

Unmeasured Forgiveness Matthew 18:21-35

Over the past few weeks we have been looking into the spiritual truths contained in Matthew 18. This whole chapter is one continuous conversation that began as a result of the disciples arguing amongst themselves over which of them was the greatest. As a result of this argument, Jesus taught that child-like humility was what made one truly great, and then He expressed the greatness of God's love for little children, and how great our responsibility is in seeing that we don't hinder them in any way from knowing God. Last week we looked at how Jesus then circled back to the issue of conflict that had started this whole conversation at the beginning of the chapter. His church, at that time just the 12 disciples, had just battled with perhaps their first experience of internal conflict- conflict that resulted from sin- from pride, selfishness, boasting. Now anytime you take sinful human beings, (which includes all of us- every human being on the planet) and attempt to form deep relationships and authentic close community (as the church attempts to do), then inevitably there will arise some disagreement or conflict. And Jesus very clearly, as we saw last week in [Matthew 18:15-20](#), outlines a 3-step plan for reconciliation of conflict.

Now Peter, and perhaps the others, in hearing Jesus outline the 3-step plan, picked up on Jesus emphasizing reconciliation and granting forgiveness. Perhaps in their minds it appeared that Jesus was advising them to be overly giving and gracious in offering forgiveness, and they imagined that surely that degree of abundant giving and graciousness would have to have a limit. Up to what point were they still to forgive and reconcile, how many times should they do that for a person? Let's look at verse 21 together. ([Matt. 18:21](#))

According to the tradition of the religious leaders during that time, one was to extend forgiveness to another up to three times. So, Peter is more than doubling that amount by suggesting seven times. He was quick to apply Jesus's teaching of liberal forgiveness to those who sought it, but he slightly underestimated God's graciousness that His followers are to mirror. [Verse 22...](#)

Now the way the original Greek reads, some contend that Jesus was saying 70 times *and* 7, and therefore some versions translate this verse as saying 77 times total; and other translations say 70 times 7, implying 490 times total. Either way, the point is not to count how many times someone comes to you seeking forgiveness. This verse is not saying that after a certain number of times you are

to then hold onto and harbor unforgiveness and bitterness in your heart- no, nor is there a “forgiveness app” on your cell phone that keeps track of the reconciliations you make up to 77 or 490 times. No, the whole idea is that you *don't* keep track- you continue to forgive *anytime* someone comes to you in true repentance seeking forgiveness. Jesus then told a parable, which is a fictional story used to convey a spiritual fact. Let's look at verse 23 and we'll read through 35. ([Matthew 18:23-35](#))

Jesus here is emphasizing again the seriousness of forgiveness and reconciliation. One slave who owed much was forgiven much, but his fellow slave who owed little was forgiven little. And this was not alright with Jesus. In this context, the slaves mentioned were as hired servants to the king. They received wages, had certain rights, and could take out loans that could be paid back with money, or by service and labor. In [verse 24](#) we see that the first slave owed the king ten thousand talents. A talent was the largest Biblical unit for measuring money, and was worth approximately 15 years of wages for a laborer. You take 15 years of wages and multiple it by ten thousand, and we are talking quite a huge sum of money here. Let's compare this to money in our day- let's say someone makes just above minimum wage and earns \$20,000 a year. You multiply that \$20k by 15 to get the equivalent of 1 talent, which would equal \$300,000. So, ten thousand talents of \$300k would be the equivalent of 3 billion dollars! You're into some serious stuff if you owe someone 3 billion dollars! Perhaps if you're China looking at the United States debt, then maybe that's just pocket change; but for the rest of us as individuals, 3 billion dollars is an insane amount of money that nobody in this world would ever be able to pay off doing manual labor. It would be completely impossible! Now the slave knew that this debt was impossible for him to pay off, yet when faced with his family and all he owned being sold, he rashly made a promise to the king, having no idea how he could possibly keep it. And the king had compassion on him, and didn't just agree to his request for patience- no he did much more than that, he went beyond giving him more time and chose to forgive the entire debt!

What a beautiful portrait of the gospel. Can you imagine trying to tally up your life's worth of sins? For each of us, the sin debt incurred by missing God's standard of perfection would be a monstrous amount, impossible for any of us to pay back. We couldn't even begin to calculate how many times we haven't been perfect. And yet our King doesn't say “Work harder, and I'll give you more time to

justify your life's account," no- when we come to Him in sincere repentance asking for forgiveness and patience towards us, He responds by saying "Your debt is completely forgiven!"

In contrast to the ten thousand talents amount of \$3 billion, in [verse 28](#) we see that the second slave owed the first slave 100 denarii. 1 denarii was equal to 1 days' worth of wages for a laborer. Using our same modern standard of just \$20,000 a year, 100 days' worth would be equal to about \$7500. To have just been forgiven a debt of \$3 billion and to then lose patience on someone who merely owed \$7500 is an incredible display of hypocrisy and a wrongful act that would have to be accounted for. By his actions, that 1st slave rightly angered his lord, and his pardon was retracted, and instead of forgiveness- he faced torture and punishment. This fictional story is conveying to us the spiritual fact of how important forgiveness is to God. Jesus is saying this issue of forgiveness is a *big* issue, a big issue with severe consequences.

