

**Matthew 18.15-35**  
From Forgiven to Forgiving

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**Main Idea:** *Being forgiven makes us forgiving.*

**Scripture Introduction**

People often hurt us, don't they? Sinful people sin against us and bitterness rises in our souls as we nurse our wounds. But God creates an alternative community in the midst of a fallen world by making us forgiving people. Listen, please, to Paul's exhortation in **Colossians 3.12-17**.

**Introduction**

Charles Spurgeon, a preacher in the 1800s, had many physical ailments. One of the worst was gout, a disease in which elevated levels of uric acid cause extremely painful inflammation of the joints, especially of the feet and hands.

A man once suggested to Spurgeon that his rheumatism was more painful than Spurgeon's gout. Spurgeon replied: "I will tell you the difference between rheumatism and gout: Put your finger in a vise and turn the crank until you can't stand the pain—that's your rheumatism. Then give it three more turns—that is my gout!" Jay Adams uses that story in his book, *From Forgiven to Forgiving* to illustrate the difficulty of forgiving.

In Matthew 18.15-22, Jesus insists that when a brother sins against us, we are to tell him so we can be reconciled:

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

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

Adams illustrates Jesus' teaching: Suppose a brother stomps on your toes (either literally or figuratively). We are *not* to whine and feel sorry for ourselves. We are *not* to hold a pity party and invite others to join in. We are *not* to become angry and storm about. And we are *not* to show our flattened toes to everyone else in the church saying, "Now, you understand that I don't mean to gossip in telling you what so-and-so did. I'm just warning you, so that you can protect yourself from such injury in the future."

What *does* Jesus say to do? Tell the person who hurt us what they did wrong. Take him gently by the hand and show him your smashed toes. *Now that is rheumatism*. We avoid such

confrontation at all costs. The risk is too great; it feels like putting your finger in a vise and turning the handle.

But gout is truly forgiving him when he asks.

Why is this gout? Suppose you are minding your own business and a sister comes and bops you good and hard (either literally or figuratively) in the nose. While you stand there, nourishing your sore snout, she comes to you and says, “You know what I did?” You say, “Yea I do. Why did you do that?” She says, “Well, you see, I have this terrible temper and I got upset, and you were the closest one around, so I ... oh, I’m sorry. It was nothing personal. Will you forgive me?”

“Yea,” you say, “but please don’t do that again.”

Five minutes later, just as some of the initial pain subsides, she returns and POW!, bops you again in the nose! Then she says, “Oooo, you know what I did?” You say, “Yea I do. Why did you do that? I thought you weren’t going to do that anymore.” She says, “Well, you can’t overcome a temper like this in 5 minutes. Will you forgive me?”

“Yea,” you say, “but don’t do it again.”

Seven times that day she bops you and asks forgiveness. Forgiving after the seventh time, that is gout.

You can read Adams’ book for more about the biblical teaching on forgiveness. This morning, however, I would like to consider one key aspect of forgiveness: *What is happening in our hearts that makes us reluctant forgivers?* That is exactly the question Jesus asks and answers when Peter offers to forgive even seven times. He tells a heart-revealing drama in three acts. Act 1: The Offer of Forgiveness Made. Act 2: The Offer of Forgiveness Refused. Act 3: The Offer of Forgiveness Withdrawn. Jesus then applies the lesson to us.

## 1. Act 1: The Offer of Forgiveness Made (Mt 18.23-27)

In order to understand the story, we must learn something about the money of that time period. The primary unit is the “denarius,” a Roman coin used as the standard pay for a workman’s daily wage. Rather than our system of wild variations in pay, a working man pretty much knew that he would receive a denarius for a good day’s labor.

The second unit which we need to know about is the “talent.” Since their economy used real rather than paper money, all currency could be compared and exchanged based on weight. A talent weighed 6000 denarii. A denarius was one day’s pay; so a talent was 6000 days’ pay. And this servant (according to v. 24) owes the king 10,000 talents. Notice four things about the debt...

