

SEVENTEETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

First German Evangelical Lutheran Church

Forgiveness without Limits

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he 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 talents 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 denarii. 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 turned 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 your brother from your heart."

We live in a world filled with sinful people. You sin. I sin. The person sitting next to you sins. There is no escaping this fact. Because you live and work with sinful people, you can be certain that you will have experiences in your life when someone sins against you. There will be times when someone hurts you with their words or their actions. There will be times when someone stabs you in the back or insults you to your face. You will have family members who let you down—who betray your trust and ignore your feelings. You will have coworkers or neighbors who say hurtful things and don't even seem to care. You might even find a total stranger who tries to make your life miserable just because you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. When this happens—when someone sins against you, when you have a legitimate gripe against a friend or family member—what are you going to do about it? This is the question that Jesus confronts his disciples with in our Gospel and it is a question each of us needs to think about today.

What do you do to that person who has done you wrong? What are your options? Perhaps the first options that come to your mind are the ones that appeal to your sinful nature. These

are not God-pleasing options, but they come very naturally. I know. I have contemplated them myself. The first thing you might want to do is to burn that person's sin into your mind and never forget it. This is called a grudge. It means that from that day forward, you are not going to look at that person the same way. You are going to think less of them. You are going to try to avoid them if possible and treat them coldly if you do run into them. In this way, you will never let that person forget just how horribly they treated you.

Perhaps another option that comes to mind is taking that grudge one step further and seeking revenge. When someone has really hurt you, when they have really caused you trouble, the thought that naturally occurs is: "They are going to pay for this." You will find the perfect moment to humiliate them or cause them the same pain they caused you. This might happen shortly after they have wronged you or you might just wait a good long time before you get back at them. After all, don't they say: "Revenge is a dish best served cold"? You might think that it will feel good to take that revenge. You might think that it will bring you satisfaction and joy to see someone else pay for what they did to you. But the reality is: there is nothing that could be more harmful to you and your immortal soul in a situation like this than holding a grudge or seeking revenge.

Jesus spoke to this very situation when he told his disciples the parable of the unmerciful servant. It's a good story. It's a story filled with high drama and unexpected turns. The story revolves around an earthly king. He's a man with a lot of wealth and power. He's a man with many others working under him. Jesus focuses on one of those servants—one that owes a king a huge sum of money. This man probably isn't a servant in the sense of a slave. You might think of him as an official. He's a man who has been entrusted with managing a large portion of the king's money and has been making himself rich on the side. Now the time has come for this man to give an accounting for where all of the king's money has gone. He has a lot to answer for and no good answers. The king finds out that this servant owes him 10,000 talents. In today's terms, that would be tens of millions of dollars. This was more money than this servant could ever pay back in his lifetime.

And so what will the king do? This is where the drama comes in. It's a big moment. The king decides he will sell this servant and his family members, recover what he can from them and never see them again. At this decision, the servant throws himself down at the king's feet and begs for his mercy. He asks for the king's patience so that he can have the time to repay the debt. Of course, the king knows this will never happen. He's never going to come up with that kind of money. And here is where the story takes its first unexpected turn. The king has pity on this servant. He doesn't merely give him more time to pay back his debt; he wipes out the servant's debt completely. He sends him away with a clean slate. This is uncommon mercy. This is truly remarkable.

But that is not the end of the story. This servant walks away from his meeting with the king, no doubt overjoyed from the decision the king has made, and he runs into a fellow worker.

It's a man that owes him one hundred denarii. In today's terms—that's about twenty dollars. So what does this servant do with the man who owes him a small amount of money? He grabs him by the scruff of the neck and demands repayment. He shows him no mercy. He wants every last penny. And if he doesn't get it, he will have this man thrown into jail. This is another surprising twist. It's shocking that this man could have such a cold heart and show such a lack of compassion in the light of what had just been done for him.

When the king finds out what this servant has done, he again calls him to account. This time there is no mercy. The man has abused the king's compassion to the point where there is none left to show. The king tells his servants to hand this man over to the jailers. And this is not just any jailer; it is the jailer who specializes in torture. The man is to be tortured until he is able to pay back his enormous debt. And since that is never going to happen, his punishment will never end.

What a fool! Why he couldn't he simply have shown some mercy to that other servant who only owed him a small amount of money? That is probably what the disciples were thinking when Jesus told the parable. That is what you and I think when we hear it today. But then the harsh reality comes home. That fool is you and I when we refuse to forgive, when we hold a grudge, when we seek revenge.

The next time someone does something wrong against you and you are finding it hard to forgive—think first of all of the debt that you owe God. Every single sin you have ever committed deserves payment. That payment is hell. That's just for one sin. Now imagine what you owe God when you put every one of your sins together. That tremendous debt is what Jesus agonized about in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed, "Father if you are willing, take this cup from me." The cup is the cup of God's wrath over sin. That is the cup that Jesus drank when he suffered and died on the cross. He paid the debt you owe. And because of Jesus' payment, God the Father turns to you and speaks words of tender mercy: "Your sins are forgiven. You owe me nothing. You are free."

When we realize what incomprehensible love God has shown us in forgiving our sin, how could we think of holding someone else's sins against them? How could we not forgive them as well? This doesn't mean we don't speak to others about their sin. This parable Jesus spoke came right after Jesus had told his disciples, "*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault.*" That is part of the debt of love you owe that person. The other part is forgiving them. And when you do forgive, everyone wins.

I once heard a story about a husband and wife whose relationship had grown pretty contentious. They realized that most of the time they spent talking with each other they spent pointing out each other's faults. And so they came up with a plan. They wouldn't say any negative things to each other for a month. Instead, if one of them had a problem with the other, they would simply write it down on a piece of paper and place it in a jar. Then, at the

end of the month, they would exchange the jars and try to talk through the problems. Well, they carried out their plan and each of them was writing many notes and placing them in the other's jar. When the end of the month came, they exchanged the jars. The wife opened hers first and found notes containing many things her husband thought she had done wrong—words she shouldn't have said, actions that weren't very loving... And she felt a mixture of guilt, defensiveness, sadness, and anger. The husband then opened his jar and started reading the notes. Much to his surprise, every note said the same thing: "I forgive you." How do you think he felt?

Forgiveness is not only good for yourself—because you are doing what is God-pleasing. It is also good for the person you forgive—because it is unexpected and it reflects Christ's love to them. It doesn't mean that the moment you forgive someone, every problem in that relationship will go away. But it is much better than the alternative. Without forgiveness, you are hurting yourself, you are putting your soul in danger and you are cutting off that relationship for good. With forgiveness, there is hope.

Always remember where it begins. It begins in the same place as the parable—with the forgiveness of the King. Remember what a blessing it is to have a Savior who has washed your sin away. Seek and find his forgiveness daily. Go back to the cross of Christ often. Go back to your baptism. Remember that you are a forgiven child of God. And as God has forgiven you without limits, offer that forgiveness to others without limits. May God bless us and give us all forgiving spirits, through Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

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