

THE MATH OF MERCY

Matthew 18:21-35 NLT

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22 "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"

23 "Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. **24** In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. **25** He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt.

26 "But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' **27** Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

28 "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

29 "His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. **30** But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

31 "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. **32** Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. **33** Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' **34** Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

35 "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

A Vision of Jesus

Author, Speaker and Franciscan Priest Brennan Manning tells the story of a woman who visited her priest, and told him that when she prays, she sees Jesus in a vision.

"He appears to me as real, as you are standing here right now, father," said the woman. "And he speaks to me. He tells me that he loves me and wants to be with me. Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Not at all," replied the priest. "But to make sure it is really Jesus who is visiting you, I want you to ask him a question when he appears to you again. Ask him to tell you the sins that I confessed to him in confession. Then come back and tell me what he said."

A few days later, the woman returned.

"Did you have another vision of Jesus?" The priest inquired of her.

"Yes, I did Father," she replied.

"And did you ask him to tell you the sins that I confessed to him while I was in confession?"

"Yes, I did," the woman answered.

"And what did he tell you?" Asked the priest expectantly.

"He said...I forgot."

This is how God forgives us. He doesn't hold grudges, he doesn't bring up our sin down the road when we inevitably screw up again. He remembers our sins no more.

In Matthew 18 Jesus tells this parable about forgiveness.

Matthew 18:21-22 NLT

21 Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"

22 "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"

Peter asks Jesus how many times he must forgive someone — offering seven as a generous number (rabbinic tradition often capped forgiveness at three times). Peter doubled that and added one for good measure. He thought his question was going to impress Jesus and make him look good.

Jesus basically said forgiveness is not a matter of mathematics, but of Spirit. "Seventy times seven" is not a literal ceiling but a way of saying forgiveness has no ceiling.

Seven is the number of completeness in the Bible

- 7 days of creation.
- 7 marches around Jericho.
- Naaman dips 7 times in the Jordan to be cured of leprosy.
- In Revelation there are 7 churches, 7 seals, 7 trumpets, and 7 bowls of judgment—signifying the absolute completion of God's redemptive plan

"Seventy times seven" means forgiveness needs to be complete.

In a similar story in Luke Jesus says seven times in one day. The disciples respond, "Lord increase our faith." There's no way we can do that.

Who's name comes to mind when you hear "how many times do I have to forgive them?"

Forgiveness is a unique concept and new to the New Testament; unique to Jesus. Forgiveness is not really taught in the OT. Only the year of jubilee from Leviticus 25 talks about this concept. It was a sabbatical year after seven cycles of seven years (49 years). The fiftieth year was to be a time of celebration and rejoicing for the Israelites. The Year of the Jubilee involved a year of release from indebtedness and all types of bondage. All prisoners and captives were set free, all slaves were

released, all debts were forgiven, and all property was returned to its original owners. There is no evidence the Jews actually participated in this.

Jesus introduces it in the Lords Prayer in Matthew 6. He emphasizes the forgiveness part:

14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. **15** But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

MATTHEW 18:23-27

23 "Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. **24** In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. **25** He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. **26** "But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' **27** Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

A servant owes 10,000 talents — a denarii was a days wages. A talent was 6,000 denarii. This is the equivalent of 160,000 years of wages, an amount no servant could ever repay in several lifetimes. The king orders the servant, his family, and possessions sold — a devastating but just sentence under the law.

The servant falls down and begs for patience; the king does more than wait — he cancels the debt entirely. This is a picture of grace, not negotiation. The debt is forgiven outright, not restructured.

MATTHEW 18:28-30

28 "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

29 "His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. **30** But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

The forgiven servant finds a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii — a real but comparatively tiny sum (about 100 days' wages). He seizes him by the throat, refuses to show the same patience he was just shown, and has him thrown in prison.

The disproportion between what he was forgiven and what he refuses to forgive is the whole point — don't rush past it. Its like \$650 million dollars vs \$3,700. You would think there would be a bit of pay it forward, or generosity by this guy who was saved from so much debt. Instead he grabs the servant by the throat and demands payment. This is overly aggressive and it shows that the King's grace was wasted on him.

