

## “Merciful Me”

### *Tell Me the Stories – part #4*

Matthew 18:21-35

I remember the first time my wife and I took out a mortgage to buy a house. It was the largest amount of money I had ever borrowed before, and when the banker showed me how long it would take to pay off and how much it was cost, I was honestly shocked. How could I afford that? When we finally sold the house and paid off the debt, we breathed a huge sigh of relief. It felt so good to have that burden lifted.

We all incur debt at some point in life. Many people have debt from car loans, houses, and credit cards, and many financial experts worry that our country is addicted to debt. But there are some debts that are impossible to pay, and they are not financial. For example, my senior year of high school, I missed an important track meet – I overslept and missed the bus – and that meant I not only let my relay team down, I severely disappointed my coach, who was also my favorite teacher. I did the best I could on Monday morning – I brought two dozen glazed donuts to class as a sign of my penance. But I knew I could never make it up. I couldn't go back in time and undo my mistake. Part of me thought that there was no way I could ever be forgiven.

But you know what? My coach did forgive me. And the grace he offered me - never bringing up my failure again, supporting me as I applied for college – that was one of the best feelings of my whole life. Forgiven and free – what could be better?

Have you ever felt the burden of a debt you could not repay? Maybe it was money, and you had to beg for mercy from the bank, from a relative, from a

friend. I happen to think those debts are easier to deal with than non-financial debts. I’m talking about words you have spoken that you wish you could take back. Promises you didn’t keep. Mistakes that haunt you and your relationships. When you are released from any of these, you feel great. But if you’re not, you struggle under a great burden.

We would all agree that forgiveness is great, but the question we really struggle with is, if someone hurts us, how many times do we have to forgive them? Is there a limit to forgiveness? The disciple Peter wondered this, too, and so he asked Jesus about it. What about seven times? That seems like a big number. Would that be enough?

Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven times.” This isn’t a math quiz (although the answer is 490). No, Jesus is saying, “Times without number. If you are counting how often you forgive, you’re missing the point.”

This is troubling. Always forgive? Really? That seems, well, impossible. I’m sure Peter felt the same way. What if someone hurt you really badly? Surely there must be an acceptable time to say, “I can’t forgive you.” Right?

Not in God’s kingdom. If we expect to follow Jesus, we need to know the truth about unconditional forgiveness. Fortunately for us, Jesus explained this truth in this parable in Matthew 18.

To recap, there was a king who wanted to “settle accounts.” Maybe he was retiring, maybe he owed someone else money, or maybe he had plans to work on a big project. The Bible doesn’t say, and it doesn’t matter. What does matter is the amount that one certain servant owed his king: 10,000 talents. The NIV translates this into “bags of gold.” I don’t know about you, but I’ve never seen a

bag of gold, much less owned one. A talent would have been worth about 20 years of paychecks. Ten thousand talents would have been hundreds of millions of dollars in today's money, but that's not the point. A talent was the highest unit of money in the Roman world, and 10,000 was the highest accountable number. This debt was extreme. It was not possible for anyone to pay it off, let alone a lowly servant. By comparison, Josephus, the Roman historian, said that all of Judea paid 600 talents a year in taxes. (ANTC, Matthew) What this servant owed his king was insurmountable – it could never be paid off.

Facing the facts, the king decides to cut his losses. He will sell his servant into slavery, along with his wife and children, and liquidate everything the man owns, to try to recoup his losses. This punishment, however, is too much to bear. The servant drops to his knees and pleads for mercy. Look at verse 26. “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.” That's kind of pathetic. It was not even possible for him to pay off this debt.

The scripture says that the king was moved with compassion. The NIV translation, “he had pity on him,” literally means his guts ached. He felt deeply for this poor servant, and instantly decided to forgive him. The whole debt was canceled. I don't know much about business, but that's crazy. It's inconceivable. It's beyond amazing.

For a moment, try to put yourself in this servant's position. How would you feel to have that burden lifted? It would be great! You would be crying, laughing, singing, skipping, dancing, and happy out of your mind, right? You'd walk out that door with a smile on your face and joy in your heart.

