

The Unmerciful Servant

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Those who receive forgiveness must, in turn, extend forgiveness.

I grew up outside New York City hearing about revenge as a strong narrative of my life. My grandfather was a Fire Battalion Chief. Sitting in his recliner, years after retiring, he would recount stories about when his fire trucks would come to a rescue and people used to throw garbage over the edge of the building to land on top of the firefighters. Yet with a nostalgic smile, my grandfather would continue on about how he and his buddies would go up and break the knees of the people who threw the garbage on top of them. And that was how he thought he would raise his grandson. He never talked about forgiving people; he talked about getting even.

We live in a world that values revenge as an ideal. Blockbuster movies make huge sales, millions of books are sold, and stories are celebrated in media about achieving revenge and accomplishing our own sense of “justice.” Not only do we see this around us, but we feel it inside of us as well. We consciously or unconsciously find ourselves treating others differently if they have wronged us, ignored us, haven’t returned a favor, haven’t repaid a debt, or failed to meet our expectations.



When and where have you recently seen or heard messages highlighting revenge in our culture?



Why do you think revenge is so often celebrated?

In this session, we will discuss Jesus' teaching on forgiveness through the parable of the unmerciful servant. Jesus' followers are invited to forgive others because they have been forgiven a much greater debt. Forgiveness of others is an overflow of God's good news, not simply an occasional act when it feels appropriate. To follow Jesus means to remember we are forgiven and to extend that forgiveness to others.

Voices from the Church

"We reveal the true condition of our hearts by the way we treat others. When our hearts are humble and repentant, we will gladly forgive our brothers. But where there is pride and a desire for revenge, there can be no true repentance, and this means God cannot forgive."¹

—Warren W. Wiersbe

1. How much forgiveness is required of a Christian? (Matt. 18:21-22)

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.



How would you define *forgiveness*?



What makes forgiveness difficult to give to someone?

Rabbinic Judaism taught that forgiving someone three times was sufficient to demonstrate a forgiving spirit, based on Old Testament accounts of God's action toward humanity (Job 33:29-30; Amos 1:3; 2:6). But the thought prevalent in first-century Judaism was that if a person sins willfully, expecting to receive forgiveness, then no such forgiveness should be offered.

Peter's question to Jesus demonstrated his willingness to more than double the typical requirement of forgiving someone. There seems to be some significance to Peter's use of the number seven, as if that number would "complete" the process. As a disciple, Peter seemed to be trying to understand Jesus' kingdom ethic and go beyond what was expected.

The particular details of Jesus' answer are often debated by Bible scholars. Some translations say "seventy-seven times," while others say "seventy times seven." Whichever translation one reads, the point is the same. Jesus is not giving a specific number of offenses after which we are no longer obligated to forgive. The number does not matter because Jesus is teaching that His followers are expected to forgive completely, without limits. Jesus' parable, which follows his response to Peter, teaches this point—Christians should keep on forgiving because of the magnitude of forgiveness that has been granted to us.



What potential objections would someone have to forgiving another person "seventy-seven times"?



What would such a level of grace and forgiveness within the church communicate to unbelievers?

2. As Christians, we have received forgiveness (Matt. 18:23-27).

²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

Jesus wanted to teach His followers what encountering His kingdom is like, so He told this story. A slave owed his king ten thousand talents, an amount so hyperbolic that the debt could never actually be paid. This amount would be more than a person could make in an entire lifetime. There is no hint in the story that the king is acting vengefully toward his slave. He is simply seeking to recoup as much of the debt as he can.

The slave, in begging for his life and the lives of his wife and children, made an outrageous claim. He offered to repay the debt, but only if he could be given more time. Jesus did not say how much time had already passed, but it is reasonable to believe his money had been gone long enough and the debt needed to be settled.



When have you experienced a dire or stressful financial situation?



What emotions did you feel through that experience?

In a wonderful twist to the expected outcome, the king determined not to exact payment *but to forgive the massive debt*. No doubt Jesus' audience would have been shocked. What just king cancels a debt, especially one of such an enormous amount? With merely a word, an indebted slave was released from his financial bondage and his entire family escaped the impending, lifelong, brutal punishment.

As the story relates to believers, which Jesus makes clear is the idea at its conclusion, we see a picture of God ruling a kingdom full of slaves that have committed countless transgressions against Him, accumulating a "debt" even more egregious than ten thousand talents. Even if we wanted to pay God back, the amount of the offense is too great to repay.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

21. God Is Merciful

Mercy refers to God's compassion and is often expressed in God withholding something, such as punishment for sin (Eph. 2:4-5; Titus 3:5). Both mercy and grace are undeserved, meaning humanity can do nothing to earn God's mercy and grace. If one could, then it would no longer be the free gift of mercy or grace.

The obvious response, with or without time, would be for God to judge us for our debts. But God demonstrates His love to us by forgiving our debts (Rom. 5:8). In this story we see a picture of God's unmerited grace, for God helps the helpless by forgiving the ones in need of forgiveness.



