

Trinity 22
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Matthew 18:21-35
God Forgives Our Debt
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I went to a small seminary with just a handful of students. It was not uncommon for the entire student body to gather in the student lounge for lunch and lively discussion. On occasion we would get into deep theological arguments. When a seminary professor would pass by in the hall way, he would be stopped by a student to determine the winner of the argument. This is how I see this episode in our text. Jesus has twelve apostles, who followed him around for three years, learning from him, preparing for the Office of the Ministry. Sometimes they got into theological arguments with each other and had to pull in their Seminary Professor to settle the matter. Peter is arguing with some other disciples. He is sure he's right. St. Luke records in chapter 17 of his Gospel, Jesus says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (3-4) So Peter asks, "How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

Yet Jesus doesn't reply, "Well done, Peter! You remembered the right number!" Rather he says, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy seven times!" Jesus isn't giving some magic number of how many times one is obligated to forgive his brother. Even the number seventy seven is not to be taken literally. It's not like you aren't required to forgive your brother when he sins against you the seventy eighth time! No, Jesus means that you must always forgive your brother. As often as he repents, forgive. There is no limit!

Now this lesson first of all teaches us how generous and gracious God is. Why does he require that we forgive our brother (or sister) so readily? Because God in Christ forgave you! (Ephesians 4:32) And what if after repenting of your sin you sin against God again? God forgives you again! What if again you fall? Again, God forgives you. As often as you repent, God forgives you. Wise Solomon wrote in Proverbs 24, "for the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity." (16)

This means the Christian repents every time he falls into temptation and is declared righteous by God every time.

Not only will God forgive you as often as you repent of your sins, but there is no sin so great that God cannot forgive you. The power of his forgiveness is insurmountable. To instruct us in this lesson Christ tells a short story.

A man owing ten thousand talents is to be sold into slavery along with his wife and children and all his property is to be sold. Yet, after pleading for patience, the master forgives him all his debt. A talent is worth about twenty years of labor. So to put it into our day, for fun, let's just say a laborer makes \$30,000 a year. Times twenty that's \$600,000. Times ten thousand that's six billion dollars. The man owed about six billion dollars to his master! Making a hundred bucks a day, this man didn't have a prayer to pay his master back! Promising to pay him back is simply absurd. And absurd is the whole point. Again, Christ doesn't mean for us to get sidetracked with the numerical value. The point is the debt is absurdly high; unpayable!

And so are your sins. The Psalmist laments, "Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults." (Psalm 19:12) We cannot number or ever recognize the great severity of our sins. They are so serious, they send us to hell. And not a thousand life times would be sufficient to make up for our sins, even if we had the strength to correct them.

Our sins are great. They are no laughing matter. Yet the proud and the arrogant pay no attention. They laugh off sin as if it's no big deal or shrug and quip, "Well, everyone's a sinner." So even people who have heard the Gospel continue their lives as if sin is no problem and has no consequence. But sin is a problem. It has a consequence. The master, who forgave his servant's debt suffered the loss of ten thousand talents. He had to bite the bullet himself. And so God, when he forgives our sins takes the load upon himself. The hymnist warns those who underestimate the severity of sin, "Ye who think of sin but lightly Nor Suppose the evil great Here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate. Mark the sacrifice appointed, See who bears the awful load; 'Tis the Word, the Lord's anointed, Son of Man and Son of God." (Thomas Kelly, Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted, LSB 451).

Yes, it is Jesus Christ who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God put the debt on *him*, for him to suffer the loss and pay the consequence. Isaiah long foretold it, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned-every one- to his own way; and the Lord has laid on *him* the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6) The suffering and death of the Godman demonstrates to us God's righteous wrath against sin. It is important for us to recognize this. A sinner will not accept the Gospel, will not believe he has need for forgiveness and actually cherish it as a precious gift unless he sees how desperately he needs to be cleared of this debt and how incapable he is of repaying it himself. Sinners must be made known of God's great displeasure with their sins, so that they repent. And as often as they repent, God promises to forgive.

