

Text: Matthew 18:21-35 (NIV)

²¹Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” ²²Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵Since 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. ²⁶“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸“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. ²⁹“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ ³⁰“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³²“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

Theme: How Can I Forgive from the Heart?

In his book *Mere Christianity* CS Lewis makes the following remark, “**Every one says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.**”¹ He then gives the example when he wrote shortly after World War 2 of how hard it is to forgive the Gestapo if you are a Pole or a Jew. But there are many examples of this in our lives. When our children fight, we tell them that they should forgive and be nice to each other. However, after they are tucked in their beds, the parents, who just said such lofty things about forgiveness, begin to fight and bicker.

A friend might complain to us about something that someone did to them. In our minds, we wonder why they are making such a big deal out of this. “Why can’t they just let it go and forgive?” Then the someone does something similar to us, and we are just as angry and unforgiving.

It is easy to tell other people how good and virtuous forgiveness is. It is very hard to forgive each other from the heart. Peter went through that same struggle. He thought that there must be a limit, “*How many times must I forgive my brother?*” In this parable Jesus shows that there is no limit. It is hard to forgive, but in our readings today we learn how we can forgive each other from the heart.

I. It begins with our own confession and absolution.

There was an interesting section in that chapter by Lewis in which he says that he often thought that it was a silly, straw-splitting distinction to talk about loving the sinner but hating the sin. How could you hate what a man did, but not hate the man?² But then he realized that he had done it all of his

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life toward one specific person. There was one person whose deeds he often hated, but he loved that person. That person was himself. He loved himself, but he hated his own sins.

That is the key to really loving ourselves. It is to see our sins, to detest them, and to confess them. We want to kill that sin and get rid of it in our lives before it destroys us. We see that in our text. The king was going to settle accounts with his servants. One of the servants owed him 10 thousand talents. This was probably equal to hundreds of millions of dollars, if not a billion. It is a sum that no one would ever be able to pay back. When this man was brought before the king, he would have regretted everything that he had done to incur this big debt. He pleaded with the king to have patience with him. He pleaded for mercy.

In our Old Testament lesson, Joseph's brother's chickens had come home to roost. They had done horrible things to him. At first they wanted to kill him, but instead they sold him into slavery in Egypt. But Joseph didn't last long as a slave. His master's wife falsely accused him, and he spent many years in a dungeon. Forgiveness is a nice thing to talk about, but how easy do you think that it was for Joseph to forgive his brothers while he was sitting in that prison? Then by a miracle of God, he was taken out of prison and made the second highest official in Egypt. It ended up that even his brothers had to come to him for food. At first his brothers didn't recognize him, but when he revealed himself to them, they were terrified. (Gen 45:3) Joseph spoke kindly to them, but they still were not sure if he really forgave them. When Jacob died, they were afraid again that Joseph might pay them back for all the evil that they had done to him.

There are times when our sins hit us in the face. We suddenly realize just how bad they were. No matter how fun they seemed at the time, we wish that we could go back and change everything. We lament them. We realize that we deserve to be punished for them. We confess them to God with a heavy heart.

What does he do? He forgives them in full. There was no way that this servant could ever repay the debt, but the king had pity on him and forgave the whole thing. That is exactly what God has done for us. We confess our sins, and he forgives them all for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ. We might remember things that we did years ago, but when we trust in Christ saving death and resurrection, God has put them out of His mind. The Greek word for "forgive" means to "send away." Through faith in Christ, God sends our sins away. They are gone. He remembers them to more. That is expressed so well in Psalm 103, *"He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."*

God has forgiven all of our sins. It is that forgiveness that enables us to forgive each other. In the second part of the parable the servant sees a man who owes him 100 denari. A denari was a day's wages. Estimate how much you make in 1/3 of a year. It is quite a bit, but compared to what he was just forgiven, it is hardly anything. There are people who have hurt us badly. They might have betrayed us, done things behind our backs, lied to us, stolen from us, and done many other things. Those things hurt. But then we remember how much God has forgiven us. We have been forgiven so much more. His grace to us makes us gracious and merciful to each other, even those who have hurt us badly. We find the strength to forgive from the heart when we trust in God's forgiving love

for us.

II. We also learn to forgive from the heart when we realize that God works all things for our good.

That is a lesson that we especially see in the story of Joseph. His brothers sold him into slavery. The very next sentence says, *“But the Lord was with Joseph”* He prospered as he lived in the house of his master. (Gn 39:2) When Joseph was thrown into prison, the next line is, *“But the Lord was with Joseph.”* He showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. (Gn 39:21) Joseph came to see that God was with him. When he revealed himself to his brothers, he told them, *“Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.”* (Gn 45:5) In today’s lesson he told them, *“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive.”* (Gen 50:20) He was able to see how God was with Him, and how God even used his brothers’ sins against him for his good, the good of many people, and even the good of his brothers.

When people sin against us, God is still with us. He promises to work all things for the good of those who love Him. He will not leave us or forsake us. Sometimes we are still in the dark as Joseph was in the dungeon. There are times when it is hard to see how God could work some things for our good and the good of others. But eventually the light will come. We might be blessed to see it during our lifetime, but we will definitely see it in eternity. We will see how God even worked the worst things that other people did against us for our good. A couple of weeks ago, I shared David’s words, *“In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?”* (Psalm 56:4) We can forgive each other from the heart when we trust in God’s power for us to work all things for our good.

Forgiveness is never easy. Revenge comes much easier. However, God’s command to us as Christians is that we do forgive from the heart. The Lord gives us the strength to do that when we confess our sins to Him and receive His forgiveness. In forgiving each other we are simply sharing the grace that God has shown to us. We also find the strength when we trust that God works all things, even the sins of others for our good. May God give us that faith in His love and His power that we will find the strength to forgive from the heart as He has forgiven us.

Amen.

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