

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Proper 19, Series A (Pentecost 15)  
Saturday, September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
Sunday, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Sermon: From the Heart  
Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Focus: God forgives our sin debt freely and fully without any merit or worthiness in me.

Function: That they would sincerely forgive others for their sins against them.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: “We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us” (SC, Fifth Petition).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. Today’s Gospel reading is one of those teachings of Jesus that I wish we didn’t have to hear today. After sharing a powerful parable about the terrible consequences of ungrace, Jesus warns, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt. 18:35, ESV).<sup>1</sup> It’s that last phrase that gets me: “from the heart.” Oh, we could spend all day talking about the *ideal* of forgiveness. We could treat it like a textbook question of casuistry, as Peter does at the start of our Gospel reading. But when the rubber hits the road and we’re talking about actual relationships with people who have really wronged me, it’s a lot harder to forgive. I’d rather say things like “I’ll forgive, but not forget,” leaving a little bit of hedge room to hold something against them in the ledger of my heart. But no, Jesus says, I must forgive them from the heart or there will be hell to pay. Jesus says as much in the Sermon on the Mount: Either we forgive others who sin against us, or we ourselves

---

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

will not be forgiven (Matt. 6:14-15). Jeff Gibbs points out that, Jesus leaves us absolutely “no wiggle room” on this point.<sup>2</sup> There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

But forgiveness is hard work, which is why Peter came to Jesus with his hypothetical situation. “Lord,” he asked, “how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matt. 18:21). We may chortle at Peter’s attempt to limit his responsibility to forgive other people. But Peter was actually being quite generous. The Jewish rabbis of Jesus’ day said that you only had to forgive a person three times. The fourth time they wronged you, you could write them off as a dirty, rotten scoundrel and have nothing more to do with them. So three times was the maximum number of forgiveness.

Peter takes the rabbis’ number, multiplies it by 2, and adds 1. He probably expected Jesus to pat him on the back and applaud his generous spirit. But Jesus threw cold water on Peter’s suggestion of 7 times.

“I do not say to you seven times,” Jesus said, “but seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:22). Ah, that explains it. So we have to forgive other people 490 times, but the 491<sup>st</sup> time that they sin against us, we can hold a grudge. Is that it?! No, of course not. Jesus isn’t going to engage in a kind of calculus for computing how much forgiveness is required. His point is simple enough: never stop forgiving. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, Jesus’ reply “is about the same as saying that there is no limit to forgiveness...”<sup>3</sup>

Then to underscore this, Jesus tells the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, one of the most terrifying stories ever told in Scripture. Jesus says that the reign of heaven is like a king settling accounts with his servants. He calls them in one by one to pay off their debts. One particular servant owes a sum of ten thousand talents. It’s hard for us to grasp the amount of

---

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2-20:34* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 937.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Once More from the Heart,” in *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 92.

money we're dealing with her. One Bible commentator, William Barclay, points out that the annual tax revenue of a wealthy Roman province like Galilee only came to about three *hundred* talents—a mere fraction of what this man owed. The ESV Study Bible points out that a talent was worth about 20 years' worth of wages for a common laborer. And this guy owed ten *thousand* talents, or about 200,000 years of wages. The number is so astronomical we can hardly fathom it. Based on Colorado's minimum wage (\$9.30 per hour), that amounts to almost \$4 *billion* dollars!

Unfortunately for our friend, he has no way to repay it, so the king orders that he and his family be sold into slavery in order to pay off the debt. Fearing the breakup of his family, the servant falls on the king's mercy and begs him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything" (Matt. 18:26). It's a desperate plea and an impossible promise. How can he ever pay back that much money?

Yet the king does better than give him more time. He forgives him instead. He wipes the slate clean, forgives the debt, and lets him go off Scott free! I don't know about you, but I have never heard of any government official giving up billions of dollars' worth of revenue. Clearly, this king is somebody quite special.

Suddenly, the servant is a free man with not a cent of debt to his name. But tragically, he is not a changed man, a new man. He should have rejoiced at the king's grace, but instead he seems to doubt his situation. Perhaps the king's mercy is too good to be true. Perhaps he will change his mind and come a calling for those ten thousand talents some rainy day down the road. So to make sure he's got his bases covered, the servant goes out and finds his fellow servant, a man who owes him a mere 100 denarii (about three months' wages) and shakes him down. "Pay

what you owe!” he demands, choking the poor fellow before giving him a chance to make good on the debt.

