

NO SECOND CHANCES

Matthew 18:21-35

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

September 17, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson is from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 18, verses 21 through 35. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us what forgiveness is and why it's so hard. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 18, beginning at verse 21, we read in Jesus' name.

²¹ 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?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ 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.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ 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. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Have you ever wanted a second chance? Maybe it was your first driver's exam, and you learned that, contrary to the name of the thing, you're not actually supposed to bump things with your bumper. Maybe it's a golf game, and you hit a terrible tee shot on your favorite hole, so you beg your friends for a mulligan. Maybe your parents told you to do something, and you didn't do it, so they took something away. Or maybe you let a friend down. You broke a promise, or you revealed a secret, or you forgot to meet them for lunch.

We've all been there. You want the person to trust you again. You want to go back to the way things were before. You just need to convince them to give you a second chance.

We've all been there, which means you've maybe been on the other side of it as well. Someone has repeatedly let you down, probably someone close to you; that's usually how it goes, simply because they have enough opportunities to let us down. They ask for second

chances, and for a while you grant them, but the thing with second chances is that they turn into third chances, and fourth chances, and fifth and sixth chances. The more it happens, the easier it becomes to happen again. It gets tiring ... on both sides.

How about with God? Before we eventually grasp the true meaning of forgiveness, we usually think of it more like second chances. We sin, and our confession goes something like this: "I'm really sorry, God. I know I can do better. Give me another chance." We do this over and over again until we finally realize that we can't do better. What then? Are we just toast? We need something better than second chances. We need forgiveness.

Jesus tells a parable about forgiveness. This parable does not have a happy ending. Sometimes Jesus' parables end badly. And we can learn something from this. When we believe and live contrary to God's Word, we fall under his wrath, and this is very bad. There are certainly parables with happy endings, and we might expect a parable about forgiveness to be one of those happy endings, but this one is a tragedy.

It starts with a question from Peter. He asks, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (18:21). I think this is kind of funny, because Peter's biological brother, Andrew, was also a disciple of Jesus. So I wonder if Andrew has sinned against Peter six, or maybe seven times, and Peter's making sure it's okay with Jesus to drop the hammer on him. But Jesus answers, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times" (18:22). Or some translations say, "Seventy times seven" (NASB, KJV), which comes out to 490. The difference is meaningless. It might as well be a zillion times, because Jesus' point is, *Don't keep track. Forgive them as many times as they ask for it.* Why? The answer is in the parable.

Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven "to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants" (18:23). The parables often begin this way. The Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, is the common subject matter of the parables. And Jesus usually compares the kingdom, not to a place, as we might expect, but to a person. So the emphasis isn't so much on, "What is heaven like?" but, "What is God the Father like?" and "What is Jesus like?" It is the king who defines the nature of the kingdom, so we learn about the kingdom by observing the king.

The king "wished to settle accounts." This little detail is the first hint at the king's generosity. He already knows how much this one servant owes him, and he knows he can't pay it. As long as the king ignores the debt, the servant will also ignore it, and it will hang over him the rest of his life. It will cause the servant guilt or anxiety. But the king actually wants to forgive him, so he takes the initiative of settling accounts.

It turns out this servant owed him ten thousand talents. That's a lot. A talent was a weight measurement. This was back when money was counted in weight. It's hard to convert it precisely into today's dollars, but some fuzzy math will get us close. One talent was worth about twenty years wages for a laborer. So ten thousand talents would be about 200,000 years' worth of wages, or approximately seven billion dollars. That's billion, with a "B." But it might as well be a zillion dollars, because Jesus' point is that this is an absolutely impossible debt.

This is one of those absurdities that we often get in Jesus' parables. Sometimes Jesus throws in a detail that is completely unrealistic, and he does it to make a point. Ten thousand talents. Seven billion dollars. Everyone knows this is a ridiculous debt for a servant. There's no way anyone, let alone a mere servant, could incur such a debt. And no king would allow such a debt to keep growing to this point. It's absurd. And Jesus knows it's absurd. That's why he used this number.

