



# ◀ *Forgiveness* ▶

JESUS CALLS US TO FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER  
AS HE HAS FORGIVEN US.

## **MATTHEW 18:21-35**

“I’m sorry!” Those two words carry worlds of meaning. When a waitress uses them over and over during the thirty minutes or so that you are at her table, they often lose any meaning. But when they come from someone who has hurt you and you can sense their anguish over that hurt, those words can be liberating to you—and to them. Forgiving others can be difficult but is essential for good spiritual and mental well-being. Jesus calls us to forgive others as He has forgiven us.

 **Why is it often so difficult to forgive someone who has offended you?**

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# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## **MATTHEW 18:1-35**

At the end of Matthew 17, Jesus sent Peter on a special mission. The disciples assumed Peter was once again singled out for something special (Matt 17:27). Not only that, but Peter, James, and John had spent time with Jesus on the mountain. Motivated by jealousy, the disciples argued about who was greatest and who should be given special privileges and assignments.

The immaturity of the disciples led Jesus to teach extensively about relationships. First, He placed a small child in their midst. Referring to the child, Jesus pointed out that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven was the one who, like a child, was characterized by humility. That humility would be seen in absolute dependence on the Father for grace and mercy just like a child depends on parents for nurturing in life (18:1-5).

Jesus spoke of “little ones,” by which He was speaking figuratively of those who follow Him. He gave a stern warning about causing a fellow believer to stumble. The one who caused “one of these little ones . . . to fall away” would be better off suffering a terrible drowning than to face God’s wrath for their actions (vv. 6-9).

Jesus supported His concern for His little ones by telling a familiar story about a lost sheep among ninety-nine who did not stray. This reinforced God’s care for His little ones, showing that He was willing to do whatever was necessary to protect them (vv. 10-14).

In addition to God’s searching for them when they go astray, He gives to the community of believers—the “church” (v. 17)—the responsibility to work with straying believers to restore their relationship with God and with other believers.

Arising out of these teachings about relationships, Peter approached Jesus with a question concerning forgiving others (v. 21). The remainder of the chapter records Jesus speaking of the need for His followers to forgive one another just as God has forgiven them.

 **Read Matthew 18:21-35 and list some principles concerning forgiveness.**

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# EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

## **QUESTION OF FORGIVENESS** (MATT. 18:21-22)

<sup>21</sup> **Then Peter approached him and asked, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?”** <sup>22</sup> **“I tell you, not as many as seven,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven.”**

### **VERSES 21-22**

In verses 15-20, Jesus spoke about the situation where one believer sins against another. This raised a question in Peter’s mind. He asked, **How many times must I forgive?** He wondered, what’s the limit on forgiving and restoring **my brother**, a fellow believer?

Peter most likely was aware of the teaching of the rabbis that forgiving three times was the limit. One rabbi had written, “He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times.”<sup>1</sup> At an earlier point in his life, Peter may have balked at forgiving even three times. But his life was being transformed. His suggestion of forgiving **seven times** is evident of that transformation. Peter probably thought he was being generous with his suggestion.

Jesus’s answer must have surprised Peter. He told Peter to forgive **seventy times seven** instead of just seven times. Some translations follow the Greek and use the number seventy-seven. Regardless, Jesus was not calling on His followers to keep track of the number of times they offer forgiveness. Rather, He was speaking of unlimited forgiveness.

God’s forgiveness is not restricted and is unlimited. That should be the way we relate to those who sin against us. Jesus reinforced this principle with a parable in verses 23-35.

 **What do you think is a reasonable number of times to forgive someone who hurts you?**

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## **COMPASSIONATE KING** (MATT. 18:23-27)

<sup>23</sup> **“For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.**

<sup>24</sup> **When he began to settle accounts, one who owed ten**

thousand talents was brought before him.<sup>25</sup> Since he did not have the money to pay it back, his master commanded that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.<sup>26</sup> At this, the servant fell facedown before him and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything.’<sup>27</sup> Then the master of that servant had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan.”

