

# Matthew 18:21-35

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[ 0 : 00 ] Let me remind you of something important. There is usually one point, one main point to a parable. Jesus tells parables to get one main point across, to do it memorably and vividly.

! And so the parable that we've got this morning has one main point. One more point that it wants to get across and it's this. It is, forgiven people will be forgiving people. Forgiving people will be forgiving people.

We can turn it the other way round and we can say, unforgiving people cannot be forgiven people. Unforgiving people cannot be forgiven.

Now if you don't understand that usually a parable is intended to get across one main point, you'll come to this parable and you'll come to all sorts of wrong conclusions.

On issues that the parable actually was never intended to address. So for some people who look at this parable and they say, well God just forgives, doesn't he, in this parable. The king forgives. There's no atonement.

[ 1 : 16 ] There's no suggestion of it. There's just repentance and then forgiveness. But that's not the point of the parable. The point of the parable is to answer a question. Look at verse 21. And Peter comes to Jesus and says, Lord, how often will my brother or sister, that can be, sin against me and I forgive them.

Many is seven times. That's the question. And that's the one question that the parable is meant to answer. And so let me remind you of the parable briefly.

You've got a servant. He's a servant of the king. He's a pretty high-ranking official. And he's dealing with lots of money. You've got to think of a kind of governor.

Of a province or something. And because of his incompetence, because of his mismanagement, perhaps even deliberate embezzlement or fraud, he ends up owing the king a large amount of money.

A vast amount of money. The day of reckoning comes. It's the end of the financial year. And he is in the deep. He owes the king 10,000 talents.

[ 2 : 24 ] That is an impossibly large figure. A talent. One talent was a lot of money in those days. And 10,000 was really the highest number in the Greek language. The Greeks couldn't really conceive of a number higher than 10,000.

They had no word in their language for more than 10,000. It's why when you get to Revelation, John wants to describe the multitude that no man can number that are in heaven.

And he describes it, doesn't he, as 10,000 times 10,000. And thousands. Thousands. 10,000 is kind of the limit of their vocabulary when it came to large numbers.

And so when Jesus says, this guy owed 10,000 talents, he was really thinking, this man could not have owed any more than he owed. He's in terrible trouble.

And we're talking billions in our money. And the whole point is that his debt was immense and completely unpayable. And there was nothing that this man could have done in order to pay back the money.

[ 3 : 31 ] He was ruined. He was finished. And it was prison that he faced. And for him and his family in slavery, they were to be sold.

You couldn't declare yourself bankrupt. And that way, if they were sold in the slavery, the king would at least get some money back from that family. And so that's the situation this man is in.

He goes to the king. The king calls him in. The man falls on his knees and begs. He begs the king. He says, doesn't he, Be patient with me.

Did you notice in verse 26, He says, be patient with me and I will pay you everything. There's no way on earth he could have paid everything.

He doesn't understand it. It's just ridiculous. He can't pay back 10,000 talents. He's asked for patience. He's asked for time to redeem the situation by his own efforts.

[ 4 : 32 ] And instead, what he receives from the king is sheer grace. It's an unbelievable act. The king cancels the whole debt and lets him go.

As if he didn't own a thing. He cancels the whole debt. 10,000 talents wiped off the slate. It's an act of pity. It's an act of compassion. It's an act of mercy.

Incidentally, the king bears the cost, doesn't he? There is actually atonement here. The king absorbs the loss. But you can imagine how that servant felt, didn't he, when he walked out of that room.

He must have been on cloud nine. Imagine I come to your house this afternoon. And I say to you, have you got a mortgage? Say, yeah, I've got 20 years to go on my mortgage.

18 years to go on the mortgage. I say, how much is that you? Tell me the amount. And I write you a cheque. Or I transfer the money into your account. I say to you, have you got university fees?

[ 5 : 38 ] You say, yeah. How much are they? I open a case and I get the money out. What is it, 9,000 pounds and I give it to you. A bridging loan. Imagine I can wipe off your bridging loan.

Credit card bill. Your overdraft. Just wiped out this afternoon. Imagine how you'd feel. You'd come to church tonight. You'd be pretty pleased, wouldn't you?

You'd be on cloud nine. And here's the man, he walks out of there. The weight, isn't it? Isn't that what people talk about with death? The overwhelming weight of it? The weight is off his shoulders. The burden is gone. And as he's walking around his workplace, he finds another member of staff that owes a comparatively minor, trivial sum.

