

# “Forgiven Therefore Forgive”

Matthew 18:21-35

Pastor James York

July 29, 2018

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?” “No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!”

“Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn’t pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. “But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. “But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. “His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn’t wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. “When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. “That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.”

On April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1958 a Korean exchange student left his apartment to mail a letter to his parents. As he turned from the mailbox, he was met by eleven teenagers. Without a word, they beat him with a lead pipe, kicked him and left him lying dead in the gutter.

Much of Philadelphia cried out for vengeance. The DA planned to seek the death penalty for the arrested youth. And then, this letter arrived signed by the boy’s parents and twenty other relatives in Korea: “Our family has met together and we have decided to petition the most generous treatment possible within the laws of your government be given to those who have committed this criminal act...In order to give evidence of our sincere hope contained in this petition, we have decided to save money to start a fund to be used for the religious, educational, vocational and social guidance of the boys when they are released...We have dared to express our hope with a spirit received from the gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ who died for our sins.”

When we forgive, we are no longer the victim but rather the victor. When we withhold forgiveness, we not only hurt the person we don’t want to forgive, we also hurt ourselves. We lose the joy of living. When we forgive, we release peace and restoration to the forgiven and to ourselves.

Peter witnessed Jesus forgiving everyone and teaching about forgiveness. The person who has been hurt is to take the initiative with loving humility, with the intent of healing the relationship meet with the offender and then offer complete forgiveness whether or not the offender shows remorse or apologies. If the offender continues to sin against you, then you are to keep loving and forgiving them until you love them back into community.

Peter pondered this radical outrageous loving forgiveness. He realized with his temper this will be a real challenge to live yet he is determined to live forgiveness. He gets Jesus’ message our forgiveness is to far exceed any earthly expectations. Peter knows Jewish law requires forgiveness of each person three times. Peter swallows hard and asks a question of Jesus that he feels is exceedingly gracious. **“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”** Seven times is more than double the most gracious forgiveness Peter has ever seen. Jesus replies, **“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”** Some translations state 70 times 7 times. The meaning of the Greek here is always. Jesus is saying that there is to be no limit on forgiveness. Forgiveness should so permeate our lives that we simply lose count of how many times we forgive. Always forgive.

C.S. Lewis believes forgiveness is the most unpopular of all the Christian virtues writing, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.” Jim Wallis reminds us “Jesus did not

say, 'blessed are the peace lovers,' which we of course all claim to be. Jesus said, 'blessed are the peace makers,' which is a decidedly different undertaking. The question this raises for us is whether we merely love the concept of forgiveness and peace or whether we expand physical energy and utilize action verbs to make peace and forgiveness realities." Alexander Pope wrote, "To err is human, to forgive divine. All people commit sins and make mistakes. God forgives them, and people are acting in a godlike (divine) way when they forgive."

Jesus says forgiveness is like a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. As he got underway, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of 10,000 talents or in today's currency about 9.5 million dollars. Ten thousand talents was an outrageously unfathomable amount of debt exceeding the revenues of King Herod's treasury for ten years. Viewed in this light it would be ten times the U.S. annual budget, roughly 44 trillion dollars. It is an obscene amount of money to illustrate God's extravagant and limitless forgiveness.

The servant has been excessively careless with their blessings. Frivolously spending. Wasting their talents, abilities and gifts. Polluting and abusing the earth. Hoarding stuff without thought of others. Using people to get ahead. Misusing power and influence. Taking rather than serving. Believing they are entitled rather than sharing. Regularly failing to give and receive love and on and on. The servant of course is each and every one of us. There is no way the servant can even begin to make a dent in the enormous debt owed, so the king ordered the person to be auctioned off at the slave market. This was the just and common practice at that time. The person was imprisoned laboring as a slave until their relatives and friends could pay the debt in full.

The servant threw himself at the king's feet and begged, "Give me a chance and I'll pay it back." Like this servant, Martin Luther observes we often attempt to work, to pay our debt to God, but despite all of our good deeds, best efforts and works, we remain indebted. Even if all of humanity worked together giving our very best, we still would come up way short in earning our salvation. Touched by the servant's plea, the king forgave him of everything, no strings attached, no discounting, or reduced repayment plan. The entire debt was erased.

Justice for all of us would be to be sold into slavery for our enormous unpayable debt to God for eternity. Jesus does what we cannot. Jesus hung on the cross and in love for us proclaimed, **Luke 23:34** **"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."** Isaac Watts in his hymn *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* wrote, "Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a present far to small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life my all."

All of us who have been lovingly forgiven and set free. Now we have a choice. Will we forgive those who sin against us as we have been forgiven?

In the story, *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean has just been released from 19 years in prison. He has been labeled a heartless convict with little hope of meeting the requirements of his parole. Jean asks a bishop for some food. The bishop invites him in, serves him dinner and gives him a comfortable bed. Before going to bed, Jean thanks him saying in the morning I will be a new man. That night, Jean has a nightmare recalling his brutal beatings and hard labor in prison. He wakes up to steal the silver.