### VERSES 23-25

The *king* in the parable represents God, and the *servants* represent those who are His followers. The picture of the king wanting to *settle accounts* is a picture of judgment. It was an occasion to take inventory and balance the books.

As this king began to settle accounts with his servants, he came across a servant who owed him an enormous sum of money—*ten thousand talents*. A talent was a unit of measurement that equaled around 70 pounds. This would have been an inordinate amount of money in the Roman and Hebrew monetary system. While various scholars have sought to estimate the debt of this man as being in the millions of US dollars, Jesus was not attempting to set an exact amount. The Greek word for *ten thousand* was the highest number in that language and is the word from which we get our term “myriad,” meaning a great number. Jesus’s point is that the man owed an enormous amount that he would never be able to repay.

For the king, the only remedy was that the man, his family, and all his possessions be seized and *sold to pay the debt*. Such actions were not uncommon in that day and time. Keep in mind that Jesus was moving to a conclusion to Peter’s question, showing that those who follow Christ have a huge debt that we cannot pay—the debt of our sin against God. The result of that debt is that we deserve to suffer the consequences of such a debt.

### VERSES 26-27

Upon hearing the sentence from the king, the servant threw himself on the ground in penitence. This servant recognized how desperate his situation was and how bankrupt he was before the king. His only hope was the mercy of the king.

In hopes of eliciting mercy for his situation, he begged the king to *be patient*. The English word *longsuffering* loosely translates the Greek word for patient.

After crying out for mercy, the servant made a promise that he couldn't possibly keep, ***I will pay you everything***. His attitude was genuine, but his stated goal was impossible. In many ways, his approach mirrors that of people today who try to bargain with God and work to make things right. Such an approach is a fruitless effort at solving a problem that can't be solved through sincerity alone. Only an undeserved pardon from the King can resolve the problem.

Only through the ***compassion*** of the king was this man's debt forgiven. The word *compassion* signifies intense feelings of empathy and pity. The servant's pleading moved the heart of the king toward forgiving the debt. As a result, the king ***released*** the servant and ***forgave*** the debt. In no way did the servant deserve this. The release and forgiveness came solely because of the compassion of the king.



**How do you see grace at work in these verses?**

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**KEY DOCTRINE:** *Man*

Only the grace of God can bring man into His holy fellowship and enable man to fulfill the creative purpose of God. (See Romans 5:6; Ephesians 2:8-10.)

**UNFORGIVING SERVANT** (MATT. 18:28-35)

**<sup>28</sup> “That servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him, started choking him, and said, ‘Pay what you owe!’ <sup>29</sup> At this, his fellow servant fell down and began begging him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ <sup>30</sup> But he wasn’t willing. Instead, he went and threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had taken place, they were deeply distressed and went and reported to their master everything that had happened. <sup>32</sup> Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> And because he was angry, his master handed him**

over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay everything that was owed.<sup>35</sup> So also my heavenly Father will do to you unless every one of you forgives his brother or sister from your heart.”

### VERSE 28

Jesus introduced another servant who owed the forgiven servant a paltry amount—a *hundred denarii*—the equivalent of 100 days’ wages. This was a debt that could reasonably be paid off over time. But when the forgiven servant found this debtor, he **grabbed him** and **started choking him**, demanding immediate payment in full. The forgiven servant had become the unforgiving servant.

**Callous indifference in no way reflects the mercy and grace of God the Father.**

### VERSES 29-31

In a manner like the pleading of the forgiven servant in verse 26, this debtor **fell down** and begged for more time to repay the debt. Using almost the same words as the first servant, he pleaded, **Be patient with me, and I will pay you back**. One would have thought that the similarity between the two petitions would have stirred the unforgiving servant to also be forgiving. After all, he had been forgiven an impossible sum of debt. The amount owed him was nothing in comparison.

**But he wasn’t willing** points to the fact that this forgiven servant made the deliberate choice to close his heart to mercy. He who had been forgiven so much should have been able to show tenderness toward someone who owed such an insignificant amount. Keep in mind that Jesus was illustrating the need for forgiveness between fellow believers. Callous indifference in no way reflects the mercy and grace of God the Father.

