



## Matthew 18:21-35

Trinity 15, September 13, 2026  
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*Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"<sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."<sup>23</sup> "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants."<sup>24</sup> When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.<sup>25</sup> And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made."<sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'<sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.<sup>28</sup> But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.'<sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'<sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.<sup>31</sup> When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.<sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.'<sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'<sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.<sup>35</sup> So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

### Mercy Received? Mercy Given.

Jesus spends the entirety of Matthew chapter 18 describing how to deal with sin. How *He* deals with sin, how we are to deal with sin. A good topic for us, because "how to deal with sin" does not come *naturally* to us. We don't know how to deal with our *own* sin, and we *certainly* don't know how to deal with our neighbor's sin.

We read the first half of the chapter as last week's Gospel reading. All the way back in the beginning of the chapter, Jesus was describing those who were the *greatest* in His Kingdom. And who are those who are greatest in His Kingdom? It is those who have *nothing* to offer. Those who can only *receive*, even a little child who can only *receive* the free gift of forgiveness in Christ. And so, Christ exhorted us to be like little children—nothing to offer, only receiving—receiving forgiveness for our sins.

And this was followed by some warnings. Jesus said it'd be better if you tied a really big millstone around your neck and threw yourself into the sea than to cause one of those little ones to sin. He said it'd be better to enter heaven crippled and lame than to waltz into hell with two hands and two feet and a full set of eyes. Again, this is how *Jesus* deals with sin. He doesn't minimize it, doesn't excuse it, doesn't hide it, doesn't cover it up—He exposes it for what it is, and He *forgives* it.

And then Christ showed just how much He desires to forgive the sins of sinners. He told the parable of the *lost* sheep. What happens if you have one-hundred sheep and one of them wanders off? What does the Shepherd do? He goes and seeks after that lost sheep. That's the nature of Jesus' work. That's the nature of His Kingdom. He seeks and He finds those who are lost—even if they're lost of their own volition—and He *forgives*—even those who have nothing to offer in return.

And then the parable got literal. And the subject changed. Because then, Jesus began addressing us. He was no longer speaking about metaphorical shepherds going after metaphorical sheep who are lost. No, now it's about *us* going after a brother or a sister who is lost. He gave us steps—not for excommunication, but—steps for regaining our brother. How we are to deal with the sin of a brother by confronting that sin head-on and then forgiving.

And the instructions were clear. First, go to him one-on-one. Next, you might have to take along a couple more witnesses. If still no positive response, take the matter to the church. All the while, look for opportunity to forgive! But if after all of that no repentance is worded out, then that brother is a *lost* brother, an outsider. Since that is what sin does; sin separates. Separates us from God and separates us from one another. But *even if* that separation takes place, *still* the goal remains to forgive. The goal is *always* to forgive, to restore fellowship with one another and with God. The last thing that Jesus wants for *anyone* is to have them cut off from Him and His Church.

Those *were* the instructions Jesus gave us for how we are to deal with sin, and they were clear... but *maybe* not clear enough for everyone. That's why Peter asks the clarifying question: ***"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"*** It's hard to know exactly what's on Peter's mind here, but he seems to want to set some sort of limit. "I know the *process* Lord, but how many times is *too* many times to forgive?"

And Jesus, whom we know loves to use exaggeration to make a point, does just that. ***"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."*** Seventy-seven times, which *may* be a reference to Lamech's boast in Genesis, ***"If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold."*** (Genesis 4:24) Well, rather than seventy-sevenfold *revenge*, Jesus calls us to seventy-sevenfold *forgiveness*. Either He's saying that, or He might also be saying ***"seventy times seven."*** (NKJV) Which, quick math tells you is 490 times. But the point is not that we count until we get to 491 and then quit forgiving. The point is to *stop* counting. The point is that you *can't* put a limit on forgiveness. The point is that you are Jesus' disciples. And so, you *must* forgive those who sin against you.

So, let's say that happens, because it will. Someone sins against you, it *really hurts*. What do you do? That's not a theoretical question. Because every one of us could list someone, maybe even many people who have sinned against us. In fact, I'll give you a minute. Think in your head, "Who has sinned against me?" You got somebody in mind? Maybe several people? *I* have a list. *You* have a list. In fact, *I* might be on your list. There's a chance of that.

I know people who have wronged me, spoken ill of me, lied about me—at least in my opinion. And I have done that very same thing to others, maybe even to you. So, what are we going to do about it? Well, there's the obvious, it's what Jesus tells us to do. Forgive. Forgive without keeping count. But that's a *hard* thing to do.

