

Forgiven and Forgiving

Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction

The Hypocrisy of Forgiveness: I remember scrolling through social media posts a few years ago and seeing the *same person* post back to back conflicting messages: (1) don't judge people who might be suffering from hidden illnesses and (2) complaining that someone parked in a handicap spot with no *visible* illness (cf. GOP staffer critiquing Obama girls at 13 and 16 as classless even though she was arrested as a teenager). I call this the "grace for me and justice for you" paradox. From the earliest days of our lives we have competing desires of fairness and forgiveness. We long for justice when someone does something wrong unless that someone is us, then we crave forgiveness. I got my picture taken and was disappointed by how they turned out. When I complained to the photographer that I didn't think the pictures "did me justice," The photog said it "wasn't justice I needed, but mercy."

- Why is this? Well I think we all long for justice (built into our souls) but we know that justice also demands payment for our sins (and none of us can escape our sin). So, **we both love and fear the justice we crave** (e.g., love and fear at the same time; love someone fear they will get hurt or hurt you).

Context of New Community: How do we reconcile humility and holiness? Accountability and grace? Exclusivity of the gospel and compassionate approach to sinners? The flow of this passage started with a reminder that we enter God's kingdom as his *children*. So we are called to embrace our position of dependency and humility as well as absorb and display the values of God's kingdom. We build each other up, rather than break each other down. We pursue those who wander. And we confront sin in our midst.

- But what keeps our fight against sin from devolving into legalism? Phariseeism? How do we fight sin yet avoid becoming grace-less, unforgiving tyrants?
- How does last week (church discipline) fit with this week? **If we pursue sin then we have to be ready to forgive.** Ignoring sin isn't love (will render us useless) but failure to forgive mutes the gospel's power and poisons the Christian community.

Let's be honest, most of us are better at **pointing out sin** than extending grace. You might get the impression that we're "trying to save Jesus from all the sinners" instead of inviting sinners to experience the grace of Jesus (Moore).

- We get the holiness, forgiveness, and discipline conversation messed up. What good is our church if people can't find the grace and goodness of God not only *taught* but *embodied*.

Those who have experienced the extravagant forgiveness of God should extend forgiveness generously to others.

- We cannot have healthy relationships, healthy community if we aren't saturated in grace and forgiveness. We know that some people will hate us because they hate Christ but **they shouldn't hate Christ because of us.** A community of forgiven people must be a forgiving community.

I think about this often: what do we really have to offer people? **We have the gospel.** If our church achieves apparent success while ignoring the message and values of our Savior, we have failed.

- Someone should be able to come into contact with our church and be able to experience in some imperfect *but true* way the realities of the gospel. And that means if we withhold forgiveness then we haven't fully understood or experienced the gospel.

²¹ 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?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ 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.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ 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. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

1. A Question of Forgiveness (vv. 21-22)

²¹ 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?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Limits to Forgiveness: Boundaries matter in your life and your relationships (e.g., trust, hurt, access). You have to set boundaries on your schedule or you will wear yourself out (e.g., sex offender doesn't babysit my kids). A person without boundaries is unhealthy.

- Peter asks an important question. What are the boundaries of **my forgiveness**. What is the limit to my forgiveness? And he gives (in his mind) a generous answer. He wants to forgive someone who sins against him **seven times**. Conventional Rabbinic wisdom set the limit at three times. Peter is seemingly going above and beyond.

But Jesus said, rather than 7 times, you must forgive 77 times (the KJV confusingly translated the idiom of 70 times *plus* 7 as 70 times 7, i.e., 490). Regardless, of 77 or 490, the point Jesus is making is simple: there is no end to the forgiveness we are called to offer (e.g., it's not like you stop at 78 or 491).

- Peter says 7; Jesus says 77 (e.g., 110%); "To infinity and beyond."

Radical Gospel: There is no end to the forgiveness we offer because there's no end to the grace we've been given. We forgive *without* limit. It's not prudent or sensible; it is truly supernatural. Jesus' disciples should express radical forgiveness to others.

Gift of Forgiveness: Can I tell you what a gift forgiveness is. From small to large situations, to have people who willingly and genuinely forgive intentional and unintentional wrongs (forgiving my insecurity, immaturity, inattention). Not keeping a record of my wrongs, the gift of time to repent (gospel soil that grows mature believers). Loved me, rather than used me.

2. An Illustration of Forgiveness (vv. 23-34)

- Jesus, the master teacher, uses a compelling story to illustrate why we should show forgiveness to those who have legitimately sinned against us. He uses this parable to highlight how things *should* be in the economy of God's kingdom.¹

A. The Grace of the Master (vv. 23-27)

²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

Enormous Debt: He starts with a story about a king and his servants. In particular, **one servant** had a debt of **ten thousand talents**.

