



Date: November 17-18, 2018
Speaker: Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor
Scripture: Matthew 18 – The Unforgiving Debtor

It happens so regularly these days that we have almost gotten numb to it. In fact, the latest one, I couldn't even find on the front pages of the newspaper, I had to scan my news feed for details of what happened.

On Saturday, October 27, it was in a synagogue in Pittsburgh while mostly elderly people were worshipping.

A little over a week later, on Wednesday, November 7, it was in a bar frequented by students in Thousand Oaks, California.

I am talking about the epidemic that is, mass shootings. Who knows where and when the next one will happen but it is almost expected that another one will happen, and another. In just the six years since a lone gunman walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, there have been almost 2 000 mass shootings in the US.

I know you could say, but Paul, that happens in the US, that is not a problem here. But, we are impacted by them for sure. How can we not be? The lives lost, the stories of heroes, using their own bodies to shield others from the hail of bullets. Maybe no story has had the impact as the one that happened in the tiny hamlet of Nickel Mines in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in 2006.

Now, just a warning. Some of what I am about to say may be little graphic but it is important for me to share some of the details so that we can grasp the magnitude of what happened afterwards.

On the morning of Monday October 2, 2006, a milk-truck driver with a grudge stormed a one-room Amish schoolhouse. The man sent the boys and adults outside, barricaded the doors and then opened fire on the girls, killing three before taking his own

life. By early the next day, two more children died of wounds sustained in the schoolhouse. Does anyone remember the story? There are accounts of violence and death in the news every day, but there was something about this story that seemed to really outrage us. Perhaps it was that the victims were children, young girls in particular and maybe because they were Amish. For this type of "big city" violence and destruction to happen in a quiet, serene community among people who were known for their peaceful and simple Christian faith was especially enraging.

As you can imagine, following this tragic shooting, reporters from throughout the country descended on Lancaster County but in the hours and days that followed, they were surprised by a different and unexpected story that soon developed. In the midst of their grief over this shocking event, the Amish community didn't cast blame. They didn't point fingers. They didn't hold a press conference with attorneys at their sides. Instead they reached out with grace and compassion toward the killer's family. The afternoon of the shooting the grandfather of one of the girls who was killed expressed forgiveness towards the killer, Charles Roberts. That same day, Amish neighbours visited Roberts's family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain. Later that week, the Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at Roberts's funeral.

It is ironic that Roberts had been tormented for years by the premature death of his young daughter. He never forgave God for her dying. Yet, after he callously shot 10 innocent Amish school girls, the Amish almost immediately forgave him and showed compassion towards his family. The widow of the shooter, Marie Roberts wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors thanking them for their forgiveness, grace, and mercy. She wrote, "Your

love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

In a world where it seems that violence is only increasing and a society that often points the finger and puts the blame on someone else, this reaction was unheard of. No one would have blamed the Amish community for hating this man, and his family. No one. But their counter cultural response caused many reporters and others to ask, "how could they forgive such a terrible, unprovoked act of violence against innocent young children?" Of course the answer lies in the one that they follow, Jesus. As Christians, the Amish hold firm to the teachings of Christ who taught that we are to forgive one another, put the needs of others above ourselves. We are to rest in the knowledge that God is still in control and can bring good out of any situation. Love and compassion towards others is to be life's theme. Vengeance and revenge, that is to be left to God to figure out. This is the way that they lived their lives.

As you know, we are in the midst of a message series on the Parables of Jesus entitled, "What's the Big Idea?" A parable as we have discovered, is a literary technique Jesus often used in the gospels to explain some of these important spiritual truths in the Kingdom that he came to proclaim, the Kingdom of God.

In the Greek, parable literally means, "to set beside" similar to the English word, comparison. Once again in the text, that we are looking at today, Jesus sets beside and compares to get to the heart of the issue.

If you have your bible, turn with me to the gospel of Matthew 18. Since a parable is a story, I find it helpful to read it in full first and then we can break it down a bit. Listen carefully as I read it to you.

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" ²² "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"

²³ "Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. ²⁴ In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. ²⁵ He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt.