On the other hand, there's something that comes very *easy* to us, and that's the *opposite* of what Jesus tells us we *must* do. It's what *I* like to do instead. Because there are days when I want revenge. There are days when I want that person to suffer as much as they have caused me to suffer. There are days when I wish they'd just disappear, for good, so that I never have to see them again.

But you see where this goes, don't you? See the isolation that brings, the separation that results from me ignoring the problem? Because it leaves that other person where they are, in *sin* and in *need* of forgiveness. And I have it to give, but I'm *withholding* it from them. And that's a terrible way to leave someone. And according to Jesus, *if I do that*, if I'm comfortable leaving someone in sin and withholding forgiveness, then I'm stuck with the same result for myself.

That's really the point of the parable of our text. "Forgive, or else." You must forgive those who sin against you. And if you do not, you will perish. That's what *Jesus* is saying. And Jesus means what He says.

So that, rather urgently, brings up the question which I would like to answer. It's the question of *how*—not in the sense of mental processes or internal strength or something like that—but "how" in terms of spiritual power? How is it possible for us to forgive some of those *real, painful hurts*?

And I would suggest that the answer is sort of embedded in the question of verse 33. ***"And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?"*** I'm going to rephrase that question a little bit: "It was *necessary* then, wasn't it, that you have mercy on your fellow servant as I also had mercy on you?" In this story, there's really only one answer to that question. The answer is "yes." It was necessary for ***mercy received*** to become ***mercy given***. And this means that the power, the spiritual power to forgive comes from *holding on* to that mercy and never, ever forgetting it.

Now I think we all know that Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of God are usually *unusual*. They're strange, they're unexpected. They tell about a man who's a wasteful and foolish sower of seed, about a king who sends his son to certain death at the hands of murderous workers, about a vineyard owner who hires workers in a way that no one ever did, then or now. And in *this* story, today's parable, there is a stunning mercy. There is a strange and unforgettable mercy.

10,000 talents in technical current financial terms is, I believe, a gazillion bajillion dollars. That's what the first debtor owes. *More* technically, it's 60,000,000 days worth of work, since one talent is equal to 6,000 days of labor. That's what this debtor owes and he has the *audacity* to pledge, ***"Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."*** Yeah, right! You and what army?

And the master *does* forgive the debt, but it is *not* because of that man's pledge. And it is not about patience either. It's about *mercy*. Now, you can define mercy in a number of ways, but one of the ways is that mercy means that "you don't get what you deserve." And mercy is a powerful, powerful thing.

It's so powerful that it sent Jesus to call tax collectors and sinners in fulfillment of the Scripture, ***"I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."*** (Matthew 9:13) Mercy is so powerful that it sent Jesus to bring rest to the weary, true Sabbath rest which was greater than any temple or Sabbath ordinance because God ***"desire[s] mercy, and not sacrifice."*** (Matthew 12:7) And that mercy has a name. Mercy's name is *Jesus*.

And although Peter was not allowed to calculate and count up sins and to figure things out in advance, Jesus *was* and Jesus *did*. And He was a powerful mercy that no one could stop, and He knew what it

would take. He knew *everything*. He knew that it would *take everything*. And so, He went and He *sold everything*. He sold everything that He had. And in powerful mercy for you and for me—He saw our debt, every secret hidden bit of it, and seeing the debt, He had *compassion*. He had mercy, and He took the debt away. That's how strong mercy is. It's stronger than sin. It's stronger than *your* sin. It's stronger than death. It's stronger than *your* death.

And that mercy has been given to me. And that mercy has been given to you. I *have* this mercy. *You* have this mercy. So, let me ask you a question that makes sense only in terms of this mercy: “It is necessary then, is it not, that you have mercy on your fellow servant as Jesus has had mercy on you? It is *necessary*, isn't it?” The answer is “yes.”

See, when you hold on to the mercy, you let go of the revenge. When God's mercy sets you free, then you set your sister free, your brother free. When God's mercy softens your heart, even when it's hard and even when you don't know when the hurt will go away and even when it makes no sense at all, Jesus opens our lips. And we say, “Yes. Yes, it is necessary.” **Mercy Received? Mercy Given.** Forgiven, I *will* forgive. It just makes sense.

Brothers and sisters-in-Christ, that same mercy—that stunning mercy, that unforgettable mercy—it's here again today. It's here for you. It's here in your Savior's words. And He invites you to bring your debt, to bring your weakness, to bring your *nothing* to the mercy of Jesus. And I promise you, *He* promises you, that His mercy will be strong *for* you and *through* you, in Jesus' saving name. Amen.

***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.