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The servant's debt represents our debt of sin against God. We might not feel like our debt is that big. That's because we usually compare ourselves against other people instead of God's Law. So seven billion dollars seems like an exaggeration. But God accurately sees the magnitude of our sin, and this is how he chooses to describe it. The point is that our debt of sin against God is exponentially greater than any kind of debt we can incur on earth. And it's far more than we can handle.

The servant, apparently, didn't grasp the absurd magnitude of his debt, because he thought he could pay it off. **"Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything"** (18:26). I don't know how he planned to do that. Even if he lived off half his income and used the other half to pay down the debt, it would take 400,000 years to pay it off. The servant was asking for a second chance. He wanted an opportunity to make it up to the king. He clearly did not comprehend the magnitude of his debt.

This is what we do with God when we try to make up for our sins. And I think we all do this in some way. Maybe you think, *I've been kind of bad this week. I should probably go to church and pay my respects to Jesus.* Or you find some good work to atone for your sins. More often it's just resolutions to do better. We avoid confessing our sins, thinking that if we can just improve ourselves we won't need to confess. So we make resolutions, usually just in our own minds, that we will do better tomorrow. Then we won't need forgiveness.

The problem is that justice doesn't work that way. Doing good deeds does not atone for our sins. And even if good works did atone for sins, even if it were theoretically possible to move toward this line of moral neutrality, our sinful nature is still in the way. Instead of moving toward the line, we keep going in the opposite direction.

It's absurd to think that we can pay down our debt of sin against God. It's absurd on the same level as a servant who thinks he can pay off a seven billion dollar debt. It's not going to happen.

So what does the king do? He forgives him. All ten thousand talents, seven billion dollars, he strikes it off the books. The king did not need to do this. The common action would be to sell him or throw him in debtor's prison. The king is never going to see the full debt repaid, but that doesn't mean he has to settle for nothing. He could reduce the debt to something manageable. There must be some way to recoup some of his losses. Imagine what this will do to his reputation. Someone else is going to think they don't have to pay either. And then another, and another, and another. But the king doesn't care. He goes all the way. He **"released him and forgave him the debt"** (18:27).

Here I'd like to pause and define forgiveness, because our world has a very weak view of forgiveness. *Forgiveness is bearing the cost for what someone else did.* We see this in the parable. What did it mean for the king to forgive the servant? Did it mean he wasn't mad anymore? He probably wasn't, but that's not really what forgiveness is. Forgiveness meant that he bore the cost of the servant's debt. The king surrendered his right to demand justice for every wasteful and sinful thing the servant did to incur this debt. He bore the cost for the servant's actions. That's forgiveness. That is always what forgiveness means.

So consider God's forgiveness in these terms. What did it take for God to forgive you? Does it simply mean that he's not mad anymore? He's not mad anymore, but that's not really what his forgiveness is. It means that he bore the cost for our sin. That's what Jesus was doing on the cross. Forgiveness means bearing the cost for what someone else did. That's what the gruesome death of Jesus is all about. He was bleeding, suffering, and dying for your sin.

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And consider this in terms of your forgiveness of your neighbor. When we forgive others, we might still be mad. A better way to think of it is that we might still be hurt. But forgiveness means that we give up our right to seek justice for that hurt.

Forgiveness also doesn't mean that we ignore sin. Just before this text, Jesus says, **"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault"** (18:15). In fact, he gives us a whole process outlining how to do this. In order for sin to be forgiven, it must be confessed. If someone sins against you, and you tell them how they hurt you, and they refuse to repent, there can be no forgiveness, and that's not your fault. And if we refuse to confess our sins to God, God does not forgive us (1 John 1:8-10). He's not asking us to forgive sins he wouldn't forgive.

But this is what forgiveness is: it is bearing the cost for what someone else did. This is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, so he assures us that when we come to him, the answer is always, "Yes."

Back to the parable. I want you to notice, and this is significant, this is not what the servant asked for. He did not want forgiveness. He only wanted patience and an opportunity to satisfy justice. He did not want forgiveness. He did not want mercy. He did not want grace.

