

CORE SEMINAR

Spring 2024

The Parables of Jesus

Course 4: The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant | Matthew 18:21-35

ICE BREAKER

Choose an ice breaker from the *Spring Community Group Guide* or go to www.fbcportland.org/icebreakers to select an ice breaker to ask your group.

- Spend about 5 minutes discussing the question – this is a great way to “warm up” your group.

HANGOUT NIGHT

Spend time discussing next week’s Hangout Night:

- What you are going to do?
- Who will host?
- What will everyone bring?

INTRODUCTION

Week 4 – and we have one of those “cheery” parables! Everyone excited? I know I am!

Now let’s be real for a moment, life in a fallen world is often characterized by broken trust, strained relationships, or unmet expectations. Whether it is intentional or not, we are constantly either hurting others **OR** being hurt by others. As a result, we’re either seeking forgiveness **OR** delivering vengeance [*I said we’re going to be real for a moment*]. This “conflict” that goes on inside of us [seeking forgiveness or delivering vengeance] should have received a reprieve when Christ came into our life.

Today, we will be in **Matthew 18:21-35** and will be reading the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Through this parable we will see our need to **forgive** others and to be **forgiven** by them. As we explore this parable, we will see how God’s never-ending forgiveness changes the way we live and relate to Him as well as the people around us.

QUESTION: Curious – by raise of hand – how many of you would classify yourself as a person who:

- **Constantly hurting others and seeking out forgiveness?**
- **OR you're being hurt and delivering vengeance?**
- **Is there a "C" option?**

Let's Pray and we'll get started...

PRAYER

[INCLUDE IN YOUR PRAYER MATTHEW 6:12

... FORGIVE US OUR DEBT AS WE HAVE ALSO FORGIVEN OUR DEBTORS...]

QUOTE

Look how they will answer it another day, who, though they bear the Christian name, persist in the most rigorous and unmerciful treatment of their brethren, as if the strictest of laws of Christ might be dispensed with for the gratifying of their unbridled passions; and so they curse themselves every time they say the Lord's prayer.

Matthew Henry

SET THE STAGE FOR THE PARABLE OF PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

Have someone in your group read Matthew 18:21-22

Before talking about the parable of the unmerciful/ unforgiving servant in **Matthew 18:21-35** we should know that Jesus gave instructions about responding to sin between individuals in **Matthew 18:15-20**. Quite often, **Matthew 18:15-20** is used to understand how to handle church discipline when there is a conflict between church members.

- *If one Christian sins against another, the one who has been sinned against is to confront the offender privately.*
- *If the offender does not repent, the one who has been sinned against is to confront him once more – plus take one or maybe two other mature believers with you.*
- *If the one who sinned against another STILL refuses to listen, the matter is to be brought before the entire church.*
- *AND THEN, if all fails and the guilty party STILL doesn't not listen to the church, then they are to be removed from membership and regarded as an "unbeliever."*

This is a difficult passage for the church. It was in the past and it still remains a difficult passage in the present. The parable we are going to talk about today follows on the heels of this difficult text.

This parable is the honestly the same issue BUT on the flip side. This passage is not about the one who sins – but the one who is sinned against. And Jesus will teach us through this parable that when we are sinned against, our response **MUST** be in line with the gospel.

In **verses 21-22**, you can almost see how Peter is working through what Jesus is teaching them and how his response [which I think it is hilarious that Peter is the one who is processing this – considering that he is the one doing the offending] his forgiveness is to be in line with what Jesus is teaching them.

And here is the question that Peter asks, “... **how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?**” Now the Jewish/ Rabbinic tradition stated that a person should forgive up to **3 times** – so the fourth time, “**you don’t have to forgive.**”

So, Peter is actually more than doubling this – and trying to stay in line with everything he is learning from Jesus. So, the number Peter is trying to come up with here is not like he’s trying to go easy on himself – or others. **7 times** is honestly a lot. But what he’s really trying to get to is this, “*surely there’s an end – a maximum time – even if it’s 7 times, that I should forgive those who have sinned against me.*”

And here is Jesus’ response, “**I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.**” And this is shocking – so much so that we can almost see Peter’s mouth drop. He takes Peter’s very generous number and He multiplies it by **11!** This number [77] goes way beyond Rabbinic tradition or anything Peter can imagine.

