

NO LIMIT TO FORGIVENESS

Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, 2017

Matthew 18:21-35

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel reading heard read before, Matthew 18:21-35: **Then Peter came to Jesus and asked Him, “Lord, how often shall I forgive my brother when he keeps sinning against me? Up to seven times?”**

²² **Jesus answered him, “I tell you, not up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.**

²³ **“That is why the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he had begun to settle accounts, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ Since this slave could not pay the debt, the master ordered that he should be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment should be made. ²⁶ Therefore the slave fell on his knees and bowed low before him, and asked: ‘Be patient with me, and I shall pay everything back to you!’ ²⁷ The master of that slave felt compassion for him, freed him, and forgave him his debt.**

²⁸ **However, when that slave had gone out, he found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii. He took hold of him and began to choke him. He said, ‘Pay what you owe!’ ²⁹ Therefore his fellow slave fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I shall pay you back!’ ³⁰ However, he refused. Instead, he went off and put him into prison until he should pay back what he owed. ³¹ Therefore when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were very sad and went and told their own master everything that had happened. ³² Then his master sent for him and told him: ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. ³³ Should you not also have pitied your fellow slave as I had also pitied you?’ ³⁴ His master was angry and handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back all that he owed.**

³⁵ **“That is also what My Father in heaven will do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from his heart.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

If you want to get someone's attention, then talk about money! When a large sum of money is mentioned, heads will turn, and ears will be pricked. A large jackpot in the lottery will get people to go out and buy tickets. A huge prize in a sweepstake will get people to send in their entries. And it's not only the prospect of receiving a large sum of money that gets people interested. Large sums owed get attention too: a bill that is much bigger than we expected; the total of one's debts when they are all added together. In the Lord's parable before us today, it is the latter: a huge, crushing, unpayable debt.

By telling a parable that included a large sum of money, Jesus wanted to get people's attention and get them to look at something they might otherwise not consider.

There are two things that are represented by the large sum in the parable, both of them things people tend not to notice. One is the magnitude of their own sins, and the other is the magnitude of God's grace in freely and completely forgiving sin. These two things taken together teach us a lesson from the Lord, and that is that ***He would have us forgive those who sin against us.***

Peter came to Jesus and asked Him, "Lord, how often shall I forgive my brother when he keeps sinning against me? Up to seven times?" Peter asked this because Jesus had just finished teaching His disciples how to deal with a sinning brother. In His teaching, Jesus had taught them to be concerned for the soul of the sinning brother, to try to lead him to repentance so that he would receive God's forgiveness. Peter understood that Jesus wants us to forgive those who sin against us, but he supposed that there must be a limit to forgiving. Thinking about this, Peter wondered just how far one should go in forgiving someone who repeatedly sins against you. He suggested **seven times**. And why not, Jesus Himself had used the number seven once when speaking about this very thing. He had said, *"If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him"* (Luke 17:3-4).

Of course Jesus hadn't meant that seven times should be a limit. He was saying that forgiveness should be boundless, so that it should be given even seven times in a single day, if that should be called for. Here Jesus makes this same point in a different way and puts it in even stronger language: **"I tell you, not up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."** In other words, *don't keep score and finally decide that enough is enough.*

Now it is hard to forgive someone, especially when time and time again they do something that hurts you. But if they come seeking forgiveness, you are to forgive.

Besides, if God kept such a record of your sins, He would have written you off a long time ago. We are all in need of God's free forgiveness over and over, every single day as long as we live. Anyone who sees himself as a disciple of Christ ought to forgive as often as the occasion arises, without any thought about limits.

Jesus then goes on to tell the parable of the unforgiving slave, which doesn't just command forgiveness but teaches the basis for unbounded forgiveness. The story is powerful and unforgettable. **"That is why the kingdom of heaven is like a king."** This is how it is where Christ rules. The story is about a king who wants to settle his accounts with his slaves. One of them owed him **ten thousand talents**. This was an enormous sum. Various kinds of talents differed in value. For example, some talents were made of gold, some of silver. Some put ten thousand talents to be somewhere estimated between \$12 and \$20 million dollars. But whatever the amount, this debt was so tremendous that the man could not possibly repay it. There's no way he could ever pay it off. But he begs his master to give him more time: **the slave fell on his knees and bowed low before him, and asked: 'Be patient with me, and I shall pay everything back to you!'**

The slave in the parable had nothing, no resources, with which to pay his debt. His promise to pay was made in desperation. He could never have paid the debt, even if he had been given the rest of his life to do it. The master had every right to command that all the slave's possessions be sold, that he himself be sold, and that even his wife and children be sold.

