

Text: Matthew 18:21-35  
Title: "Forgiven forgivers"  
Time: 8/11/2024 am  
Place: NBBC

Introduction: The passage we read this morning is bookended by instruction from the Lord about how to deal with some terrible tragedies. Earlier in chapter 18 of this Gospel, the Lord gives instruction about the tragedy of church discipline caused by an unrepentant church member. We have experienced that difficult situation only twice over the seventeen years of my ministry here, and looking back it still feels like two times too many.

In chapter 19 the Lord addresses the tragedy of marital divorce. This tragedy is caused by the hardness of the human heart. It results in further adultery unless it was adultery that caused it in the first place. It ruins homes, the children of those homes, and the testimony of those homes where a Christian family is involved. When I was younger, I heard Charles Osgood do a talk about how divorce is bad for the environment. His point was that more resources are necessary to support two households for a family that should only be one household. So Osgood counselled that if you want to be a good conservationist, do not get a divorce.

I mention these bookends because our passage has the power to preclude both of these tragic outcomes. It is a passage about forgiven people and the power of forgiven people to forgive. Achieving forgiveness forestalls church discipline. Instead, says Jesus, "You have gained your brother." And achieving forgiveness conquers the hardened heart that leads to divorce.

We are not a church in the throes of a church discipline situation. Praise the Lord. And I have no knowledge of anyone under the sound of my voice this morning who is suing for divorce. Again, praise the Lord. But delays in the repentance of

sin and hindrances from the hardness of hearts are ever present realities in our war against the devil's temptations and our sinful flesh, which test whether or not we have the power to forgive that Jesus demands of us in this chapter.

Paul was not dealing with a situation calling for church discipline or a marriage facing a divorce when he challenged the Ephesian church with this exhortation: "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). Forgiveness is simply one of our ongoing one-another responsibilities as a local church congregation. Without it, we fall prey to a one-another reality that can destroy a local church. Paul warned the Galatian churches: "But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another" (Gal. 5:15).

Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness, and Jesus's answer teaches us two things about forgiveness: (1) forgiveness is a perpetual responsibility; and (2) it is based on a powerful reality. Simply put, we must ever be forgiven forgivers.

I. Forgiven forgivers have a perpetual responsibility to forgive (vv. 21-22).

Illustration: Within the first couple of weeks of my pastorate here, I received a phone call from a neighbor who had attended our church under a previous pastor. She spoke of how hurt she had been by our church and how she would never be able to forgive our church for the hurt we had caused her. She claimed she had put up with a lot but finally had reached her breaking point. She simply could forgive no longer.

Application: Peter may have identified with this sister's frustration. He wants to know how many times he has to forgive someone before he can claim to have reached the true breaking point, beyond which we need not forgive those who have offended us any longer.

The Lord's answer is clear. *Seventy times seven* means that there is no limit to the number of times we need to forgive a brother who sins and desires to make things right. The phrase is likely better translated *seventy-seven times*, and there is a connection between this verse and Gen. 4:24, where Lamech proclaims how many times he would be avenged for the wrong done for him – seventy-seven times. Jesus is telling Peter that as committed as Lamech was to revenge, so committed must the believer be to forgiveness. There is no “line of no return” for the Christian, no point at which we declare forgiveness impossible. There is no straw which once and for all “breaks the camel’s back.” We are to forgive perpetually.

Christ not only commands perpetual forgiveness, He was also the perfect example of it too, and not just for those who said they were sorry and were willing to do penance. Jesus hung on the cross bearing your sin and mine, experiencing the just wrath of holy God, and as He hung there, what was His disposition toward the city that had treated Him this way? “Father, how could they do this to me?” “Father, wait until I show them?” “Father, I don’t know how I could ever forgive this?” “Father, let’s make them pay?” “Father, I’m through with them!” Not at all. Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing?” (Luke 23:34).

If we are going to call ourselves Christians, followers of the One who prayed that way at that time, then we are going to have to be people who put no limits on our willingness to forgive. Forgiveness is a perpetual responsibility.

I shared those words of Christ on the cross with the sister on the phone, but she refused to be like her Savior in this regard. I have crossed paths with this neighbor a number of times over the years, and she never seems like she is a happy person to me. I do not know if she has any regrets. I do know that the Lord expects us to forgive like He does.

II. Forgiven forgivers build on a solid foundation to forgive (vv. 23-35).

Illustration: Foundations are important parts of buildings. While Maureen and I lived in Danbury CT, we lived for a time in an apartment over a podiatrist's office on Grand Street. Up the hill from us, just off of Deer Avenue, a house came up for sale which seemed to be a huge bargain given its size and location. Maureen and I went to see it and quickly came to understand why the price was as low as it was.

Many of the old homes in the downtown area of Danbury were built with most of the weight of the home falling on a single oak beam running from one side of the foundation to the other. In this home that beam had not been supported correctly, had cracked, and the entire house was falling into the basement as a result. Walls were tearing away from ceilings, floors were unstable and uneven, and systems were being torn apart because of the lack of an adequate foundation.

Application: Jesus wants his disciples to understand the foundation on which they could build their commitment to perpetually forgive. Christian forgiveness is based on a powerful central steel beam that cannot fail. This foundation is a very simple truth. Jesus encourages His disciples to build their ability to forgive on the powerful reality that we have been forgiven. Christ wants His disciples to not only forgive, but to forgive as the forgiven forgive. That we have been forgiven is the solid foundation on which we can build our forgiveness of others. Jesus's parable teaches us two things about this.