- A talent is a weight, usually of silver in monetary contexts (if not specified). The "value" varied with inflation but is generally equal to 6,000 denarii (both *talents* and *denarii* show up in this passage). 1 Talent = 6,000 denarii; 1 denarii = 1 day's wage (of laborer).
- It would take a laborer who worked 250-300 days a year 20-25 years to earn 1 talent.
- 1 talent = half a lifetime's working income. **A talent is a huge sum of money.**
- **Therefore**, ten thousand talents (60 million denarii; three hundred tons of silver!) is far outside a person's grasp (especially a servant).
 - In fact, to take a linguistic angle (word nerd), the term "10,000" is the largest numeral for which a Greek term exists and talent is the largest known denomination of money at the time (France). Putting them together (i.e., ten thousand talents) has the effect of saying "zillion" (which, I hate to break it to you, even though it sounds like million and billion, is, like its cousin, "jillion," is not a real number. **It's an unfathomably enormous debt, an implausible amount.**

Sin and Debt: The problem for the servant is described as "debt." This is the same word used in the Model Prayer (We pray that the Father would "forgive us our debts, as we also have

¹ It's just a parable: not asking you to go lend more money to this person (unwise); not calling you to give an abuser access to victims; not calling for forced reconciliation; but it is calling for real forgiveness from your heart.

forgiven our debtors”). We all owe a debt to God. We fail to pay him the obedience, worship, and submission we owe. Luke’s version of the Model Prayer makes the connection between debt and sin clear: “forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us” (Lk 11:4).

- The point is clear: God has forgiven the enormous debt of our sin.
- Do you see your sin and God’s forgiveness this way? If you don’t see your sin debt as something this large and this impossible to overcome it leads to multiple problems.
 - It leads to a **deficient view of God** and his character. He’s not that holy or that different or that unique. He becomes like an optimized version of us. So the gap between us and him isn’t that large.
 - And we tend to minimize our sin as a “mistake” or a “momentary lapse” and, therefore, it’s “not that bad” (e.g., “I haven’t murdered someone” or if I have I’m “good at heart,” etc.).
- I see this all the time, folks who, rather than being overwhelmed with gratitude for God’s grace, feel entitled to God’s blessings. It’s not enough that God forgave them a certain debt, now he is on the hook to fund a certain lifestyle.

God forgave the debt we could not pay, by paying it for us:

- “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (1 Pet 3:18).
- “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13-14).
- “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Do you see your sin debt as this large? If not, you’ll miss how extravagant God’s grace is.

Fair Punishment: Let the story continue to play out for a second to feel the weight. ²⁵ 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. The servant is ordered to be sold, along with his family, to pay *some* of the debt owed the king. This won’t pay the full debt but it will recoup some of the loss and, more importantly, it maintains the fairness of unpaid debt. The king is not being unreasonable, which makes his mercy even more significant

Compassionate Master: ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. The king, his master, here’s is request and has pity² on him. He has compassion on him.

- When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matt 9:36). When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick (Matt 14:14). And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him (Lk 15:20).

² σπλαγχνισθεις

This is the beauty of our Savior. His forgiveness is not merely an accounting trick or a legal verdict but central to his very heart. His forgiveness is a debt paid, not out of obligation or duty, but out of love and compassion.

Beyond Our Request: The master goes beyond the servants request. The servant wants more time to pay, the master cancels the debt (taking the loss on himself). Cf. Lk 15, asking to be a servant, but welcome back as a son.

- "God doesn't match our sin with his grace. He over-matches our sin with his surplus grace" (Ortlund). "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20b).

B. The Hypocrisy of the Servant (vv. 28-31)

²⁸ 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.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ 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.

Narcissistic Perspective: The servant's response to his fellow servant is infuriating. His fellow servant owes him a lesser debt (e.g., 100 denarii; 3-4 months wages). It is not an insignificant amount of money (app. \$12,000); it is a real debt but it pales in comparison to the debt he was just forgiven.

- Mother ran into the bedroom when she heard her seven-year-old **son** scream. She found his two-year-old sister pulling his hair. She gently released the little girl's grip and said comfortingly to the boy, "She didn't mean it. She doesn't know that hurts." He nodded his acknowledgement, and she left the room. As she started down the hall the **little girl** screamed. Rushing back in, she asked, "What happened?" The little boy replied, "She knows now."

When others sin against us, it creates real, painful hurt. But, when we put ourselves at the center of everything, we blow it out of proportion. There is no sin someone commits against you, greater than the sin you commit against God. There is no debt someone owes you greater than the debt Jesus forgave you. What has someone done to you that rivals your sin against God?

Vengeance and Rights: Our sense of fairness competes with these gospel commands. We want vengeance. We want someone to pay for what they've done. But Paul asks in 1 Cor 6: "Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" God is perfectly just but *getting even* isn't a gospel thing.

