

**Parable of the Wicked Servant**  
**Matthew 18:21-35**  
**ABC 5/31/20**

On July 17, 2015, 21-year-old Dylann Roof entered Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, & was welcomed into a Wed night Bible study. An hour later, as the members closed their eyes to pray, he stood up & started shooting. By the time it was over, 9 people were dead, with each of the victims having been shot at least 5 times.<sup>1</sup> In his journal, Roof stated that he specifically wanted to kill the people in the church because they were black.<sup>2</sup> It was a horrific act that shattered families & outraged a nation. But perhaps what shocked people even more was the reaction of some of the victims' families. Yes, they wanted justice, but personally, they forgave him. Instead of seeking revenge, they prayed for him, despite their own pain.

Nadine Collier, whose mother was one of the victims, told Roof, *I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you. & have mercy on your soul.*<sup>3</sup> Collier's words prompted astonishment & questions. How could anyone forgive someone like him?

In Jesus' parable we're looking at this morning, we learn how important forgiveness is to the Christian life because forgiveness is at the root of what God gives us in His grace. But forgiveness isn't natural to us. Because it's so foreign to our human nature, we find it difficult to forgive others. King Louis XII of France expressed the feeling of many people when he said, *Nothing smells so sweet as the dead body of your enemy.*<sup>4</sup> Yet nothing so characterizes the new nature of Christians as forgiveness because nothing so characterizes the nature of our Lord. Jesus' most striking & humanly incomprehensible words from the cross were, **Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing** (Lk 23:34). After being betrayed, falsely convicted, beaten, spat upon, & unjustly nailed to a cross to die an excruciating death, He held no hatred for His tormentors but instead offered them forgiveness. Following that example, Stephen's last words were, **Lord, do not hold this sin against them!** (Acts 7:60). He was at that moment being stoned to death for having committed the *crime* of preaching the gospel. Yet his heart wasn't filled with bitterness but with compassion for those killing him. Forgiveness is the stuff of true godliness. Nothing so demonstrates God's love as His forgiveness. A person who does NOT forgive is a person lacking in godly character & without Christlike love, no matter how right their theology or how righteous they

<sup>1</sup> "Autopsies: Each Church Shooting Victim Was Hit at Least 5 Times," *Chicago Tribune*, December 14, 2016

<sup>2</sup> He also said he originally thought about killing drug dealers but decided against it because he thought they would shoot back. "Dylann Roof's Confession, Journal Details Racist Motivation for Killings," *Chicago Tribune*, December 10, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Berman, "I Forgive You": Relatives of Charleston Church Shooting Victims Address Dylann Roof," *Washington Post*, July 19, 2015

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Thomas Guthrie, *The Parables Read in the Light of the Present Day*, p 316

think they are or appear to be. A Christian who won't surrender a hateful, resentful, bitter attitude toward someone who's wronged him is a person who doesn't know the peace of his redeemed humanity nor the glory of God's gracious divinity. An unforgiving Christian is a living contradiction, an oxymoron of who he is in Christ. It's central to the heart of God to forgive & only those Christians who radiate forgiveness demonstrate true godliness. Before we get to the parable & it's 3 acts, it's vital we see the context behind Jesus giving it. Open your Bibles to Mt 18.

**1. The Setting** In vs 1 Jesus was asked by the disciples, **Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?** Using a child as an object lesson, He responded, **Whoever ... humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven** (4). In that society a child had no rights, so Jesus was saying the one who gave up personal rights & submitted to His authority would have part in the kingdom of heaven. He then warned the disciples against leading one of these children of the kingdom into sin (6). They are the objects of God's attention. But Jesus knew being in a family doesn't mean there are no misunderstandings & offenses, so He gave detailed instruction as to how differences should be resolved in the family of God (15–17).

Our parable this morning is brought about because of Peter's question about forgiveness. Peter knew that forgiveness was a characteristic of God & was to be a distinctive of His children as well. He knew human nature & how many times people need forgiveness, often for the same offense. He understood the tendency to commit a sin, be forgiven, & then, before long, commit the same sin again against the same person. In light of Jesus' teaching about discipline in the church, Peter wondered how many times followers of Christ, as a church body & as individuals, were obligated to forgive fellow believers who continued in wrongdoing. How many times should they be allowed to repent & be restored to fellowship? Peter also knew the Pharisees demanded forgiveness as an evidence of personal righteousness. You've got to hand it to Peter here. He had personalized Jesus' teaching & his concern now was about his own responsibility. So he asked, **Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me & I forgive him?** From His reference to **my brother**, it's clear he was thinking about a believer, represented by himself, forgiving other believers. His question was, *Does forgiveness have a limit? I know a person who commits an offense & repents should be forgiven &*

