

### A Parable on Forgiving One Another

Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew 18:21-35 - *"Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"* <sup>22</sup> *Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.* <sup>23</sup> *Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.* <sup>24</sup> *And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.* <sup>25</sup> *But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made.* <sup>26</sup> *The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'* <sup>27</sup> *Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.*

<sup>28</sup> *"But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!'* <sup>29</sup> *So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'* <sup>30</sup> *And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.* <sup>31</sup> *So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done.* <sup>32</sup> *Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.* <sup>33</sup> *Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?'* <sup>34</sup> *And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.* <sup>35</sup> *"So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."*

#### Background Notes

In Matthew 18:15-20 the Lord taught the three-step procedure for believers to follow if we are wronged by another believer. Step 1 is to go "one on one" to that offending brother or sister. If that doesn't help, Step 2 is to go to the offending person with two or three other believers as witnesses. Finally, Step 3 is to lay the problem before the leaders of the local church who have the authority to exercise discipline.

In this context of church discipline, Peter asked the Lord how many times he should forgive a brother who has sinned against him. From early rabbinic literature we learn that the rabbis taught that a person should forgive an offender 3 times. Peter thought that he was going well beyond the extra mile when he said we should forgive 7 times. But the Lord said, No, we should forgive 70 X 7 times! Some translations say 77 times - the Greek here could be translated either way. And we should never take revenge on a person who offends us. Romans 12:19 says, *"Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord."*

In any case, the point that our Lord was making is hard to miss: we should **be willing to forgive** any number of times. Notice that I said, “be **willing** to forgive”! That’s the key! Being willing to forgive doesn’t mean that you should just overlook the offense and not do anything about it.

So what should we do? We should follow the procedure that is outlined in Matthew 18:15-20. Some Christians think that if you have truly forgiven an offender, you do nothing – you simply overlook the offense. That’s not taught in the Bible! Although there may be cases when you choose not to do anything, the Lord gave us a three-step procedure to follow when we’ve been wronged, right here in verses 15-20. So we should start with a willingness to forgive as we take Step 1.

This is what our Lord said in Luke 17:3-4: *“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.”* Notice: **if he repents**. But what if he doesn’t repent? You follow continue to follow the procedure of Matthew 18:15-20. It is your option, and this passage is authority to take action from the Lord Himself.

Being willing to forgive is the key to your peace of mind. It’s key for nipping off a “root of bitterness” before it starts, and for freedom from the desire to take revenge on the offender. It’s another way of saying to “forgive in your heart.” But remember that being willing to forgive, or to forgive in your heart, doesn’t mean that you’re forced to do nothing – the Lord gave us a procedure to follow.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. A forgiving spirit is surely expected by our heavenly Father.

In order to illustrate the forgiving spirit that is expected of His disciples (both then and today), the Lord gave a parable. A king had a servant who owed the king a huge debt. In the parable, the king obviously represents God and the man who owned millions of dollars (by today’s standards) obviously represents us. We are “in debt” to God, because we have sinned against Him and we have **no way** to pay the huge debt. In that day, if a person couldn’t pay back a debt, he could be thrown into debtor’s prison and his wife and family could be sold into slavery until the debt was paid! In the parable, the king showed mercy to the servant and forgave him the great debt. Notice how referred to the servant’s debt: “**all** that debt” (v32). What an illustration of our great debt that God is willing to forgive, because Jesus went to the cross and died for our sins. He paid our debt!

The man whose debt had been forgiven now went out and found a fellow servant who owed him less than a hundred dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded immediate payment. He showed no mercy, and had his fellow slave thrown into debtor’s prison. This clearly showed that the first servant wasn’t grateful for the grace that the king had shown to him, so the king then threw this unforgiving man into prison until he paid his whole debt - which was impossible.

If we have truly responded to the grace of God and received His forgiveness, then we should respond to His goodness by having a **forgiving spirit** towards others. It is expected of us! In fact, a forgiving spirit is proof that we have entered the family of God! **Not having a forgiving spirit is evidence that we have never truly repented.** *“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).* A forgiving spirit is surely expected by our heavenly Father.

## 2. An unforgiving spirit is severely judged by our heavenly Father.

*“Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (v32-35).*

Now comes a big question: in this parable, does the unforgiving servant represent a believer who loses his salvation, or a believer who is disciplined and loses his reward, or an unbeliever who ends up in hell? The fact that he is forgiven at the beginning of the parable favors the interpretation that the man represents a believer. He can't represent a believer who loses his salvation, however, because that would contradict portions of Scripture that teach believers cannot lose their salvation. Therefore, in this view, his being thrown into prison at the end of the parable would be interpreted as discipline in this life or eternal loss of reward in the future.

The problem with this view is that, in the parable, the man is handed over to the jailers and tortured until he can repay the debt - a debt he can never repay. This sounds more like eternal punishment in hell than a loss of reward, doesn't it? There are a number of other features about this parable that would indicate that our Lord had an unbeliever (one who only professes to be a servant, or one who is a “Christian in name only”), and not a true believer.

Notice that this is a parable of the “kingdom of heaven.” Verse 23: *“Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.”* Remember that the “kingdom of heaven” is not the same as heaven. The kingdom of heaven is present-day Christendom, in which we have the true and the false - the wheat and the tares, the wise and the foolish, the true servants and the false “Christian-in-name-only” servants.

Furthermore, notice the man's attitude: *“The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all’” (v26).* He didn't say, “I can't pay! I have nothing! I deserve to be thrown into prison.” But what did he say? He said, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.” This is certainly typical of unbelievers who have no real understanding of the enormous debt of sin they owe. They see no need to repent, and they think that they can work their way into heaven by their own “good deeds”!

Notice, too, that before the man was initially forgiven of his debt, he was never really sorry that he had piled up such a huge, un-payable debt. His attitude and actions are proof of this. The man was “forgiven” in the sense that the king took care of the debt, but not in the sense that the man repented and received forgiveness. He never repented. He was not touched by the king’s mercy, nor was he thankful.

In the same way, the penalty of all our debt of sin has been paid. When our Lord Jesus went to the cross and died for the sins of the world, His atoning work was **unlimited** in scope. It was sufficient to forgive every sin that has ever been committed. God Himself paid the debt! **Forgiveness is declared -- but it must be received to be effective!** The attitude and actions of the wicked slave prove that he didn’t repent, because he didn’t show gratitude for the king’s grace to him.

The fact that the king called him a “wicked slave” is another indication that he represents an unbeliever. The Lord would never call a member of own His family a “wicked slave.” True believers can lose out on a reward for what they could have done with their lives, but failed to do - but the Lord will never call a true believer a wicked slave! Therefore, in the parable, the “prison and torture” represent hell. The unforgiving spirit of the wicked servant was evidence that he had never repented for his debt, and he was not a true servant. An unforgiving spirit is severely judged by our heavenly Father.

## Practical Application

### Make sure of your salvation!

*“So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (v35).*

This Scripture is not teaching that you can lose your salvation if you don’t forgive an offending brother or sister. All Scripture must harmonize with other Scripture, and other Scriptures clearly teach that true believers can’t lose their salvation. However, this Scripture is a warning to us, as believers, to examine our hearts and make sure of our salvation. Remember that Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed the Lord, was listening when the Lord gave this parable - and he failed the test of verse 35.

What about you? Have you truly received the Lord Jesus as your Savior? Are you willing to take that first step, and forgive your erring brother or sister from your heart? If you say, “I can forgive, but I can never forget,” that may be an indication that you’re unwilling to forgive. **A true believer is willing to forgive. Make sure of your salvation!**