MATTHEW 18:31-35

31 "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. **32** Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. **33** Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' **34** Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

35 "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

The other servants are "greatly distressed" and report what happened — forgiveness has a community dimension; unforgiveness grieves those watching.

The king calls him "wicked" — not merely unwise, but morally culpable for failing to pass on the mercy he received.

He is handed over to the jailers "until he had paid his entire debt" — a sobering image of what it looks like to reject grace after receiving it.

He's trying to show how big a debt we've been forgiven. And we hold these petty little grievances against us.

Biggest Sinner in the Room

We have to understand that we are the biggest sinners in the room. In any room I enter, I might know some of your sins, but I am keenly aware of ALL of my sins. I know how God has forgiven me. So I must assume I am the biggest sinner in the room. THAT will help keep others sins against me in check.

THE LAST SUPPER

It is said that during the painting of the Last Supper, DaVinci painted his enemy's face on Judas, but couldn't paint Jesus face. He realized it was because he held hatred in his heart.

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The passages imply that there is no forgiveness as long as we are unrepentant and unforgiving. While they also imply that there is unlimited forgiveness even as we sin against God. It's a paradox.

I am expected to be endlessly forgiving of others in order for God to endlessly forgive me. But it is impossible for me to be endlessly forgiving. So which is it? Does God forgive no matter what over and over? Or is God's forgiving power dependent on me and my abilities to forgive over and over? I certainly hope it is not the latter.

The point of these passages is not just a commandment to forgive (and if we don't then we will be punished), but an assertion that forgiveness is a gift, and it is impossible without God. God makes the impossible task of forgiveness possible.

Whether or not you believe in divine forgiveness, the research shows that being forgiving is good for you and others. Forgiveness isn't condoning a bad behavior. It isn't letting someone off the hook or forgoing justice.

Forgiveness closes the gap that justice cannot perfectly close. Forgiveness reconnects us to the dignity of every human, and if you believe, it connects us to God. Forgiveness says, "I see your human dignity regardless of behavior. And I treat you with dignity and respect."

This isn't about earning forgiveness through good behavior — it's about whether the forgiveness we've received has actually taken root in us. Genuine reception of grace produces the fruit of grace.

Therefore, forgiveness is not an option for the believer, it's a requirement.

Jesus says how can you expect God to forgive you. The evidence of Jesus' forgiveness in you is your ability to forgive others.

I understand that humanly speaking you feel you can't forgive. That may be true. That's where the spirit of God comes in. The spirit gives you the ability to do what I know I must do but can't do.

Think again about the person you have a hard time forgiving.

Now think about ALL that God has forgiven in you.

Notice the gap between our 10,000-talent debt that has been forgiven and whatever 100 denarii someone owes us. And then forgive them.

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Small Group Discussion Questions

Peter opens with what he probably thinks is a generous offer: forgive up to seven times. Jesus answers with seventy-seven times (or seventy times seven). What is Jesus communicating with that number? What does the sheer scale of it say about the kind of forgiveness he has in mind?

Look carefully at the numbers in the parable. The first servant owes ten thousand talents — an almost incomprehensible sum — while the second servant owes a hundred denarii, roughly a few months' wages. Why do you think Jesus made the contrast so extreme? What is he trying to make unavoidable for the listener?

The king's forgiveness in verses 26–27 is immediate and total — he doesn't set up a payment plan or put the servant on probation. He simply cancels the debt. What does that tell us about the nature of the forgiveness God extends to us? How is that different from how we often imagine God's forgiveness working?

The forgiven servant goes out and immediately seizes his fellow servant by the throat over a comparatively tiny debt. Jesus doesn't explain why — he just shows us the scene. What does that juxtaposition reveal about what had gone wrong in the servant's heart? What had he failed to actually receive, even though the debt was cancelled?

Verse 35 is searching: *"That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."* Jesus specifies *from your heart* — not just formally or outwardly. Is there a difference between forgiving someone with your will and forgiving them from the heart? What does the deeper kind of forgiveness actually require?

Forgiveness is one of the places where the gospel most directly collides with our natural instincts. Who or what situation comes to mind when you sit with this parable? What would it look like — concretely, not abstractly — to forgive that person or situation from the heart this week? What might make that possible?