

**“Forgive Us”**  
**Mathew 18:21-35**  
**Rev. Curtis Bablitz**  
**August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

You have to feel a little sorry for Peter. He’s trying his hardest to make Jesus happy here – doing his best to impress his master and be the perfect pupil. In Peter’s day, the scribes and experts in the law taught that you should forgive someone who wronged you up to three times – ‘three strikes and you’re out’ is a pretty old idea – so when Peter suggests forgiving someone seven times, he is going above and beyond the norm here, he’s trying to be extra gracious, and he thinks that’s what Jesus wants.

And you can’t blame him for trying, because let’s face it, forgiveness is hard. We struggle to figure it out, just as much as Peter did. Relationships are hard, and inevitably they break down because of our human failings, and when they do, we want to know how to fix them, to undo the damage we’ve done, to make things right. We know that when we make mistakes, we want to be given a second chance, an opportunity to make amends and not be defined by the wrong we’ve done.

But we also know that when we give those second, third, seventh chances and we just get hurt again and again and again, that can’t be what Jesus wants for us – for people to stay in abusive relationships and be told again and again to forgive and forget and allow the pain and suffering to build and build, that can’t be what Jesus has in mind when he talks about forgiveness. Just like Peter, we want to figure forgiveness out, we’re trying to do our best to do what Jesus wants us to do, but it’s hard. Forgiveness is hard.

And that’s why Jesus tells Peter, and tells us, this story, to help us to understand. It’s a story about a king who wants to settle accounts with his slaves – and if you were standing next to Peter, listening to Jesus tell this story, right away, you would assume that the king is the villain of the story. If you’re a peasant living in first century Palestine, a fisherman, a shepherd, a carpenter, you know that kings are always trouble, they always make life miserable for the

poor folks just trying to get by under their feet, so right away, you feel sorry for these slaves as they get hauled in front of the king to pay back the money they've borrowed.

But then the king's men drag in one particularly sorry wretch, a man who owes his master ... ten thousand talents. Ten thousand talents. And this is the point where things get ridiculous. See, a talent is a unit of weight, referring to a certain amount of silver, and a talent of silver was worth a lot of money. If you were a common day labourer in first century Palestine, and you worked everyday, twelve hours a day, six days a week, 52 weeks a year, for TWENTY YEARS, you would earn ... ONE Talent. One. Which means that, in order to earn ten thousand talents, you would need to work at that same pace for Two Hundred Thousand Years. Put this another way: in Jesus' day, the entire yearly tax revenue for the entire Roman province of Galilee and Perea was 200 talents.

The annual income of King Herod the Great at the height of his power was 900 talents a year. One talent was about 100 pounds, so 10,000 talents is around a million pounds of silver – with that much silver, you could built an exact replica of the Statue of Liberty out of pure silver, twice, and still have enough left over to make seven life-sized silver African elephants. So owing someone 10 thousand talents, it's like saying the man owed eleventy gazillion dollars – it's such a large sum, it's ridiculous. And you start to wonder: what kind of a king would lend out this kind of money? And what was this servant doing, that he could borrow that kind of money, and lose it all? Of course, the servant can't pay that debt back – no one could – and so the king orders that he be sold into slavery, along with his wife and his children and everything he's ever owned and everything he's ever loved. And the slave, aware of the certain doom that is about to befall him, throws himself down at the king's feet and cries out, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."

And again, this is ridiculous. "Have Patience with me and I will pay you everything?" How exactly does he plan on doing that? Remember, the debt he owes is so vast it would take him 200,000 years to earn enough to pay it back, assuming he doesn't spend anything in the

meantime, so what is this guy's plan, exactly? Double check the couch cushions to see if there are any solid silver elephants that fell in? Asking the king for a little more time – "Just give me til the end of the month" – it's ridiculous. The servant doesn't seem to have any idea of just how hopeless his situation is – he's still trying to cut a deal, still trying to add things up and arrange his finances and find some way to repay a debt that can never, never, never be repaid.

And then it happens. The king looks down at this utterly hopeless, deluded slave who owes him more money than can possibly be imagined, and just as you're expecting the worst, everything changes. The king is moved to compassion, he takes pity on his servant, and he forgives the entire debt. Just erases it. The entire amount, this massive weight beyond measure, and the king forgives it. It's gone. In one moment, everything has changed for this servant, his world has been turned upside down, he has gone from facing a lifetime of misery and suffering for him and his wife and his kids, to complete and utter freedom. He doesn't owe the king a cent.

And that is ridiculous. Kings aren't supposed to do that kind of thing, to forgive such a colossal debt out of compassion for a poor servant – it's unheard of, such generosity, such reckless, gracious compassion from someone in such an unassailable position of power and wealth. That kind of grace just isn't supposed to happen in the real world, but the king forgives his servant's debt, and it turns his world upside down.

