

# Becoming a Forgiving Community

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Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at [ChristChurchEastBay.org](http://ChristChurchEastBay.org). Today's reading is from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 18, verses 21 through 35.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.

Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him.

[ 1 : 15 ] Be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay back everything. The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.

He grabbed him and began to choke him. Pay back what you owe me, he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. You wicked servant, he said. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you?

In anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you, unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

[ 2 : 25 ] Good morning, Christ Church. I want to congratulate you all for making it here today. Today, we're in about 40 to 60 minutes. There are going to be other people gathering. If you could just make some room for them as they stumble in.

We've made the coffee extra strong today at our community time. And, you know, as much as I dislike daylight savings time in the spring, I really love March Madness.

So you should just know that for the next month. I'm going to be on sort of an emotional roller coaster. This morning, I'm on a high, so go Duke. But as we get back into the Gospel of Matthew this morning, Matthew chapter 18, Jesus' sermon on the church, his sermon on church community, we remember kind of where we've been, which is that in Matthew 16, Jesus gave this incredible promise.

He said, I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And we've been looking now in Matthew 18 these past few weeks where Jesus is now outlining his blueprint for the church and how he wants to build his church according to his design, his architectural plans.

And I actually want to invite you, if you would, to take one of the Bibles in your pew. You can open that up, and you can turn to page 799.

[ 3 : 52 ] Page 799, that's where we are today in Matthew chapter 18. And you'll notice there at the top of that chapter in verse 1, the disciples asked this question of Jesus.

And the question is this, who is the greatest in the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus has been giving this very long and deep answer to that question.

He says, well, this is how you're to live as the family of God. This is how you're to relate to one another as children of the living God. Members of my disciple community, citizens of the kingdom of God, I want you to be like this and act like this and think like this.

And so he launches in in verse 2, and it says that he called a little child whom he placed among them. And from verses 3 to 6, he defines greatness in the kingdom of God as someone who has true humility like a small child.

And he says it's with that humble attitude that you look out for the best interests of the other disciples in this community and you welcome them and you serve them in true humility. And then in verses 7 through 11, Jesus says, I want you to be careful not to cause any of the other disciples here to stumble in their walk of faith.

[ 5 : 12 ] I want you to not cause anybody else to trip up as they're trying to live the Christian life. You used to think about what was good for you, but now that you're part of my family, you don't just think about your own individual needs, you think about what's good for the whole group.

And so I want you to deal very seriously, Jesus says, with your sin, the sin that's causing you to stumble, and maybe the sin that's causing other people to stumble. And then in verses 12 to 14, Jesus reminds us that God is like a shepherd who cares for his one sheep that wanders away.

And he so values that sheep that he reaches out to them in retrieving and reclaiming love to bring them back. And Jesus says, I want you to have the heart of your father.

That you would so value your brothers and sisters that if you see them drifting off and slipping away from their commitment to Jesus Christ, that you would reach out to them and reclaim them to the fold of faith and bring them back to the sheep pen of the church.

And then Jesus says in verses 15 to 20, what should you do when a brother or sister in the family of God has personally wronged you and wounded you?

[ 6 : 25 ] He says, you should seek their spiritual best interest. And you should do that by going to them and gently pointing out their fault, pointing out their sin so that they can repent and receive the mercy of God, and you can be reconciled.

And Jesus says, that's my formula. That's my process for preserving the unity and purity and peace of the church. And Jesus gets to the end of this whole section and he says, now does that answer your question about who's the greatest in the kingdom of God?

The person who's the greatest does all of these things in my disciple community. Now Peter has been listening very closely to Jesus and he says, well, Lord, that's hard.

I mean, do you know this disciple community? I mean, have you met so-and-so? They're hard to love. And so it provokes this question in verse 21 where Peter came to Jesus and he asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or my sister who sins against me?

Up to seven times. Now Peter's virtue is that he wants to frequently forgive his fellow disciples. And that's a good thing. Sevenfold forgiveness is much better than zero forgiveness.