Now, we can speculate why Jesus chose 77, but we can think of a few ways:

1. It’s so high that you’ll eventually lose count forgiving someone that many times. Basically, keep forgiving until you lose count!
2. Seven [7], Biblically, is a number of wholeness, of completion or of perfection. Look at Revelation, the number of the beast is “666,” because he is short of God’s glory, His wholeness, His completion and His perfection **IN EVERY WAY**. So Jesus is saying we should forgive – completely – in every way.
3. Forgiveness is about the undoing of the curse of sin. What do we mean? In **Genesis 4:17-24**, we see Lamech [he’s described as a descendant of Cain]. In this passage, we see that when someone sins against Lamech with a minor offense – Lamech responds with killing the person. Lamech says that his revenge is “77 fold.” Things had gotten so bad by Genesis 4 that Lamech is exalting in vengeful violence. This is life in a fallen world. Forgiveness is about undoing the curse of sin and Jesus is saying

here that ***“life under the gospel is just the opposite of vengeful violence... limitless vengeance is being replaced with limitless forgiveness.”***

And Jesus knows the tradition just as much as His disciples. He can see the looks on their faces as He tells them in what way they should forgive, so He tells them a story [a parable] to help them understand His teaching

Let's look at **verse 23**

Have someone in your group read Matthew 18:23

The first thing we see is that Jesus is describing a specific relationship. A relationship between:

- A King – an authority who is in charge - who wished to settle accounts
- And, servants – who is under the king and answers to the king - who owed the king money.

This isn't like your friend or family member who owes you a small amount of cash.

- This is more like the IRS saying you've defaulted on your taxes – for all of your life – here's what you owe!

Now don't miss this – Jesus says this is comparable to what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

- So who are we? [*we are the servants who owe...*]

Let's keep reading:

Have someone in your group read Matthew 18:24-27

So, here's the conflict, this servant OWES an astronomical amount of money – like never... ever... ever... ever... ever... ever going to be able to pay it back – like ever... [you get the picture]

A talent was a measurement of money in those days [don't know if silver or gold] and it was measured by weight. Immediately you should ask, “how much money do I owe when you stop counting and start weighing...”

- Roughly a talent weighed 75lbs.
- Now this guy owed 10,000 talents. [*there will be math in this lesson today.*]
- **So, he owes 750,000 lbs of money.**
 - ***And then the question you should be asking is, “WHAT DID THIS SERVANT DO TO OWE THIS AMOUNT OF MONEY?!?!?”***

- **And how giving was this king TO LEND THIS AMOUNT OF MONEY TO THIS GUY?!?!?**

This is an infinite amount of money – and this is the point that Jesus is trying to make. It is impossible to pay it back.

In **verse 25**, we see the consequence of the debt – he is to be sold along with his wife and children. Even the price they will bring will not pay off his debt, but this is the only way that the king can recoup some of his losses. Sad picture really of debt and negligence.

Then in **verse 26**, we see the plea. The servant begged for patience and gave a promise that the servant made to the king that he would repay everything. The servant is begging for patience – “please be patient with me.” Now, if you were paying attention to the math we just did, this is a hopeless plea. He will never be able to pay everything back.

In **verse 27**, we see the three-fold response of the merciful king.

- He had **pity** on the servant.
- He **released** the servant.
- And, he **forgave** the servant’s debt.

These are not the things that the servant was looking for – *he stated he would pay it back* – but it all came from the mercy of the king’s heart. So, the king forgave.

So look at this, 10,000 talents are now gone – 750,000 lbs of money are no longer owed.

- Think of the release – gone.
- Think of the pressure – gone.
- The king forgave the debt and now he carries the debt – he now carries the loss

QUESTIONS: What seems to be Peter’s view of forgiveness? How does this compare to your own?

For what does the first servant in the parable ask? Can he make good on his promise? How is this similar to ways we approach God?

What three things does the master initially do for the servant [verse 27]?

- **Why do you think that each act is significant?**

What does this parable say about our condition before God?

- **Describe the spiritual debt that you owe to God.**
- **How has God handled this debt?**

Let's move to verse 28...

Have someone in your group read Matthew 18:28-34

Oh how the turned tables have turned! In the second half of the parable we have a different set of characters:

- We have the forgiven servant
- And we have one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii [equivalent to 100 days wages.]
- These two guys are equals – this WOULD be the equivalent to your family member or friend...

