

Matthew 18:21-35
"Forgiving Generously"
Pentecost 16 (Proper 19 A)

September 17, 2023
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is highly likely that you have financial debt. I know, I do. Back in early August, U.S. credit card debt broke the trillion-dollar mark. The U.S. Student loan debt is nearing \$2 trillion. Not to mention mortgage payments and car payments. So, it is highly likely that you have financial debt to pay. If you think you are financially sound, well, someday, our national debt will need to be paid. So, if you want to be depressed really fast, check out the website: USDebtClock.org. There, you will see your share of the debt rise every millisecond. It's disheartening. So, financial debt certainly surrounds us all. Now, don't you wish that your financial debt could be forgiven?

Well, today's Gospel reading is about forgiving the debt of sin. When someone sins against you, he is indebted to you until you release him from that debt by forgiving him. For instance, let's say someone is always saying bad things about you. The Jewish Talmud taught that forgiveness was only on condition, such as not forgiving someone until he or she apologized. And often with forgiveness came a price: the sinner had to make it up to you somehow.

Also, the Jewish Talmud taught that a person was only obliged to forgive someone the same sin three times. Yes, you heard that right: three times. So, Peter seems to be showing some generosity. Peter is gracious as he is offering to forgive the same sin seven times! But what Jesus says is even more shocking: forgive the same "**seventy times seven**" (Matthew 18:22). What's more is that God is not counting. That's the point of that large number. We could never keep track of it! So, Christ means freely forgiving all the time and with no condition. Just think about it. Jesus is saying to endlessly forgive those who sin against you every single time he hurts you.

And much more than that! Jesus is saying to treat him as if each time was the first time. So, when our fellow brother or sister in Christ sins against you, with humility, you privately speak to him or her, since you owe that person forgiveness. That is so opposite of what our sinful self wants to do! We want to hold a grudge.

Today, Jesus explains this heavy teaching with the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Here, we have a servant who owes a huge debt. When I say huge, I mean massive. Actually, when I say massive, I mean impossible. This man owed 10,000 talents. Now, it's hard to comprehend this. How about if I said he owed about \$25 million dollars? That is roughly what 10,000 talents equates to in today's dollars: \$25 million!

Now, this man's king, whom this servant owed the money was not a tyrant. He is a caring king, so he wished to settle the accounts with his servants. Up comes this man who owed him \$25 million. This was an impossible amount of money to ever pay back! His only future was debtors' prison. And since he could not pay, he, and his family were ordered to prison and his possessions would be garnished. With the Law staring right at him in the face, this servant fell on his knees and begs the king, ***"Have patience with me, I will pay you everything"*** (Matthew 18:26).

Out of pity, the king who was a generous king forgave this man's entire debt. The king just generously forgives.

Shockingly, this man, who had his massive debt forgiven is unwilling to do the same to a man who owes him a much smaller debt: 100 denarii, which is about \$2,000 today. This servant who was freely forgiven would not forgive his fellow servant's minor debt. Instead, he seizes him and begins to choke him saying, ***"Pay what you owe!"*** (Matthew 18:28) He didn't forgive him and worse yet, he threw him into a debtors' prison. When the other servants reported this to the King, he immediately called the wicked servant back and angrily had that man thrown into debtors' prison. He received the punishment that he deserved.

Have you ever thought that some churches look similar to courtrooms? This is no accident. Here, we approach the King with our debt of sin begging Him to have mercy on us and forgive us, saying: ***"Lord, have mercy"*** (Kyrie). Now, God isn't like the wicked servant, so He doesn't grab us by the throat and choke us. No, because of Jesus, God forgives us as He announces personally, ***"I forgive you all your sins."***

Now, there is still a price. All debt must be paid. Either at a loss by the one who is owed debt, or by paying the debt off. Jesus pays the debt. He pays our debt with His life. He takes our place under the judgment of God. He takes our place as the criminal. He dies a criminal's death on the cross. We, who are guilty are declared innocent. Jesus who is really innocent is declared guilty. This is known as the Great Exchange.

