

## 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:

<sup>21</sup> 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?” <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to Peter, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When the king began to settle, one servant was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

<sup>28</sup> 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.’ <sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him in prison until his fellow servant should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> 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.

<sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered the servant to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup> 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.”<sup>1</sup>
- 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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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.contemporarychristianity.net/econiroot/LionLamb/027/forgive.html>  
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