

“Forgiveness is only possible through the Gospel”

Matthew 18:21–35

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[0 : 00] This is a reading from Ephesians chapter 5, verses 15 to 21. Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of time, because the days are evil.

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit. Addressing one another in psalm and hymns, in spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Well, good morning. Let's take a moment and bow our heads in prayer. Heavenly Father, we give you thanks and praise that now we can gather together to hear you speak directly to our hearts and minds.

Father, we just ask that you would graciously open your word to us, that you would speak to us. Father, if there's any distractions from the week, from last night, whether good or bad, that they would just, you would take them away from our minds, and that you would draw us into yourself. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now we're going to talk about a topic, as Daniel just read from the Gospel, the topic of forgiveness.

[1 : 25] And this topic is one of, that could, some people really enjoy talking about forgiveness, and a lot of people don't like talking about forgiveness. So we're going to address that, we're going to look at it.

And the view of forgiveness, this idea that we need to forgive people who have wronged us, we need to forgive our family, we need to forgive our friends, is something in our culture right now that is considered, the idea is considered dangerous.

It's considered useless. Some people are indifferent to it. Some people think that you must have justice before you can even consider to forgive somebody.

But Jesus, in this Gospel, in the text that we're looking at, speaks directly to it. And he speaks quite bluntly about it through a parable, and we're going to look at it.

Because the parable of the unforgiving servant, which by today's standards is considered dangerous, and it's also considered controversial, has a meaning within it that we need to listen to.

[2 : 29] We need to look at it, we need to talk about it, because it's a very actually serious thing. Now if you haven't already, if you've closed your Bibles already, open them up again. Turn to Matthew 18, and we're going to look at verses 21 to 35.

There's Bibles in the back if you don't have one. It's really helpful to have a Bible with you, to look at what happens before the text, and to look at what happens after the text.

Now this parable has a very serious warning within it. And we need to pay attention, and we need to heed it. And we're going to look at it in a couple of ways. We're going to look at it as God requires more than you think from yourself.

It costs Him more than you think. It's harder than you think, more serious than you think, and more freeing than you think. But in order to understand this text properly, we need to look at the verses right before, and I'll just briefly summarize them.

The verses right before, Jesus is also talking about forgiveness to His disciples. And what He's doing is He's showing them how to deal with it in a more corporate setting.

[3 : 39] First off, you need to work out forgiveness between you and your brother or sister, and come together. If that doesn't work, you need to bring it before a couple of witnesses. And if that doesn't work, you need to bring it before the church, and do it that way.

But then after this, after Jesus talking about this to His disciples, Peter comes up to Him and does a very classic Peter thing. Because through the Gospels, you see Peter always making, almost like a

fool of himself.

Almost, always questioning what Jesus does. But then he gets greatly redeemed in the end. I believe it's in the Gospel of Mark that really hones in on that. But Peter comes up, and he says this. Then Peter came up and said to Jesus, Lord, how often will my brothers sin against me, and I forgive them? As many as seven times?

Jesus said to him, I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. Now, Peter asks something by his cultural standards, which is actually considered very generous.

[4 : 47] Because in the Old Testament, it's only commanded to them that they only have to forgive somebody three times, and then they can write them off. So Peter's actually being generous here.

But then Jesus turns it against him, and uses it, and almost would have blown everyone's minds when they heard this. It would have been unheard of, what Jesus says. Because what Jesus says turns out to be, if you're counting, 490 times.

It's not just three times, it's not just seven times, it's 490 times. But what Jesus is honing in on here, what he's teaching his disciples, has nothing to do with the number.

It has nothing to do with the number. Because the thing with the number seven, forgiveness, number seven means completion within the Bible. So when Jesus uses this number, it means forgiveness must be complete.

It must be fully complete. It can't be half, it can't be a quarter, it must be complete. It's like, all of us have objects in our life that we hold on to dearly, that we really like.

[5 : 58] When I was ordained a deacon before becoming a priest, one of my former high school teachers came to my ordination. And he's someone who introduced me to the outdoors, getting more involved in the outdoors, a lot of canoe camping.

And he gave me a paddle at my ordination. And that's very significant in the outdoor communities, when you get a paddle. It's like in the music community, I believe Johnny Cash gave Bob Dylan his guitar, which signals something of respect.

And he gave me this paddle. And this paddle's worth a lot. And I hold it dearly. But this idea of forgiveness that Jesus is honing in on is, say I'm on a canoe trip with this paddle, and one of my friends breaks it.

I need, what Jesus is talking about here is I need to forgive him for breaking it. I need to absorb it. But then what if I'm on another canoe trip with him and I've replaced the paddle, and then it gets broken again by him?

I need to forgive him or absorb the cost again. But how are we to absorb this? Because if you're counting forgiveness, how many times you forgive somebody, you're actually not forgiving them.

[7 : 11] That's what Jesus is talking about here. But how is this possible? How do we do this? Well, Jesus lays it out in a very straightforward illustration.