- Asking the question, "what about me," isn't where the gospel takes us.
- Even the language of rights sometimes can be misleading. Rights are good and necessary in a civil society. But, as Christians, we gave our rights away the day of salvation. Only Jesus has any rights in our lives. We go from bondage to sin to bondage to Christ (e.g., in the military, Uncle Sam owns you).

- So, in Christian marriage, I do not “belong” to myself but to my spouse. As a Christian parent, I don’t live for my desires, but sacrifice for my family. As a member of the church, God’s family, I consider *others* as more important than myself.

No Servant Is Above His Master: Why? Because our entrance to the kingdom of God is predicated on our being children of the king. If he is gracious, then we are called to extend grace. If he is forgiving, then we are called to forgive.

- A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master (Matt 10:24-25)
- Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful (Lk 6:36).

C. The Anger of the Master (vv. 32-34)

³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’

Refusal to Forgive: The king has shown extreme forgiveness. So what would cause him to be angry and punish his servant (if he didn’t punish his extreme debt)? **The lack of forgiveness.** His refusal to forgive is **wicked**. Evil, in this story, is not having a debt or being a sinner but receiving grace and mercy but refusing to extend it to others (e.g., taking but not giving). It’s the height of **hypocrisy**. You should not accept the forgiveness of another and yet refuse to extend forgiveness to someone else (especially in a lesser situation). And it draws the **anger** of God. Sin gets God angry. In particular, this kind of self-absorbed life, this presuming on his grace, this refusing to acknowledge and understand his forgiveness.

- It is hypocritical not to forgive when you realize how much you’ve been forgiven. So, a lack of forgiveness is either (1) **ignorant** or (2) **malicious**. Either you don’t understand God’s grace or you don’t care.

Refusal to forgive will result in severe and eternal punishment, since those who are truly forgiven will forgive. A lack of forgiveness demonstrates that you’re not a part of God’s kingdom because you don’t desire or reflect the values of the king.

- ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.
- The translators have softened the punishment. These are not mere “jailers” but “torturers” and “tormenters.”³ God, who is generous beyond measure, will not forgive the unforgiving. There is no place in God’s economy for unforgiveness.
- For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matt 6:14-15).

Grace Received But Not Applied: Why does this anger him? Because it is grace received but not applied. It is grace taken but never given (e.g., It drives me crazy when someone doesn’t text me back but expects me to text them back).

³ βασανισταῖς

- To refuse to forgive expresses lack of gratitude for God's forgiveness. To refuse to forgive means we haven't experienced God's grace. The Christ-life is one of union with Christ. We become absorbed into his death and resurrection (e.g., die to sin; raised to life).

3. The Application of Forgiveness (vv. 35)

³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Are You the Unforgiving Servant?: So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive The reader is supposed to be angry at this, but then it turns to them.

From Your Heart: from your heart⁴ This is one of the hardest phrases. You can't just say you forgive. If your heart remains unchanged then the problem remains unsolved. It has to be pure and genuine. If your heart remains unchanged, then it is still in bondage to vengeance, regret, and shame (it's an action from a love/value).

Conclusion

How? Only the Gospel: This is all well in good when it comes to minor offenses or simple slights, but what about major issues? How do you forgive an abuser, oppressor, or murderer?

- This is where the conversation gets hung up in secular discourse. Because we've seen forced reconciliation or calls to forgiveness that demean calls for justice.
- Our society has struggled with this. In 2006, when 8 of 10 (6-13 year old) girls were shot at an Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County (killing 5), the world was shocked that the community could forgive the man who did it.
- When a 21-year-old white supremacist killed 9 African-American members of Emmanuel AME at a Bible Study, the world was shocked that some family and church members extended forgiveness. And the same shock continues today. Some say forgiveness is not appropriate in this sort of heinous activity, that it lets those who perpetuate things like racial violence off the hook.

But we don't ever see forgiveness and justice as opposing forces. We will not marshal forgiveness to perpetuate injustice. However, we refuse to abandon the radical call of Jesus to forgive and to love.

- Historically "when Christians rooted their moral norms in the divine justice of God, that also meant grounding them in the divine mercy of God. So patience, mercy, and forgiveness of wrongdoers has always been part of the Christian" call of discipleship (Keller).

Bear the Weight: Forgiveness is only necessary because there is sin. Sin can't go unpunished. To forgive is to bear the weight of sin, to pay the debt on behalf of someone else. Forgiveness is always a form of voluntary suffering that brings about a greater good (e.g., the king took the loss

⁴ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν

of the debt, Jesus bore the punishment of our sins). When you forgive, you bear the weight of someone's sin and **only the gospel** can provide the measure and means to enable this. Only the gospel can empower us to forgive.