The servant is into justice, or at least, his understanding of justice. He seems like the kind of guy who "just cares about things you should care about like doing your work right and showing up on time, keeping your word." He expects other people to treat him fairly. But he's very inconsistent. He doesn't see that he's not the kind of person he expects others to be.

And we see this when he finds a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii. Like before, we'll pull out our fuzzy-math calculators to figure this out. A denarius was one day's wages for a laborer. So a hundred denarii would be a hundred days' wages, or somewhere around fifteen thousand dollars. So just forget the seven billion dollar debt for a moment. If someone owed you fifteen thousand dollars, would you care about them paying you back? I think you would. That's a significant debt, especially when we're talking about a personal loan. You have every right to expect someone to pay you back that kind of debt. That's only fair. That's the way this world works. That's the way God designed it to work. In this world, fifteen-thousand-dollar debts are supposed to get paid. But ... what if someone else forgave you seven billion dollars. Suddenly, fifteen thousand dollars looks a bit smaller.

The first servant failed to see this. The enormous forgiveness from the king did not have the impact on him that it should have. So he demanded that the second servant pay him back. He physically assaulted him and threw him in debtor's prison, which was his legal right. But it was also the king's legal right to throw the first servant in debtor's prison.

There's an obvious hypocrisy here, so much so that the other servants see it and report it to the king. And then the king does what he had the right to do in the first place. He threw the first servant in debtor's prison until he should pay all his debt. This, of course, means life in prison, because this debt would take thousands of lifetimes to repay.

Then, to make sure we all get the point, Jesus says, **"So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart"** (18:35). To go back and answer Peter's initial question, *So you want to have a limit on forgiveness? What if God had a limit on forgiveness for you? How do you think that would go?*

We have sinned against God so greatly that our neighbors' sins against us pale in comparison. Or to look at it from a positive angle, God's forgiveness of us dwarfs our forgiveness of our brothers.

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Here's the really hard part of this parable for us: When we take Jesus' warning at the end seriously, which we should, we wonder to ourselves, *What if I don't perfectly forgive my brother? What if I don't really forgive him from my heart?* When we're honest with ourselves, I think we will see that our forgiveness is never perfect. God's forgiveness is perfect, but ours is not. When someone really hurts us, the pain usually lingers. We might say, "I forgive you." We might never mention our injury again to them. But the pain usually lingers in our minds. So does that mean that we haven't really forgiven them from our heart? And does it mean that God does not forgive us?

Don't make your forgiveness of others a path to salvation. God's forgiveness of us is not conditioned on how well we forgive our neighbors. Otherwise, it wouldn't really be forgiveness. We do not forgive in order to be forgiven. We forgive because we are forgiven. Do you see the difference?

The first servant failed to forgive the second servant because he never really appreciated the king's forgiveness. Remember, he didn't want forgiveness. He didn't ask for it. He simply wanted patience so that he could pay off the debt. He was living under the delusion that he could satisfy the demands of justice. He did not appreciate the king's forgiveness; therefore, he was unwilling to forgive his fellow servant.

Forgiveness is not something we do in order to earn God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness comes first, and God's forgiveness reigns supreme. So don't take Jesus' warning as a path to salvation. Simply let it be a warning. If we despise God's forgiveness by refusing to forgive our brother, we will be condemned. That's the warning, and it's true. But God's forgiveness of us comes through God's mercy.

If you're worried about this, forgive your brother, simply because you should, and dwell on God's forgiveness.

Dwell on what God has done in Jesus Christ to forgive you. Consider the one who paid the cost for your sins. Consider the one who suffered, bled, and died for you. Consider him who is risen from the dead and is continually interceding on your behalf. It is for Christ's sake that God forgives you. Consider the ten thousand talents, or seven billion dollars, paid for by Christ's blood. Meditate on the gracious truth that there are no more second chances. There is only forgiveness. You are forgiven for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.