

This summer I have been preaching through a sermon series that I have entitled Masterclass: Storyteller, in which I am looking at the parables of Jesus, the stories that He told, and what we can learn from them about what it means to know and follow God. If you're unfamiliar with the term parable, the best definition I have found comes from Pastor John MacArthur: **A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson.** Jesus often taught in parables, using word pictures like "God's kingdom is like treasure hidden in a field" or "God is like a Father welcoming home a wayward son." By using everyday language that was familiar to his audience, he ensured that the stories would stay with them long after he left. But he also used parables because the way they were told would cause the self-righteous and sophisticated to reject his teaching as basic, completely missing the deeper spiritual truth hidden in the story, while those with childlike faith would respond to Jesus and want to know Him better.

This morning, we are going to be in Matthew 18:21-35, looking at a parable that is known as the parable of the unforgiving servant. And I will say up front that I would encourage you to be thinking through any specific situations of forgiveness or offense in your life. I will be throwing a lot at you this morning about forgiveness, and I pray and hope that something in there will be relevant to your situation. So let me read the parable first, stopping to explain its context, and then we'll talk about what it means for us today. Beginning in v. 21:

*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven times."*

Peter asks a great question here. **Does forgiveness have a limit?** Is there a point at which someone runs out of chances and we can be done with them? In Jesus' day, there was a popular belief that **three was the limit** that you had to forgive someone, and so Peter probably thinks he's being generous here by offering to forgive seven times. But Jesus tells him to forgive seventy times seven times. It's Jesus' way of saying "keep on forgiving and don't keep counting." And then, to illustrate his point, Jesus tells this parable:

<sup>23</sup> *"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*

Jesus tells them a parable about a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. The money belongs to the king, and one of his servants, who is probably one of his tax collectors, owes him ten thousand talents. Now, in those days, a day's wage was called a denarius, and a talent was the equivalent of 6000 denarii. And so, ten thousand talents is equivalent to about 60 million days of work. At \$20/hour, or \$160/day, that would be 9.6 billion dollars. Jesus' point is obviously that this servant has somehow mismanaged about 9.6 billion dollars of the king's money and now owes an enormous debt to the king that can never be repaid.

Continuing:

<sup>26</sup> *“At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’<sup>27</sup> The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.*

The servant says, “I’ll pay it back!” Really? That’s ridiculous. This servant is not only foolish, he’s stupid. Nevertheless, the king takes pity on him – he feels compassion for him. Miraculously, he cancels the debt. And, instead of throwing him into prison, he lets him go.

The story continues in v. 28:

<sup>28</sup> *“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. <sup>29</sup> His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back’ <sup>30</sup> But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.*

The servant has just been forgiven a few billion dollars of debt. And now he goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii, which would have been about 3 months wages. And the other servant says the same thing – be patient with me and I will pay you back. But the first servant refuses and has the second servant thrown into debtor’s prison.

And now the end of the story:

<sup>31</sup> *When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. <sup>32</sup> Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I*

*had on you?’<sup>34</sup> In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.<sup>35</sup> This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”*

When the king hears about what his servant has done to his fellow servant, he has the servant thrown into prison. And look how Jesus ends – this is how God will treat you if you do not forgive others.

So, to recap: Peter asks Jesus if there is a limit to forgiving others, and in response, Jesus tells this parable about a king, a debt, and two servants. Let’s look at what this parable teaches us about forgiveness – what it is, where the power to forgive comes from, and how we go about doing it.

### 1) What is forgiveness?

I find Jesus’ use of the debt imagery to be the perfect metaphor for the offenses we experience and what they cause. When someone hurts you, there is a debt that is created. When you are wronged, abused, mistreated, offended, there is a debt, and somebody has to pay. The natural response is to make the one who offended you pay. When we decide to get revenge, we are essentially saying “You’re going to pay for what you did to me.” We make them pay through gossip, the cold shoulder, abuse, withdrawing friendship, or ruining their reputation, among other things. And maybe that works – over time, the debt goes down and you no longer feel the need for revenge. But in the process, making them pay for what they have done has a way of twisting you into a bitter, spiteful person. As the recovery saying goes, “*Holding on to resentment is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.*” Or, as often happens, revenge becomes a **back-and-forth cycle**. They hurt you, so you hurt them back, and then they hurt you back again, in an ever-escalating war.

