

Forgiving from the Heart (Matthew 18:23-35)
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Last week we learned how God in His lavish love forgave all our sins. Today we will continue on the topic of forgiveness. In Matthew 18:21 Peter asks how many times he must forgive his brother who sins against him. He suggests the number seven, thinking it is a perfect number, but Jesus replies seventy seven times, which is such a large number most people wouldn't bother to keep track of it. Jesus' point isn't to count to or stop at seventy seven, but rather that perfect forgiveness is a state of one's heart which results in forgiveness every time. It's just like how you love your wife or children all the time rather than keeping count of how many times you love them.

Jesus continues by telling the parable of the unmerciful servant in vv. 23-35, which teaches us that we must forgive from the heart because of the forgiveness we received from God. There is a link between the forgiveness of the master and the expectation of the servant to forgive in response. A good example of this is the testimony of former gymnast Rachael Denhollander at the sentencing hearing of her abuser, Larry Nassar, a serial child molester who was the USA Gymnastics national team doctor. At the hearing she said that she prayed that Larry would experience true guilt and remorse that would lead to repentance and forgiveness from God, which he needed far more than her forgiveness, which she also offered. Her faith and acceptance of God's grace enabled her to overcome cruel memories and gave her the freedom and strength to freely forgive.

Going back to the parable, we can learn three lessons from the three main scenes of the story. First, we learn of the king's lavish grace in forgiving debts. The amount that the servant owed, 10,000 talents, is equivalent to billions of dollars. This was so large nobody could ever repay it or scarcely even make a dent in the debt. If it was forgiven, it must be wholly due to grace. This is the lavish grace God has in forgiving the insurmountable debt we incurred due to our sin. Second, we see the absurdity of treating such grace with contempt. The 100 denarii, worth a few hundred dollars, is nothing compared to 10,000 talents. Instead of remembering that he had been forgiven such a large debt, he threw his fellow servant in prison. Jesus uses similar wording to describe the first two scenes of the parable. Both servants fell on their knees and

begged with the same words. The king forgave the unmerciful servant, who in return threw his fellow servant in prison. Of course the other servants were outraged when they saw this. Third, we learn the frightful fate awaiting the unforgiving. God gives such abundant grace, and yet also can unleash devastating punishment. This is not a contradiction. If God is so characterized by grace and compassion, then He cannot accept as His own those who have no compassion. Jesus concludes in v. 35 that we will meet the same fate if we do not forgive from the heart.

But aren't we saved by grace and not by works, even the work of forgiveness? This is true, but being devoid of a forgiving heart is a sign that we never accepted God's forgiveness in the first place. Forgiving others indicates the state of our hearts. If our heart is forgiving, it is only by the transformative power of receiving God's forgiveness. If you are habitually unforgiving, then either you are blocking the effects of the gospel in your life or you are deceiving yourself and you never received it. Refusing to forgive means we are enslaved to our anger, resentment, vengefulness, and self-righteousness.

We know forgiveness is important, but how do we do it? We must follow the example of the merciful king in the parable. First, he took pity on the servant. The word for pity here means compassion and empathy. It's natural when we are offended to reduce the offender to their offense, in order that we may have moral superiority to pass judgment on them. We must identify with them as people, and see ourselves as equally sinful and broken people who have been shown grace through the cross of Jesus. Second, like the king, we must cancel the debt. When someone wrongs us they cost us our reputation, money, self-esteem, or happiness. We naturally want to hold back friendship or even get revenge until they repay us. But forgiveness means cancelling this debt and absorbing the loss, just as Jesus absorbed the debt of our sin on the cross. Finally, the king let the servant go; he didn't let the offense become a barrier. Jesus reconciled us to God, so that we may be His children. We must likewise reconcile with those who offend us. And the forgiveness through Jesus is our ultimate source of strength to forgive others. Jesus identified with us by humbling Himself completely, and cancelled our debt on the cross, through which He reconciled us with God. If we have truly received this abundant forgiveness, then it will overflow and manifest itself as forgiveness towards others.