²⁶ "But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' ²⁷ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

²⁸ "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

²⁹ "His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. ³⁰ But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

³¹ "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. ³² Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

³⁵ "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

Context is important in most things in life but it is especially important when reading the bible. So let me give you some background information that may shed a bit of light on this scene.

Jesus is in the midst of teaching presumably a group of his followers on how to deal with people that that wronged you.

The teaching had obviously raised some questions so Peter, a close follower of Jesus' approaches him and asks, *Okay, so people are going to do things to me that are not kind or appropriate or just out and out mean. I get that, it's a cruel world. But bottom line, I need to know, what is my responsibility? How far must I go? When is enough, enough? How many times do I forgive my brother when he sins against me?*

What Peter is saying to Jesus? *I need some boundaries.* Don't forget the Jewish people in this culture, they were so used to following guidelines, and rules. They had laws written out for everything. How many times they wash their hands in a day, who they could associate with, how often they should pray, when you could work, when you could rest. Their whole lives were regimented by do's and don'ts, and by should and should not.

That is so different then our culture today. We don't like people telling us to do anything today, do we? A few weeks ago, when we were waiting at the hospital for my daughter to give birth to our little grandson, I parked in the hospital parking garage. It was quite full so I ended up parking on the 6th level. As I made my way down the stairs I was blocked at the fifth level and a sign rerouted me back up and to another staircase. Now that was a little inconvenient but as I was walking back up, another person was headed down the staircase. I thought I would spare him the trouble so I said, *hey, you can't go that way. It is blocked off. You have to use the other staircase.* He just kind of looked at me, brushed me off and kept going. This is my confession. I stalled a bit just to see his face when he made his way back up. I wanted to give him that look, *I told you so.* We don't like to be told what to do but for the Jewish people of Jesus' day it was different.

They even had a formalized procedure in place for forgiveness. Rabbis taught that people should forgive those that offend them, up to three times. After that, you are off the hook. Jump into Peter's shoes here. He has now been following Jesus for some time. He is beginning to catch on to this new way of life that Jesus is proclaiming. He sees first-hand the way he heals people, casts out demons and handles his enemies with grace and composure. Jesus has come to teach a new way of doing just about everything so he must also have some expectations about how to forgive.

Peter must be thinking, *Surely, Jesus would want us to forgive others more than the three times the rabbis teach. Probably double that, if not more.* So

He approaches Jesus in,

Matthew 18:21

"Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"

Peter probably thinks he is going to be rewarded by Jesus for thinking outside the box. For finally catching on. But Jesus' response really throws him for a loop.

Matthew 18:22

²² "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"

What do you think that answer means? That followers of Jesus are to keep some sort of a tally in our heads and when you get to 490 times that a person has ticked you off, you can finally go *aha, that's it. I have reached my limit. I don't forgive you anymore! I am done!* Before Peter can even make sense of what he just heard, Jesus begins to tell a story, a parable of what forgiveness looks like in the Kingdom of God.

Think of it like this Jesus seems to say.

Matthew 18:23

Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him.

So, we have a king who wants to settle accounts with his servants. I can kind of picture him in a library at a big, ornate wooden desk, a scroll unrolled in front of him with a ledger sheet for each servant. He then proceeds to call them into his study one by one.

Matthew 18:24

In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. ²⁵ He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt.

No wonder the king wanted to clear up his IOU's. This one guy alone owes him millions of dollars!

Let me put this debt into perspective. This man was a servant so he probably would earn minimum pay. So, in our culture today, that would be \$15 an hour as of January 1, 2019. If he worked 8 hours a day at \$15 an hour that is \$120 a day at 5 days a week equals \$600 a week. If he works 50 weeks a year, (we will give him two weeks unpaid vacation), that is \$30 000 a year. At that rate, and assuming that he doesn't spend a cent on food, housing or clothing, it would take him over 33 years to pay off a \$1 million debt. But the text says he owes millions of dollars. It would take this man centuries to pay off what he owed the King.

Doesn't this raise a few questions in your mind? Like what on earth was this guy doing with all the money? Did he have some expensive hobbies, indulgences or maybe a gambling problem? And why would the King just keep lending him money? Allowing this man to run up such a massive debt?

