

Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSV)

²¹Then 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?” ²²Jesus 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. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, 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. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But 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.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

It's easy to think we understand forgiveness. But how often do we reflect on this truth about forgiveness: we are forgiven so that we may forgive.

Take a breath. A deep one . . . deeper. Now hold it. Keep holding it . . . longer. How long can you hold it? One minute? Two perhaps? Breathing, indeed living, requires us to breathe out as well as breathe in. I remember from my brief flirtation with circuit weight training that it was important to learn the proper way to breathe while struggling to lift the weight. Inhaling was easy, but remembering to exhale was very difficult. I'd just keep holding and holding my breath as I strained to move the weight smoothly and in rhythm.

Forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in. Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than breathing it out. Sadly, this is a truth that one servant never learned.

The unforgiving servant¹

Today's parable comes from Matthew 18, part of the fourth long block of Jesus' teaching in the gospel. Beginning in verse 15, Jesus tells his disciples how to handle situations where one has been sinned against by another. The offender is to be taken before two or three witnesses and, if needed, the large community of believers. If the offender refuses “to listen even to the church,” Jesus says, they are to be treated like a “Gentile or tax collector.” Neither is good, so far as Jesus' disciples are concerned.

Then, Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive a member of the church who has sinned against him. Perhaps seven times, Peter suggests. But instead of affirming Peter's notions of forgiveness, Jesus tells him that he is to forgive “seventy times seven.” In other words, Peter is to forgive without limit. He is to forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive . . . Jesus then tells Peter a parable to help him grasp the full truth about forgiveness.

A king was settling up accounts with his slaves. There is one slave who owes the king a lot of money. So much money that it certainly would have conjured up visions of astounding wealth, for it would take the average laborer 15-20 years to earn a single talent and the slave

¹The parable is about a master and slaves, though modern translations often use the term “servant,” to help the reader understand that slavery in the ancient world was different in many respects from our own tragic experience with the horrors of African slavery. In the ancient world, slavery was common, often arising from indebtedness and even self-sale, in addition to the enslavement of conquered peoples. By some estimates, 35% of the Roman Empire's population were slaves. Household servants were usually slaves. In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus' day, even households of modest means could afford two or three slaves.

owes the king 10,000 talents!² To settle up as best he can, the king orders that the slave and his family be sold as well as all the man's possessions. But when the slave falls on his knees and begs for mercy, the king forgives all the debt – all 10,000 talents. All of it. One could hardly imagine a more gracious act.

“How do you know when or if you have been forgiven for something you have done wrong?”

In today's parable, the king's forgiveness of the first servant's is plain to see. But, often, we aren't so sure about God's forgiveness.

Three years ago, we asked the congregation to write down questions they would like to ask God. There were certain questions from the cards that really tugged at my heart. This was one of them. I wanted to say to the person . . . “be assured of this, we are a forgiven people, you are a forgiven person, I am forgiven. God's grace pours over us like water over a waterfall. Is there a catch? No.”

What should characterize God's forgiven people? Repentant hearts for one. We know how far short we fall of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We know that we do not love God and love others as we should. Yet, each day, we awake determined to do better, to leave a bit more of our sinful selves behind us.

What should *not* characterize God's forgiven people? Ungrateful hearts for one. This is the problem with the first servant.

Paul preached God's message of grace and forgiveness of sins. Too often, people reacted by saying to themselves something like this: “If we've been forgiven, then let's go sin some more and get forgiven again. In fact, grace is so wonderful, let's sin a lot so there can be more grace” (Romans 6:1). Of course, this was all nonsense. The only appropriate response to God's grace is grateful obedience, forgiving others as we have been forgiven ourselves.

One would think that being the recipient of such forgiveness would forever change a person. Yet, this same slave refuses even to be patient with a fellow slave who owes him a small sum, no more than a few weeks' wages.. Seemingly forgetting, though probably just not caring, about the grace shown himself, the forgiven but unforgiving slave has the debtor thrown into prison. When the king learns what has happened, the slave's original debts are reinstated and he is tossed into prison where he will stay until he can repay the 10,000 talents – which he will never be able to do.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity was highly valued in the ancient near-eastern cultures. If someone does something for me, I then am obligated to do something similar for them. The forgiven servant naturally then assumes that the reciprocity he owes his master is to be extended only to his master.

