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1 http://www.contemporarychristianity.net/econiroot/LionLamb/027/forgive.html
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