### 1.1. *Size of the debt*

Since a denarius is one day’s pay and a talent is 6000 days’ pay, 10,000 talents represents 60,000,000 days of labor, 164,383 years of hard work. If he pays no taxes, buys no food, provides neither a home or clothing for himself or his family—if the man takes every singly penny he earns and gives it to the king, it will take 165,000 years to pay the debt!

And what if the king charges interest? Suppose, out of the sheer goodness of his heart, the king charges only 5% interest (a rate better than any of us can find). At 5% interest, at the end of the first year, the man will owe an *additional* three million days of work! What good is earning one denarii a day when interest adds to your debt 8219 more *every day*?

Of course the numbers are not significant in themselves. They are important because this is a funny story. When Jesus said, “One servant owed ten thousand talents,” everyone chuckled. Like when your five year old is first learning about numbers and you tell her that the trampoline is too expensive, and she asks, “Does it cost a bazillion dollars?”

The size of the debt is not simply huge—it is that. It is so huge as to be humorous. *It is a debt greater than anyone could ever imagine.* To appreciate the offer of forgiveness we must understand the size of the debt.

### **1.2. Means of the debt**

Throughout this parable, the main character is called a “servant.” He is neither an entrepreneur nor a lord; we would call him a blue-collar worker. There certainly is nothing wrong with being blue-collar—it tells us that he worked for a living.

It also demands that we ask how he could accumulate such a debt. The text does not say, so we should not make too much of this point. Yet let me give you a word picture which may help us hear the story in the same way Peter heard it.

Suppose Joe, a teller at a local bank, retires after 30 years with First National. But the announcement in the paper is not good news, for Joe is to be jailed because he owes the bank \$8,219,178,080. Would we not guess that Joe might have *stolen* the money? This is not a legitimate loan gone bad—a bank would never loan someone on a teller’s salary over \$8 billion. This is embezzlement, theft, fraud. The servant has stolen from the king.

### **1.3. Promise to pay the debt (18.26)**

Jesus already told us that the servant could never pay back what he owed (v. 25a). He could not even pay the interest! Yet he promises to pay back ALL. What audacity! “Pay it all,” will you? With what? Where will you find 165,000 years to work?

Note well what the servant has done in saying to the king, “Have patience with me and I will pay you *all*”? He ridicules the king; he makes fun of the debt; he denies that he really owes anything. *A promise to pay is an insult when you have no money.* But notice the king’s gracious response.

### **1.4. Canceling of the debt (18.27)**

If an angry king had choked this arrogant and foolish servant, we might have justified his reaction. The king has been mistreated, he has been mocked, and he has been called a fool.

Yet he does not respond in kind. Instead, he reaches down to this poor, cheating, desperate, helpless servant, and he scratches through the debt. The bill will not be repaid; the obligation will be forgiven. Not for anything the servant has done, but because the king is full of compassion, abounding in mercy, not treating his servants as their sins deserve.

God is that King—to him we owe an infinite debt. We are the poor servants, stealing glory from God, and having no means of repaying. And the curtain falls on Act 1 with a gracious king offering what is ill-deserved—mercy and forgiveness. How will the servant respond?

## **2. Act 2: The Offer of Forgiveness Refused (Matthew 18.28-30)**

Unlike the money owed the king, this obligation could be repaid, and the offer to do so could be considered sincere. One hundred denarii would be about 100 days of work. Not an small amount, by any means. If you owe someone 1/3 of a year’s salary, that is a significant unsecured, personal debt. Yet *when compared* to what the servant owed the king and what the

king had just done, it was a small, we might even say, insignificant amount. The king forgave a debt greater than anyone could ever imagine, yet the servant will not overlook a fraction of what he had just been forgiven.