We don't know the answers to those questions but what we do know is that the King does something that was not uncommon in this day. He orders the servant and his family sold into slavery to pay the debt. Even this gesture demonstrates the incredible grace of this King. He knows that by selling them into slavery, he is only going to recoup a very tiny fraction of the debt that was owned to him. A harsher King would have been within his right given the huge outstanding debt, to send the man to prison or even to his execution and then sell his family into slavery for generations to repay what was owed to him. That was how justice worked in this day. There was no declaring bankruptcy. You had to pay up no matter how long it took.

For the listeners gathered around Jesus, they would have clued in by now, this was hyperbole. Jesus was telling a story that was an exaggeration to make a point. That is, that the servant's debt could never be repaid by the servant. It was impossible. But look as Jesus continues the story.

Matthew 18:26

"But the man fell down before his master and begged him,

How does the servant respond? He falls to his knees and begged. Wouldn't you? Can you picture it? You have to feel sorry for him right? A broken man that is humbled and humiliated that things had gotten

this much out of control. What would you expect someone, who only earns a minimum wage but owes millions of dollars, would say to the one he was indebted to? *It is too much. I have gotten way in over my head. I can never pay it back, I am sorry. I don't know how it got to this.* Is that what you would expect from someone who is truly repentant? But look how this servant responds. Yes, he is on his knees and begging but he says to the King.

Matthew 18:26

'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.'

Be patient with me and I will pay back everything! Really? *Just give me a bit more time and I will pay back the millions I owe you on a servant's minimum wages.* Maybe he'll get a second job or hit the jackpot with Lotto 649! *I just need a little more time!* Was this really a broken man? A humbled man? Or was he delusional, arrogant beyond belief that he thought he could actually repay this money?

Have you encountered someone like this? You know that they are at the end of their rope. They have run out of excuses but they just can't admit it. They have dug themselves so deeply into a hole that they just don't know how to get out. It's their pride. They are trying to save face. It was at this point that Jesus does the unexpected. Remember, parables were often used by Jesus to put a twist in the story that the audience would not have been expecting to get to a deeper spiritual truth.

Matthew 18:27

Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

Why do you think this King felt pity for his servant? He wasn't remorseful. He hadn't hit rock bottom yet. I think that the King felt pity for him because he just didn't get it. This man didn't understand the magnitude of his situation. Just how much he owed. The debt he had accrued. He still thought he could overcome it on his own.

I am sure you have seen the news footage of the raging wild fires causing death and destruction in parts of California. It is heartbreaking. I read a news account this week of how neighbours had to plead with a homeowner to evacuate as he stood in his backyard trying to hold off the advancing flames

with a garden hose. That is what desperation looks like.

This servant didn't understand the enormity of his situation. He is trying to put out a raging fire of debt with a garden hose. But the King let him off and forgave his enormous debt. He set him and his family free. That's amazing grace. He was completely within his right to at least have the man thrown in jail but instead he offers freedom. How would you feel? Have you ever been released of something that you had an obligation to? Maybe you too have had a debt forgiven. Or maybe a speeding ticket. Anyone been let off with a warning instead of a fine. It is a huge relief. Unfortunately, I have been pulled over on a few occasions and only once was I let off. I had been called up to the hospital by a friend whose dad was on his death bed. In my haste to get to the hospital, I was speeding. Sure enough I saw the familiar sight of flashing lights in my rear view mirror. I pulled over. I begin praying, "please have the officer ask me why I am going so fast". The officer sashays up to my window. *Can I see your license and ownership?* Yes officer, I responded. I fumbled for them and handed them to her. She glances over them. *You know you were going pretty fast. Yes officer.* "Please ask me why I am going so fast". *You must be quite a hurry to be going so fast. Yes, officer,* "Please ask me why." *Where are you going in such a hurry?* Bingo.

So, I explained to her that I am a pastor and I was going to the hospital as someone was dying. She kind of looks at me. *Do you have any proof that you are a pastor?* I said, *just look at my face.* No I didn't say that. I looked around for any business cards but then spotted my bible. *I have my bible.* *Just a minute,* she said. She walked back to her car. A few minutes later came back and said, *I will let you go with a warning for today, but slow down.* Thank you, Jesus! What a relief. Forgiven something I actually deserved.

