

# Matthew 18:21–34

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 29 October 2023

Preacher: David Helm

[ 0 : 00 ] Our scripture reading today is Matthew 18, verses 21 to 35. Again, the scripture text is Matthew 18, verses 21 to 35.

Then Peter came up and said to him, Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him?

As many as seven times? And Jesus said to him, I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold with his wife and children and all that he had in payment to be made.

So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything. And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

[ 1 : 19 ] But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii and seized him. And he began to choke him, saying, pay me what you owe.

So this fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, saying, have patience with me, and I will pay you. He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

And should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I have had mercy on you? And in anger, his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt.

So also my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

[ 2 : 24 ] You may be seated. Well, good morning, and thank you, Julian, and thank you to all of our youth group for leading us in worship.

What a wonderful thing to be led by various aspects of our church family. I want to title my sermon this morning, Forgiving Those Who Fail Us.

Forgiving Those Who Fail Us. To put it forcefully, followers of Jesus are ready and willing to forgive, comma, again.

Followers of Jesus are ready and willing to forgive, again. When I look at a text like this, it's nice to have a sense of how it moves.

And this one moves very easily. There's a principle stated by Jesus, and then there's a parable that represents that principle.

[ 3 : 44 ] There's a statement that's made, and then there's a story that's told. It's interesting that he tells the story because statements are good and of themselves.

Principles are clear when known, but a parable or a story can fill out not just what is to be done, but why it's done.

The story has the advantage of pulling us in on a variety of ways beyond simple duty. The principle is there.

Peter asks, how often do I have to forgive someone? And Jesus says, well, not seven times, but 77 times. Principle stated.

Parable told. Statement made. Story to reinforce. What you're to do. Christians are ready to forgive others again, but the story has the advantage of motivating you and explaining why to do it in the first place.

[ 4 : 58 ] I love those opening words of Peter. Lord, how often? How often? It makes me think of the phrase, how many times? How many times usually comes from somebody's voice in a moment of exasperation?

And it's not always related to simply the forgiveness of sins. It might be a parent saying to a child, how many times am I going to have to remind you to make your bed?

It might be one friend saying to another, how many times are we actually going to have to deal with this issue again? How often, Peter asks, do I have to forgive someone?

It's a reasonable question, isn't it? For those who are following Christ, how often should we actually be extending forgiveness?

And notice what he says, is seven times good enough? I think that's reasonable. Peter's comment is an expansive use of forgiveness.

[ 6 : 13 ] The Jewish rabbinic literature would indicate that you were to forgive somebody three times. You know, that's probably where we get, you know, three strikes and you're out, three chances.

I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you. I'll forgive you a third time. Peter says, what about seven? He doubles up on it and adds one. This is an expansive use of forgiveness. And let's be honest. At some point, don't people need to be held accountable for their actions. Accountability for actions taken is necessary for life.

Certainly there ought to be some limit. Jesus' response is surprising. It's, no, not three, not doubling up plus one.

[ 7 : 18 ] Take a run at 77 times. I think what he's really saying is that you don't get freedom to not forgive them on the 78th time. I think he's using a figure of speech to say, there's really no limit to the times you ought to be willing and ready to forgive someone when they are truly repentant.

The Christian puts no limits on how often they will forgive someone who is truly repentant. No limits. The fact that it comes in the form of a story then is interesting to me. The advantage of the story I've already indicated.

Why would we be that kind of people? Maybe the story will let us in on why. But the form of this particular story is significant and I don't want it lost on you.

So I'm going to spend a couple of moments providing the form of the story. It comes in the form of a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

[ 8 : 37 ] That's not happenstance. There's significance to the fact that Jesus tells a story about a king coming to settle accounts with servants.

Have you ever watched a Netflix series and gotten two-thirds in and felt like you needed a recap and you've gone online and hit the thing about give me a recap up to season 7 or season 18 in this sense and let me know what's been going on because you need to kind of get reacquainted with the plot line of the whole thing.

Well, most times that I've done those things the recap is very boring and the person speaks really clearly and without any emotion at all but you get caught up.

You need to get caught up on why king and servant are significant. Let me just give you a quick recap on the significance of this. The whole book of Matthew reads as like this massive mini-series and right now you might be wondering where are we?

