

“Forgiveness Received, Forgiveness Given”

Matthew 18:21-35

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Prayer: God, without your Word, we have nothing to say. Without your Spirit, we cannot listen or obey. So give us your Word and your Spirit that we may honor Jesus Christ, the Lord. Amen.

Picture yourself in first-century Judea. Jesus tells a story that, to his original audience, begins as something absurd—almost comical.

A servant owes his king ten thousand talents. To put that in perspective, a single talent was about fifteen years' wages for a manual laborer.¹ Fifteen years times ten thousand—that's billions of dollars today.

You might be wondering, how could someone owe that much money? The servant isn't a household slave. He's a government official. He likely built up this debt by mishandling the king's money or by failing to collect taxes for the king. So this wasn't money he spent on himself. It was a debt connected to his job.² Even so, it is a comically impossible sum. There's no working it off. There's no payment plan. So the servant falls on his knees, begging for time—time that everyone listening knows won't help him.

Then, the unbelievable happens.

The king doesn't just grant an extension. He cancels the debt entirely. Erased. Gone. In one act of radical mercy, this servant gets his life back.

He walks out of the palace, steps into the street, and immediately runs into a fellow servant who owes him one hundred denarii—about three months' wages. That's a real sum, sure, but it's completely manageable.

So what does the one who was just forgiven do?

He grabs his fellow servant by the throat. He demands immediate payment. He ignores the man's pleas and throws him straight into prison.

¹ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. VXIII, Leander E. Keck, et al., eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 382.

² Boring, 382.

When we hear this, we're shocked. How could he do that?

For years, many of us have read this parable through a familiar lens. Right before Jesus tells it, Peter asks him, "Lord, how many times should I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?" And Jesus says, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

So we tend to treat the story like a math lesson about endless patience.

But some scholars believe Matthew added the last two verses to apply the story to his community.³ Verse 34 says the king gets angry with the first servant for refusing to forgive his fellow servant, and verse 35 has Jesus say, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister." Matthew has allegorized the parable, making the king a stand-in for God.

That presents a problem, according to Bible scholar John Dominic Crossan. Because if the king is a stand-in for God, we are left with a disturbing image of the divine: A God who grants absolute pardon, only to turn violent, revoke that grace, and hand the servant over to torturers.⁴

Crossan observes that the parable does not really answer Peter's question about repeated forgiveness. Peter asks about quantity: *How many times must I forgive?* But the servant in the parable is not asked to forgive someone repeatedly. He faces a single choice.

Instead, the parable focuses on **quality** and **transformation**: *What happens when we receive extraordinary forgiveness but refuse to extend that forgiveness to another?*

The servant was given an unbelievable gift. He was freed from an impossible debt, which should have changed him completely. But receiving mercy didn't make him merciful. As soon as he left the king, he went back to his old ways—demanding payments, threatening others, and dragging them to prison. He took the gift for himself, but refused to share it.

³ Boring, 382.

⁴ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 101-109.

This leads to Crossan's core insight: **Forgiveness that is genuinely received must become forgiveness given.**

If you receive mercy and it doesn't change how you treat the people around you, then you haven't really embraced it. You've just used it. You're still living by the old rules of debt, power, and payback.

This is why the difference between the two debts is so staggering. It isn't just a lesson in math; it exposes our own hypocrisy. We love living in a world of endless grace when we are the ones in debt. But the second someone owes us an apology, an explanation, or a favor, we immediately demand strict, unyielding justice.

This story cuts right to the heart of how we live today.

Think about a regular Tuesday evening at home. One spouse is putting away dishes, quietly fuming: *"I did the laundry on Sunday, I took out the trash yesterday, I cooked dinner tonight, and they haven't even noticed."*

Meanwhile, the other person walks in, completely oblivious, maybe forgetting to bring home the one item they were asked to pick up. Instantly, the mental ledger opens up.

We might not grab people by the throat today, but we grab them with icy silence, a sharp comment, or a mistake from six months ago. We keep meticulous records of who hurt us, who owes us an apology, and who isn't pulling their weight. We demand that people pay what they owe before we'll offer them any peace.

Jesus exposes how destructive that really is. When we live by the ledger, we build our own prison. Jesus, instead, invites us to break the endless cycle of grudges, debt, and revenge. He was calling us into a new way of living.

To experience God's grace means realizing our slate has been wiped clean—not so we can go out and demand payment from everyone else, but so we can tear up the ledgers we hold against our neighbors, our spouses, our children, and our enemies.

Nelson Mandela understood this deeply. After spending 27 grueling years in a South African prison, he walked out to lead a nation. Yet he invited his

former prison jailer to sit in the front row of his presidential inauguration as an honored guest. When asked how he could extend such grace, Mandela said:

*As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.*⁵

That is the exact choice facing the servant in Jesus' parable, and it is the exact choice facing us today. We can hold onto the debt, demand our payback, and stay locked inside a cell of our own making—or we can step into true freedom.

The fundamental question of this story isn't, "How many times should I forgive others before I've had enough?"

The question is: "Has the forgiveness I claim to have received actually turned me into a forgiving person?"

If we have truly experienced God's staggering generosity, it has to flow through us and out into the world. It has to dismantle our need to get even. Jesus' parable reminds us that when we receive forgiveness, we are called to forgive others.

May we move beyond celebrating mercy as a concept and actually practice it daily—abandoning our bitterness, breaking cycles of resentment, and proving that the mercy we've received has truly made us free.

May it be so. Amen.

⁵ Nelson Mandela, *The Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994).