[ 7 : 48 ] But the problem with Peter's formula is that it has limits. And that it only goes up to seven times. And so Jesus says to him in verse 22, he says, I tell you, Peter, not seven times, but 77 times.

There may even be a note in your Bible that says, actually, 70 times seven times. 490 times. I want you to practice such unlimited, unceasing forgiveness that you never give up on your fellow disciples.

And then Jesus tells a story. And in this story, Jesus wants us to know that zillion-dollar forgiveness requires zillion-dollar mercy lest we presume upon God.

That's the point of Jesus' story that he's going to unfold for us is that zillion-dollar forgiveness requires zillion-dollar mercy lest we presume upon God.

And he launches into this little story about the zillion-dollar forgiveness of this king. You know, Peter, I think, is in some ways trying to impress the Lord with his gracious generosity and says, Lord, how about sevenfold forgiveness?

[ 9 : 06 ] That's pretty amazing, isn't it? And Jesus says, no, Peter, 70 times seven. If only you realized, Peter, how much God has forgiven you, you would actually stop counting how many times you have to forgive other people.

And so Jesus says in verse 23, Now, this is the king's administrator.

He's got some responsibility, big-time responsibility in this kingdom. And for whatever reason, we're not told he's massively mismanaged his life and mismanaged accounts so that he owes this king 10,000 talents or 6 million denarii, which in that economy in the ancient world were the wages of a day labor that amounted to 200,000 years worth of labor.

Not 200 years or 2,000 years, 200,000 years worth of labor. This guy's broke. He's insolvent. He's bankrupt.

Worse than that, he's in debt. Zillions of dollars beyond calculation. He could never have enough to repay the king. Verse 25, Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

[ 10 : 34 ] This is the just consequence for the injustice of defrauding the king. Right? He's condemned to servitude and to the loss of all of his freedoms.

And then in verse 26, The servant, realizing this, fell on his knees before him. Be patient with me, he begged. And I will pay back everything. Now this poor guy doesn't understand his true condition before the king.

He doesn't understand his total inability. He would need at least 200,000 years to pay off this debt. And he says to himself and to the king, I can do that.

I can do that. Now I wonder how you think about your spiritual and moral condition before God today. I wonder if you realize how desperate things actually are.

Or if you think to yourself like this guy, I can pay back everything. If I just have enough time and enough creativity, I can repay the debts that I owe to God.

[ 11 : 39 ] And I can work my way back into a right relationship with this king. And I can build up enough spiritual credits by coming to church on daylight savings time.

And I can build up enough moral merits by loving this annoying person that I'm with today. And, you know, I can balance out the ledger of this king.

And Jesus in the story is telling us that no, your only hope is not in yourself and what you can do. Your only hope is in this king and the grace that he gives.

And so he says in verse 27, Now that's a really bad translation of a wonderful Greek word.

We've talked about *splanchnizomai*. And *splanchnizomai* is what the good Samaritan feels for the man who's lying in the ditch. *Splanchnizomai* is what the father feels for his prodigal son who's covered in filth.

[ 12 : 40 ] *Splanchnizomai* is what Jesus is feeling for the crowds who are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. It says that this king, he's struck in his heart with compassion.

With a visceral love in the depth of his being. And that is what causes him to give immeasurably beyond what this man asks.

Right? He doesn't extend the terms of his debt. He doesn't reduce the cost of his debt. It says that he just cancels his debt entirely.

The total remission of a crushing burden. A gracious zillion dollar forgiveness. And he says to the man, he says of the man, he says, let him go.

And he just sends him back as a free man to his family and to his home. And this guy was dead. And now he's alive again. He's back in his new life and new relationships and a new future and a new outlook.

[ 13 : 47 ] And you'd think he'd be extremely happy. Right? You'd think he'd go home and throw a party with his friends. And we'll come back to that in a minute. But Jesus is teaching us something extremely important here.

And that is exactly where he begins the Sermon on the Mount. Where he opens with those words, blessed are the poor in spirit. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God is full of people who are spiritually poor. People who have mismanaged their lives. They've squandered their gifts.