Those of you who are teachers or students. Just how good does it feel when you wake up and discover that you have a snow day? Freedom from a day in class! College or university students, what about when a professor graciously offers an extension for a paper, or better yet, says you don't have to do it! Don't you feel so overwhelmed with gratitude for the kindness and good fortune offered to you that

you just want to return it to others? You just want to pass on your good fortune by extending mercy and grace to others.

This servant is this parable Jesus is telling, is let go. A huge debt is off his shoulders. He has been forgiven. You would think that he would be on top of the world. So overwhelmed with gratitude that he would just want to pass that on to everyone he encountered. Instead, look at his response.

Matthew 18:28

"But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

Instead of being filled with mercy and compassion, this servant is still weighed down by pride and entitlement. Maybe that is what got him in the problem in the first place. He goes out and immediately stalks one of his fellow servants who owes him money. A couple of thousand dollars. A relatively miniscule amount compared to the huge debt that he was just forgiven. He grabs the guy by the neck and demands payment as he chokes the life out of him. *Pay back what you owe me!!* How would you expect this guy being choked would respond?

Matthew 28:29

"His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded.

Once freed from the clutches of this mad man, he begged just like the first servant did before the king. *Just give me a little more time and I will pay you.* The difference here however, is that presumably he could repay it. This was not an overwhelming debt. He could probably repay it in a matter of weeks or months. The first servant is still weighed down. Wrapped up in himself. There is no mercy. No pity. No forgiveness. No appreciation for what has been shown to him. He has the guy thrown in jail until he can pay up.

Let me make this clear. This was completely within his rights. It was the code of this culture. Someone can't pay their debts, the one owed could have them thrown into jail. It was justice. It was the expectation actually. That is what most people did.

As you can imagine, some other servants witness this whole scene. They knew the huge debt that had been forgiven the first guy and they are appalled by his reaction to the one who owed him. So they go and tell the King what has happened. The second meeting with the King doesn't go as well as the first for this servant.

Matthew 18:32-33

'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me.³³ Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?'

Matthew 18:34

Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

He sent him to jail, which he had every right to do. To be tortured until he paid his debt, but sadly, it was an impossible debt for him to repay on his own. His torment would last for an eternity. This is kind of an uncomfortable verse isn't it? This is where Jesus gets to the heart of the issue. After the parable is told, he addresses Peter's question about forgiveness with these words.

Matthew 18:35

"That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

This is a biggie! To Jesus, forgiveness is a big deal. So what is the main point Jesus is trying to get across through this parable? What is the Big Idea? Could I suggest that perhaps Jesus wants the people gathered around him on this day and all of us to recognize that we too have amassed a huge debt? I am not talking about your mortgage, your line of credit or your student loan. Some of you here today, may not even realize that we all owe a debt for the way that we have rebelled and turned away from our creator, God. In our pride and self-sufficiency, we thought we knew how best to live our lives and we shut God out and just look at where that has gotten us.

Like the first servant, the debt is too much to even calculate. God as our King, has two choices. He could imprison us until we repay it ourselves, which is impossible or he could forgive us and our debt. In his grace and mercy, he has offer his forgiveness

through his son, Jesus. By what Jesus did through the cross, his death and resurrection, the ledger has been wiped clean. Our debt has been eliminated. Our selfishness and apathy deserve punishment but instead, we have been given life. Freedom. Unmerited favour. So how do we respond to that? To our King? Do we beg for more time, thinking if we work like a dog we can earn it? Or are we apathetic, thinking the debt is so large, there is nothing we can do so who cares. Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.

Or do we receive the amazing grace of our Saviour? Turn our lives over to Jesus and take the heavy load or pride and self-sufficiency off of our shoulders and give it to him. Through this parable Jesus illustrates that one way you can determine whether someone has truly received the forgiveness of the King is by the way they extend mercy and grace to others. As I have studied this passage this week, I admit, that I was pretty quick to condemn the first servant in this parable. What a jerk! Throughout this week, as God has been working on my heart, I have had to come to grips with my own ability or inability to accept, extend and ask for forgiveness. I wish I could tell you that I have this one all figured out but I know in my heart I have been holding onto things. There have been people that have hurt me and I have not always found it easy to forgive. To let things go and it festers, right here in my heart and soul and it weighs me down. Do you understand that feeling?