*restored a few times. But what if he repeats it over & over again? How often must I forgive him? Up to 7x?* 7 is a number that represented fullness, & his thinking is an increase over the rabbinic view that 3x was enough.<sup>5</sup> Compared to Jewish tradition, it was generous & no doubt was based on Peter's growing understanding of Jesus' teaching & personal example of compassion & mercy. Realizing Jesus' graciousness was in marked contrast to the self-centered legalism of the scribes & Pharisees, Peter doubled their limit for forgiveness & added one for good measure.<sup>6</sup> Peter was probably thinking he was going a long way toward mastering true righteousness by suggesting this. He must have remembered that Jesus had demanded their righteousness should exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees (Mt 5:20). & certainly 7x exceeded their demands. He wanted to know whether such forgiveness would be a demonstration of righteousness that satisfied Christ's demands. Unfortunately, Peter was still thinking like the scribes & Pharisees & like fallen human nature is always inclined to think. We're all legalists at heart. He was thinking in the measurable & limited terms of law not the immeasurable & unlimited terms of grace. Law keeps count; grace does not. Therefore, **Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven or 77x"** (can be translated either way) & both convey the idea of infinity. Although 7 would be an astounding number for Peter to consider forgiving someone, God's forgiveness toward him is overwhelmingly greater, far beyond Peter's attempt to limit or gauge it by a number. Record keeping isn't to be considered, & a Christian with a forgiving heart thinks nothing about it. He forgives the 100<sup>th</sup> offense or the 1,000<sup>th</sup> just as readily & graciously as the 1<sup>st</sup>. Why? Because that's the way he's forgiven by God. Jesus wasn't setting a limit, just the opposite. He was speaking of repeated, regular sinning that's committed many times a day, day after day, & of repeated forgiveness, day after day. He was saying even if a fellow Christian sins against you every day, 7x each day, you should be ready & willing to forgive him that often. The faithful, godly Christian will never allow his own forgiveness to be surpassed by a brother's sin. We're to reflect our heavenly Father's nature, where sin against Him increases, so does his gracious forgiveness (Rom 5:20).

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<sup>5</sup> The Tractate *Joma* quotes Rabbi Jose ben Judah (c. A.D. 180) as saying, *If a brother sins against you once, forgive him; a second time, forgive him; a third time, forgive him; but a fourth time, do not forgive him.*

<sup>6</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr, [Matthew](#), Vol 3, p 145

Jesus then tells this parable to illustrate His point. We tend to sometimes look down on Peter, thinking we'd do better. But Peter was, at least, asking the right question. He realized it was right to forgive & that he had an obligation to do so. He was trying. But do we even try? To put it another way, do we forgive even 7x, not to mention the 77 or 490x suggested by Jesus? Can you think of anyone who, in the last week or month or year, you have consciously forgiven for the same offense as many as 7x? You may have, but probably not. So at least grant Peter something. He'd been in Jesus' school for only 3 years & had a great deal yet to learn, but he'd learned at least this much. To illustrate His point, Jesus tells this parable.

## 2. The Parable (23-35) A. Scene 1: The King & His Servant 23-27

Jesus introduces the parable by specifically stating it's about **the kingdom of heaven**, whose citizens include only believers. Not only that, He tells the parable **for this reason**, that is, as a direct response to Peter's question about forgiving a brother (21), which in turn was a response to His teaching about discipline within the church (15–20). Peter himself obviously was a believer, & his reference to **brother** indicates a fellow believer, especially in light of the fact that this chapter focuses on believers, the Lord's **little ones who believe in Him** (6; 10). Jesus is illustrating the need for believers to forgive each other.

The scene is tense. This accounting would be like an intensive audit by the IRS & the tension increases when the king finds one servant enormously in debt, owing **10,000 talents**. The word translated **10,000** was the highest Greek numeral, the word from which we derive our English *myriad*. The **talent** was the highest unit of currency of that day. It was the equivalent of about 6,000 denarii. Since a denarius was considered a day's wage for a day laborer, this meant if a person worked 300 days out of the year, it would take 20 years to earn one talent. If the servant owed 10,000 talents, the total would come to 200,000 years' wages!<sup>7</sup> To gain perspective, the total annual revenue collected by the Roman government from Idumea, Judea, Samaria, & Galilee was about 900 talents.<sup>8</sup> Based on those figures, **ten thousand talents** amounted to more than 11

<sup>7</sup> As calculated by Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, pp 23–24

<sup>8</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.11.4

years of taxes from those 4 provinces. It could appropriately be translated as *billions of dollars*.<sup>9</sup> In other words, it was an absurd amount. We might use the word *zillions*. Only a very few in the ancient world would ever come close to having this amount of money, much less owing it to anyone else. Since the servant cannot pay, the king, now referred to as **lord**, announces that the servant, his entire family, & all he owns will be sold to pay for the debt, even though it won't come close to covering what was owed. The servant begs for mercy, promising to **pay back everything**, as if that were possible. But on hearing his plea, the king takes pity, has mercy on him, & cancels the debt, completely forgiving it.

