
**“The Limits of Forgiveness”
(Matthew 18:21-35)
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Introduction:

It was Clint Eastwood playing his iconic role as Dirty Harry in the 70's movie *Magnum Force* that coined the famous line, “A man's got to know his limitations.” I think those words are true for all people. That's the ethic by which most people operate. This is what we usually do. We try our best, in a very unscientific way, to find the moral average, right? So we look around at the work place, we look around at church, at what our neighbors are doing, and we mentally determine the moral average—it's right about here. You don't want to aim for any lower than the average, that would make us look pretty bad. And you don't want to aim to high above the average because that's either unattainable and we're just setting ourselves up for disappointment, or we don't want to look like a teacher's pet in front of others. So we find the average and aim a little higher. Also, if you're faced with a moral dilemma and you reach a little higher than the moral average, then, in front of your peers, you look like a saint. And that's always nice, isn't it?

With that said, we all have our limits and no one will judge us for going over the tipping point. We set our limits with giving our finances to God, wrongly thinking that the tithe is the biblical limit, when it's really the biblical minimum. We set our limits on the time we choose to give to others, on our commitment to God, on personal spirituality, on concern for our broken world and so on.

And so what we've done as a spiritual community is that we've created this muddy middle ground. No one knows where it begins or where it ends, but as long as we're in it, then we're okay. I think that's our human nature.

What does this type of living have as its root? Well its not good. Conformity, mediocrity, self-righteousness, self-preservation, self-promotion, apathy. Isn't it true? If we look within our hearts, I think we'll all agree that that is what we do and those are the motivators. Of course we know that none of these are godly, biblical motivators. You don't often read in the bible that we should strive for mediocrity or do this for your self-righteousness.

So here comes Jesus and he just throws out the window this type of sinful and substandard way of doing life and he says crazy things like, “sell everything you have and give to the poor”, “forgive until it hurts”, “turn the other cheek”, “go the extra mile” and the like. In the realm of human relationships Jesus sets for us an unattainable standard. And by our strength and with our sinful nature it is unattainable, but with the power of God and the work of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to do that which is impossible to do. And one of the most difficult things Jesus asks us to do is to forgive and in doing so, he sets for us the limits on forgiveness.

A couple things about forgiveness before we get into the passage.

- Forgiveness: what is it? It is acceptance of the person apart from the action. Not to count the wrongs of a person against them. That's what God did with us. He has accepted us, despite our sinful actions. He hasn't counted our wrongs against us.

- Jesus commanded and assumed his followers would forgive others as we seek God's forgiveness. (The Lord's Prayer)
- Jesus said forgiveness was so important that worship to God should be delayed until things are made right again.

Matthew 5: 23 *"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.*

- Jesus is to us the model of forgiveness. (on the cross – in forgiving enemies and in what the cross accomplished)
- Jesus taught that our receiving forgiveness from God was conditional upon us forgiving others. (Mt. 6:14-15)
- When a sinful brother or sister in Christ has been forgiven, we are to welcome the person back into the full love and fellowship of the church. (2Co 2:7)

Let's take a look at today's teaching

TNIV Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart."

How many times should we forgive someone?

Peter's question to Jesus was pretty honest. A certain person has offended him requiring that Peter forgive him. However this person was a repeat offender. It wasn't that Peter had to forgive him one time or even two times. Maybe even three times. But Peter here trying to be a really good person and says up to seven times.

In Jewish tradition, religious leaders said that up to three times we are obligated to forgive, but on the fourth offense there shall be no forgiveness. So when Peter says, "up to seven times" he's trying to outdo the known standard of the day. He's trying to make himself look like a pretty forgiving person.

I think we're the same as Peter a lot of the times. We think we've gone the extra mile in terms of forgiveness. We say things like, "I think I've been more than fair, more than generous, but no more. She has crossed the line." And we may even tell the Lord like Peter did. "Lord, I am not going to give him another chance. He'll walk all over me. He'll take me for granted."

The response of Jesus is staggering. Jesus' answer to Peter's question and suggestion is mind-blowing. Jesus says forgive the offender seventy seven times. Jesus is not setting a quota here, as if we're to keep tallies on people's offenses. "Okay, husband is at seventy six. One more to go. Then he's gonna get it."

Jesus is telling his followers to do the impossible. As many times as the person offends you, forgive him...limitlessly, forgive the offender.

But how is this possible? How can a person forgive limitlessly? I mean we all have our limits. We all have a line drawn in the sand...don't we? Jesus shares a story, a parable, to show how limitless forgiveness is possible as well as the consequences of one who does not truly forgive.

In this story Jesus basically says that we can forgive limitlessly because his followers have been forgiven limitlessly.

In this story there's a king who was looking to settle all his financial accounts with his servants. And a servant was brought in who had accumulated 10,000 talents (bags of gold) worth of debt. Now let me try to explain how much debt this comes out to be in today's money.

A day's wage for a foot-soldier or day labourer was 1 denarius. That was what these average folks were expected to earn for one day's work. Now one talent equaled 6000 denarii. This servant owned 10,000 talents. $10,000 \times 6,000 = 60,000,000.00$ denarii. $60,000,000.00$ days of a typical worker's wage.

Now these days, let's say a typical labourer, burger flipper, file filer, bank teller, on the conservative side, earns \$10.00 an hour – so \$80.00 a day. Okay let's round it up to be \$100.00 a day. Multiply that by 6000.00 and you get $600,000.00 =$ one talent. Multiply $600,000.00$ by 10,000 talents and you get... $6,000,000,000.00$. Six Billion Dollars.