And it would be wonderful if the story ended there, wouldn't it? I could just wind this sermon down, we all sing Amazing Grace and we go for lunch. But it's not over yet. The servant leaves the king's presence, and he's barely out of the door before he meets another servant, one of his co-workers in the king's house, and this man owes the servant one hundred denarii. Now, that's not an insignificant amount of money. One denarius was one day's wages, so 100 denarii is about 3 months pay, and the servant wants it back now, and he refuses to listen to his fellow servant's plea for more time, and instead he throws the man in jail until his debt can be repaid.

Now, put yourself in this guy's shoes. I mean, here he is, buried under an unimaginable mountain of debt, cowering in fear, begging for his life and the lives of his entire family, and the next minute he's free, his burdens lifted, he's 10,000 talents richer. Wouldn't you think he'd want to go home, talk to his wife and children, tell them the amazing news about the king's compassion and the debt repaid, tell them that everything is going to be alright, that their lives have been spared?

That kind of compassion, that kind of miraculous reversal, wouldn't you expect it to have some kind of effect on the man? His whole world has been turned upside down, and yet the first thing he does, the very first thing he does, is he tries to turn it right back the way it was before. He's acting like he's still in debt. He's acting like that burden is still on his back, like he still needs to scrounge and scrape and pinch every penny to get by. Even after receiving such an amazing, undeserved, unimaginable gift, the man is still trying to cut a deal, still trying to add things up and arrange things so that he's in control, so that he comes out ahead.

At the beginning of this parable the servant was living in a world where kings are cruel and harsh, where debts must be paid, where you keep track of everything you owe and everything that people owe you and you never ever forget and you never ever let anything go, and then suddenly everything changed - the king and the servant started living in an entirely new world, a world governed not by calculation but by compassion, a world that keeps no record of who is ahead and who is behind, a world where all debts are forgiven, all weights are set aside.

The servant was given the opportunity to leave his old world behind, and he couldn't do it; as soon as he left the king's sight, he was doing everything he could to rebuild his old, broken, deadly world, and unfortunately for him, it worked. He wanted to live in a world where everything adds up and everything checks out and nothing is ever forgiven or forgotten, and that's the world he gets. At the end of the parable, he finds himself right back where he started, in ruin and despair. The servant had a choice as to which world he would live in, a world of debts or a world of forgiveness, and he got exactly what he wanted.

And that choice is the same choice that Jesus gives to Peter. Peter thinks that he is being compassionate and gracious by offering forgiveness seven times, but he's still keeping track, still calculating who's ahead and who's behind, still treating forgiveness as a tool to be deployed to shape the world the way you want it to be. Jesus tells him that the kingdom of God has no limits on forgiveness, because the kingdom of God is governed not by calculation but by compassion, the kingdom of God keeps no record of who is ahead and who is behind, the kingdom of God is where all debts are forgiven.

Because forgiveness isn't something where we are in control. Forgiveness doesn't mean staying in poisoned, abusive relationships and trying to fix things, trying to control things, it doesn't mean we keep carrying the pain of broken promises out of duty or obligation. Forgiveness gives us the freedom to set all our burdens down, once and for all, to set down our grief and guilt, our bitterness and desire for vengeance, to cast all the weight we've been carrying for so long, set it down and walk away free, out of debt forever.

Forgiveness enables us to leave old, broken relationships behind and build something entirely new, not based on past mistakes, unpaid debts and second or seventh chances, but relationships based on a new foundation of freedom and reconciliation and grace. Forgiveness isn't something that happens seven times or seventy-seven times, it is part of the very fabric of God's kingdom, it is the air that we breathe in and out as we go about our lives in God's world, and it can never be measured, it can never be counted, and it can never run out.

That is the kingdom that our God is calling us to live in today, and every time we pray this prayer, every time we ask God to forgive us as we forgive, we are asking God to bring that kind of forgiveness into our world, into our lives, to take the burdens we carry and set us free. Each of us carry so much weight, the weight of the pain we have suffered, and the weight of the pain we have inflicted on others, ten thousand talents worth of bitterness and regret, and yet we still cling to the illusion that somehow, we can make it work, we can fix things ourselves,

that with one more act of defiance we can bend others to our will, with one more application of force we can have the world we want, the church we want, the families we want, the lives we want, if we just have a little more time, we can make it work, we can stay in control.

And in the midst of our stubbornness, in the midst of our sin, Jesus Christ still calls to us, calls us to let go, set down the weight we're carrying, set down our bitterness and pain, leave behind the world of debts and debtors and come in to the kingdom of God, come into a world where compassion reigns, a world where all debts are forgiven, a world where the King of Kings put the weight of the universe on his own shoulders, and died on a cross to save sinners like you and me.

Our God wants to turn our world upside down, to flood this broken world with the power of unending, amazing grace, to transform the way we live and move and breathe in this world, transform us from lives defined by insisting that we get what we deserve to lives spent glorifying the one who took the penalty we deserved upon himself so that we could have everlasting life.

Our God is calling us to build the kingdom here, to invite all those around us to let go of the pain and the hurt and the loss we hold so closely, to stop adding up debts and instead breathe in the free air of a world where all our sins are forgiven, a world where Jesus Christ is King. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!