So let's look at it. Verses 23 to 27. This is Jesus talking. 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 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, and I will pay you everything. And out of pity for him, the master of the servant released him and forgave him the debt. Now, this number that Jesus uses here, 10,000 talents, this number is an unheard of number. It would have been 4 billion plus dollars, an impossible number to achieve, to get to.

[8 : 22] And the punishment that the king gives here, the master gives, is something in that time which was very normal. If the debt couldn't be paid, they sell everything that the person owes. Kind of like debtor's prison in the Victorian era when Charles Dickens was alive.

It's this idea that they sell everything, they count their loss, and they move on and get what they can get. But the cost, the cost would have bankrupt the king.

It's that the king forgave him this debt. And the king does it. This idea of 4 billion plus dollars, 10,000 talents, is something that is, for a king to do this, would have been unheard of, like impossible, can't happen.

Because it would have just bankrupt the entire kingdom. But the king does it. Jesus is using an illustration here to show something beyond this idea of this number being forgiven.

If you're familiar with the gospel, you know how Jesus goes to the cross for you and me. He goes to the cross. And he does this because sin entered the world.

[9 : 30] And this debt that happened through this sin cannot be paid through human means. It's impossible to pay it. But God knew this.

And he sends his son to appease the debt that has to be paid. Because God is a just God. He gives the command in Genesis, do not eat from the tree.

And humanity eats from the tree. So he has to follow through with it. But he sends someone. He sends his son in order to stand in our place. C.S. Lewis has a famous essay called God in the Dock. And this thing is, what the essay is about, is about that we are standing within the dock in the courtroom before the judge, the just judge. And we have our sentence laid out before us.

All the evidence is laid out. We are found guilty. But then Jesus comes through the side door and stands in our place and we walk free. But Jesus doesn't.

[10 : 31] See, Jesus could have ended the illustration here and it would have been a feel-good story. A nice illustration. It's all settled. The king forgives the servant and life goes on.

But Jesus doesn't finish here. He keeps going. Why is he doing this? And that's what we need to find out. Because forgiveness is so hard to do.

It is harder than you think. This idea that we must forgive those who have wronged us regardless of how severe it's been is unheard of.

It is so hard to do. So in the next verses, let's take a look. 28 to 31. But when the 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. So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, Have patience with me and I will pay you.

[11 : 39] He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. And 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. See, what's going on here is that the servant owed the other servant, the one who was just forgiven, way less.

It would have been just around \$12,000, which is still a lot, but it's significantly less than \$4 billion. But it was also in his right to do what he did, to send the servant to prison.

It was in his right at that time. He didn't have to forgive him. So this idea of forgiveness, Jesus is honing in on. So what is Jesus trying to show here? What he's showing here is that the servant, yes, he was forgiven, has not changed.

His heart has not changed at all. Only looking out for himself. Only those who have been truly changed by the forgiveness of God can forgive freely.

[12 : 44] That's what Jesus is talking about here. And that is why Jesus used this illustration for Peter as he brings this question to him. Because Peter, still in his mind, had this idea that he only had to forgive seven times, and then he could just walk on and write that person off.

But Jesus is showing here is that if you have been forgiven, if you are clinging to that forgiveness that God has done through his son, you must forgive. And Jesus is bringing that to home before he goes to the cross.

So how do I forgive? How do I do it? Well, someone who's influenced me quite dramatically is Timothy Keller. He has passed away now. But one of his last books he wrote is called Forgive.

And if you are curious about forgiveness, and if you struggle with forgiveness, I would highly recommend this book. But I'm just going to take a section from it because if someone says it better than you, you should just quote them.

And it's just a short section. So how do you forgive? He lays it out in four ways. And the ways he lays it out just gets harder and harder as he lays it out. Now, forgiveness, according to Timothy Keller, is it's not something where you just excuse the person and you don't talk about what has happened.

[13 : 58] There is an offense that happened and it needs to be addressed. It needs to be brought up. The way Jesus talks about it in the previous verses, you need to go to your brother or sister and tell them what has happened, how they offended you, because they actually might not even know.

But it needs to be done in a way that is not accusatory. It just needs to be brought up. It needs to be talked about. And then step two is that you need to identify with the person who's offended you or sinned against you as a fellow sinner.

You're not to elevate yourself above that person because they also are only saved through grace. It's nothing else. They are just as guilty as you are before God.

And Jesus has come also to save them. And then you are to release and absorb the offense. And then lastly, which is, in my opinion, is probably the hardest one, you are to aim for reconciliation of the person.

You're aimed to have relationship with that person. Now, Daniel, a couple weeks ago, talked about with his father and the things he's gone through.

[15:11] And I also have dealt with a father who has not been the greatest. And I've kind of written him off. For over half my life, I haven't talked to him. He kind of just disappeared out of my life when I was 18.

And going through this text has really, it's kind of really beat me up this week that I, most likely, I need to reach out to him. And I need to try to work through forgiveness with him.

So I'm not up here just pointing a finger at you. You know the classic saying, you point a finger, you have three or four pointing back at you? I'm up here, I am someone who also needs to forgive deeply.