They've ruined their potential. And they've mounted up all around them a massive pile of debt. Maybe they've loved themselves more than they love this king.

Maybe they've impoverished themselves spiritually and bankrupted themselves morally. And they've just racked up this crushing zillion dollar debt that they're totally unable to pay.

[ 14 : 46 ] But Jesus says, if that's you, take heart. Because this king's heart burns with compassion for you. And he leverages his authority to release you from that debt.

And he exercises his power to free you from your bondage. And takes that burden of your debt off of you and onto himself.

And he forgives that debt at a staggering cost to himself. Now, Jesus doesn't tell us in this story how he does that. But this points us to the climax of the gospel.

All four gospels where the son of this king is hanging on a cross. And there he's absorbing your zillion dollar, 200,000 year debt into his body and into his soul.

And he's doing that not just for one person. But for every person who would bring their debt to him and trust in him. That's an enormous load that Jesus has on his shoulders on the cross.

[ 15 : 52 ] And do you know what he says there? Do you know what he says on his cross? His final words are to tell us die. To tell us die. And that means it is finished or it is accomplished.

But that's the word that you would write on a bill in the ancient world to say paid in full. See, on Good Friday, Jesus is not just raising our debt ceiling.

He's obliterating it entirely. Jesus isn't just canceling our debt. He's paying it himself. And Jesus is causing your account, your ledger before the king to read paid in full.

And some of you kids have recently learned from Pastor Andrew that grace, G-R-A-C-E, stands for God's riches at Christ's expense. And what this king does for this man, Jesus does for us, he says, let him go.

Let them go. Forgiven. Set free. Raised up to new life. Now, if that's true, shouldn't we be dancing this morning? I mean, I know some of you are Presbyterians, but we, shouldn't we be, shouldn't we be hugging each other this morning?

[ 17 : 14 ] Should not we be weeping with joy if this is true? If you're exploring Christianity today, I want to encourage you, if you've been here for a while, to take a little step of faith today and to believe that Jesus lived the life that you should have lived and that he died the death you deserve to die.

And he did all that so he could write in the king's ledger next to your name, paid in full. And if you even want to believe that, I just want to invite you to silently pray even now, God, I want to believe it.

God, give me the ability to trust in the finished work of Christ on my behalf. And if you're a Christian here today who's allowed this truth just to live in your head, but not in your heart, maybe you've been ignoring it and neglecting it, and you've let it become this cold, dim, barely flickering ember in your heart, I want to invite you to simply pray right now, Lord, revive me.

Lord, let your compassion and your infinite mercy and your immeasurable grace and your astonishing zillion-dollar forgiveness burn white hot in my heart again.

Jesus wants us to get really clear about what this zillion-dollar forgiveness of the king is all about. But he says this zillion-dollar forgiveness requires zillion-dollar mercy.

[ 18 : 51 ] Zillion-dollar forgiveness requires zillion-dollar mercy. Now, how do I know God's love is operative in my life? How is the forgiveness of God somehow bearing fruit in my relationships?

And remember, Peter's question is, Lord, how many times do I need to forgive my brothers and my sisters here in this disciple community? And remember, this is Jesus' sermon on church relationships.

This is a sermon on congregational ethics. And what he's telling us in this story is that we know God's love is operative and that his forgiveness is bearing fruit in us when we forgive our fellow servants of the king.

That this zillion-dollar forgiveness from the king is producing in us a zillion-dollar transformation of heart that's growing in us humility and patience and graciousness and charity and liberality so that the king's compassion is what you and I are exercising toward our brothers and sisters in the community of disciples.

Now, I want you to just look around you this morning. And I want you to, you can look left and right. I give you permission. You can look behind you, in front of you. I want you to just find two or three people who are difficult to love.

[ 20 : 14 ] Okay, don't look too long. Don't look too long. And I noticed a lot of you are looking at me, which I totally get it. But I want you to see how this man who's just been forgiven acts toward his fellow servant of the king.

Because you would expect him to be jubilant, right? You'd expect him to have this incredible change of heart. But what does he do? It says in verse 28, when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 silver coins.