But the debt is not comparable:

- One owes 100 days of wages - which could be paid back reasonably.
- There are 6000 denarii in a talent.
- More math = $6000 \times 10,000$ [number of talents owed in the 1st half of the parable] = roughly **60,000,000 days wages.**
- $60,000,000 / 365 =$ roughly **164,383** years that the forgiven servant owed the king.

VS 100 days of wages –

- Vastly different relationship
- Vastly different debt

So, by taking the two halves of the parable it seems that everything is different

- Different debts
- Owed to two different people
- Even the ability to payback is different.

But, there's one thing that is the same – let's look in **verse 29**. Just like in the first half, the offending servant pleaded for patience and mercy - **'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'**

- This is the only thing that is the two men in debt make the exact same **plea**.

Then we see in **verse 31** how the other servants witnessed these events – were concerned – and reported what they saw to the merciful king. It doesn't go so well for the servant this time as he appears before the king. He's called wicked, chastised for not being merciful [when he was shown mercy] and in the king's wrath – he delivered the servant to the jailers. This is a picture of eternal punishment.

- Remember **60,000,000 days** wages that were owed

- Over **164,000 years of work**
- Delivered to his jailers “**until he should pay all his debt**” - eternally

QUESTIONS: What are the similarities and differences between the two servants’ debts, their pleas, and the response they get?

How does the first servant’s lack of mercy impact others?

- **What is the end result for him?**

How does God’s forgiveness of your sins change the way that you relate to other people?

- **What kinds of requirements and conditions do you wait for people to meet before you forgive them?**

Let’s finish up...

Have someone in your group read Matthew 18:35

Our mindset is that when people “wrong us” or “sin against us” that we want them to get what they deserve. But, Jesus tells us that those who are in His kingdom will extend mercy BECAUSE mercy has been extended. Those who are unwilling to forgive others who sin against them will not be forgiven by God and will be given the punishment that they deserve for their sin against Him. This is direct – but it’s just that simple.

QUESTIONS: What warning does Jesus give in verse 35 to those who do not forgive others?

- **Are there people who you do OR you have struggled to extend forgiveness?**
- **How can Jesus’ parable motivate you or guide in you that relationship?**

CONCLUSION

People in God’s Kingdom are characterized by their forgiveness of others who have sinned against them—with no limits as to the extent of sin or how many times they may have to forgive. They are able [*and want*] to do this because they have been forgiven by God for their sins [*a debt that they could not repay*] and have been spared the punishment that they deserved for their sins.

This parable is a picture of the gospel – a picture of God’s mercy – a picture of the Kingdom of Heaven. Here’s how:

- The gospel is about a **relationship** between a servant and a King. By the way, we’re the servant.
- The gospel is all about an infinite **debt**. We owe Him everything.

- The gospel is about a just **punishment**.
- The gospel is about a merciful king that provides **forgiveness**.
- And, the gospel is about a **change** that should happen in us – mercy received produces mercy given.

As we conclude, I want to read the final statement from a lady named Rachael Denhollander who spoke at the trial of her abuser – Larry Nassar. It is a picture of what mercy and forgiveness looks like - even as she faced and spoke to the one who wronged her terribly.

In our early hearings, you brought your Bible into the courtroom and you have spoken of praying for forgiveness. And so it is on that basis that I appeal to you. If you have read the Bible you carry, you know the definition of sacrificial love portrayed is of God himself loving so sacrificially that he gave up everything to pay a penalty for the sin he did not commit. By his grace, I, too, choose to love this way.

You spoke of praying for forgiveness. But Larry, if you have read the Bible you carry, you know forgiveness does not come from doing good things, as if good deeds can erase what you have done. It comes from repentance which requires facing and acknowledging the truth about what you have done in all of its utter depravity and horror without mitigation, without excuse, without acting as if good deeds can erase what you have seen this courtroom today.

If the Bible you carry says it is better for a stone to be thrown around your neck and you throw into a lake than for you to make even one child stumble. And you have damaged hundreds.

The Bible you speak carries a final judgment where all of God's wrath and eternal terror is poured out on men like you. Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you.

I pray you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me – though I extend that to you as well.

The gospel is not about getting what we deserve – it is about extending mercy and forgiveness.

CLOSING PRAYER