Did you know in chapter 1 it opened with the exciting claim that Jesus had come as a king? The phrase, the opening line that he was the son of David. David was the idealized king.

[ 9 : 53 ] The opening line of this mini-series was let me tell you about Jesus who comes as a king. That is the heir to the throne. And it follows it with he's the son of Abraham.

Abraham was going to be the promised hope of the nations. And so Matthew by way of its series is on Jesus as king. Hope of the nations.

No wonder then episode 2 the magi come and say where is he who was born king of the Jews? Or John the Baptist in the third episode arrives on the scene and says repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Or the evil one comes in episode 4 and says well let me tempt you. If you are the son of God then do these things. And he's demonstrating his kingship until Jesus himself begins to speak in chapters 5 through 7.

And his opening line is on those who would receive the kingdom. Countered then with miracles that make manifest or validate the message that I am king says Jesus.

[11:01] The paralytic I've come to forgive sins. John the Baptist then wondering later in an episode are you the one we're supposed to look for? Are you the coming king that forgives sins? And Jesus says will you go back and tell John these things? Only followed by parables. Chapter 13. Seven of them on what the kingdom is like. And finally Peter's going to confess you're the king. You're the Christ. And now here we are. A story on kingship and servitude. It's as though the writer wants you to know Jesus is coming again and he will settle accounts with all who professed his name.

That's an enormously significant point. The form of the story is significant. This is what it looks like according to Jesus to follow him as king.

It will mean that we are willing to forgive people again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again.

[12:18] Why? Why? 23 to 27. The first reason reason we are willing to forgive because the forgiveness that we receive from God came without any limits.

That's the form of the story. Therefore, verse 23, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants when he began to settle. One was brought to him who owed him 10,000 talents and since he 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 so the servant fell on his knees imploring him have patience with me I'll pay you everything and out of pity for him the master of the servant released him and forgave him the debt.

Notice he didn't say yeah I'll give you more time you get it done on your own. He released him he forgave him the debt. We forgive in story form because the forgiveness we have received from God was beyond any limits.

Let's get this clear. 10,000 talents was a sum too big for anyone to pay. There's some debate among scholars today on what would be the present day equivalent of a talent but we do know that a talent in the ancient Roman world was the largest of all denominations.

A talent. It'd be like the Ben Franklin today. It'd be like a hundred dollar bill. It's the largest of the denominations. We also know that a talent was in a sense the largest measurement of unit unit of measurement.

[14:00] So if you had if you had 10,000 talents of silver and today each talent of silver would approximate 208 dollars then the debt even on those simple terms is a multi-million dollar debt.

it was a large sum and he uses this to indicate the extent or the limitless nature of the forgiveness that this king was willing to afford the servant.

See you and I when we stand before God and we come to settle accounts and we will stand before him there will be a day of judgment where we will be responsible for all the things we did in the flesh both the good and the bad and there's some notion in the scriptures that our life is going to be on display for ourselves to see but perhaps for everyone to see and we're going to give an account for all the deeds done in the flesh and according to Jesus the heart motivation behind the deeds done in the flesh that's going to be the most terrifying moment for all of us in life even for the Christian who will pass through that day of judgment that refining fire that burning up of all wood hay and stubble so that only that which is pure remains in which some will be saved as though by fire whereas others will come through with multiple strengthening things that they'll carry into eternity because they follow Jesus well and rightly when he comes to settle accounts and we stand before him if we were to number our sins according to the units of measurement before us the debt would be unpayable we would now or then say have pity on me we wouldn't say according to the story I'm going to pay you everything no we will say I'm unable I'm unable to pay can't do it I don't have I don't have I got this credit card with that limit I got that credit card with that limit I got that credit card with that limit and if I limit it out all of them I'm not even close Jesus says by way of principle forgive him without limit by way of motivation salvation because you have been forgiven by God beyond all limits that's why there's a writer by the name of Charles Hodge who I read a long time ago and he references the dilemma of us considering our sins by number listen to what he says our guilt is great because our sins are exceedingly numerous it's not merely outward acts of unkindness and dishonesty which we are chargeable or habitual and characteristic state of mind is continually evil in the sight of God this is what he says our lives are not to be numbered by the conscious violations of duty they are as numerous as the moments of our existence did you ever consider that that who we are when we stand before a holy