Now, he's no longer in debt, but he's still broke. And he's still got to keep his family afloat. And so he's looking for some quick cash. So he remembers this guy who owes him 100 denarii, which is basically four months' worth of wages.

That's not an insignificant sum. I mean, take your monthly salary, multiply it times four. Wouldn't you want that back? Four months' salary. But compare four months of wages with 200,000 years' worth of wages.

And what does he do with this man? It says he grabbed him and began to choke him. And he demanded, pay back what you owe me.

[ 21 : 28 ] Any of you ever want to do that? I mean, doesn't it just feel so good to even think about it? Just to reach out your hand and to grab that person's throat? Some of you haven't actually lived in Christian community.

If you don't want to do this, to grab that person's throat and to begin to choke them and to say, you owe me. You did me wrong and you owe me.

Doesn't that make you feel so powerful? So in control? The problem is, how can this forgiven debtor, who's experienced the king's mercy, be so impatient, so aggressive, so harsh, so critical, so contemptuous, so vicious toward his brother?

I mean, where is this spirit? Where is this unmerciful attitude of, you owe me, even coming from? Verse 29, it says, His fellow servant fell on his knees and begged him, Be patient with me and I will pay you back.

Shouldn't this man hear and see himself in his debtor? Because these are the exact words of his recent plea to the king. His debt to the king was incomparably, immeasurably greater than anyone's debt could ever come close to being for him.

[ 22 : 53 ] And yet he's disregarding that experience and that relationship with his gracious king and he's acting as if he'd never been forgiven and never been set free.

Verse 30, it says, He refused and instead he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. How could this guy be so indifferent, so cold, so callous, so hard-hearted, so mean-spirited?

Now this is where I pause and I just say, Man, Jesus is a brilliant storyteller, isn't he? Because he pulls you in to feel disgust and hatred for this guy.

And then when he gets you like in his trap and he gets you all the way close to himself, he kind of holds up the mirror and he says, It's you. And you realize he's been talking about you the whole time.

Each of us here has somebody who owes us today. People who've come to your relational bank account, they've come to your ATM, and they've made withdrawal after withdrawal after withdrawal.

[ 24 : 00 ] They've created a deficit. Maybe you've got four months worth of debt that they need to pay you back. Maybe it's a Christian brother or sister in the broader church.

Or maybe it's even somebody here in this disciple community, a friend, a member of your community group, a parent-child relationship today, a husband-wife relationship today, a mentor or a leader, where you may be thinking today like, Man, this person just hasn't invested in the relationship as much as I hoped that they would.

Or there's times when you felt, Man, I wish that they had welcomed me or seen me or heard me or honored me or thanked me in some particular way. Or maybe there's times when you needed your church family and you needed people to pray for you and serve you and encourage you, and they just failed to come through in your time of need.

Maybe there were times where you needed somebody to call you or hug you or listen to you or help you or comfort you or bear your burdens, but none of those ever happened.

And maybe there were times where you needed somebody to give you some godly counsel or truthful accountability or some courageous challenge for you to deny yourself or to sacrifice yourself, and that person just shortchanged you or neglected you or ignored you.

[ 25 : 25 ] And perhaps there's fellow servants of the king who just said things and done things that are just not in line with Jesus Christ and his gospel, and they've wounded you and they've hurt you.

If you've been around church for any amount of time, that's happened to you. Your relational balance sheet is in the red. Your relational ledger is full of names of fellow servants who owe you.

And isn't there just a part of you that wants to grab your fellow disciple, your brother and sister that you love in Christ, and say, give it back? That's called your sinful nature.

That's called your old self. That's called your passion. That's called your flesh. It's called all kind of things in the New Testament, and it's there. And Jesus, what is he insisting that his disciples do instead?

He says, don't make them pay their debt. You pay their debt. You bear the cost, a great personal sacrifice to yourself, and put no limits on how much it's going to cost you or how willing you are to pay to absorb and forgive this debt.