Why does he refuse to forgive? Jesus does not tell us exactly what the man was thinking, leaving it instead to us to search our own hearts and find our sinful motives which prevent our forgiving others. Yet I might suggest one overarching theme which unites my heart with that of the wicked and unmerciful servant—*I imagine that I deserve my forgiveness.*

Remember that the servant promised to repay the king *all* he owes. That promise could *not* have been sincere. The amount was too great! So when the king says, “The debt is forgiven,” we can imagine what the servant felt: “I must be a pretty good person to get such treatment. Not everyone is let off scot-free; the king saw something in me that made him stand up and take notice. The king recognized me as deserving the best.”

How do I know the servant thought that way (other than the fact that I think the same)? Because when he turned and saw one who owed him a few coins, and when he heard from that man’s lips the same words he had spoken to the king, he did *not* say, “I want to be like the king—he forgave me so I will be forgiving. That king is a great man and he gave me great grace; I too want to be a great man who gives great grace. The king treated me better than I deserve; I will treat my fellow debtor better than he deserves.”

No, instead, he said to himself, “Does this bum know how much the king thinks of me? The king gave me special treatment; therefore, I deserve special treatment from those who owe me. The king is impressed with me; now this servant will be too. I must not forgive him, for the king has already said how great I am.” And so we throw our spouses in prison with the cold shoulder treatment rather than forgive like the king.

My wicked heart does not naturally look to the King and see great grace; it looks to itself and imagines great worth. I deserve what is offered! The king offers forgiveness based on *his* mercy; the servant refuses it based on *his* merit. He does not need the king’s compassion, and *having never accepted forgiveness from the king, he has none to offer a fellow sinner.*

### 3. Act 3: The Offer of Forgiveness Withdrawn (Matthew 18.31-34)

When the king realizes that the foolish servant has refused mercy, he withdraws the offer. The servant has insulted the king’s grace and so he will receive that which he deserves: justice. He will be tortured until he repays the debt he cannot repay. He will be tortured forever.

Tough story—tough for that guy, though we might say he only got what he deserved. But Jesus goes further—he concludes with a pointed application.

### 4. Conclusion (Matthew 18.35)

This parable seems to be about forgiving others—and it is. But even more, it is about being forgiven. Those who are able to forgive are those who have accepted God’s forgiveness.

*What is in our hearts that makes us reluctant forgivers?*

It is this: we have not accepted that God’s forgiveness is all of grace. Like the servant, we leave the palace believing we deserved God’s offer. We neither needed nor received grace, because we were offered payment for being good people.

Do you daily admit to a debt you cannot possibly pay? Have you accepted forgiveness all of grace? One way to know the answer is described in this parable. People who have accepted forgiveness readily and joyfully forgive others.

Is that you? Or are you one who keeps a record of how you have been wronged? Do you believe your life would be great if others would just do their duty? You do what you are supposed to, why should you forgive them when they do not? Can you tell me of the failures of your spouse, or has love covered over a multitude of wrongs so that they are buried beneath of sea of grace and forgiveness? Are you like so many, afraid to forgive your spouse lest they use that as an excuse to continue to fail and hurt you? Does the forgiveness of Christ characterize you, the kind of forgiveness that is empowered to treat others as if they had never sinned?

If not, might it be because you see yourself as better than others? Do you leave the presence of the King thinking you are a decent person, hardworking, with the best of intentions, while your neighbor does not really even try?

This parable never denies that you may be better than your spouse. Instead, Jesus asks that we quit looking at other sinners for our standard, and turn our eyes to God. There we will find a debt we cannot pay, a debt relieved only by his compassion. Have you received the grace of God in Jesus' forgiveness of your debt?

Today you may repent of your self-centeredness. Repentance means turning to God. The first step is accepting the debt we owe. Then will we see how great is His forgiveness offered.

And having known that forgiveness, all other's debts will shrink to insignificance by comparison. How often shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Not seven times, but seventy times seven. Where will I learn such compassion? When I turn to God and find that he has forgiven us 70 billion times 70 billion. Forgiven people are forgiving people.