God and we are trying to number the sins they are as numerous as the moments of our existence because never have I fully loved God never has my heart really been entirely pure never are my actions without some mixture of motivations and so my sins are as numerous as the moments of my existence how are you going to repay for that I can't I can't pay that and yet the king stands before the servant and says clearly I release you I forgive you the debt has been paid for you let me put it to you this way why do you forgive other people time and time and time again because the magnitude of God's mercy toward us amazes when we consider the magnitude of our sins toward God if you're a non-Christian under the sound of my voice this morning a few things are now clear you have been told that the

[19:20] Bible teaches that we will have to settle accounts with a king Matthew's claim is that Jesus is that king to whom we will owe an accounting for our lives Jesus is indicating that our ability to stand rightly in his presence will depend on his mercy not your currency but his mercy so if you are a non-Christian under the sound of my voice today and you are rightly like me concerned maybe for the first time that you're going to stand before God and either have a private audience in which all this stuff is made known or that audience is going to be public for all the world to see so that we would see the extent of God's mercies toward all of us or his rightful judgments toward all of us then I would tell you this little parable is perhaps the best thing you've ever read in your life because Jesus is indicating that there is a way to be made right with God and it is his granting his declaration of his forgiveness his releasing of the debt his cancellation his pardon his remittance of all the legal consequences that would rightly be yours on account of the debt it's all done by the king and in this gospel if you keep waiting for the episodes to come you're going to see on what grounds is Jesus able to forgive me of my sins and be merciful while at the same time be just because a

God must be just and that's all going to come in this book yet it's a preview of episodes to come he's going to hang on the cross and make full payment for sin without violating God's justice because he himself will take the penalty on your behalf he's taking your debt he's taking your inability to pay he's with his own blood saying payment made in full remittance of any legal obligation and the father will look at you and at me in that moment and we will say lord have pity on me and the king will say I have forgiven him I have forgiven her their debt is cancelled their debt is paid or the king will say the debt holds because they never turned and asked me for the forgiveness why do we forgive the sins of others because

God's mercy toward us is without limit that's good news folks that's good news God's mercy toward you in Christ has no bounds it's measureless you can't plummet the depths of his mercy what do you do then this is where you would become a follower of Christ this is where you would take up with Jesus this is what it means to be a Christian this is what it is to be born again it's to confess your sins before God asking the work of his son to be adequate payment that you might actually stand into his presence and walk into an eternal world of mercy and grace upon grace upon grace not of your own accord but of his and as a consequence of this Christians are willing to forgive others here because they know the extent to which God has forgiven them there let me put it to you as clearly as

I can put no limit on the number of times you will forgive someone who truly repents what you do here with one another matters there between God and you there's a turn in the story verse 28 the word but always a big word in storytelling a contrast is now in play but when the same servant went out he found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 denarii and seizing him he began to choke him saying pay me what you owe so his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him have patience with me and I will pay you almost the exact same wording and this one refused and went out and put him in prison until he should pay the debt it's a 100 denarii was the debt of this one to the man who had been forgiven 10,000 talents a denarii present day terminology was a day's wage 100 days 3.5 months of work

I don't know what you make in 3.5 months but that was the number probably considerably less for most of us than the 10,000 talents even on the standard of a Ben Franklin is a couple million in other words there was a debt that was significant but it was incomparably small minuscule to the magnitude of the debt he had been forgiven and this one is merciless takes him chokes him throws him refuses that's what he does he refuses verse 30 he refused the one who had received forgiveness is the same one now that is refusing to forgive which leads to the second reason why you and I should forgive do you see it there 31 and following when his fellow servants saw what had

taken place they were greatly distressed they went in and reported to the master all that had taken place then his master summoned him and said to him you wicked servant

[ 25 : 54 ] I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me and should not you have mercy on your servant as I had mercy on you and in his anger the master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debts in other words he would never be able to get out so also Jesus says wow what an ending so also my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart why do we forgive other people who sin against us or injure us time and time again one reason because God's forgiveness of us is without limits but secondly if we refuse to forgive others we're going to suffer an eternal loss that's why if you don't like the positive motivation here's the negative I want to forgive you why because I just sense how much God has forgiven me if that doesn't work for you I want to forgive you why because if I refuse