In Jesus’ parable, the servant has lost billions of the king’s dollars, and somebody has to pay. But instead of making the servant pay it back, the king chooses to bear the cost, cancel the servant’s debt, and let him go free. Essentially, that is what forgiveness is. When someone wrongs you, there is a debt that is created, and somebody has to pay the debt. **Forgiveness is making the choice to pay down the debt yourself.** It is choosing not to punish your offender, but to take the debt upon yourself and to leave the judgment to God.

Ken Sande, in his book *The Peacemaker*, shares what he calls “The four promises of forgiveness”:

**“I will not dwell on this incident”** – I won’t rehash the past and keep focusing on what you did to me.

**“I will not bring up this incident and use it against you”** – Instead, I will put into practice the words of Paul in *1 Corinthians 13:5 - Love keeps no record of wrongs.*

**“I will not talk to others about this incident”** – I will not ruin your reputation to others.

**“I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship”** – I will treat you with kindness. I will pray for you

That last one will require some nuance, which we will get to in a minute. But take these four promises to heart. They are not easy. When you forgive someone by choosing to pay the debt down yourself, it can feel like death. But in the end, it leads to resurrection and rebirth. Instead of making them pay and becoming a bitter person, we take the debt on ourselves, and in the end find freedom.

Now, let me clarify what forgiveness is by saying six things forgiveness is not:

1) **Forgiveness is not condoning what someone has done.** It’s not saying that what someone did to you was okay or no big deal. In fact, it is precisely the opposite. As G.K. Chesterton wrote, “Forgiveness means pardoning the unpardonable or it is not forgiveness at all.”

2) **Forgiveness is not forgetting.** Sometimes you need to remember so that you do not allow it to happen again.

3) **Forgiveness does not mean you don’t confront sin** – Remember Jesus’ words in **Matthew 18:15** - *“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them brother over. If someone has wronged you, you need to confront them about the sin, while also being ready to forgive. However, recognize that **if you have not already chosen to forgive them in your heart, you will not be able to confront well.** Confrontation has as its end the restoration of the person who hurt you. It comes from a desire to see them grow in righteousness so that others will not suffer the way you have. It does not come from a desire for vengeance. If you have not forgiven, you will likely confront with a desire to have them realize just how badly they have hurt*

you, and often with a desire to see them hurt as much as you hurt. And chances are that you will overreach, and only make things worse.

4) **Forgiveness does not mean there are no consequences** – there may be consequences, even with forgiveness. Just because you forgive someone does not mean that they might not need to face legal or relational or vocational consequences for their actions.

5) **Forgiveness is not reconciliation** – forgiving someone doesn't mean you need to get back together or that you will start another business together. In Jesus' parable, I doubt the king hired the servant back. Forgiveness and trust are two different things. You can forgive, but trust takes time to rebuild.

6) **Forgiveness does not happen all at once** – it is usually a process. Maybe today all you can do is decide that you won't kill the person who hurt you. But that's a step in the right direction.

7) **Forgiveness does not mean that the offender is forgiven**

Consider the question of whether we should forgive someone who will not repent or apologize? Or what if we feel the need to forgive someone who is dead and will never be able to apologize? Consider the words of the theologian Miroslav Volf:

*“We can forgive, but it is not received until there is repentance. If they imitate the forgiving God, forgivers will keep forgiving, whether the offenders repent or not. Forgivers' forgiving is not conditioned by repentance. The offenders' being forgiven, however, is conditioned by repentance... Without repentance, the forgivers will keep forgiving but the offenders will remain unforgiven, in that they are untouched by that forgiveness. Why? Because they refuse to be forgiven.”*

We are to always be ready to forgive, but the offender is not forgiven until they truly repent of their sins.

Forgiveness is choosing to pay down the debt ourselves.

## 2) Where do we find the power to forgive?

For those of you who struggle to forgive someone who has sinned against you, where do you find the power and grace to forgive the way God desires you to forgive?

## 1) By seeing the debt that God has forgiven us

Certainly the main point of this passage is that we find the power and grace to forgive when we recognize how much we've been forgiven. If we are struggling to forgive someone, the power and grace to do it comes from becoming aware, or from being reminded, of the depth of our sin and how much God has forgiven us.