Because of Christ's great act of sacrificial love, we approach the King – our Judge – each week, every day, continually freely forgiven. Today, this courtroom is no longer a place of terror, but a place of celebration, as we rejoice in our forgiveness. So, as repentant sinners, we no longer fear condemnation and the hell of fire as we approach His holy throne.

Just think about it. If you owed someone several millions of dollars, that debt should haunt you every day. But to have it forgiven fills you with an indescribable relief and joy! Here, in the Divine Service, Jesus forgives our debt of sin. In response, we bend our knees and praise the Lord as we tell others of His wonderful deeds. Oddly enough, in God's court, it is the Judge Himself who takes our place in the judgment. He generously justifies you. He declares you who are guilty, innocent. And now, He wants you to do the same. You have been shown mercy, so show mercy.

Now, when someone does not forgive another – like the wicked servant, it shows that he never really received God's forgiveness in the first place, because those who are forgiven naturally forgive others – and not just superficially. Such Christians don't seek revenge or keep grudges, or remind others of past forgiven sins, or slander another's reputation as payback.

How often do you avoid talking with a fellow brother or sister in Christ because of something they did to you? If God treated us like we tend to treat others, what would become of us? Our debt of sin is so heavy that we would sink into the depths of hell, just like the wicked servant.

Revenge, or putting conditions on forgiveness is the sinful world's response to sin, but this is not God's response to sin. God holds no conditions on forgiveness. He freely forgives you! So, we ought to generously forgive others!

And this includes the many times when the sinner doesn't even ask for forgiveness! After all, we don't always remember each of our sins against God, but He forgives us anyway. ***“If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?”*** (Psalm 130:3). So, let us not keep a record of sins committed by our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now, Jesus isn't saying that when we forgive that we will forget every sin that has been done to you. We aren't God. So, you will likely be careful trusting a fellow brother or sister in the future, but Jesus always says to forgive.

As Christians, we should not be holding back forgiveness from others, but forgiving ***“those who trespass against us”*** as our Lord taught us to pray.

Just think of Joseph from our Old Testament reading. Could our situation be worse than Joseph’s? He was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, because they didn’t like his message. Joseph suffers temptation and abuse. But he would later become a Prince of Egypt. Later, his brothers come asking for his help, but they did not recognize him. In an emotional scene, as his brothers are at his mercy and finally confess their sin, Joseph says, ***“I am Joseph!”*** (Genesis 45:3). The brothers shake in fear, expecting judgment. Instead, Joseph forgives them and blesses them. Could your situation be worse than this?

Or could it be worse than Jesus? Jesus, like Joseph, was a faithful Son. Like Joseph, His own people tried to kill Him because they didn’t like His message. Jesus suffers the abuse of mankind. Yet, after suffering and dying, Jesus rises from the dead, He stands among His unfaithful disciples, who also shake in fear, and speaks to them words of forgiveness and blessing: ***“Peace be with you!”*** (John 20:19). As our exalted God and Lord, Christ comes to us today with those same words of forgiveness.

You may also notice that before Joseph forgave his brothers, he also wanted them to see the wrong that they had done, so they would know their need for forgiveness. It’s the same with the Triune God. In the parable, the debtor wasn’t concerned at all about his debt, and so he kept on incurring more debt. It’s only when the King approaches him that he begins to feel the debt. So, it is with us. Our Old Adam doesn’t concern itself with sin and doesn’t fear the wrath of God. But when the Law holds your sin before you, then you feel it. Only then do we say, ***“I am a poor, miserable sinner.”*** And then the Gospel of Christ forgives that debt of sin.

You may not know how high your financial debt may be until you get that bill in the mail. The Law of God is similar. So, when you see our great debt, repent, and ask for mercy, the Gospel shows that God forgives you. In Holy Baptism, Jesus stamps forgiven on your debt of sin. Because of Christ’s atoning death and resurrection, we receive forgiveness through Him and thus, we forgive generously just as Christ has generously forgiven you. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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