



Matthew 18:21-35  
 Life Is Too Short To...  
 “Live Without Forgiveness”

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This morning we close out our summer series of messages. Next Sunday we will begin a new series going through a book of the Bible, in the New Testament, that we know as “1 John.” (**1 John Sermon Graphic Here**) Now, maybe you’re sitting there thinking, “Wait, Pastor Brian. Didn’t you just spend like 15 months going through John, ending just this last spring?” If that’s your thoughts, then this next series is *particularly* for you, though I’m confident we will all benefit from it...but *1 John* is different than the gospel according to John. 1 John is an often-overlooked part of the New Testament, though there are others that are even more overlooked (like 2 John and 3 John), and we will get to those other ones next spring. Anyway, next Sunday we start this series in 1 John.

This morning as we wrap up the current series, (**Graphic**) we’re talking about forgiveness: Life is too short to live without forgiveness. Forgiveness is a two-way street. Sometimes we need to ask for it, and sometimes we need to extend it. When we don’t, we’re allowing ourselves to live in bondage to fear, relational brokenness, bitterness, anger, and even hatred.

This last week I came across an article from The Gospel Coalition by a gal named Mekel Harris.<sup>1</sup> She wrote openly and honestly about her relationship with her dad. She writes, “For many years, I struggled to forgive my father. We’d been inseparable in my early years, but we eventually drifted apart. By the time I entered middle school, the burgeoning divide only widened. Work forced him to spend a lot of time away from our family, and the more he traveled, the more distant he and my mother became. Flickers of frustration erupted into explosive arguments, followed by deafening silence. All the while I smiled and performed on the outside, as sinful resentment and anger sprouted in my heart.

“For nearly 20 years, I clung to the hurt inflicted on me like a badge of honor...Pain became my story...Pride seeped into my spirit, resisting any opportunity for inner healing and connection with my father. Emotional and physical distance felt safe. Year after year, silence between my father and me

remained the norm. The thought of obediently walking out of bondage felt frightening, full of overwhelming uncertainty. **It was simply easier to wallow in past hurt than to throw off the past and be thrust into an unknown future.”**

She points out one of the challenges of not forgiving: that it can be hard, it can be a little scary, because sometimes the norm we’re living in – as imperfect as it is and with as many consequences as it may give us – sometimes we’re simply comfortable there. We’re familiar with it. We know how to navigate life with the brokenness of unforgiveness. We become like the modern-day version of the Israelites after they escaped from Egypt. They cried out to God, **“Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, “Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians?” It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”** (Ex. 14:12). We would rather God leave us alone and not prompt us to do the hard work of forgiveness, and instead remain in bondage to brokenness and pain. Like the Israelites failure to trust God for their future, we also fail to trust God that the hard work of forgiveness will actually lead to a better future, rather than the comfortable but broken one we are in.

There’s a lot in Scripture on forgiveness. Jesus alone teaches on it a number of times including in today’s passage from Matthew 18:21-35. We will start with just the first couple of verses (**Mt. 18:21-22**). We’ll read the rest in a moment, and this is all God’s Word to us this morning....

So, in the Jewish faith, which was the background for all of these disciples and for Jesus, the bar that had been set for forgiving was three times.<sup>2</sup> If you forgave someone up to three times for a particular offense, you were fulfilling your obligation of offering forgiveness, like checking a box to say you’ve done it. ☺

So, when Peter asks Jesus if he should forgive a person “up to seven times” he’s thinking that’s a lot. More than double their standard. But Jesus responds, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Or in some translations, it will say “Seventy times seven.” The context doesn’t make it clear which translation to go with. But it doesn’t matter. The number is not

the point, because who's going to keep track of forgiving someone 77 times, let alone 490? **Jesus is telling Peter – and now us –that we don't stop forgiving.** There is no right number...it's not actually something to stop doing and it's not just a box to check...because there's no end to the forgiveness we should be extending to others.

Jesus then uses this as a springboard to teach about forgiveness through a parable. Parables are stories Jesus creates that convey truths about God, faith, and living in relationship with God and people. So, he tells a story about forgiveness. Let's read **verses 23-27.**

All right. Let's talk a little Jewish historical finances as well as translation of Greek to English to help us understand the shocking nature of this story. **The traditional translation of this “ten thousand bags of gold” is “ten thousand talents.”** Not “talent” as in “America's Got Talent” but as in a measure of weight that was equal to about 80 pounds. That's American pounds, not British pounds, just to be clear. There's a lot of potential misunderstandings here! It's one reason I love this translation that simply calls it 10,000 “bags of gold.” But, in case you missed it, this means that bag, or each talent, would weigh about 80 pounds. There are 10,000 of them in this story – 800,000 pounds of gold. It is a ridiculous amount of money in their day...in any day. It is equal to about \$2.3 billion today. This is not an amount that can be paid off unless you're the Bill Gates of Jerusalem. It's impossible. There is nothing this servant can do to pay off this debt.

So, the king sets forth a plan. It's what you and I would call a foreclosure sale. He's going to sell the servant, his family, and everything the servant has, and even though it wouldn't come close to paying off the debt, at least no more debt would be incurred. But the servant pleads his case, and says that he will pay back everything that is owed, even though that's a ridiculous and absurd notion; Utterly impossible.