It's a hundred denarii. What's that? Well, if you work it out, it's basically three months' salary on the minimum wage. That's what a hundred denarii is.

[ 6 : 44 ] It's not an insignificant sum. It's three months' salary of the minimum wage. So it's a few thousand pounds. It's a substantial amount.

If you owed me, let's say three thousand pounds, I'd want to get it back. And so here's a man who's owed, let's say three thousand pounds. It's not a totally insignificant sum of money. But he goes to his friend, and what does he do?

He grabs him by the throat, and he begins to choke him. Where's my money? And he demands immediate payment of his three thousand pounds. The man falls on his knees, and he says, do you hear the echo?

He says, have patience with me, and I will pay you. Haven't we heard that before? Be patient with me, and I will pay you. Everything. They're the exact words that the servant used when he asked the king to be patient with me.

But on this occasion, those words fall on deaf ears. And he refuses to be patient. He refuses to be merciful. He takes him to the courtroom, and he puts the man in prison until he gets the three thousand pound back.

[ 7 : 51 ] And word gets around the staff. And we read that the fellow servants were greatly distressed. And you can imagine they were, but rightly so. I mean, there's something incredibly hard-hearted, isn't there, about a man who's been forgiven millions of pounds, cruelly demanding the instant payment of a few thousand pounds.

His name was Albert Tesla. Albert Tesla won the lottery a few years ago in the United States. The amount he pocketed was seven million dollars.

That's a lot of money, isn't it? Seven million dollars. But two years later, after Albert Tesla won seven million dollars, he was sent to prison. And he was sent to prison because he failed to pay child support, which totaled thirty-five thousand dollars.

He got seven million dollars, but he couldn't pay thirty-five thousand dollars. You think that's bad? Well, the servants in this story, the work colleagues, they certainly did, didn't they?

So the fellow servants report to the king that the king is absolutely furious and very disappointed. Disappointed that such an act of sheer grace and forgiveness and mercy had made so little difference to the man's character or heart.

[ 9 : 10 ] And so we read in verse 32, then his master summoned him and said to him, you wicked servants, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should you not have had mercy on your fellow servants, I had mercy on you.

And in his anger, his master delivered him to the jailers, literally to the torturers, until he should pay all his debt. And so it's not slavery now, it's torture, shockingly.

Until he can pay back all that he owes. And it's going to take him a very long time, an impossibly long time. And then the punchline comes in verse 35, here's the punchline, and so also my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

So there's the parable. What can we say about it? Let me remind you, one big lesson in a parable. And it's intended to teach us that those who experience God's utterly amazing forgiveness will themselves be forgiving people.

So let's look at that. First of all, let's see God's utterly amazing forgiveness. And when we think of God's forgiveness, we shouldn't think of him overlooking minor misdemeanors.

[10:26] We should think of him cancelling a huge, unpayable debt. God is a great king and we are his stewards. We are his servants.

We are answerable to him. We owe him obedience and we owe him honour. We owe him respect. We owe him love. We owe him worship. You owe him your whole life.

And you have not paid him what you ought. And you, whether you're willing to admit it this morning, are guilty of serious mismanagement. When we recognise this, when we understand this before God, that we have a massive unpaid debt to a great and glorious Lord, we get before him on our knees and we beg for mercy.

We beg for mercy. And I wonder, has that ever happened in your experience? Have you ever come to that point where you've suddenly realised how vastly in debt you are towards God?

And how you cannot pay it back yourself at all. How you need mercy. And the amazing thing is that when we get to that point, God does forgive us, doesn't he? He cancels the debt.

[11:36] He cancels the debt. According to the rest of Matthew's Gospel and the New Testament, he cancels the debt because of the Lord Jesus. He absorbs the cost. And only because of Jesus.

The Jews in the Old Testament, they were familiar with, they knew that if you were in debt, there was a close relative, a kinsman, redeemer, who if he had the money, could come and pay the debt off him.

And you would be released. And so where is the redeemer who can pay 10,000 talents? Where is the redeemer with that kind of money? Where is the redeemer who can rescue from a debt like that?

No earthly redeemer can pay that. And that's why God sent us a redeemer. There is a redeemer, Jesus, God's own son. The Messiah, the Holy One, no debt of his own.

But he was able to pay out of his great and glorious righteousness all the debt we owe. And so when we get to the point of being on our knees and begging for mercy, God forgives us.