The situation was hopeless, and what this parable does is shows the nature of the sinner's case before God, and it is no exaggeration. We have nothing with which to repay God, no resources to use to make up for our sins. We can't work them off. We can't pay for them with money. We don't have anything that doesn't already belong to God. We can't do anything for God that we don't already owe Him. With each and every sin we commit, we run up the same impossible-to-pay debt to God. For each sin, an eternity of suffering in hell would not pay back the Master what is owed to Him. Our sins are sins against Him, for He is our Lord who made us, and we are accountable to Him in everything. The debt is an enormous one, for to offend against the Lord of all is a fearful thing.

There was only one hope for the slave, only one way out: that the master would simply release him from his debt and let him go. But, he dared not hope for this. Yet this is what the master did. **The master of that slave felt compassion for him, freed him, and forgave him his debt.** The master was a compassionate man; he was moved by the plight of his slave. He knew that the man's only hope was for the debt to be

forgiven. Out of the generosity of his own heart he forgave the debt, even though it was so large and the slave so unworthy. Here we see the grace of God. He sees the plight of sinners and is moved with compassion. “*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...*”¹ God saw that the only way out for us was if He acted on our behalf and paid the debt for us. This Jesus did when He offered His life to the Father as sacrifice in full payment for all our debt. So now for the sake of Jesus Christ, God cancels the debt we owe Him, be it ever so large. He forgives us freely, out of the goodness and kindness of His own nature. He forgives us fully, wiping out our debt completely, so that not one sin remains to be held against us. In the forgiveness of sins we see the magnitude of God’s grace in Christ.

When we see the magnitude of God’s grace in Christ and believe it, this changes our view of the sins that are committed against us. When we see what a great debt we owed to God and how He has forgiven us, the debts that others owe us appear very small and insignificant. Jesus also helps us to see this by a second incident in the parable.

After the slave left the presence of his master he ran into a fellow slave who owed him some money. A **hundred denarii** to be exact. To be consistent with what we’ve said before, that’d be about \$17,000 – which I suspect for most of us is still a lot of money. You would think that the slave would have been in a generous mood after his master had showed him such generosity. But it wasn’t that way at all. He not only confronted the fellow slave with his debt but did so rudely, even violently. **He took hold of him and began to choke him. He said, ‘Pay what you owe!’ Therefore his fellow slave fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I shall pay you back!’** The fellow slave pleaded with him, and notice that he did so in the same words that the slave had used to plead with the king. Those words should have sounded a familiar chord to that slave, reminding him of the mercy that recently had been shown to him. But he remembered nothing of that mercy, and had his fellow slave thrown into prison for the debt.

This callous conduct on the part of the slave shows us how outrageous it is for us forgiven sinners to refuse to forgive those who sin against us. Compared to what we owe to God, anything anyone owes us is small. This is so even in the case of wrongs that by themselves are very great. If you are holding a grudge against someone, if there are old wounds you are still nursing or insults you are brooding over, if there are people whom you would like to pay back for the evil they did to you, then the unforgiving slave is you. Perhaps someone in your life has done you some great harm.

¹ John 3:16

Perhaps someone has stolen from you, hurt you deeply, or done some great injury to you or someone close to you. These are grave wrongs, yet the wrong that has been done is mainly against God. If He who is holy and righteous and Lord of all is willing to forgive great offences, who are we sinners to withhold forgiveness? So even such things we are to forgive from the heart.

To refuse to forgive is great wickedness in the sight of God. This is what Jesus Himself calls it; the master in the parable says to the unmerciful slave, “**You wicked slave!**” Those who will not forgive others show by their refusal to forgive that they have not repented of their own sins and have not come to see and believe the grace of God in Christ. The steadfast refusal to forgive is the act of an unbeliever.

Now, of course, this does not mean that anyone who has unforgiving thoughts is an unbeliever. We all have unforgiving thoughts, for we are still both flesh and spirit, old Adam and new man. Satan too, wants us to believe that we have a right to refuse to forgive someone who deliberately harms us, especially if that harm is repeated and the offender shows no repentance and doesn't even care about being forgiven by us. The devil wants us to imagine that we can derive a certain satisfaction from holding a grudge or even trying to get revenge, so we find it extremely hard to forgive and find that evil thoughts of anger over past wrongs arise in our hearts. When we find this happening, let us repent of those thoughts and seek God's forgiveness for them. That we may have a forgiving heart let us bear in mind the magnitude of God's grace in the forgiveness of our sins. When we forgive others as God forgives us, we are the ones who are blessed by that. Knowing that we are blessed, that alone will lead us to forgive those who sin against us and to do so from the heart. Amen.

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

PRAYER FOR THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord our God, we rejoice to stand in Your presence and to come before You in prayer, praise, and thanks through Your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. We thank You for showing us Your power and glory in this vast universe, and for enabling us to see Your majesty and might in the creation around us. We praise You for filling the earth with life and goodness, and for renewing it continually according to Your laws. Help us to harvest the fruit of honest effort, to find joy in the coming of each new day, and to rest in the peace of each night.