And also however *great* the sin is, God promises to forgive. The currency to pay the debt of your sin is the very blood of Jesus' Christ. Your sin, no matter how great it is, is not greater than Jesus. To say that your sin is unforgivable is to say that your sin is greater than Jesus Christ himself. That is blaspheme! No sin, no matter how great or perverted is too gargantuan to withstand the blood of Jesus. Do not doubt God's forgiveness. Your sins don't stand a chance against his grace.

Had not the master forgiven the man's debt, he would have been sold into slavery with his wife and children and all his property would be gone. Had not God forgiven you of your sins for Christ's sake you would go to hell for all eternity. Those were the stakes. And so you owe it to God to be eternally grateful for his abundant grace and mercy toward you and forgive others, just as God forgave you.

The servant departed from his master after being forgiven the debt of two hundred thousand years of labor. And he goes and finds a fellow servant, who owes him one hundred denarii. A denarius is one six thousandth of a talent. It is a pitiful amount of money compared to what he had already been forgiven. Yet, instead of showing mercy as his master did him, he choked him, demanded immediate payment, and threw him in prison even as he begged for patience and promised to pay. The man was so callous that he didn't even recognize his own words from the mouth of his fellow servant, "have patience," as he had just pleaded moments ago to his master. So his fellow workers reported this injustice to the master and the master justly condemned the man to torture in prison.

Here Jesus ends his story and warns, "So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother from the heart." The silence must have been deafening after Christ uttered those words. God means business. This isn't a pious suggestion. This is a divine mandate. "You must forgive or I will condemn you to hell," God says. This isn't the first time Jesus gives this warning. In Matthew 6 he warns, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (14-15) And our Savior taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

This shoots a jolt of terror into those who hold grudges and hatred instead of forgiving. But we must forgive. For one the debt we have been forgiven is so great. For us to withhold forgiveness, because we think we have been so sorely mistreated is quite ridiculous when God forgives all your trespasses with the precious blood of Jesus.

The servant wouldn't forgive a measly one hundred denarii after being forgiven ten thousand talents! Yet, when you think of it, one hundred denarii isn't so measly. A denarius is a day's wage, let's say a hundred bucks. So we're talking ten thousand dollars. Imagine being put out ten grand? Wouldn't that upset you? So the point is not that you must forgive those who have minorly upset you in your life. God wants you to forgive those who have majorly hurt you, who have left physical and emotional scars that will remain your whole life. God wants you to forgive those who have cheated you out of money and inheritance, who have murdered your loved ones, who have done the unthinkable. Yes, we ought to be like St. Stephen, who followed Christ's example by praying, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" as men hurled stones at him until he died. (Acts 7:60)

As God forgives your greatest sin against him, so you ought to forgive your neighbor's greatest sin against you. This does not mean that you declare absolution to someone as he sins against you. No, that would confirm him in his sin. Rather you confront the person, who sins against you (Matthew 18:5) and when he repents forgive him. If he doesn't repent, then you bear his sin, even as Christ patiently bears the sin of the whole world eagerly desiring their repentance.

You forgive, *because* God forgave you. You forgive, because God forgives the person, who sins against you. St. John confesses, "[Jesus Christ] is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:2) Whatever your neighbor has done to you that hurt you so, Christ suffered for it. When you forgive your brother for sinning against you, you are not simply doing a good work. You are confessing the Gospel of Christ. You are confessing with the Apostles' Creed, "I believe... in the forgiveness of sins." You don't forgive, *so that* Christ will forgive you. You forgive, *because* Christ has forgiven you and because he forgives the person, who sins against you.

Are you troubled by the command to forgive? Do you pray, "as we forgive those who trespass against us" with unease? Do you fear you don't have the power to forgive those, who sin against you? Well, you don't. Not of yourself. But God does. And he gives you the power to forgive through faith in Christ. Faith itself is a gift, and not your work. To forgive those, who sin against you is to do nothing else than to confess Christ. Christ died for all sins, so he died for the sin done against you. If your brother repents to you, God has already forgiven him. When you forgive you are confessing that God has forgiven you all of your sins for Christ's sake as well.

If bitterness dwells in your heart, pray that God would remove it. And confess with St. Paul, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." (1 Timothy 1:15) Forgiving your neighbor is confessing Christ. And with the mouth one confesses and is saved. (Romans 10:10) Confess Christ. And believe that your sins are forgiven. Amen.