[12:47] And God cancels the debt. Because there is a redeemer. Jesus, God's own son. Second thing is that forgiven sinners will be forgiving people.

Forgiven sinners will be forgiving people. You would have thought, wouldn't you, that that servant would have been willing to forgive anybody anything. What was the debt that he was owed compared to the debt that he owes to the king?

On which the king had counseled. Any wrong, any injury, any insult. Anything that's been done to us, however considerable, when you consider that in comparison with the insults and the injury and the wrong that we have done to God and what God has forgiven us, we have to say, don't we, that nobody, nothing, anyone can do to us compares to what we have done to God is of any significant. God is perfectly right and holy. He is holy in the right, isn't he? And that is very, very rarely true.

So when relationships break down in human life, very rarely is one party holy in the right. I usually, in a situation, there's somebody who is more in the right than the other person.

[14:28] And maybe there's one party that's 95% in the right or 98% in the right. That's usually the case in earthly relationships.

Rarely, very rarely, is one party holy and completely 100% in the right. But God is completely 100% in the right. God is righteous.

God is holy. God is God. And he is the one who forgives us. He is holy right and we have been holy wrong and yet he is the one who forgives us.

I find that amazing. And so if we refuse to forgive, what if sinners refuse to forgive our fellow sinners?

The holy and righteous God can forgive sinners. How is it that we can't? And we're saying, aren't we, that we are more holy than God.

[ 15 : 31 ] We're saying that we're greater than God. And if we ask God for forgiveness but refuse to forgive others, we are burning the bridge we need to cross.

And that is why we cannot be forgiven unless we are forgiving. We need to cross the bridge of forgiveness ourselves. And by refusing to forgive we are burning the bridge that you and I need to cross ourselves.

But let's note the order. The order is very, very important. It's God's forgiveness which comes first. God's forgiveness precedes ours. Our forgiveness is the response to God's forgiveness of us.

And so that casts light on the Lord's Prayer, doesn't it? What's the only petition in the Lord's Prayer that the Lord Jesus comments on after he's told his disciples? The one petition he comments on is forgive us our debts or forgive us our trespasses or forgive us our sins as we've forgiven our debtors or those who trespass against us or those who sin against us.

And he goes on to say, he goes on to say if you do not forgive those who sin against you, your Heavenly Father will not forgive you. He makes a comment about that petition and it's important to understand that God does not forgive us because we forgive others.

[ 16 : 58 ] No, we forgive others because God has forgiven us. no one who has understood the grace of God no one who understands grace will be an unforgiving person.

The third lesson we must learn is the terrible punishment of being unforgiving. Look at verse 34.

And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt.

And these are solemn words. So also my Heavenly Father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from the heart. Now who's he talking to?

He's talking to his disciples. He's talking to the twelve. He's talking specifically to Peter. It was Peter who asked the question. And this parable is a reply to that question.

And the punchline of this parable makes it very very clear absolutely clear that you can be outwardly very closely associated with Jesus Christ and still go to hell.

[ 18 : 08 ] You can actually be one of the twelve disciples and go to hell. One did. You can be outwardly a church member you can be a respectable church member and not be a saved person in the end.

This is the question that's asked by Jesus by his disciples and by Peter in particular. And Jesus tells this story and he says this is how my Heavenly Father will treat each of you. No exception. Unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

Not just words. Not just words. Not just pretend. but heartfelt forgiveness. And that is what happens when we've been forgiven.

That's the kind of forgivers we become. I just want to spend five minutes as we close just to make a few further comments on forgiveness. Because this is a very hard-hitting parable.

And it could worry or confuse us unless I think I make a few comments on the nature of forgiveness. forgiveness. It won't help us. This parable does not teach that forgiveness is easy or straightforward.

[ 19 : 24 ] I think the Christian church in this country and the United States is plagued with a trivial view of forgiveness. A sentimental view of forgiveness. Where sin is not taken seriously.

And sin is not dealt with. And so there have been a number of occasions and a number of times where there has been a great tragedy. And church going Christian people will say pretty much in the immediate aftermath what they feel they are expected to say.

And so they will say I forgive my daughter's killers. I forgive the person who has murdered my husband or daughter. And I know it's a very hard thing to say but I'm not convinced that that is right. Because the context of Peter's question is in relationships in the local church. That's why I took the time on it before the reading isn't it? And so he says what happens when a church member goes astray?

If for instance he or she sins against you what do you do? Do you just ignore it? Do you write the person off? Do you condemn the person you shrug your shoulders? And say well have you? No Jesus says you go and you seek that person.