After last week's sermon on the two sons, someone asked about whether we should all become prodigals, just so we can better understand the love and grace of God. But rebelling in a crazy way against God isn't necessary. Even if you are like the older brother or have always been a good person, take an honest look at God's requirements and then an honest look at how far short you fall. As you read through the Sermon on the Mount, you find Jesus continually raising the bar on what God's standards are – you have heard it was said “do not murder,” but I tell you “anyone who is angry will be subject to judgment... you have heard it was said “do not commit adultery,” but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. And then he closes with this in **Matthew 5:48** – “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” Make no mistake, you are billions of dollars in debt, metaphorically speaking, to God.

And the bad news is that the penalty is not just prison, but death and Hell, eternal separation from God and all that is good.

**Romans 6:23** - *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

And like the servant, we will never be able to repay the debt through any amount of good works.

**Romans 3:20** - *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*

We are all hopelessly in debt, metaphorically speaking, to God. But here is the good news:

**Romans 5:6–10** - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died*

*for us. <sup>9</sup> Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! <sup>10</sup> For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*

When we were hopelessly in debt, spiritually bankrupt before a holy God and deserving of Hell, God chose to pay down the debt Himself. He took pity on us, canceled the debt as Jesus took the debt upon Himself on the cross, and gave us our freedom. And now:

***Romans 8:1-2*** - *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, <sup>2</sup> because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.*

The more clearly you see the debt you have been forgiven, the more you are able to forgive. The greater your awareness of your sin, the more you will be transformed by Jesus' death on the cross for your sins, and the easier it will become to forgive others. This was the revelation I experienced as a 21 year-old on the day of my baptism – even in my most holy moments, I was so full of sin. But Jesus had died for me, and God loved me.

The power to forgive comes from realizing how much you have been forgiven. And as this parable shows us, when we fail to forgive others, we are a servant who thinks they are the king. The power to forgive comes from seeing the debt that the King has forgiven you, and remembering that **not only are you just a servant, but that there is a king, there is a judge, and He alone knows who is truly to blame and how punishment or justice should be handed out.**

## 2) By trusting that there is a King who will judge

Nobody gets away with anything. Remember what Paul wrote:

***Romans 12:17-21*** - *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

God's wrath is his justice – he looks at rape, abuse, betrayal, and he gets angry, and he will bring justice. That is not your job. Your job is to love and forgive your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Overcome evil with good.

Miroslav Volf, a Yale theologian and Croatian who lived through the violence in the Balkans, wrote this in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*: *“If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence – that God would not be worthy of worship... The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God... My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many in the West... But it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence (results from the belief in) God's refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die... [with] other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.”*

Whatever was done for you, there will be justice, for there is a God of justice on the throne who will judge. Where do you find the power and grace to forgive? See the debt that God has forgiven you. And trust that there is a King who will judge.

### 3) By embracing the transformative power of forgiveness

There are few things on earth more powerful and transformative than the power of forgiveness. There's a great verse from Genesis 33:10, the story of Jacob & Esau, where Jacob is reconciled with his brother and says *“For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably.”* To forgive someone else is like showing them the face of God, who sees sin for what it is but pays the debt himself. Think of the Amish in 2006 when a gunman shot 10 children. Within hours, members of the Amish community had visited the killer's parents and expressed sympathy for their loss and support for the hard days ahead. And half the people attending the funeral of the gunman were Amish. As Jesus said:

**Luke 6:32–36** - *“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. <sup>34</sup> And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. <sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be*



*great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. <sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

If you have been wounded, you have an opportunity to showcase the gospel in a way that others do not. I do not say that to heap another burden on you, but to embrace the transformative power of forgiveness, to see the opportunity you have to display the gospel of grace to a watching world. Ask God for the power to forgive the unforgivable, just as He has done for you.

### 3) How do I forgive?

#### 1) Decide you want to forgive

It's a process, but it begins by deciding that you want to be free.

#### 2) Understand the debt you've been forgiven

Reflect on this reality; understand the depth of your sin and the depth of His love for you

#### 3) Take pity on your offender

In the parable, the king took pity on the servant. To take pity is to be moved with compassion for another person's misery. When we are offended, we often create a caricature. You blow the person's faults out of proportion. He is insensitive. She is a betrayer. He is a liar. She is disrespectful. I'm complex, a mixture of good and bad. But they are just jerks. Taking pity is to be moved with compassion, to recognize that they are human as well, that they were sinned against and sin against you. Think of **the wife who cheated on us** – instead of her becoming the unfaithful cheater, she is a woman who is capable of great love and has good qualities who is also capable of making really bad decisions and letting her emotions get the better of her. The **boss who fired us** isn't just evil and out to get us, but a man with some very good skills and some not so good skills, who has to make hard decisions that don't always please other people. Even the man who abused you is someone made in the image of God, loved by God, but capable of making some really bad choices. To take pity on someone is to not caricature them. Instead of magnifying their bad qualities – they're a betrayer or a liar – you recognize that they are complex like you. Just like you, they can be weak, they can act out of fear, they can make bad decisions, and they can hurt people without meaning to.