This lesson of forgiveness goes hand in hand with the previous lessons Jesus pointed out throughout this chapter 18. It fits right in with the lesson emphasizing humility- pride keeps you from being a forgiving person, but humility allows you to give freely that which was freely given to you. It fits right in with helping children not to stumble- as in, most children require much patience and forgiveness, and if we can give that to them rather than wrath and anger, then we'll avoid causing them to have a distorted view of God and thus lessen the chance that they'll stumble. This lesson of forgiveness goes hand in hand with the portrait of the shepherd seeking out the one sheep that strays. God is so ready to forgive that He even proactively seeks out one who is straying so that they can be forgiven and welcomed back into the flock of sheep. It fits right in with the 3-step plan of reconciliation- each step in the plan is aiming for repentance and forgiveness to occur so that the body of Christ can be restored to unity. In fact, one of the major threads throughout the entire Bible is God's forgiveness, leading to reconciliation, redemption, and restoration. Forgiveness is one of the major components of God's character. Forgiveness is the whole reason why God came down from Heaven in the form of a man and endured an unjust, grueling death on a cross. Forgiveness is the means by which we are able to enjoy a right relationship with God. Forgiveness is absolutely necessary for us to be able to spend eternity in God's presence in a world infinitely better than this current one. Forgiveness.

If forgiveness is that big of a deal throughout scripture, if it is that big a component of God's character, if it is what Jesus sacrificed so much for, if forgiveness is what the kingdom of Heaven is all about- then how dare we claim to be followers of Jesus and claim to have a seat in Heaven with Him- if we are unwilling to forgive our brother or sister.

One commentator broke this parable down into 5 basic truths, he summed it up like this:

- 1.) *Our sins are great.*
- 2.) *God freely forgives them.*
- 3.) *The offenses committed against us by our brethren are comparatively small.*
- 4.) *We should therefore most freely forgive them.*
- 5.) *If we do not, God will be justly angry with us, and punish us.*

We have a duty to forgive, and when we don't, it is considered to be a great evil. Think of it like this, when we choose not to forgive, we are exalting ourselves as being better than others. Without using words, we are attempting to make ourselves great. And the prideful aspiration of greatness is what provoked this whole conversation in the first place.

Some have used this last verse 35 as a defense for supporting that you can lose your salvation. Joseph Benson, a Bible commentator who lived during the seventeen and eighteen hundreds, argued that *"the debtor was freely and fully forgiven, He willfully and grievously offended, His pardon was retracted, the whole debt requited, and the offender delivered to the tormentors forever. And shall we still say, that when we are once freely and fully forgiven, our pardon can never be retracted?"* Others would say that someone who refuses to forgive has never really experienced forgiveness themselves, and thus were never truly saved. Matthew Henry says it like this: *"Those who do not forgive their brother's trespasses, did never truly repent of their own, and therefore that which is taken away [forgiveness] is only what they seemed to have."* Either way, the message is still very clear- we as Christians are to forgive those who seek our forgiveness.

Many of you have perhaps heard the name Corrie ten Boom. She was a Christian woman from the Netherlands who worked with other family members to help

many Jews escape the horrors of the Holocaust during World War II. Corrie and her sister Betsie would hide Jews in their home, and help them get to safety. They saved many, but eventually the sisters were found out and arrested, and sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp, where they were kept for 2 years. Towards the end of that 2 years, Corrie witnessed her beloved sister Betsie die, and 15 days later after Betsie's death, Corrie was released. She later found out that she was released by "accident" and that all the other women in her age group were sent to the gas chambers. Corrie returned to the Netherlands, and the war ended, and there she created a rehabilitation center that aided survivors and others in need that had been affected by the war. Another two years later, she returned back to Germany, and later traveled to other countries as well, proclaiming Jesus, with the message that *"there is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still,"* and that *"God will give us the love to be able to forgive our enemies."*

In her book, *The Hiding Place*, she writes these words: *"It was in a church in Munich that I saw him—a balding, heavyset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear... And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. 'Betsie, how thin you were!...' Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: 'A fine message... How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!' And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand... 'You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,' he was saying, 'I was a guard there... But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well...' again the hand came out— 'will you forgive me?' And I stood there... and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do... I knew [forgiveness] not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to*

forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that. And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. ‘... Help!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’ And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’ For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then.”

Perhaps there are some here this morning that need to make the decision today to forgive. The choice to forgive may not be backed by emotions and feelings that support it, but the choice to forgive is backed by Jesus’s words in this passage- the words here are nothing short of a commandment that we are to obey. You might ask “How am I to forgive that person for the terrible things they did?” I believe Corrie ten Boom found a good answer to that question- you choose to forgive and ask God to supply the feeling as you walk in obedience. Let’s pray.