Jean's crime was stealing a loaf of bread as a starving boy which resulted in 19 years of brutal treatment making him a desperate person. The bishop was capable of extraordinary forgiveness, because he realizes God has forgiven him and desires for us to forgive one another. Jean is transformed by the bishop's merciful act of forgiveness. Jean starts a new life. Working hard, he buys a brick factory. He treats all his employees with the utmost dignity and is always quick to forgive even the worst offenses. Jean becomes rich; but instead of spending his money on himself, he gives generously to the church and helps out anyone who is down and out. Jean's life is full of him generously giving extraordinary forgiveness. Jean always remembers he has been forgiven by God and the bishop, therefore he dedicates his entire life to forgiving and serving others. In the process Jean discovers true love.

Jean's life is contrasted by a policeman. A man obsessed with strict justice for even the tiniest offense. The policeman believes that people are either good or evil, black or white. Since Jean stole a loaf of bread, stole from the bishop, missed his parole meeting and vanished, then Jean is a man that must be brought to justice and imprisoned despite all the good he is currently doing. The policeman is obsessed with revenge. He lives a lonely, bitter life tormented by his rules of justice. The policeman almost captures Jean about every ten years. Each time the policeman is unmoved by Jean's exemplary life and the many people his forgiveness and charity has transformed. Finally, the policeman is so tormented by his inability to forgive he commits suicide.

The policeman is like the servant in Jesus' parable forgiven of the enormous debt yet unable to forgive another's minuscule debt. Some are troubled by the end of Jesus parable for on the surface it appears the king withdraws forgiveness of the ungrateful, unforgiving servant. God is sad when we refuse to forgive. It breaks God's heart that we struggle to forgive when we have been forgiven so much. The torture God allows for those who are unforgiving is brought upon by themselves. The unforgiving servant created their own hell. The inability to forgive another person consumes the mind, dissipates joy, and feels like endless punishment until death. Barbara Brown Taylor calls the inability to forgive, "arthritis of the spirit". Anne Lamott says refusal to forgive "feels like drinking rat poison and then waiting around for the rat to die."

President Jimmy Carter writes of the time he resented a journalist who helped Reagan prepare for their debate using Carter's personal briefing book which was stolen. The book contained Carter's positions on the issues, his analysis of Reagan's positions, vulnerabilities, and tactical plans for the debate. All of this stolen material was used by a respected journalist who professed fairness and objectivity. Carter felt this was wrong yet wrote, "to my detriment, I retained the resentment for years after the event." Carter believes to truly forgive someone is one of the most difficult challenges of life for anger grows. Especially in instances where our paths repeatedly cross those of the people who hurt us. Then we selectively notice everything hateful or despicable about that person and ignore all they do that is admirable and generous, so our feeling of condemnation grows. We view the person with a negative lens, so we often misinterpret their actions, even distorting their good actions as hurtful. Carter writes, "...Our resentment of others constitutes a barrier, not only between ourselves and them but between us and God. Anger has a way of springing back to life inside us. Perhaps Jesus' admonition to forgive another seventy times seven refers to the fact that we may have to overcome our own inner anger in reaction to a single offense that many times! Sometimes the only way to put aside our resentment is deliberately to take an overt step toward reconciliation."

Carter wrote, "Try as I might I could not bring myself to forgive the journalist until the day I was preparing a Sunday School lesson on forgiveness. My own hypocrisy was too much. Carter searched for something that could break the anger between them. He realized they had common ground in a love for baseball and that this journalist had wrote a book on baseball, so Carter read the book and wrote the journalist a letter expressing his appreciation for the insights he had given him and then offered forgiveness. Now to Carter's relief, he can read his column and watch him on TV with a positive reaction, because his resentment has been removed."

Carter concludes, "Is there a burden of anger, hurt or resentment toward someone weighing upon us? We should not ignore it any longer. With God's help, we can think of some gesture of forgiveness and reconciliation to offer and have the courage to make the first move. Doing so can be an important step toward emotional and psychological healing and a new freedom in the grace of Christ's love."

The Korean family, the bishop, Jean Valjean, Jimmy Carter were all able to forgive, because they realized how much they have already been forgiven by God. The choice is yours. Refuse to forgive and you will be tortured by anger, resentment, racing thoughts, and a joyless life or forgive and God will set you free so you can really live. Amen

### **Movie Clip summary**

***The Bishop hears him so Jean strikes him knocking him out. The next day the police bring Jean back in chains to the bishop with the stolen silver. The Bishop says I gave the silver to Jean but Jean you forgot the valuable candlesticks. The bishop gives Jean the candlesticks and the police release him. The bishop says to Jean, "You have lost a lot of time. Don't forget; Don't ever forget you promised to become a new man." Jean replies, "Why are you doing this?" The bishop replies, "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil with this silver I bought your soul. I ransomed you from fear and hatred and now I give you back to God."***