[ 26 : 40 ] Because remember that the king had compassion on you, and he canceled your debt, and he let you go. And so now you are to do the same with the fellow servants of your king.

Is there anybody you need to let go of today? Anybody you got a hold of that you just need to release? Remember the lavish cost that God paid to forgive you compared to the relatively small cost that it takes to forgive one another.

And think about what Jesus did when he was wronged and when he was wounded by his own people. I mean, he had his closest disciples who betrayed him, denied him, and abandoned him.

And Jesus' brothers and sisters all around him, they failed him. His disciple community, they completely disappointed him. The very people that should have loved him and worshipped him, they rejected him and they crucified him.

But what does he do? What did he do? As the nails were driven into his hands and his feet, and as he was gasping for breath and slowly suffocating, he summoned up, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he summoned up the ability to pray, Father, forgive them.

[ 28 : 05 ] Father, forgive them. He didn't choke us. He didn't demand us. No, he prayed for us, and he released us from our debts and prompted by gratitude for this lavish, extravagant love.

We who are forgiven sinners ought to commit ourselves to costly, lavish, extravagant mercy toward those who sin against us and to pray for them, Father, forgive them. Father, forgive them.

That's actually the mark. This merciful heart is the mark that you have genuinely received God's saving grace if you live this way and love this way with your fellow brothers and sisters.

In the disciple community. Jesus is saying zillion dollar forgiveness requires zillion dollar mercy. And one last thought, he says, lest we presume upon God.

Lest we presume upon God. And here's where the story gets super serious. It says in verse 32 that these fellow servants held this guy accountable. And then in 32, the master called the servant in, you wicked servant, he said, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.

[ 29 : 17 ] Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? And in anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart. See, this once forgiven servant who refuses to forgive is finally unforgiven.

And the freedom he goes out and abuses, he ultimately loses in the end. And Jesus is telling us that a healthy appreciation for the king's mercy leads to merciful treatment of others, but a cavalier disregard for the king's justice leads to the unjust treatment of others.

And Jesus' doctrine here might surprise us, it might even embarrass us because he's saying what the whole Bible says. He says, this king is both a merciful forgiver and a just judge.

And this guy gets thrown into prison, he gets tortured, and we say, gosh, that seems harsh. That seems judgmental. That seems cruel. And the secular doctrine of no judgment at first seems a lot better, doesn't it?

[ 30 : 29 ] Except when you realize that if there is no judge in heaven and there is no judgment day to come, that means we're all the judges, and today is judgment day, and that is truly terrifying because we will never get justice and we will never get peace.

And so Jesus preaches this doctrine of judgment to wake up his comfortable, complacent disciples. This one who teaches more about judgment than the prophets and apostles combined is the same one who took our judgment upon himself on the cross to save us, is the same one who speaks judgment not to unbelieving pagans but to believing disciples who are way too sure of themselves and think that they can follow Jesus without forgiving like Jesus.

And Jesus says, no. It's like a surgeon who takes a knife and cuts on your body to remove the cancer.

Is that a cruel surgeon or is that a very kind surgeon? And Jesus says, I'm here to do some preventative medicine and give you the spiritual tasks that will build up my church family, my church community.

And he says, first of all, I want you to fix your eyes on the king's merciful forgiveness on his cross in the past. And secondly, I want you to fix your eyes on the king's just judgment on his throne in the future.

[ 32 : 04 ] And thirdly, I want you to fix your eyes on your brothers and sisters here in this disciple community in the present and with the compassion that comes from the heart of the king. I want you to forgive them and I want you to let them go.

Now, I don't know if I'm just preaching to myself today or if I'm preaching to any of you, but God's calling us to live out this zillion dollar mercy in our own congregation.

He's calling us to live out this zillion dollar mercy in our own families. He's calling us to live out this zillion dollar mercy with every person you see here today. He says in his sermon on the mount, blessed are the merciful because they will be shown mercy.

And that's the new kind of family he wants to build. A family that forgives our brothers and sisters from the heart, not just seven times, but 77 times, even 70 times, seven times.

May God enable us to do this in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.  
Amen.