So in a familiar move, the other servant falls down on his knees and begs the first man, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you” (v. 29).

A light should’ve gone off in the miserly man’s head. His fellow servant appeals to him with *the exact same words* he used to beg the king. It’s déjà vu! But his heart is too hardened to recognize this fact. He refuses to forgive his debt or give him more time and instead throws the other guy into debtor’s prison (v. 30).

When the other servants see this, they are “distressed,” Jesus tells us (v. 30). No doubt! They probably also owe him money and worry about what will happen to them. So they go and make report to the king, who is absolutely outraged at what he hears.

“You wicked servant!” he shouts. “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 mercy on you?” (Matt. 18:32-33).

Remember the difference in the amount of debt we’re taking about. The wicked servant owed ten thousand talents, or about four *billion* dollars. The other servant only owed 100 denarii, or about seven *thousand* dollars. Seven thousand dollars is a lot of money, that’s true, but it’s nothing compared to four billion. If you think about it in terms of a stack of one dollar bills, the smaller debt would be a stack of money about 30 inches high.<sup>4</sup> But the bigger debt would be 271 *miles* high—or about the same elevation as the orbit of the International Space Station! As I said before, the difference is astronomical!

So what does the king do with the wicked, unforgiving servant? Does he sell his family into slavery? Does he put him in debtor’s prison? No, he does worse than any of that. He hands

---

<sup>4</sup> According to [www.ehd.org](http://www.ehd.org), the height of a stack of 100 one dollar bills is 0.43 inches.

him over to the jailers to be tortured in a torture chamber. (I know that the ESV reads simply “jailers,” but the Greek word *basanistais* literally means torturers). Will this guy be able to pay off his debt? I’d say there’s no way in hell—literally.

Then Jesus adds this sobering corollary to his tale: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt. 18:35). There it is again: *from your heart!*

So Peter, what does this parable say about you forgiving only seven times? What does it say about our attitude, “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me”? What does it say about our resistance to forgive people who hurt us?

Quite simply, it says that if we have a bitter, angry, hardened heart and refuse to forgive other people, then we better watch out. Because there will be hell to pay—literally. Eternal damnation is the punishment God promises to us if we fail to forgive others. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you *do not* forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive *your* trespasses” (Matt. 6:14-15). As Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, “It is... perfectly clear that if we do not forgive we shall not be forgiven. There are no two ways about it.”<sup>5</sup> This is the inconvenient truth about Christianity. Grace begets grace. If we do not forgive, then like the unforgiving servant, we will be damned and handed over to the devils to be tortured in hell for eternity. Not a pleasant thought.

So think about the people in your life who have hurt you, the people against whom you nurse a grudge, the people of whom you say, “I wouldn’t forgive them in a hundred years!” How many times does Jesus ask you to forgive them? Once? Twice? Three times, as the rabbis suggest? 7 times, as Peter offers? 77 times? 490 times? Or as many as it takes?

---

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 105.

Do you really need me to answer that question for you? I think Jesus' parable already makes the point. You see, when we look at the sin debt of other people—the huge pile of grievances we have against them—it can certainly look like a giant heap. But it's nothing compared to the burden of guilt we owe to Jesus. As Luther writes in the Small Catechism, "We daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment" (SC, 5<sup>th</sup> Petition of the Lord's Prayer). If our salvation were dependent upon working off our sin debt and making amends, our ledger would always remain in the red. You could never do enough right to outweigh the wrongs in order to make yourself right with God.

So God in his mercy did something about it. He sent Jesus to die on the cross and pay off your debt with his holy, precious blood—the costliest treasure the world has ever seen. He wiped your slate clean. He erased your debt and removed your guilt. Did you deserve it? No, of course not! But Jesus is a gracious God and forgiving Lord. As King David says in our Psalm, "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10). In other words, he doesn't give us what we deserve. Instead he forgives us. "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12). God's amazing grace is astronomical and unfathomable.

And in response to his abundant grace, God simply asks—nay, demands!—that we show grace to others. The Bible says, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:31-32). As forgiven sinners, we are called to forgive others *in the exact same way* that God in Christ forgave us. His mercy fills our hearts and overflows into the lives of the people around us, no matter how great their offenses may be. God's children forgive as God forgives—"from the heart" (Matt. 18:35). Forgiveness isn't easy,

but God can change our hearts. And so we pray, “Lord, have mercy.” Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.