- We have the audacity to think the gospel has the power to burst apart our calloused hearts that limit ability to forgive.

When we forgive and bear the cost of someone's sin (whether small or large), we are living the Christ life. We are applying the power of the gospel to our hearts and lives.

- And this is a distinctly **countercultural** call. It's amazing how the values of plurality and tolerance are eroding in our society. We believe that actions have consequences but we also believe that forgiveness and redemption are possible.
 - So rather than forgive and redeem, we seek vengeance and retribution. It's no wonder that our is "littered with enormous numbers of broken and now irreparable relationships" (Keller). E.g., "Politics itself becomes a new kind of religion, one without any means of acquiring redemption or forgiveness. Rather than seeing some people as right and others as mistaken, they are now regarded as the good and the evil, as true believers or heretics."

Love: For us, forgiveness and kindness are not ways to manage other people's behavior or get what we want. Rather, these values flow out of our call to gospel love. As Paul describes in 1 Cor 13 (a passage about the church): "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:4-7).

- "Love is not possible where self-preoccupation holds sway in a person's life. So self-forgetfulness is a part of true mental health. This is not possible to create directly, but only as one is absorbed in something worthy and great." As we are united with Christ, we are able to live for his glory and not our own.
- "Forgiveness is a form of 'self-renunciation,' giving up your perfect right to pay back to the person what they did to you. This directly opposes how Americans are now taught to think and live. We are taught self-realization and assertion, that your happiness, interests, and needs always come first. A culture promoting self-maximization, one that pits self-fulfillment against self-sacrifice, will produce revenge or withdrawal as a response to any mistreatment, while a countercultural teaching of self-renunciation will much produce forgiveness as a response. 'Most of us have been formed by a culture that nourishes revenge and mocks grace.' Therefore, for some forgiveness is seen as self-hating, and revenge and anger are seen as authentic."

What's In a Name: Interested in church names. E.g., **Redemption Heights**, etc. What would we be if the we had little room for redemption? Or "Not Too Much" **Grace Community Church**. (cf. church split at Harmony Baptist; or Fellowship Community Church is another way of saying "Church, Church, Church"). Maybe **Corinth Baptist** is the only good name ('cause we're messed up).

- We need to live up to our name (live up to the gospel standard we proclaim).

- “Our fundamental being” [as the church] is based on the fact we are witnesses to Christ *who is only known through witnesses*. “To be a witness means [we] bear the marks of Christ so that [our lives give] life to others.” So we embody the values and priorities of Christ so the world can know and experience him (Hauerwas).

The Possibility of Genuine Forgiveness: Real forgiveness from the heart, for you and from you, is actually possible by God’s power. But, it will only be possible and good if we value the sacrifice and forgiveness of Jesus.

- There’s a forgiveness crossroads: either you go the path of freedom and forgiveness or you get consumed by bitterness and vengeance.

As Christians who’ve received much from God we can generously extend grace to others. But it doesn’t come from self-effort or willpower. It starts with God’s forgiveness of us freeing us to forgive others. Genuine forgiveness requires a few inner resources that only the gospel can give us:

- **Gospel Humility:** By understanding our true sin, we gain a healthy perspective on the sins of others toward us. We avoid an over-inflated sense of being personally wronged. “You can only stay bitter toward someone if you feel superior, if you feel that you would never do anything like they did. Those who won’t forgive show they have not accepted the fact of their own sinfulness.”
- **Gospel Acceptance:** But we *really* have been forgiven by God. We really have been completely accepted by Christ. Because of this, we do not seek approval or acceptance in our own activity or in other’s approval. “If you know God’s love and forgiveness, then there is a limit to how deeply another person can hurt you. They can’t touch your real identity, wealth, and significance. The more we rejoice in our own forgiveness, the quicker we will be to forgive others.”

Gospel Forgiveness: Forgiveness is not saying someone else didn’t do wrong. It’s not saying you haven’t been hurt or wronged. It’s not saying you shouldn’t be saddened by someone’s actions toward you. Forgiveness is not giving someone an excuse to harm again. You still feel pain. You still long for and pursue justice.

- Because of the real damage of sin, forgiveness is a visible gospel act. It is absorbing hurt like Christ did for us. It’s cancelling a debt, like Christ did for us. It’s seeking good rather than evil even for those who do us harm.
- True forgiveness is seen on the Cross.

What Story?: What story of God is communicated by the way you forgive others? If someone saw the way you forgive, what would they believe about God? What part of your heart for God has been atrophied by an unwillingness to forgive?

- What would freedom to forgive look like for you?
- What would our church look like if it extended forgiveness generously?
- Who is God calling you to forgive today? Yourself? Family member? Friend? Trust and obey.