1. We have currency to forgive because our debts have been forgiven (vv. 23-27).

Illustration: Our national debt stands at an inconceivable \$35 trillion. The website [usdebtclock.org](http://usdebtclock.org) tracks the growth of our debt in real time, and it shows that the debt is growing by

\$100,000 about every four seconds. In 2020, the national debt as a percentage of our GDP climbed to 132%. When I became the pastor of this church, the national debt was only 63% of our GDP. Interest on our debt is approaching \$1 trillion per year, coming close to the amount we spend on national defense. As Americans, we are just beginning to understand what it means to be burdened with an unpayable debt.

Application: Like our federal government, the slave we read about in these verses had not been a very good steward. His debt was beyond his ability to pay. Faced with the destruction of his family, he makes a pathetic plea in verse 27 for patience, but the truth of the matter is that no amount of patience would have been enough for that slave to make things right on his own. Assuming the talents spoken of here were merely silver and not gold, Christ tells us that this man was responsible for squandering about \$10 billion of the king's credit in today's money. His situation was hopeless.

We may sit here today reading about this man's plight relieved that we do not owe anyone \$10 billion. But the truth of the matter is that every man bears a debt far more severe than this before our holy God. You and I are sinners against an infinitely holy God. This is a debt which many have denied exists, and many others have sought to pay on their own. But the day of settling accounts is coming, and only those who have placed their faith in the merciful forgiveness of the King will escape the penalty due them as a sinful debtor to God.

Christ is teaching His disciples a lesson, but if you are here today still trying to pay this debt with your good efforts rather than simple faith in the death of Christ on your behalf, you need to trust the merciful forgiveness of the King this morning. Jesus went to the cross to pay your sin debt for you with His own precious blood. Repent as a guilty debtor before your righteous King, believe that He is your Savior, and all will be forgiven.

For those of us who have known the merciful forgiveness of the King in our lives, we who have been forgiven the debt which we could not pay, Christ's message could not be clearer. We can forgive because our debt has been forgiven. We are not on our way to debtors' prison. We are not bound by the burden of our own obligations anymore. We are free to forgive because we are freely forgiven.

In his book *The Great Gain of Godliness*, Tomas Watson put the truth this way: "If God spares us as a father does his son, let us imitate God. It is natural for children to imitate their parents; what the father does, the child is apt to learn the same. Let us imitate God in this one thing: As God spares us, and passes by many failures, so let us be sparing in our censures of others; let us look upon the weaknesses and indiscretions of our brethren with a more tender compassionate eye." We have currency to forgive because our debts have been forgiven.

2. We have motivation to forgive because the alternative is far worse (vv. 28-35).

Illustration: Perhaps you have learned the Lord's Prayer. I went to a college where we prayed the Lord's prayer before every fine arts performance we were required to attend. The prayer prays in part, "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Application: The Lord's prayer teaches us that the benefit of being forgiven comes with a heavy responsibility. God expects forgiven people to be very good at forgiving. Matthew 18 is clear that repentance is an important precondition for forgiveness (v. 15, "if he listens to you"; v. 26, "have patience with me"; v. 29, "have patience with me"; v. 32, "because you pleaded with me").

But notice how pathetic and unconvincing the indebted slave's guarantees of repentance are. "I will repay you all" is

simply a lie. The slave could never pay it all. The debt of the sinner who has been the longest in hell still remains unpaid to this day before his holy God.

A parallel passage in Luke 17:4 tells us that as sinners we have the capacity to repent 7 times in a day while committing the same offense over and over. There is not much change of life there, but still the Lord forgives. Clearly, the basis for our willingness to forgive has nothing to do with the quality of the “I repent” that we hear. It has everything to do with what the Lord demands of us – we forgive because He commands us to. Our King who forgave us expects us to forgive.

And He gives us a very clear “or else” in this passage. Here we find motivation to forgive, because the alternative is far worse (vv. 34-35). Notice that the consequence for failure to forgive (being delivered to the tormentors) is different than the consequence for failure to be forgiven (vv. 25, being sold into slavery, the confiscation of his family and possessions). What likely is happening in vv. 34-35 is a flogging for the slave’s harshness toward his fellow slave, not a repayment of the original debt. So as believers who are eternally secure as the forgiven of the Lord, we can expect to come under the Lord’s discipline unless we possess a willingness to forgive our brother.

Clearly, the adage holds true scripturally that our failure to forgive an offender does us much more harm than it could ever do the one who offended us.

Conclusion: Aesop told a fable called “The Miser.” It is about a very rich man who had many possessions that caused him to worry incessantly about their security. To alleviate his concern, he sold all he had and converted it into a round lump of gold. He buried his lump of gold underground at the end of his garden, and every night he would go out to dig it up, confirm it was still there, and admire its size.

One day, a thief noticed the rich man's habit. He followed him to the edge of the garden and spied what he dug up. After the rich man buried his gold and went home, the thief came and stole away the lump of gold. The next morning, the rich man came to check on his treasure only to find there an empty hole.

The rich man now turned poor lamented his loss with great heartache and wailing. A neighbor came by and learned of his loss. The neighbor had a suggestion for the man, but it was one of rebuke rather than comfort: "Take a stone and put it in the hole, and think that it is your lump of gold. You never meant to use it anyway. Therefore it will do you just as much good to fondle a lump of granite as a lump of gold."

Our King has bestowed on us an inexhaustible treasure of golden forgiveness, and having done so He commands us to dish it out in His name to those who offend us. Let's not put our forgiven debt into a hole where we claim it but fail to share it. Our forgiving God wants us to be forgiven forgivers.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*