I have no right or expectation that God will forgive me this is like the Lord's prayer isn't it father forgive us our trespasses even as we forgive those who trespass against us this relationship between what we do with one another is the means by which we actually have an appeal before God if we refuse to forgive others according to the story we will suffer an eternal loss by failing to forgive others we forfeit our claim on the enjoyment of God's forgiveness that's what's at stake the forfeiture of your claim on receiving forgiveness I can hear rightly many wrestling with this men and women who in our midst rightly find it hard to forgive let's concede this it isn't just that the problems with me it's the problem of things that have been done to me how do you make sense of this given the propensity of some to abuse a statement like this what about the person who's been literally cajoled subjected!

to a life of continual abuse they're supposed to forgive? really? I suppose we need to think about what is meant by forgiveness is Jesus asking you to place yourself repeatedly in harm's way no let me say a couple things John Calvin wrote and they were helpful to me pastorally and hopefully to you who find yourself in a situation where you have no idea how many times I've forgiven someone and yet it has really become detrimental to the progress of my own life the safety of my own person the welfare of my own children or whatever it might be Calvin says there are two ways in which offenses are forgiven first if a man shall do me an injury

I lay aside the desire of revenge though I continue to entertain an unfavorable opinion of him as he deserves yet still I am to forgive him I'm able to forgive someone that doesn't mean I think highly of them Calvin would give some help there he says a second kind of forgiving is when we receive the person into favor by our compassion we raise up those who have fallen so the second forgiveness is almost like this relational reconciliation the first forgiveness is I'm not going to take revenge and I would say to many I'm not going to put myself back in harm's way I forgive you but the consequences for the actions are real and meaningful and they will require me to take these steps Calvin will go on and say as soon as a man by words makes profession of repentance are we bound to believe him a guy says hey will you forgive me he says were this done we must of necessity go willingly and knowingly in a mistake for where will be discretion if any man may freely impose on us even to the hundredth offense and then he says that

Christ does not deprive believers of the exercise of judgment so as to yield a foolish readiness to believe or receive but you're not supposed to be foolish if you're being abused I don't want you to go home thinking like well he said I got to forgive!

[ 31 : 08 ] him I got to forgive her self to this inappropriate behavior those things are different you can forgive someone and say I'm not going to take revenge on you in fact I am but nevertheless I am done with your ability to continue to do this to me in the best case scenario you forgive someone and there's actually relational reconciliation at the same time to forgive someone does not require that you continually put yourself in a position to be repeatedly harmed by them please hear me on that so what is forgiveness it's a heartfelt decision to cancel the debt to not hold them accountable to in some sense say God will hold them accountable I will not forgiveness is not taking up revenge forgiveness is actually offering pardon forgiveness is remitting the legal obligation or consequence of their action and according to the last verse it has to be done from the heart the heart is a little different than your feelings it doesn't mean you got to feel like forgiving!

The heart here really means an act of your will you got to determine in your will to let it go you know what happens when you don't let it go I can tell you bitterness emerges ill will emerges decades will emerge where you're completely isolated from relationships and it actually is self destructive to not forgive which would be another reason to forgive forgive because it's good for you that's not the

reasons in the text but it's true but the fundamental reasons to continue to forgive one his forgiveness the forgiveness that I've received came without limits two my refusal to forgive will come with eternal consequence so we forgive anyone here today needing to forgive someone yeah don't show a whole a show of hands we'd all be we'd all be like this anyone here finding it hard to forgive someone who's done you such incredible hurt remember God's forgiveness toward you was without limits be warned your forgiveness of them is an indication of being received by God why forgive in simple terms because you were able to say Jesus thank you for forgiving me why forgive because Jesus your mercy your kindness has no end why forgive because once I was your enemy and now I'm at your table why forgive he paid a debt you couldn't pay and you don't want the consequences by holding on to it our heavenly father as we think about this word it's not easy given the nature of some of the offenses that many in this room could speak of so give us courage and confidence and give us wisdom and friends to help give us sound judgment and a heart that's ready in Jesus name amen