

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Forgiven and Forgiving”

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Matthew 18:21-35 (The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant)

Peter was beginning to wonder just how far he had to go with this business of forgiveness. Jesus kept talking about it; He just wouldn't let it go. He said things like, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Mt. 6:14). Peter decided to test the boundaries. "Lord, how many times?" "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Peter thought he was erring on the side of generosity. The rabbis of the day were saying three times was enough. After that, it's an eye for eye. But Jesus says, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." In other words, just keep on forgiving. Make forgiveness and mercy your way of life. Then Jesus tells a little story.

A king decides it is the day of financial reckoning. His men drag in a guy who somehow managed to get himself into boatload of debt. He owes the king 10,000 talents. How is anybody's guess, but this is far more than any individual could ever hope to repay. So, the master orders the servant and his wife to be sold into slavery to recover a bit of the money.

The servant falls to his knees and begs. "Be patient, and I will pay you everything." He makes no excuses. He does not ask for mercy. He asks for patience. He's not a slacker. Though an act of futility, he will work as hard as he can to repay this debt.

The master feels pity for the man, and out of his pity he cancels the debt. He doesn't cut it in half. He doesn't expect payments on the interest. He wipes the slate clean.

Then the story takes another surprising turn. This servant goes out and finds someone who owes him a hundred denarii, a drop in the bucket compared to what he was just forgiven. But he grabs the guy by the neck and starts choking him. The man falls to his knees and begs, "Have patience with me and I will pay you." The words should have sounded familiar; he had just used them himself. But apparently the mercy given him hasn't changed his world view; it was just a onetime event. So, he orders the man imprisoned until all is repaid.

Other servants witnessed the man's treachery and can hardly believe it. They blow the whistle on him, and this time the master has no pity. He turns that rascal over to the jailers until he should pay all his debt. Since the debt cannot be paid, and the jailers were renown for being torturers, clearly this represents eternal hell. Just in case we missed the point, Jesus ends the parable with a stark warning to his listeners, who now include you and me: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

We wish he hadn't said that. It was such a fun story until the moral of it came along. But it answers Peter's question and reveals just how serious Jesus is about forgiveness. We are to forgive and keep on forgiving as God has forgiven us. Our debt was huge. To try to repay it is futile. God has completely forgiven it in Christ. Having been given this mercy how could we ever withhold it from others?

Think about this, won't you, living in this culture that has grown so comfortable in refusing mercy to those who have sinned. Collectively, we don't put the best construction on anything; no, we assume the worst about their person and character. If this is what they were like in college twenty years ago, this is what they are like today. We don't explain everything in the kindest of ways; no, we want to see them humiliated. We don't cover over a multitude of sins with love. No, we cancel them out of society. We ruin them, their careers, their reputations, and take delight in doing so. It makes us feel righteous.

We like to think we're simply holding people accountable for their words and actions. We like to think it serves the general good as an agent of change. In truth, it constitutes a hate-fueled public shaming that

aims to ruin a person, not rehabilitate him. It ignores the possibility that a person can grow and change and amend his ways.

It's remarkable. Twenty years ago, everyone was talking about tolerance and inclusivity. We didn't like talking about the sin of others. That was taboo. It was considered unloving, intolerant, and exclusive. Now, *everyone* is talking about the sin of others, but not in a merciful way. No, we let our rage guide us. We forget we are every bit as fallible as the person we are condemning. Forgiveness is not simply an innocent person forgiving one who is guilty. It is one guilty person forgiving another guilty person. In the familiar words of John, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn.1). Jesus said, "Let he who is without guilt cast the first stone". Two thousand years ago his hearers got the message, dropped their stones and quietly walked away. Today the air is thick with stones, and it worries me. Any society that refuses mercy is in no position to ask for or expect mercy from God.

We cannot really control the character of our culture; we can only control ourselves. And for individuals, Jesus has a warning. Any person that is merciless and unforgiving, forever demanding accountability, will also, in the end, be shown no mercy or forgiveness. Be careful about this, folks. Jesus said it in the strongest of terms. Therefore, I should not dance around it either. There are lots of ways to get to hell; one of them is by being unmerciful and unforgiving.

When the world is speaking about publicly shaming the sinner, Jesus is speaking about His overwhelming forgiveness. That's the Good News in this parable. It points us to the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ, equal to any moral debt and depravity you and I might have. With this parable, He's inviting us to consider how broad and high and deep his love and mercy are. Remember that huge debt that was canceled outright? He has done that for you. Every sin of thought, word and deed, in the past and future has been washed with the blood of Christ. This mercy changes your world view.

That first servant had a debt so great it threatened his entire life. He could be put in jail, his property liquidated, his wife and children sold. He begs for the opportunity to work it off. He will hammer away at it until he drops dead. But the master has a different vision for the man's future. He wants to bring him into a new kind of kingdom. Not a kingdom where you pay your debts, but a kingdom where your debts are paid. Not a kingdom where you hammer away at your religion to save yourself, but a kingdom where you are saved, a kingdom ruled by the mercy and grace of the Master, our Savior Jesus.

Trouble is, this servant went out into the world and no longer saw himself living in that kingdom. No, he re-entered the dark place, where every debt needs to be paid and every debtor held accountable. He demands justice, not mercy. He wants accounts settled and paid in full. For him, forgiveness was a single transaction, not a way of life.

Unfortunately, we can fall into the same temptation. Sometimes we limit God's grace to a moment in time, rather than a state of being. But God's forgiveness changes your world view. When God forgives you on account of Christ, he brings you into a new kingdom. It's not just a momentary experience, a get-out-of-jail-free card so that you can work harder to accomplish your salvation. No, our baptism puts us into a state of grace, grace that we also want to share with others. We are not servants trying to work our way out of an impossible debt. We are the children of God who live in His Kingdom where His grace pervades. Sure, if you want, you can go back to the other kingdom where you try to repay your load of debt . . . but it's an exercise in futility. Who would ever want to do that? Instead, live in the mercy of God.

Our world is suddenly fixated on the sin of others, but we don't want to be part of that. We don't want to miss out on something new God is doing right now, which is setting people free from their debt through the forgiveness of sins. As our psalm says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." That's a long way and that's what God has done for You in Christ. He has forgiven you the whole load, and calls you, frees you, and sends you to live in that forgiveness, in that state of grace, and share it with others.