That's what we all would expect. And in a deft twist to prove a point, the exact opposite happens. This unmerciful servant goes out and immediately finds

a fellow servant who owes him a few hundred denarii – the equivalent of a few hundred bucks. A sum that could be easily repaid in a year or so. And he grabs the second man by the neck, choking him, demanding his money back. Notice the reaction of this second man – just like his accuser, he drops to his knees and begs, “Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.” The parallelism is no coincidence. And the contrast in reactions is stark. The unmerciful servant throws his colleague into a debtor’s prison to force him to pay off the loan. The idea was, if you were incarcerated, someone else would come and bail you out. All this for a few hundred bucks.

Those looking on are rightfully upset – their stomachs turn. And when they report it to the king, he confronts the unmerciful servant. “How could you do this, after all that I forgave you?” Look at the words – “You wicked servant.” (verse 32) Let me translate for you: “You evil, scummy, slimebag. How could you not show mercy after what I did for you?” The king throws his servant into jail to be tortured until the debt is repaid; in other words, forever.

This is not bedtime reading. This is not a happy-ending story. It’s tough, it’s troubling, and that is exactly the point. Our teeth clench, our guts turn when we hear of this obvious injustice. And then Jesus slams home the final point – this is how God will treat us if we refuse to forgive others.

Ouch. Forgiveness is serious business in God’s kingdom.

When confronted with this truth, we have two ways to react to this story: in fear (which is a powerful motivator), or in gratitude. The truth is, God has forgiven us of more than we could ever imagine. There is no way to repay our debt. No way to make up for our sin. We are the rebels, the renegades, the ones who have rejected God. We have all lied, cheated, stolen, hated, and much, much

worse. And the fact remains, despite all of our brokenness, Jesus died to save us. When we confess, God forgives us every time, and he doesn't keep count. That is the gospel truth.

But what happens? When we don't get our way, we still complain. When someone hurts us, we still hold grudges. We throw our relationships into virtual prisons by avoiding people, being passive-aggressive, gossiping, and looking for revenge. Me. You. All of us.

There is only one problem in the Christian Church today. It's not finances. It's not lack of biblical knowledge. It's not poor leadership or ethical dilemmas. It's related to all of those, but at the core, the one thing most Christians lack is a proper understanding of how good God's grace is. We are self-righteous, believing God owes it to us because we've been "good." We need to come to grips with how bad our sin is and how good God's mercy is. How much our justification, our salvation, came at a great cost, worth more than all the money in the world. Our debt was paid by the blood of the precious Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. If we could just grasp this one fact, how impossible it is that God forgives us, we would find that all the rest of our priorities would fall in line, whether it be relationships, finances, musical preference, or anything else in life.

This parable is not meant to scare us, but to embolden us to be forgiving. The truth is, God does forgive. God has forgiven and will continue to forgive. We cannot allow ourselves to become hypocrites who proclaim the forgiveness of God without showing that same forgiveness to others. I don't always read the Bible literally, but if I read Jesus' words that way, that is sufficient motivation for me to make amends with anyone who has hurt me. I don't want God to reject me!

The cornerstone of Christianity is forgiveness. It is the foundation for everything else we do. Why do we worship God? Because he forgave us. Why do we give to the church? Out of gratitude for God's forgiveness. Why do we evangelize? To tell others about God's forgiveness. Why do we teach Sunday School? So children won't have to live their lives without the love and forgiveness of Christ. Why do we sing? To tell about God's forgiveness. Why do we plow the sidewalks, keep the lights and heat on in this place, give to the food pantry, hold VBS, submit to an organization that moves our pastors? Because we are forgiven, and forgiven people live their lives in humbleness and obedience to the cross. All of the things we do here are to tell others about the forgiveness of Christ.

Do you know how much you are forgiven? Is there an area of your life that you need to change so that God and others will see the gratitude you have for your forgiveness? This is the one thing that will build up or destroy the church – whether or not we choose to live as forgiven people. All other words, thoughts, and actions will flow from this one source.

Hear the good news. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. That is proof of God's love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Now go and live out that forgiveness by showing love and mercy to your neighbor! Amen.

**Memory Verse: Matthew 18:33**

"Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"

**Thoughts for reflection:**

- What is the greatest debt you have ever owed? Did you repay it? How?
- Think about a time when someone hurt you. Did you forgive them? Was it easy?

- In what ways have we incurred a “debt” to God? How have our sins broken our relationship with God?
- Do you know that you are forgiven? Have you experienced the grace of Christ?
- Whom do you need to forgive so that God can continue to show you the greatness of his forgiveness?