So the servant pleads his impossible case. But the king has a third option. **He decides to have mercy on the man and sets forth a new course of action. He canceled the debt.** Poof. Gone. Sheer grace and mercy. Perhaps some of you sitting here this morning pay a mortgage on your house, or you have

medical debt, or debt on a credit card or two. Imagine the bank calling you up and saying: “You know that \$230,000 you still owe to pay off the mortgage?” or the hospital saying, “You know that \$20,000 you owe us still?” or credit card with a balance of \$8,000 with monthly penalties and 157% interest that you’re being charged every day? Can you imagine any of them calling and saying, “Don't worry about paying it off anymore. We've decided to forgive your debt. We realize that you're never going to be able to pay it off, and we want to give you this gift, and forgive the debt that you owe.” If that happened to any of us, we would be completely grateful – and that’s not even being forgiven for a ridiculous amount as Jesus sets it up in this parable.

And so, the servant should be the most grateful person on the face of the planet. Let’s keep reading... **18:28-35** First, we now get this 100 silver coins translation that traditionally is a hundred denarii. A denarius was a typical, basic day's wage, and 5,000 denarii equaled one talent, or in this case, 5,000 denarii equaled one of these 80-pound bags of gold. So, the two amounts that are owed here are *vastly* different – one is equivalent to 100 days’ wages while the other is equivalent to 50 million days of wages. It’s Bill Gates’ net worth compared to a 5-year-old’s.

**But this guy who has been forgiven much has no gratitude, and no concept of “forgive as the Lord forgave you,” as Paul puts it in Colossians 3:13.** So when the servant faces the opportunity to forgive someone of a comparatively minuscule debt (100 silver coins), he doesn't do it. He has completely forgotten about the immense forgiveness he himself had just received. Word about this gets back to the master who had originally forgiven him, and the debt cancellation is rescinded, and the guy has to pay off his debt, even though there's no way he could ever do that. It's way too big. The only hope he had was of the master doing what he offered to do – to forgive it.

Jesus then closes the story and gives the final answer to Peter's question by saying that the way in which this king treated the servant is how his Heavenly Father will treat the disciples if they don't forgive each other:

Forgiveness doesn't have a number attached to it. It's not something that's quantifiable.

Whenever I read this parable, I think of a line in a prayer that Jesus teaches his followers. It goes, "Forgive us of our debts, as we forgive our debtors." This is a story about that line in that prayer. This is a dangerous parable, and that's a dangerous line to pray. **The point being made is that we are to forgive others as God has forgiven us.** God takes the business of forgiveness seriously, and he expects us to do the same.

And the forgiveness that Jesus is speaking of isn't a shallow forgiveness; it's not just words that are flippantly spoken, off the cuff, as if forgiveness is no big deal. His closing words to Peter are "forgive your brother or your sister from your heart." In other words, truly forgive. Do it with integrity, and intentionality, rooted in love, and not casually as though it's not important.

Forgiveness sure isn't casual for God. Like the debt that the servant owed the king, our debt to God because of our sins against Him is huge. It's incalculable. We cannot repay it. There is nothing that you or I can do to climb out of the hole that our sins have dug for us, and get back to being as holy as God is holy. The only way to get back to a place of holiness is through the forgiveness that God offers us through Jesus Christ. **The once and final offer of forgiveness was a matter that came from deep in the heart of God, and it cost him his Son.**

My friends, if you have not received the forgiveness of God, the gift that he offers, now is the time. Like the king in the parable, God has made the decision to forgive us, and then there's a decision each of us can make to receive what God offers through Jesus Christ. We have a mountain of debt that's sky high because of our greed, lust, pride, coveting, laziness, selfishness, and more. Like the servant in the parable, there is no way any of us can pay it back to get on even terms with God. But because God is merciful and kind, He forgives us of that debt as a gift through faith in Jesus Christ. You can receive that gift of forgiveness by faith in Jesus. And once we've done that, it opens the door to forgiving others as God has forgiven us. It's impossible to forgive as he did when we haven't received his forgiveness.

It's still difficult to emulate, but impossible without it. Let's make sure not to live as the servant did. But rather: **Let's live in gratitude, extending forgiveness to the people in our lives.** Mekel (earlier story) learned to forgive her father and have a healed relationship with him. It was a process and a journey for both of them. Sometimes it's that way in our lives. So, let's move into new territory in those relationships, rather than staying in the comfortable and familiar places of brokenness and unforgiveness. Besides extending forgiveness, it may very well mean asking for it, and genuinely confessing to someone and asking for their forgiveness of you.

My guess is we all have some people in our lives where forgiveness is needed. Life is too short to live without it. Yes, forgiveness is hard work and we face our own imperfections and grievances when we forgive others of theirs. That's one thing that helps us to forgive other people – recognizing that we need forgiving as well. So, it's all difficult work. Just ask Jesus – he hung on the cross because of forgiveness for you and me. But that also shows us how much forgiveness matters to God. So, let's ask for and receive God's forgiveness, ask for it from others as well, and forgive the people in our lives – not just once or three or seven times, but as much as is needed. Because that's exactly what God does with us. Let's pray...Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/shackled-by-unforgiveness/> - It's not a long article, and she lays out some "steps" or keys to forgiving that I did not cover in the message this morning. It's worth reading.

<sup>2</sup> Hagner, Donald A. *Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B – Matthew 14-28*, p. 537.