



# THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

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### Forgive as Forgiven

Matthew 18:21-35 (NIV84)

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"  
<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."  
<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.  
<sup>26</sup> "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.  
<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 you back.'  
<sup>30</sup> "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed 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 turned 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 from your heart."

Last week the verses immediately preceding our gospel reading for today impressed upon our hearts the responsibility and need to be our brother's keeper, to point out the unrepentant sin of a fellow brother or sister in Christ, all in the hope to lead them back to Christ and his forgiveness for them. What we didn't talk about last week is frequency. How often should I confront sin in my brother or sister in Christ? How many times can I forgive them? How many times can I forgive them for the same sin?

Peter asks a natural follow-up question, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" (verse 21) We don't need to be harsh against Peter and immediately assume that he didn't want to forgive people too many times. Maybe he is honestly searching for parameters to figure out when people are abusing the gift of God's forgiveness. Maybe we could rephrase his question to, "How many times should I forgive someone before I am certain that they are abusing God's forgiveness and making a mockery of it?"

Don't we have the same question? To the boy who just hit his brother for the seventh time today, you call out their name in your stern voice. He immediately responds, "I'm sorry." At first you accept it, but when you've heard it for the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh time that day, you call back, "Are you really? Are you really sorry?" When the eighth time rolls around, my forgiveness is done. Now they have to prove to you that they are really sorry in order for you to forgive them.

Jesus does not put a limit on the number of times to forgive someone. He responded to Peter, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (verse 22) Why so many times? Because that is how many times God has forgiven you – and more! Jesus explains how we can forgive someone so many times by telling this extended simile – a parable, a story based on everyday life and events meant to illustrate a truth about God.

The story goes that a king wanted to settle accounts with his servants. Maybe a better term than "servants" would be "vassals" or "governors." These servants are not slaves; they are men of prominence, but they owe allegiance and they owe money to the king.

The first servant or subject comes before the king owing a debt of 10,000 talents. A talent, as used in the Bible, is not the ability to do something well, but it was a monetized standard of weight. Thousands of talents meant you owed a lot of money. I don't have an exact exchange rate for you, but figure that this guy owed the king millions, maybe billions of dollars. It would take some 1000 years or more to pay this off. We don't need to know the exact number, just that the debt was so high that there was no way that this man could pay it off in his lifetime no matter how hard he worked. So, the king ordered that the servant and his wife and his children, and everything he owned be sold to repay the debt.

At this, the debtor groveled before the king, “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.” (verse 26) The servant wanted to make this right, to pay the debt he owed. He bows down before the king, promising to make this all better if he just has the time to do it.

Amazingly the king responded by wiping out the servant’s entire debt. “The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.” (verse 27) Nothing was left outstanding. However, the king wasn’t motivated by the begging. He knew that the servant would never be able to pay off this debt. Out of compassion for him, he forgave that million, billion dollar debt, freeing him from the whole weight of it. The servant was forgiven his debt.

We are this servant. We don’t like to think about it, but we have incurred a mountainous debt of sin before God. Every time we failed to listen to him, every time we brushed off his commandments, every time I sought to serve myself first, that I failed to warn one of my brothers or sisters in Christ about their sin, I charged my account before God. My ledger was spilling over with the red of debt as the sins piled one on top of the other. Only one payment would satisfy what I had done – my death, and even that payment wouldn’t be enough. That was my punishment, not my loan satisfaction. Each and every one of us pile up a debt against God that we cannot repay, not in a 1000 lifetimes.

When God called us to account for our massive debt of sin, we groveled before him. He bound us for our crimes committed against him, held us in chains awaiting final judgment. We begged and pleaded with him, but that wasn’t enough. For his own reason, he loosened our chains. The satisfaction, the payment made in full, came by the life and death of Jesus Christ. He freed us, pardoned our mountain of debt, promising us that there was nothing more to pay. No more bills. No more due dates. No refinancing. No more debt owed. We are the forgiven servant.

What happened, though, when the forgiven servant in Jesus’ parable met up with another person who owed him, who had a debt like him? The man encounters a fellow subject, fellow vassal, who owes him 100 denarii. This is like 3 month’s wages, \$10,000 or more. It’s high, but it could be reimbursed.

Despite the massive debt he just had wiped out, this forgiven servant seized the debtor, grabbed him by the collar, put him up against a wall, and began to choke him! “Pay back what you owe me!” he demanded. (verse 28) The fellow servant groveled before the forgiven servant, gasping out, “Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.” (verse 29) Instead of having the mercy that was shown him by the king when he made the same plea, the forgiven servant refused to have any sympathy or compassion on his fellow servant – his equal. Instead, he had the man thrown into prison until he could repay his debt, which how could he being in prison?

Can you believe the nerve of this forgiven servant, how he could act so cruel and heartless after he had experienced such kindness and compassion having owed a much bigger debt? Not a single bit of the mercy that had been shown him would he give to another. As atrocious as it is, we’ve been this forgiven servant, haven’t we?

When someone wrongs you, you personally, they are amassing a debt against you – one that is not easily paid off. The child who lies to his parents, the friend who talks about you behind your back, the coworker who silently dismisses you and avoids you, the spouse who breaks their promise to you, they all have incurred a debt against you.

Over and over and over again, you are the one wronged. You are the one who is sinned against. You are the one hurt. The anger rises. There’s this little voice that populates your mind with hate, with ideas of how to get back at this person, to give this person the revenge they so much deserve. Forget forgiving them. I want them to know what they have done wrong and how much they have hurt me. I demand retribution. I demand repayment! Thus we have been the unforgiving forgiven servant.

Christ shed his blood for me. You know this. I know this. I know the mountain of sinful debt that I owed God has been wiped out by his sacrifice. Yet, I can be so unforgiving to others because Satan wants me to think that I will find satisfaction by holding on to these bitter feelings of revenge and hate. Instead of forgiving, I withhold my love from this person until they pay back their debt to me, until they make things right with me. The truth of the matter is that such an action - holding on to that debt of sin that someone incurred against me - will only hurt me. In fact, it will corrupt me just like it did the forgiven servant.

Jesus brings the parable to an end by relating how other subjects of the king witnessed the unforgiving actions of the forgiven servant and how cruelly he had treated his equal. The king called the forgiven servant to account again. “You wicked servant, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” (verses 32-33) “In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.” (verse 34) The forgiven servant lost his forgiveness when he withheld that compassion the king had shown him. Instead of going free, the forgiven servant was handed over to be tortured because he refused to show mercy as it had been shown to him.

Jesus concludes his parable ominously. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." (verse 35) This warning is meant for us. If we want to hold on to someone's debt of sin against us, if we will not forgive until we have been satisfied that the person who wronged us has done enough to make amends, that they passed our tests of being sorry enough, then God will expect the same of you. He will expect you to make amends and pay the debt you owe him - that insurmountable debt of sin.

So, what should I do? It is not our place to put a price or count on the forgiveness of others. The fact of the matter is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, who takes away the sin of the world, the sin of every single person including you and me. God has had compassion on us through Jesus Christ. The red in our ledger against God has been wiped out with no more payments due ever.

This is the forgiveness that we now give to our brothers and sisters in Christ. It's not easy to give because we want our sense of justice satisfied that tells us that wrongs must be paid for. God tells us, though, that the payment has been made. He wiped our debt out. So, have that same compassion and wipe that debt out for the person who sins against you when they ask for your forgiveness. God has forgiven them, and so we forgive no matter how many times they sin against us. We forgive as we have been forgiven. Amen.

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