I have many things I need to work through. So the thing is, for the king, the king in this parable to forgive, he would have to no longer view the servant as an offender, as one who owes him money. He would have to view him as a fellow citizen again. Some commentators on this text have commented that Jesus, thinking about this servant who has this immense debt, it was only possible that he was within the king's court working with him.

[16:18] So they say that the king would have had to restore him back to that job title to truly forgive him. If any of these steps that Keller lays out, he says, aren't followed, you haven't forgiven.

Now I want to take a moment here to acknowledge that some of us in this room have experienced severe abuse from people.

And the idea of forgiving somebody who's abused you is quite difficult. Or if you've experienced church hurt, leadership has hurt you in a sense, and you have still struggled with it, I want to acknowledge that because it's quite difficult to do.

or you've experienced violence or slander or something else from somebody who's committed towards you. Or you've seen church leadership sweep under the rug issues within the church and say you just need to forgive and move on.

You don't need to address it. That is wrong. That is totally wrong. And it's also extremely hard to work through forgiveness in that way. I want to acknowledge it.

[17:23] Forgiveness isn't something where you just snap your finger and move on. It is something that could take a lifetime to work through. And also we see in this section, before we move on to the next section, that unforgiveness is visible.

The servants see the other servant not forgiving the servant of the debt or working with him in the debt. They just see it. It's visible. Unforgiveness is visible.

It's interesting because forgiveness is not visible. It happens behind closed doors. It happens within your heart. But unforgiveness is outward. It's visible.

You can see it. That's what we see from the text here. And the thing is Jesus doesn't just stop here. He doubles down on it and he makes it even more serious.

It's more serious than we think. Verses 32 to 35. 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 not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had had mercy on you?

[18:34] 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.

So Jesus doubles down and what does the king do? he gives him over to the same punishment that he approved for that servant to go through that he sent to jail.

The king just gives him what he already approved. The thing that we see from this text we see in verse 26 that you cannot earn your salvation. The servant says let me just go and work and I'll pay for it.

I'll repay the debt. See you see here you cannot repay your debt to God. It's impossible. And then you also see here in verse 32 and also in verse 26 is that you cannot grovel for your salvation. You cannot plead for it. It's impossible. It's not going to get there. You cannot repay your debt by groveling. You cannot repay your debt to God by trying to earn it. The only way that we stand right

before God within his forgiveness is through a changed heart is when we just come before him and say Lord have mercy on me a sinner.

[19 : 49] See those who cannot forgive will not like heaven. The reason why is because the only way to heaven is through mercy is through the forgiveness through Christ.

Then the only songs within heaven are going to be about forgiveness and divine grace. See we notice here how the servant has already been forgiven before he has the opportunity to forgive. See forgiveness works when we forgive out of our hearts because our hearts are changed by the forgiveness of Christ. That Christ on the cross that we get the free gift of forgiveness through that. It's only when we're changed through that that we can forgive. Forgiveness doesn't work when you think I must forgive and then I'll be forgiven. That doesn't work like that. But forgiveness here is also more freeing than we think because it's only possible through the gospel.

We can't do it on our own. See this illustration that Jesus uses is one of those throw it back in the face at the person listening. Nathan the prophet does it to Daniel when he sins with Bathsheba and he comes before him and tells the illustration to him.

[21 : 04] It's one of those. It gets thrown back at you. Jesus is being very clever here when he does this. It's only through the gospel when you are transformed by it that you can forgive your brother and sister because if you don't forgive, if you're not changed by it, you're trapped within it.

You're trapped within a jail and you let the person who's offended you or who's done something against you to have power over you even when they've moved on.

All your decisions are based on that action of unforgiveness all your, how you view yourself are based on that action of unforgiveness but the gospel frees you from that.

Jesus went to the cross because he knew all our struggles. He knew all the sin that we do daily and that is when you get the, when we look on the cross, when we gather together and give praise to Christ, to God about what he did on the cross.

anything is possible and it's only possible when we're on our knees before Christ and we say, Christ, come into my life and help me.

[22 : 18] Later in the service, we come to the point, we say it every week in the liturgy and it's on page nine when we get to say it and we say it after communion and it's all our problems we send to Christ crucified.

All our fears we send to Christ crucified. All assaults to the devil we send to Christ crucified. Then we can say all the things that have been done to us that we struggle with constantly we send to Christ crucified.

This isn't just slap a band-aid on it saying. It's something that is truly life-changing. The gospel changes our lives and then we can set all our hopes.

We can set it on the risen son because that's the gospel. The gospel is that we have this great hope that Christ will come again. Then as we apply it to our lives daily, we can become more like him. That is the great hope. That is what Jesus is talking about here in the illustration. So if you're like me and you struggle with forgiveness, you struggle with things in your life, go to Christ.

[23 : 25] Christ, come before him and ask him to help you daily in your walk with unforgiveness. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we give you thanks and praise that you have provided your son to make us right before you.

That you give us a way, Lord, through all the things that we struggle with. That we can just give them the Christ. We can give all our problems, all our fears. That we can set our hope on your risen son.

And the hope that he will return and we'll stand before him face to face. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.