Think of Jesus on the cross:

**Luke 23:32-34** - *Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. <sup>33</sup> When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals-- one on his right, the other on his left. <sup>34</sup> Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*

In his moment of greatest hurt and wrong, he is interested in forgiveness. He was moved with concern for their misery instead of focusing on his own hurt.

#### 4) Trust that God is a wise, sovereign judge

It is not wrong to want justice, punishment, and accountability. But you are not God. You are not the judge. You want to take God’s seat because he is not punishing them in the manner or timing in which you think they should be. They are getting away with it, so you must take revenge. Unforgiveness reveals that at some level, you do not trust that God is good or just, and so you need to do the job for Him.

**1 Peter 2:20-24** - *But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. <sup>21</sup> To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup> “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” <sup>23</sup> When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*

Jesus entrusted himself to him who judges justly. When we are wronged, we need to entrust ourselves and our offender to God, who judges justly. This person belongs to YOU, not to me. You can deal with them, care for them, judge justly. Lord, YOU are the judge, and I trust you to judge wisely. You alone have the proper perspective, and the right to judge.

5) Express your forgiveness to them – tell them you forgive them

6) Pay down the debt yourself – choose not to dwell on the incident or use it against them.

One of the great stories of forgiveness is shared by a woman named Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch woman who passed away 30 years ago and is best known for her book *The Hiding Place*, which was also made into a movie. Corrie Ten Boom and her family had sheltered Jews from their Nazi oppressors until they were caught and sent to the concentration camp at Ravensbruck. Her father eventually died in another camp, and at Ravensbruck she was not only humiliated and degraded, but she watched the life of her sister Betsie ebb away until she also died. Yet God's grace was real in the midst of all the suffering, and after the war she went to Germany to preach God's forgiveness.

Following one service, a man came forward whom she recognized immediately. One of the worst experiences in camp had been the delousing showers, where the women were ogled and taunted by leering guards. This man was one of those S.S. guards, a man who had been one of the cruelest, especially to her sister. In Corrie Ten Boom's own words:

“It was some time ago that I was in Berlin, and there came a man to me saying ‘Ah Miss ten boom I am glad to see you. Don't you know me?’ Suddenly I saw that man, that was one of the cruelest overseers, guards in the concentration camp. ‘I am now a Christian, I have found the Lord Jesus, I read my Bible, and I know that there is forgiveness for all the sins of the whole world. Also for my sins. I have forgiveness for the **cruelties I have done**. But then I have asked God's grace for an opportunity that I could ask one of my very victim's forgiveness. And Fraulein ten Boom, once and you're forgiven – will you forgive me.’ And I could not. I remembered the suffering of my dying sister through him. But when I saw that I could not forgive, suddenly I knew, I myself, have no forgiveness. Do you know that Jesus has said that? When you do not forgive those who have sinned against, you, my Heavenly father will not **forgive you your sins**. And I knew, I am not ready for Jesus to come quick for I have no forgiveness for my sins. And I was not able. I could not I could only hate him. And then, I took one of these beautiful texts, one of these boundless resources, Romans 5:5- the love of God is shed abroad into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who is given to us. And I said thank you Jesus that you have brought into my heart, God's love through the Holy Spirit who **is given to me**. And thank you father that your love is stronger than my hatred and unforgiveness. That same moment I was free, and I could say, Brother, give my your hand and I shook hands with him. And it was as if I felt God's love stream through my arms. You've never touched so the ocean of Gods' love as that you forgive your enemies. Can you forgive? No! I can't either. But He can.”

And as she prayed, she felt not only forgiven but set free. The glacier of hate melted within and her hand unfroze. As she reached out her hand and spoke her forgiveness, she felt another burden of the past fall away.

The story of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35 teaches us that forgiveness is choosing to pay down the debt yourself. The power to do this comes from seeing the debt that Jesus paid for you, the debt that you have been freely forgiven. It comes from entrusting God to be the Judge. And it comes from embracing the transformative power of forgiveness. Let's pray that God would empower you to forgive as you have been forgiven, that the world might see the gospel through your love and mercy.