Above all else, we thank You for the gift of Your only Son Jesus Christ, and for revealing Yourself and Your saving love to us through Him. We praise You for His holy life of true manhood, for His innocent sufferings and death on our behalf, and for

His glorious resurrection to eternal life, so that, through Him, we have the forgiveness of our sins, the power to conquer all evil, and the sure gift of eternal life. Bring us finally to the everlasting kingdom that You have promised us through Your Son.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of Your Word to be the lamp to light our path through life. Give us Your Spirit that we may listen to Your Word with eager understanding. Enrich our lives with the endurance and the encouragement that the Scriptures give, and fill us with hope, now and for ever. Lead us by the Spirit, so that we may not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Teach us to ignore the desires of our sinful natures. Give us confidence that there is wisdom in Your commandments, and grant that we may take delight in them. Fill our lives with the Spirit's fruit of love, joy, peace, humility, patience, goodness, and faithfulness.

We pray for Your Church. Rule and direct it to accomplish Your purposes and plans. Defend it against all error and doubt, and keep it in the truth. Make it alive by Your grace, that it may seek to praise You in every good work.

Uphold all leaders in our land. Help them to know and follow Your will, so that they may maintain law and order with firmness and love, and so that we may live in peace and quietness, and serve You without hindrance.

Bless our homes. Guide all parents that Your Word and will may have pride of place in their lives. Help the young to live in the light of Your Word and to know the happiness of a life of faith and purity.

We pray for all who are facing hardship, sickness, suffering, and danger. Fill their lives with Your grace, and hold before them the perfect peace of Christ.

These prayers, and all our unspoken desires, and anything else we should have asked of Your mercy, give us for the sake of Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 50:15-21

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers realised that their father was dead, they asked, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and actually pays us back for all the evil that we have done to him?"

¹⁶ So they sent a messenger to Joseph to say: "Before your father died, he left these instructions, ¹⁷ 'This is what

you are to tell Joseph: "We are begging you, please forgive the crime and the sin that your brothers committed against you, because they did evil to you!"' So now, please, forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father!"

Joseph wept when their message came to him. ¹⁸ Then his brothers themselves came and threw

themselves down before him. They said, "See! We are your slaves."

¹⁹ However, Joseph told them: "Do not be afraid! For am I in the place of God? ²⁰ Although you planned evil against me, God has planned good to come from it, in order to accomplish what is so this day, the preservation of the lives of many people. ²¹ So now, do not be afraid! I shall provide for you and your little ones."

He reassured them with words that touched their hearts.

Romans 14:1-12

¹ Welcome the person who is weak in the faith, but not for the purpose of getting into quarrels about opinions! ² One person believes he may eat anything; but another person, who is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The person who eats should not despise the person who does not eat; and the person who does not eat should not criticise the person who eats! For God has accepted him. ⁴ Who are you to criticise some-one else's servant? It is with reference to his own master that he succeeds or fails. He will also succeed. For the Lord can make him succeed. ⁵ For one person thinks that one day is better than another is; and another person thinks that every day is alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind! ⁶ The person who observes the day observes it to the Lord. The person who eats eats to the Lord. For he gives thanks to

God. The person who does not eat refrains from eating to the Lord, and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. ⁸ For, if we live, we live to the Lord; and, if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ For Christ died and became alive again for this purpose: that He might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰ However, why do you criticise your fellow-Christian? Or why do you too despise your fellow-Christian? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For Scripture has said: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before Me, and every tongue will make confession to God.'" ¹² So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked Him, "Lord, how often shall I forgive my brother when he keeps sinning against me? Up to seven times?"

²² Jesus answered him, "I tell you, not up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

²³ "That is why the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he had begun to settle accounts, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ Since this slave could not pay the debt, the master ordered that he should be sold, with

his wife, children, and all that he had, and that payment should be made.²⁶

Therefore the slave fell on his knees, bowed low before him, and asked: 'Be patient with me! I shall pay everything back to you.'²⁷ The master of that slave felt compassion for him, freed him, and forgave him his debt.

²⁸ "However, when that slave had gone out, he found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii. He took hold of him and began to choke him. He said, 'Pay what you owe!'²⁹ Therefore his fellow slave fell down and begged him, 'Be patient with me! I shall pay you back.'³⁰ However, he refused. Instead, he went off and put him into prison until he should pay

back what he owed.³¹ Therefore when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were very sad and went and told their own master everything that had happened.³² Then his master sent for him and said to him: 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.³³ Should you not also have pitied your fellow slave as I had also pitied you?'³⁴ His master was angry and handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back all that he owed.

³⁵ "That is also what My Father in heaven will do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from his heart."