This act leads to the central focus of the 1<sup>st</sup> scene. Clearly the point of the king's canceling so massive a debt is to display his lavish grace. The king's compassion stands out on every count & shows God's grace in forgiving our debt of sins through His Son. That's why Jesus created the story with a servant owing such a huge debt in the 1<sup>st</sup> place. That the king wanted to settle accounts was realistic enough, but as soon as we're told a servant comes owing billions of dollars, we're meant to understand there's no way he could ever repay it. Sadly, selling people into slavery to recover debts is common in human history. Sometimes Jews who were bankrupt voluntarily sold themselves into slavery, so they'd at least have food & shelter. But the amount such a sale would bring wouldn't have equaled even a tiny fraction of the staggering debt owed. Nor would the extra time the servant attempts to negotiate have changed his situation. Again, he might have been able to earn back a little bit of the amount owed, but no employment could have made a dent in his total debt of zillions of dollars. He wanted a chance to make good on his debt but his understanding of his ability to do this was faulty, but his attitude was right. In an act of total submission, he throws himself completely on the monarch's mercy. The man was guilty, condemned, devastated, & remorseful. He had no defense & offered none. Every one of us should be overwhelmed by our sin as this man was overwhelmed by his debt. That incalculable, unpayable debt represents the debt for sin that every one of us owes God. When the Holy Spirit convicts a person of his sin (Jn 16:8), he's faced with the fact that the extent of his sin is beyond

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<sup>9</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation*, p 71

comprehension & humanly unpayable. Like Paul, when he saw his sin in the clear light of God's law, every convicted sinner has a glimpse of the utter sinfulness of sin (Rom 7:13). It's such a glimpse that Job had of himself & that caused him to **repent in dust & ashes** (Job 42:6), & it's such a glimpse that Ezra had of himself & his fellow Jews that caused him to pray, **O my God, I am ashamed & embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads & our guilt has grown even to the heavens** (Ezra 9:6). When we add up all the things we've done to fall short of God's infinitely perfect & holy standards, combined with all the things we haven't done that would have pleased Him, our debt is enormous. There's no way we can ever pay it. If it's to be forgiven, it must be wholly of God's magnificent grace. We must realize regardless of how much harm a sin does to those we sin against, it's 1<sup>st</sup> of all an offense against God. Every sin ever committed is committed against God.

Just as the unpayable amount of money in the parable is a picture of man's unpayable debt for sin, the punishment mentioned here makes one think of hell, where condemned people will spend eternity paying for the unpayable. The glory stolen from God by man cannot be repaid by man, & therefore, even after spending an eternity in hell, a person would be no nearer paying his debt & being fit for heaven than when he entered. The utter spiritual bankruptcy of every human makes it impossible for him to pay the limitless debt he's incurred because of his sin. But God graciously forgives the enormous debt of the sinner who confesses his sin & trusts in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. The moment a person acknowledges the sinfulness of his sin & turns to the only Savior from sin, his mountain of debt to God is paid in full forever.

What happens next in the parable seems inconceivable, until we realize that each one of us is guilty, in various ways, of doing what this forgiven slave did.

### **B. Scene 2: The Forgiven Servant & Another Servant 28-30**

The servant, freed from his debt & the possibility of enslavement, now goes out & finds a fellow servant who owes him money. By using the term **fellow servant** it suggests he was a fellow believer & that the principle Jesus teaches here primarily relates to believers' treatment of each other. Although Christians should be forgiving of everyone, they should be especially forgiving of one