Instead of forgiving, the unforgiving servant **threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed**. This begs the question, how can an imprisoned person ever repay what is owed when he is deprived of the opportunity to earn money?

The actions of the unforgiving servant didn’t go unobserved. The indebted slave didn’t need to cry out on his own behalf. His fellow **servants** observed all the action. The text says they were **distressed**, a Greek word meaning “grieved and greatly

disturbed.” Possibly, they were thinking that this unforgiving servant might treat them in a similar way even if there was no debt owed. The unforgiving servant’s actions revealed that his heart was evil, an evil that could spill over in other situations. Because of their consternation, they went to the *master* and gave a full report of *everything that had happened*.

***We who have been forgiven so much must willingly forgive others who have offended us.***

### VERSES 32-35

The king (called *master* here), who once was benevolent and merciful, boiled with anger as he summoned the unforgiving servant into his court. Notice now that the king called the servant *wicked*. The servant’s true nature had been revealed. At his very core, this man was *wicked*, and it showed in how he treated a fellow servant. Now there was no doubt that the mismanagement of the king’s wealth was not incompetence, but rather intent to defraud the king.

The king reminded the unforgiving servant of the huge debt that had been forgiven for him: ***I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.***

An important principle is this: those who have received mercy must show themselves merciful to others. The king reminded the unforgiving servant of this truth: ***Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?***

How quickly the king’s attitude toward his servant changed. Moving from mercy and forgiveness, the king exacted a worse punishment than he had proposed before. He turned the servant over, not to the jailers, but to the tormentors. The Greek word translated *jailers* here is more accurately translated “tortures.” The unforgiving servant’s situation was much worse at this point. He wasn’t just facing imprisonment; now he would endure torture as well because of his wickedness.

As in the case of the unforgiving servant, an unwillingness to forgive others exposes the true condition of the heart. A person who can’t forgive others is in no condition to accept God’s forgiveness. Paul summed it up with these words in Ephesians 4:32: “And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.”

A note of caution on the interpretation of this parable. A believer who is unwilling to forgive another believer does not forfeit the forgiveness of God that comes through salvation in Christ. That forgiveness is permanent and all encompassing. Rather, an unforgiving spirit breaks down the fellowship that the believer has with the heavenly Father. A person who has experienced God’s forgiveness at a deep heart level will be eager to share forgiveness with others to whom forgiveness is due.

Thus, the response of Jesus to Peter’s question has returned full circle. We who have been forgiven so much—a debt we couldn’t pay—must willingly forgive others who have offended us. This is especially true with the one who is a brother or sister in Christ.



### What are some dangers of believers failing to forgive others?

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Compare passages to gain insight into a biblical teaching.*

Compare Matthew 18:27 with verses 34-35. In verse 27 the king released and forgave his servant’s huge debt. In verse 34 the king revoked his forgiveness and cast the unforgiving servant into a place of torture. Verse 35 states this is what God will do to “every one of you” unless you forgive other believers “from your heart.” Reflect on the following questions: What is the danger of basing a doctrine on a parable? What other passages can you cite to indicate that a believer does not lose his or her salvation? Summarize the main point of Jesus’s parable and how His warning in verse 35 should be understood.

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- + We are not to put limits on our willingness to forgive.
- + We can know that God is compassionate and willing to forgive.
- + We are to forgive one another in the way God has forgiven us.

 **As a group, consider the excuses people often give for not forgiving others. Discuss whether these excuses are valid and if they can apply to our relationships as followers of Jesus. How should the experience of God’s forgiveness impact how we approach fellow believers who offend us?**

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 **Spend time thinking through your relationships. Who comes to mind when you think about the need to forgive? What might be the consequences of not offering forgiveness? What might be the benefits of forgiving that person?**

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 **Memorize Matthew 18:33.**

*Prayer Needs*

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1. John F. MacArthur Jr., *Matthew*, vol. 3, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985-1989), 145.