I would suggest that Jesus' message is that forgiveness is not conditional based on a number (3 or 7 or 490) or a state of mind on any given day. It is an attitude of the heart and is a natural expression of a life that has truly received God's gift of forgiveness.

Remember at the beginning of this message? I told you about the grandfather of one of the Amish girls who had been killed in schoolhouse. How he forgave the shooter? When he was interviewed, the reporter asked him two questions.

The first question was, *Have you forgiven this man?* The grandfather responded, *in my heart, I have.*

The second question was, *How is that possible?* The grandfather responded, *with God's help. I gave it to God to hold.*

Forgiveness isn't trite. It isn't easy. In fact, it can be hard at times and true heart wrenching forgiveness can only be extended sincerely with God's help. Forgiveness doesn't mean forget. When the Amish chose to forgive, it doesn't mean that they didn't love those little girls or that they were cheapening their memory somehow. It simply demonstrated a deeply held conviction that God had forgiven them a huge debt, and they were to forgive others. For them it was a way of life, the way that they walk in faith every day. They received the unconditional love and grace of Jesus and through his strength in their lives, they were able to pass that along to others. The fact is, the Amish had the right to want revenge and retribution, just like the King in this parable. But they gave up that right, that heavy burden and instead offered forgiveness.

Our world says that we have a right when someone hurts us, abuses us, or betrays us to be angry, vengeful, spiteful or even bitter. It is our right. Jesus' words in this parable flipped that upside down. *The kingdom of heaven is like this*, he teaches. The mercy and forgiveness that we have received from the King, should so impact our heart, our lives and our values, that we can't help but shower mercy and forgiveness onto others.

So, can I ask you? Have you received the forgiveness extended to you by God? If so, are you living in the freedom that comes with it? If not, perhaps it's because you are still holding on to the heavy load that is your pride and it is hindering you from extending that same grace and forgiveness to those in your life. Maybe you are still blaming your parents for a flawed childhood. Or still resenting that a child abandoned you in your time of need. Maybe you are still angry at a former teacher or boss for not giving you the credit you felt you deserved or disappointed in the church or a pastor for letting you down. Perhaps you are still holding a grudge against a former spouse. This is not easy stuff but forgiveness is possible when we turn it to Jesus.

Christian author Lewis B. Smedes said, *"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."*

Some of you here today are holding onto to past hurts and pain and grievances and you are a prisoner to them. And if you don't release it and forgive, you

will be tortured bitter people until the day you die. Some of you are bitter, I hear and see it. You are forgiven, do you believe that today? Have you received it? With God's help, can you share it with others? As holy people that God loves, may we at North Park, be quick to receive and extend forgiveness, in our churches, our families, our marriages, our relationships and in our communities. And may the way that we forgive one another be an example of Christ's love and mercy, to a world that so desperately needs it. Amen?
Amen

Points to Ponder

What's the Big Idea?

Matthew 18:21-35 ~ The Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Describe a circumstance in your life when you chose to forgive someone even though it was difficult. How did you come to the decision and what were the repercussions?
2. Have you ever been on the receiving end of forgiveness? Describe a situation when you had to ask for forgiveness. How did the person respond? How did it make you feel afterwards?
3. Do you remember a time in your life when you came to the realization of the debt of sin that you owe to God? Consider the forgiveness that He has offered us through his Son, Jesus. How has your life changed because of receiving the forgiveness God has offered to you?
4. Is there someone in your life that you know you need to forgive but are struggling with it? What is it that is blocking you from forgiving?
5. Is there someone in your life that you know that you need to ask for forgiveness? What is preventing you from approaching that person?
6. Share some examples of people that you know whose lives are true examples of grace, mercy and forgiveness.

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically for those who have shared that there are stumbling blocks for them asking for forgiveness or extending forgiveness to someone in their life.