How would you compare being forgiven of your sin debt before God with being forgiven of a large financial debt?



What effect has God's compassion and forgiveness through Jesus Christ had upon you?

3. As Christians, we must extend forgiveness (Matt. 18:28-35).

²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.'²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.'

Jesus' ability to capture the attention of His audience was on full display here. After telling of a man whose immeasurable debt had just been forgiven, he went on to tell of that same man leaving the king's presence and finding a fellow slave who owed him a debt.

This slave, having just received forgiveness of his own massive debt, began choking his fellow slave for the same offense, yet with astronomically different proportions. The second slave responded exactly the same way as the first slave responded—he pleaded earnestly for time to repay. The first slave, feeling wronged by the debt owed him, did not extend grace. Instead, he had the second slave tossed in prison.

Yet is this not the way we behave toward others? We who have been generously forgiven for our sins find those same sins repugnant in others. We often point out the same faults in others that we ourselves think we have mastered. This part of the parable of the unmerciful servant is the picture of what God sees of you when, having been forgiven for your rebellion, you fail to forgive others.



What are some ways, even subtle ones, that we can punish others instead of forgive them for wrongs they have done against us?



How can we resist the desire for vengeance and instead practice mercy as it has been shown to us in Christ?

While this action might have been justified in normal circumstances, the fellow slaves were shocked that the first slave was withholding mercy despite having receiving forgiveness for his own egregious debt. Therefore, they reported to the king what they had seen. In righteous anger, the king confronted his slave and rebuked him for the hardness of his heart. The king chastised the slave in verse 33, pointing out that grace received should be grace extended.

The punishment we see in verse 34 is harrowing: those who receive forgiveness but do not extend it to others are “wicked” and will be punished justly and severely. The translation we are reading mentions that the servant was turned over “to the jailers,” but this is actually quite different than it seems. The original Greek word means “torturer.” So what this means is that the slave was tormented in the parable until the full payment was made—and recall how impossibly large was his debt. This has major implications for us reading this parable today.

As 21st-century followers of Jesus, let us not gloss over this section as merely an anecdotal story. Jesus concluded this teaching on forgiveness with a very clear and pointed application in verse 35—those who have been forgiven but do not extend forgiveness will be treated as the first slave. Jesus is very forceful here: Forgive, or face God’s judgment. A true realization of our forgiveness in Christ results in a radical heart change. Those who have been freely forgiven freely forgive.

Voices from the Church

“There is no such creature as an unforgiving Christian. That being doesn’t exist. Christians forgive. We forgive because we have been transformed by the power of the gospel.”²

—Douglas Sean O’Donnell

 How are you challenged by Jesus’ addition of the phrase “from your heart” to His command to forgive?

 What practical steps do you need to take in light of Jesus’ teaching in the parable of the unmerciful servant?

Conclusion

We are a people who have sinned greatly against God our Creator. Our debt is so massive that, like the first slave, we could never repay our King. In a gracious act, however, God sent Jesus, and by faith in Him, God cancels our debt and forgives our rebellion. Through Jesus' death on the cross for our sin, in our place, we have received an incomprehensible forgiveness. We don't see our sin as serious as God does. God doesn't grade sin on a curve—our sin is unforgivable, unatoneable, and unfixable without what a just and loving God has done in Christ for us.

Yet often we fail to walk by the power of the Holy Spirit, and in a return to our sinful behavior, we willingly choose to withhold forgiveness from others. Jesus condemns this way of living for those who belong to His kingdom, for His is a kingdom characterized by forgiveness. Even during His darkest hour of suffering on the cross, Jesus asked God to forgive His executioners (Luke 23:34).

Peter's question, which frames the story for us, is an indication that we have much to learn about how to operate in Jesus' kingdom. We are to be a people characterized by forgiveness because we have been forgiven. If we fail to forgive, then judgment will come severely to us because we have not been transformed by the gospel. Those who fail to forgive resemble "followers" who call out the Lord's name but are not known by Him (Matt. 7:21-23). But the Lord does know intimately those whom He has forgiven, and they follow Him in His example by forgiving others.

Voices from the Church

"It is the essence of Christian discipleship not just to love your neighbour in the way you would like to be treated, but also in the way you have been treated by God."³

—David Wenham

CHRIST CONNECTION: Though our debt before God was too great to be paid through our good works or effort, we have received forgiveness through the grace of Jesus Christ, who paid our debt through His death on the cross. God has wiped the slate clean with the blood of His Son.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to model forgiveness in our relationships in order to put on display the nature of God's forgiving heart.

1. How can a Christian displaying unlimited forgiveness for a fellow believer strengthen his or her witness to the gospel of Jesus?

2. What is your testimony of receiving and experiencing the forgiveness of God for your spiritual debt of sin?

3. Are you withholding forgiveness from someone? How can you show forgiveness from your heart to this person in light of God's mercy toward you?

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