

Matthew 18:21–35

21 Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ 22 Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

23 ‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” 29 Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’

Faithful God, how blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Sanctify us by your Word and Spirit so that we may glorify you in the company of the faithful; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today’s scriptures all relate to forgiveness in some way. It’s a great theme, especially for us as Christians, but it’s also a tough one for people to really get behind. Let’s face it; it’s usually easy to forgive someone who committed a minor infraction against us, but it can be much more difficult to forgive someone who has deeply wounded us. There are some things that people do that make it almost impossible to reconcile with them. And for each of us that line of reconciliation could be in a different spot.

Yet I want to point out that forgiveness is not necessarily reconciliation. This passage should never be used, for example, to tell someone in an abusive relationship that they need to forgive their abuser and go back to them and the status quo. Forgiveness is not always for the benefit of the offender, in many cases the person who was offended needs to try to forgive the offender, because anger, hurt, humiliation, and many of the other emotions that can come from being wronged are very heavy to carry. They can weigh us down and crush us if we don’t let them go. It is possible to forgive someone without ever letting them back into our lives, or giving them the opportunity to hurt us again.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story about this. A woman in his congregation came to him. She was a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She said to him, “Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he’s living in up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?” He answered her, “I’m not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn’t, it was mean and selfish. I’m asking you to forgive because he doesn’t deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I’d like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of

it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to the resentment, but you're hurting yourself."

Our gospel passage starts out with a question from Peter. "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Now before we get on Peter's case too much, we need to remember a few things. This passage is right after the passage from last week. The one where Jesus outlines how people should deal with someone from the church community who has sinned against them. After trying to resolve things one on one, we are to bring a couple of fellow community members to witness the confrontation. If things are still not resolved, we are to bring it to the whole community. If they still are unwilling to listen to the community, we are to treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector. This sounds pretty harsh, doesn't it? How do you think we are to treat Gentiles and tax collectors? Well... Jesus ended up having dinner with them and healing them if they needed it! The point being that as Christians we are still supposed to try to put our best effort forward.

So, Peter asking this question soon after hearing this explanation from Jesus kind of means that he missed the point. On the flip side, he did pick the number seven, which is considered a holy number of perfection, so maybe he is asking about perfect forgiveness. Jesus' response is basically saying, your forgiveness needs to be more than perfect forgiveness, it needs to be perfect times perfect, or even infinite forgiveness. The Greek number is a bit unclear as to whether it is seven times seven, or seventy-seven times seven. Either way, it's a lot of forgiveness.

Then to drive the point home Jesus tells a parable. This parable is certainly about forgiveness, but it's also about something else. I'll get to the second part in a bit.

I want to emphasize that this parable is hyperbole. The actions of the characters and the circumstances are extreme, to the point of absurdity.

Let's start with the idea that a king would loan money to his slaves. It's possible that it might happen, but if it did, it was very rarely. The second point is the amount of money that was lent is completely over the top. A talent was about 130 pounds of silver and would take a laborer about fifteen years to earn. This means that the servant owed the king about 150,000 years of labor! In other words, he would never, ever be able to pay this debt back.

This actually brings up a side point. Who in their right mind lends such a huge amount of money to someone that has no hope of paying it back? As I've recently been reminded again as we go through the process of buying a house, banks are very careful about who they lend money to. They make sure that it is possible for the person to reasonably pay it back.

About the only folks who aren't as careful about this are the student loan companies. They are more than happy to lend out huge amounts of money for people to get an education. Don't get me wrong, I think it's very important for people to have the opportunity to get an education, I just think that the system is totally broken when it comes to how that education is paid for.

The student loan companies tend to charge as much or more in interest than a bank does for a mortgage. To top it off there is no guarantee that a person with a college degree will be able to pay that money back. I have colleagues from seminary who went straight through from undergraduate school and racked up well over \$100,000 in student loans. Most ministers are not going to find it easy to repay that kind of debt, even if they do get a good full-time ministry job. Some of these colleagues have ended up never entering ministry or dropped out after having some bad experiences. The debt is like a weight on their shoulders weighing them down. The loan companies are more than willing to lower your payments to make it easy for you to pay

something, but the interest keeps accruing. I recently saw something on Facebook about a woman who had a \$40,000 dollar loan that she has payed on since 2014. She never missed a payment. She currently owes \$41,000, and that's after six years of payments!

Getting back to our parable; if this story were real, the king should have known better. The slave has no way of paying off this debt. The king threatens to sell the man, his wife, and his children. It should be noted that this action won't give the king enough money to pay off the debt. It won't even come close to it. The king threatens to do it because *he can!*

The slave begs for mercy and the king is moved to pity and forgives the debt entirely. Once again, showing that he has total control over the slave's life.

After the slave leaves the king's presence, he runs into a fellow slave who owes him 100 denarii. He then attacks his fellow slave demanding that he be paid. The slave begs for mercy, just like he did moments before, but the first slave is unwilling to show the mercy just shown to him. He throws his fellow slave into debtors' prison. Why does he do this? Once again, it's because *he can!* This story doesn't make a lot of sense until you look at it from the angle of people being able to dominate over other people. Having the ability to control someone else. The first slave was actually less likely to get the 100 denarii from his fellow slave while he is in debtors' prison, but it felt really good to exercise his power, especially after feeling so powerless before the king moments before.

As one commentator puts it, "Something deep in our democratic bones objects to the power structure of this scene. Something deep in the history of the American republic refuses the notion that a human being can own other human beings, or even worse, that a human being can sell other human beings.

The scene makes no sense until we realize that we, perhaps are not so democratic as we imagine, that perhaps our republican virtues are not so deeply held after all. Perhaps, at the heart of things, we just wish we were the slaveholder in the story, the master who cannot be held accountable for anything by anyone.

This is a parable told to an audience that loves power and loves to pretend that it does not. Matthew's story is told to an audience that hates Rome, and wishes it had the power to do to Rome what Rome did to them. Since that will never happen (that sort of messiah seems never to come), they have settled for abusing what power they have over their sisters and brothers in the community of faith. The point of the parable is made at the end: if this is how you wish to structure the world, you should expect God to fit right in. If the only question that really matters is who dominates whom, then Jesus says, "Then my father, my heavenly father, will also do this to every one of you."

Is today's scripture about forgiveness? Absolutely. Jesus is definitely saying that we must work on forgiving those who have wronged us, even if they do it many times. This doesn't mean we are doormats, and continue to let others abuse us, but for our own well-being, if nothing else, we need to let it go.

This scripture and the parable are also about power. We all have power over others to some degree or another. We need to recognize that we do have that power and use it in the best ways possible. Jesus is saying that we should use his and God's example as our guide when it comes to interacting with others. It's not easy, but it's what is best, and it's what is expected. Let's try to meet those expectations. Amen.