[ 20 : 39 ] What does the shepherd do? The shepherd if he loses just one of his sheep he goes out and he seeks the sheep that is lost and he brings the sheep back home.

What do you do with church members that go astray? Well we've all got a responsibility. We have to go and to seek that person that's wandered away from the Lord Jesus. And how do we seek them? Well Jesus says this in the passage we looked at last week you go privately and you seek to show them their fault. And if they listen to you great you've won them over. But what if he doesn't listen? Well you keep at it.

And you go with two or three witnesses and you want to show them their fault so that they'll come back and you deal with the wrong doing. and if they do come back and they say yeah I'm sorry I was out of order I sinned you forgive them and the matter goes no further.

And what if he will not listen to the two or the three? Well in that event he says you take him to the church the leadership and if he refuses to listen well you have to treat him like somebody who's not a Christian like a pagan or a tax collector.

[ 21 : 45 ] And you don't share the Lord's Supper with them. You don't allow them to think of themselves as a Christian. And if of course they listen and they repent well you extend total 100% forgiveness and it's settled.

And Jesus goes on to say for a church to do this it's really difficult and it's a sensitive thing and we all shy away from it and Jesus says when you do this when you seek to do this I am with you when two three are together I am with you don't be afraid.

And what you decide on earth will be ratified in heaven don't shy away from it. And I think the passages in Matthew 18 really help us to think through Christian forgiveness.

Christian forgiveness is not a sentimental thing. It's not pretending that sin doesn't matter. It isn't letting the offender off the hook without getting him or her to face up to their wrongdoing.

Christian forgiveness seeks to bring the wrongdoer to repentance. And when the wrongdoer faces up to his wrongdoing and repents the individual and the church must totally and completely forgive.

[ 23 : 04 ] And Peter says how often should you do this? Seven times. He's being generous.

Remember the rabbis, the local rabbis said three times and you're out. And Peter is being generous and Jesus says no 70 times son.

It doesn't mean when you get to 488 sins you say to them listen you've got two more to go. And then you get 490 sins. That's it. Seven is a significant number to Jews isn't it?

It speaks of completion and fullness. And actually there's a really interesting cross reference with Genesis 4 with Lamech. And Jesus is actually reversing the language of Lamech, the descendant of Cain.

In Genesis 4 verse 23, Lamech boasts and says to his wife, if Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy seven times. I'll go after you. Don't come near me. I'll go after you.

And so it's clear that the opposite of revenge is forgiveness. And Jesus is saying here there's to be no going after people.

[ 24 : 09 ] There's to be no revenge. There's to be no limits to our forgiveness of one another.

There's no limit at all to our forgiveness. And when you consider what God has done and God has forgiven us, we will be able to forgive those who ask for it.

And so whenever a person truly repents, and in Luke's version of this same incident, it's more clear. Luke 17 verse 3, if your brother sins rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him.

And if he sins against you seven times in the day and turns to you seven times saying I repent, you must forgive him. God forgives us when we repent. And we forgive people when they repent.

That means that the forgiveness is not identical to reconciliation. There are people that confuse that. We seek to offer forgiveness to someone who has been sinned against or against the church. we seek to offer forgiveness. We seek reconciliation. But that reconciliation may be refused. That forgiveness may be refused. It may be turned down.

[ 25 : 21 ] And when that happens, what does a forgiving spirit do? Well, a forgiving spirit shows itself by not taking revenge against the person by a refusal to retaliate.

By a refusal even to say bad things to others or bitter things to others about that person. And we pray for God's blessing on that person. We make it clear to that person we want to offer them forgiveness and reconciliation.

But if at the end of the day they don't want it, and they turn that reconciliation when it cannot be achieved, what should we say to offenders?

Should we offer offenders a blanket kind of forgiveness? Is that what we should do? Is that what we're called to do? If somebody killed one of my children, what would I want to say? That's what I

think I'd want to say.

I think I'd like to meet with them. I'd like to go and see them in prison. I'd like that person to see the enormity of what they've done. I would try and bring that person to repentance.

[ 26 : 35 ] repentance. If that person became a Christian, I would sit down and I would share bread and wine with them. But I can't forgive them fully and completely without some indication of confession and repentance on the part of that person.

forgiven people will be forgiven people. Forgiveness is not easy.

It is difficult. But a forgiven person will always seek to extend that forgiveness to everyone who sins against them.

Let's pray.