another, because they are **fellow slaves** who serve the same King. This debt is much smaller, only 100 denarii, or 3-4 months' wages. Although the 2<sup>nd</sup> debt was extremely small by comparison to the 1<sup>st</sup>, it was a real debt & represents a real offense committed by one believer against another. If the offense weren't real, it would need no forgiveness. Jesus wasn't teaching that sins against fellow believers or against anyone else are insignificant but are minute compared to the offenses every one of us has committed against God & for which He has freely & completely forgiven us in Christ. The 1<sup>st</sup> servant violently demands repayment, grabbing & choking the 2<sup>nd</sup> servant. This man also begs for mercy, using almost exactly the same plea as the 1<sup>st</sup> servant did with the king.<sup>10</sup> Jesus highlights the contrast between the 2 servants by using parallel wording in vss 26 & 29. Both servants approach their masters by falling on their knees. Both beg their masters with the words, **Have patience with me & I will repay you.** This should have shocked the forgiven slave's memory into a right response, but those familiar words brought no sympathetic reaction in him. Instead of showing mercy like he'd received, he throttles & has his fellow servant thrown into prison until he can pay his debt. We can assume he knew how impossible it would be for this servant to earn enough to pay him back while in prison. His actions are especially startling considering the enormous amount he's just been forgiven. Almost as unimaginable as the king's forgiveness is this servant's response. His behavior seems unthinkable, even bizarre, & it's hard for us to imagine someone could act this way. That's exactly the Lord's point to Peter & the other disciples. For Christians to be unwilling to forgive one another is unthinkable & bizarre.

Vss 27 & 30 reflect as diametrically opposite a pair of reactions to the pleas as Jesus could have portrayed. The king forgives the enormous, unpayable debt. But the forgiven servant is unmerciful toward a fellow slave with, in comparison, a tiny debt. It highlights the absurdity of spurning such grace. But there's no indication that his own experience of mercy made him grateful & it clearly didn't make him merciful. Instead, he was proud, presumptuous, & hardhearted. Unfortunately, as Christians we can often reflect a similar arrogance & insensitivity. Although we've been totally & forever forgiven of all offenses before God, on the basis of His grace, we often act as if we're

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<sup>10</sup> The only difference is that the first servant says he will pay back **everything**.

forgiven on the basis of our own merit. We may even look down on our brothers & sisters in Christ with disdain & a sense of superiority. We still have the capacity to give way to the sinful, spiteful ways of our unredeemed humanness. But, **even so**, Paul says, **consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts** (Rom 6:11–12). We want to see ourselves as the 2<sup>nd</sup> servant here but the reality is we are the 1<sup>st</sup> one. We're so often ungrateful, spiteful, & unforgiving. This parable is an unflattering picture of the sinful flesh that still resides in every believer & that has caused great conflict & damage within relationships & within the church. Those who've been graciously, totally, & permanently forgiven by God for their immeasurable sins against Him are to act like the divine children & heirs they've become by reflecting the love & compassion of their heavenly Father. They're to **be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, how? just as God in Christ also has forgiven them** (Eph 4:32). It's no wonder the 2<sup>nd</sup> man's fellow servants were **deeply grieved** or **greatly distressed** or **outraged** (31). We're meant to react to Jesus' story with grief, distress, & anger as well.

**C. Scene 3: The King & His Servant Reprise** (31-34) The other servants are upset & report what's happened to the king. This time he's very angry. Because the servant didn't have mercy on his fellow servant as the king had on him, he turns him over to the jailers to be tortured until he can pay back his own debt. This is a different side of the king than what we saw earlier. Yes, he can exhibit lavish, unprecedented love, but he can also unleash righteous anger & punishment. DA Carson captures the balance of mercy & judgment reflected here: *Jesus sees no incongruity in the actions of a heavenly Father who forgives so bountifully & punishes so ruthlessly, & neither should we. Indeed, it is precisely because He is a God of such compassion & mercy that He cannot possibly accept as His those devoid of compassion & mercy.*<sup>11</sup> The logic of vss 32–33 is inescapable. One man was forgiven so enormous a debt, how could he possibly refuse to show mercy to his fellow servant, who owed a comparatively paltry debt? Unlimited forgiveness ought to be demonstrated with mercy toward others because it's a reflection of a right relationship with the Father. Or to

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<sup>11</sup> "Matthew," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol 8, p 407



state it another way, God's forgiveness of our sins should motivate us to forgive those who offend us. We should be **deeply grieved** when a fellow believer is unforgiving, because his hardness of heart not only tends to drive the offender deeper into sin but also causes dissention & division within the church. It tarnishes the church's testimony before the world & it grieves the Lord Himself.

So the other slaves went to the king with this awful story, expecting that proper action would be taken against the unforgiving creditor. This feature of the parable forms an interesting insight into the believer's responsibility not only to go through the steps of disciplining a sinning brother but to petition the Lord Himself to act in chastening & purging the ungracious sinning child of God. When we allow sin to control an attitude or action, we're being **wicked**, because sin is always sin. The sin of unforgiveness is exceedingly **wicked** in a believer, because he has infinitely greater motivation & power to be forgiving than does a person who's never experienced God's redeeming grace. How can a person accept God's mercy for all his sin, an unpayable debt, & then not forgive some small offense committed against himself? It isn't that the king expected the 1<sup>st</sup> slave to give his fellow slave a chance to repay the debt but that he expected him to **have had mercy on his fellow slave** & to forgive his debt entirely, **even as** the king had **had mercy on** the forgiven slave & had forgiven his debt entirely.