So if you were to work every day of the year you would have earned \$36,500.00. It would take a modern day wage earner 164,383 years to pay the debt.

Say you had 55 good years in you to work and earn that kind of money. You know, you started early at 15 and ended at 70 yrs. It would still take you 2988 life times to pay off the debt.

All of these ancient and modern day calculations are to make one point and one point alone. **The debt cannot be repaid.**

There is no way that this servant could ever repay his debt. In this situation there is really only one choice. There is only one appropriate response for the servant. It isn't, "Listen, give me some time...I'll pay you back." "Look, take everything I own." "I'll borrow from everyone I know."

All of these responses are foolish. The king would have had a good laugh. The king knows the debt can't be repaid. The king could have taken him and his whole family into slavery for the rest of his generations. Instead he offers mercy. He extends forgiveness.

Every single one of us owes a billion dollars in sin debts to the King. The bible says the wages of sin is death so you and I, we deserve to die a billion deaths to pay off our sin debts to the King.

Some of us might be saying. "I haven't committed a billion sins." Okay, okay...I'll give you that. But say you and I commit 10 sins a day. I think that's pretty conservative. That would be 3650 sins a year... times 70 years would be 255,500 sins. Now Peter 255,500 is nowhere near a billion.

Give me a second to explain. To an infinitely holy God, in one sense, everyone's a Hitler. To an infinitely holy God one white lie and serial murder is infinitely sinful. How many sins did it take Adam and Eve to ruin it all? Grand total: ONE! Think of the shockwave the sin of one person sent across all of humanity. Folks, before a holy God, we're all infinitely sinful.

For you and I to say, "Listen God, give me some time, I'll change my ways." "I'll make it up to you God. I'll be good." "Don't worry God, by the end of the day, my good deeds will outweigh my bad deeds."

And God is saying..."How you gonna do that? You're already six billion in the hole." "He'll have a good chuckle." And then he'll say, "How about this...I will extend to you forgiveness." "In the blink of an eye, six billion in the hole will be zero. No, I've got even a better idea. Six billion in the hole will become six billion to your credit."

That's what the bible says God did through Jesus. It took a person who was infinitely perfect to erase the debts of people who are infinitely sinful. Folks, you and I can never be good enough. The hole is too deep. God will not only take you out of the hole, he'll set you on top of a mountain. All the good works, all of the perfect obedience that Jesus did, goes into our account.

When you and I get to heaven and the ledger is opened, there is going to be an incredible amount of stuff, good stuff on our page of the ledger. And as God reads, you and I will say, "God, I never did any of that." And God will say, "I know. But you let my Son Jesus do it for you."

People of God, that's how much you and I have been forgiven.

When we realize the amount we've been forgiven, it's unthinkable to act in the way this forgiven debtor acted. That was the improper response.

After the servant was forgiven this insurmountable debt, incredibly relieved, he goes about his own business until he comes across one of his own servants, that just happened to owe him some money. He owned the man 100 denarii. One hundred days worth of wages. It would have been around \$10,000.00 for us today. Not a small chunk of change, but in response to the great debt he was forgiven it was nothing.

And the first servant demands the debt to be repaid. And the response of this second man is almost the same one the servant gave to the King. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' His words at least have a hint of possibility. \$10,000 though difficult, is a reasonable debt to repay. But instead of being gracious to his servant, the first servant begins to mercilessly choke his servant demanding the money be repaid. And has the man thrown into prison. If we saw this drama played out by the best actors, directed by the best director, scored by the most talented musicians, and financed by an unlimited Hollywood budget, what emotions would they be trying to awaken in us, the viewers? I think something similar to this.

There was a great King who had done some horrific things and his conscience was hardened and he felt no remorse and so one of his chief advisors begins to tell the king a story.

"There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor.² The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle,³ but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴ "Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

⁵ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die!"⁶ He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

⁷ Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. Every single one of us has not only the ability, but the propensity to act as the unmerciful servant and King David acted. We all have the immensely wicked ability to expect to be forgiven, but not offer forgiveness.

Sins against us are **not** nothing. They're not petty. They're significant offenses. They really hurt. They leave scars. They damage trust. And God knows that. He knows the wrong that's been done to us. And the message of God is always this. "Vengeance is mine." God says, you forgive, and I'll take care of justice. And he'll do it in one of two ways. He'll be able to mete out justice so perfectly that no one will be able to say or feel that that wasn't fair. God will take care of it in one way—the cross; the other way—hell.

But compared to the sins we've committed against God, the sins committed against us are nothing and must be forgiven.

There are people in our lives that we have not forgiven. We've clung on to hate and anger and revenge and bitterness. We have parents that have hurt us. We have spouses that were cold to us. We have friends that have turned their backs on us. We have bosses that have been unfair to us. We have spiritual leaders who have let us down.

And all God is saying is, "Don't you realize how much you've been forgiven?" "How can you not forgive?"

Why are Christians able to forgive and do something so counter to our survival instincts? We're able to the supernatural, because the supernatural was done to us.

Consequence: tortured until he pays back all he owes. Which is never.

This is a kingdom guideline. He who is forgiven much, loves much. In Lord's prayer. There is no excuse for a non-forgiving Christian.

Conclusion:

Forgiveness we may think releases the sinner, but more than that it releases you. Satan uses an unforgiving spirit to eat away at your life. You become consumed with hatred and bitterness and a payback, I can never forgive you mentality.

Forgiveness is a true demonstration of the power of God working in you. Have we placed limits on forgiveness? God hasn't with us and neither should we with others.