But the parable makes clear that the generosity the slave received should have been passed on to others. As John Carroll writes, “The kindness from which I have benefitted should reach to touch others who had no part in that original act of kindness. Since, in the parable, the king in some way embodies the graciousness of God, the point is that I should be so transformed by the experience of divine grace that I am able to bring that same grace and mercy into all my relationships with others.”³

As with all the parables, we have to be careful about pushing them too far, e.g., seeing the character of the king as telling us more about God than the parable intends. This is a parable about forgiveness told in response to a question about forgiveness not about the nature of God.

Craig Blomberg suggests that we focus on the three episodes of this parable if we are to grasp Jesus' point about forgiveness:

- The first episode illustrates the boundless grace of God.
- The second episode shows the absurdity of refusing to extend grace to others when we have been given so much.
- The third episode (the punishment of the first servant) starkly shows the consequences of spurning God and God's grace.

Eduard Schweizer put it this way: ‘God's forgiveness is not for decoration but for use.’ Living, truly God-shaped living, requires that forgiveness be breathed out, not just breathed in. A truly grateful heart is also a forgiving heart.

²This is a good time to remind ourselves that Jesus' parables are not meant to be utterly realistic depictions of life. They are teaching tools. We aren't to worry about how a slave could assemble wealth that would rival Bill Gates'.

³from *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* by James and John Carroll, Hendrickson Publishing, 1996. The later quote from Schweizer is also from the Carrolls' book.

Interpreting of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

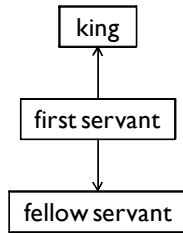
By their nature, parables lend themselves to over- and under-interpretation. For example, it is often said that each parable has a single main point. But this isn't necessarily so. Often, there are important meanings built around each main character. There are some questions to ask yourself about a parable that will help you hear Jesus better. In this text box, we'll step through these questions for each parable in this series.

What is the narrative context of the parable?

- Today's parable comes from Matt. 18, part of the fourth long block of Jesus' teaching in the gospel. Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive a member of the church who has sinned against him. Jesus tells him that he is to forgive "seventy times seven." In other words, Peter is to forgive without limit. Jesus then tells Peter a parable to help him grasp the full truth about forgiveness.

What is the parable's structure?

- The story is centered on the first servant and his dealings with both the king and his fellow servant.



What background information about culture, customs, geography and so on are important?

- The amount of money the king forgives the first servant would have conjured up visions of the great wealth. Not so much that it is unimaginable, but far outside any of the listener's experience. The ratio of the first servant's debt to that of his fellow servant's is roughly 6000:1.

What is the perspective of each of the main characters?

- The king is the giver of grace, forgiving the enormous debt of the first servant. It isn't hard to picture God as this king.
- The first servant, whose enormous debt has been forgiven, turns out to be hard and unforgiving himself. A flood of grace has fallen on him, but not even a trickle flows onward to the fellow servant. His is a heart at least four sizes too small!
- The fellow servant, who has been refused any grace, is left worse off – lost and overwhelmed and in prison.

Note: The parable diagrams are taken from Craig Blomberg's book, *Interpreting the Parables*. If you really want to dig into the parables, this book is a good guide.

READING WITH HEART & MIND

Monday, Matthew 6:14-15 & Matthew 18:21-22 Jesus teaches about our duty to forgive without limit.

Tuesday, Genesis 45:5-14 & 50:15-21 Joseph (of the many-colored coat) forgives his enemies.

Wednesday, 1 Samuel 24: 8-12 & 26:21-25 David forgives Saul for trying to kill him.

Thursday, Mark 2: 1-12 Jesus forgives the sins of a paralytic. This would have been shocking to those watching – who can forgive sins but God?!

Friday, Nehemiah 9 The people of God gather to confess their sins to a forgiving God (v. 17 contains a well-known description of God's forgiveness and love).

Saturday, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 Paul urges the Corinthian church to forgive and call home someone who had done something bad enough to be removed from the church.