**3. The Conclusion** (35) So far, so good, perhaps. The parable seems to have resolved itself in a way that fits our sense of justice. We might wish Jesus had stopped there, but He concludes with this disturbing word: **35**

This is troubling because it seems to imply a *works* salvation; if you forgive others (a work), you'll be forgiven. But even if it doesn't teach that, it seems to indicate that grace continues by means of works. We may be saved by grace, but if we fail to act rightly, God may cancel His forgiveness & have us thrown into hell anyway. Such an interpretation is unacceptable when compared with what the Bible teaches so clearly elsewhere (Eph 2:8-10). Let's read it again: **35**

Jesus makes it clear the king represents God, the heavenly Father. The servants naturally stand for the people of this king, children of God. Each of us must identify with the greatly indebted

servant & the people who wrong us are like his fellow servant. Because He is holy & just, God is always **moved with anger** at sin, including the sin of His children. God has holy indignation whenever a Christian sins (Ps 6; Acts 5:1–10). As chastening for his sin, the unforgiving slave was **handed over to the torturers** (not executioners) **until he should repay all that was owed him**.

To sum up the parable, Jesus is declaring the spiritual debt God has forgiven us is so enormous that any refusal on our part to forgive others is as ludicrous as this man's behavior & that God will be equally stern in His punishment of such lack of forgiveness. The point is obvious: We must be limitless in forgiving others since God has been infinitely forgiving with us.<sup>12</sup>

Every Christian feels the Lord's discipline at some time or another, because every one of us needs it at times. It's natural that God's **discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness** (Heb 12:11). When we forget our own forgiveness by God (or take it for granted) & refuse to extend forgiveness to fellow believers, He can put us under such **torturers, tormentors, & inquisitors** as stress, guilt, hardship, pressure, or other difficulties until the sin is confessed & forgiveness is granted. As James tells us, **Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy** (2:13). That's what Jesus unmistakably declares to be the parable's point: **So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart**. The unforgiving believer will satisfy God only by offering his own forgiveness to those who sin against him, most especially **his brother** in Christ.

Jesus isn't speaking here of the forgiveness that brings salvation, saying that God only saves those who are forgiving. No, that would be works righteousness. He's speaking of people forgiving each other after they've experienced His grace. Those who are saved, transformed, given a new nature in Christ, & have the indwelling Holy Spirit will generally show that changed life by having a forgiving attitude (Mt 6:14–15). But there will be times when we fall into the sin of unforgiveness & this instruction is for those times.

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<sup>12</sup> Boice, J. M., *The Gospel of Matthew*, p 395

We've covered the parable & its meaning this morning & we could leave it at that. But this parable & forgiveness raise questions that need to be answered. That's part 2 for next week. Let me close with another true story of forgiveness.

Corrie ten Boom, who was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during WWII for sheltering Jews, tells a remarkable story about forgiveness, illustrating how it's something that can only come from God Himself. During a church service in Munich after her release, she saw one of her former SS guards from the camp. Seeing him brought back painful memories from the camp, memories of humiliation, degradation, & suffering for her & her sister, who died there.

After the service the guard approached her, holding out his hand, saying, *How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein. To think, as you say, He has washed my sins away!* Anger swept over her, & she was unable to forgive him. She quickly prayed for Christ to forgive her & help her forgive him. She took his hand, & to her amazement she was filled with an almost overwhelming love for him. She concluded, *I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.*<sup>13</sup>

After what God in Christ has done for us, could we ever refuse to make any attempt to forgive those who've sinned against us? I believe the point of Jesus' parable here, as harsh as it may sound, is that the answer to that question is, *No*. Why? Because no one who's truly sensed how much he owes God, how much he's offended God, how much his sin has separated him from an infinitely holy & loving Creator, & who also recognizes that God in Christ has forgiven him, through no merit of his own, will withhold forgiveness from another. No one who truly understands these concepts & has received that forgiveness could ever act in such a way as the servant in this parable. True Christians could never refuse to forgive one another, choosing instead to inflict the worst possible vengeance. May God guard all of us from ever behaving like the servant in Jesus' story. & may He grant us the ability to forgive from the heart. PRAY

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<sup>13</sup> Ten Boom, *Hiding Place*, p 215