

Mathew 18:21-35 [Read]

Lord Jesus, help us today to not push our way to the front, but to willingly fall in behind you that we might see, hear and learn from you and your divine wisdom. Keep in our sights the fact you are Lord and King, that we can trust you and your words in every circumstance of life. Soften our hardened hearts, smash down the barriers that we hide behind and look to for self-preservation. Transform and renew our thinking and our actions by your Holy Spirit as we listen to your voice today and protect us and all our relationships from spiritual attack. We ask all these things in Jesus' holy name, Amen.

1. Fool me once, shame on you – fool me twice, shame on me. What about seven times like Peter asked Jesus? Forget it – you're history! This 'fool me once' idiom rolls right off the tongue.

It's even easier to put to work in your life! When someone upsets you a few times you just write them off. It's the easy solution. It's even easier to justify because most of the time you can make a strong enough case that others will affirm your decision.

You might have a bit more trouble justifying your case to Jesus.

And this might even hit your conscience like a brick but Jesus says you're never finished forgiving offenders – ever. And what flows out of the gospel today is that you should never *want to be finished forgiving people.*

That's a challenge which may come to you as a very hard word.

In Matthew 18 Jesus says that a certain servant had racked up a debt equivalent to thousands of lifetimes' worth of wages. How much?

This servant [in our economy] had a personal debt to his master equivalent to a lazy \$6 billion or so – give or take. There was no way the servant could repay this debt. That's the point! The credit card is totally maxed out so to speak with no possible way of repaying it.

The issue for the servant in Jesus' story is that the King isn't interested in some kind of payment plan back to financial freedom. The account needs to be settled now, today. *What do you do?*

"At this 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, cancelled the debt and let him go."* Can that be right?

The King cancelled what would be in today's terms a \$6 billion dollar debt because he felt for the servant. He cancelled it and let him go.

The King didn't even sell the servant and his family as slaves as a kind of good will gesture, but instead forgave the debt and sent him on his way. [PAUSE]

2. How would you be feeling if that was you? If your debts were simply cancelled, the credit cards paid off and you were sent on your way - how would you react? I think that

might even be enough for me to dance publicly! What about you - would you be happy? Would you be singing a new song and filled with joy?

Here's the thing though. The bible doesn't allude to the servant's feelings about his new found financial freedom. Except to say his first order of business as he left the King's palace was not to rejoice and draw others into his joy.

Not to praise the King's generosity and goodness in his life – but to go hunting for someone who owed him a much, much smaller debt.

\$6 billion had been wiped off his bottom line moments before and here he is choking someone to death because of a debt worth a few thousand dollars. What's going on?

- Do you think this unmerciful servant stopped to consider the magnitude of what he had received from the King? No way!
- Do you think this unmerciful servant's heart was filled with gratitude and joy; or had he been displaying a hollow façade to the King when he begged for mercy?

Because he seems completely unaffected by the sheer greatness of what he received.

I can say that because his hands are wrapped firmly around another man's neck choking the life out of him!

3. Jesus isn't talking about financial debts today is he? No he's talking about the kind of debt we pray about in the Lord's Prayer. *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name... Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors...(Matt 6:9-12)*

Today Jesus is making a big point. The unmerciful servant in the story is a stand in (an actor) for a real person; he's a stand in for you (and I include myself in that).

Jesus is saying your sins have maxed out your card. You have a debt of sin that you could never ever repay that leaves you in a pretty unfavourable position before your King who requires justice.

The wages of sin is...death. Psalm 49 says, *"no man can redeem the life of another, or give God a ransom for him. The ransom for a life is costly..."*

So at great cost to the King, your massive and incalculable debt has been paid – by God. God doesn't say to you, *"How many times have you come here for forgiveness? You've exhausted your credit. You've exhausted my patience!"*

He doesn't wrap his holy hand around your neck and choke the life out of you. No, he says *"I forgive you all your sins."*

- You leave here this morning debt free.
- Your sins are as far from you as the east is from the west.
- The books are closed.
- The debt is paid.
- The slate is wiped clean, *"not with gold or silver [or money or a higher form of credit], but with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death"* as the old Catechism says.

God doesn't work in your life according to *'fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me' principals*. God doesn't wipe you as a friend or disown you as his child or pretend you don't exist because you come back to him repentant and begging for forgiveness, renewal and a fresh start.

He doesn't keep score of wrongs so he can throw them back in your face to humiliate you or kick you while you're down. People do that – God doesn't. Instead he sees your life through the lens of the cross of Christ and says, "I forgive you; I love you; I've paid that massive debt with the life of my only Son, now go in peace."

4. As children of God, how will you respond to the immeasurable grace you've received?

Do you leave here today and continue to relish the thought of metaphorically choking someone in your life you just can't forgive? Do you continue to play out an argument or an event in your mind's eye over and over again, each time treasuring the look on your opponent's face as you deliver that final soul crushing word?

Jesus says that unmerciful hearts like these will receive the same response from God. In other words if you won't forgive others out of the abundance you have received, neither will God forgive your sins. When this happens, you show that your heart is actually hard and cold.

Forgiveness isn't easy, the cross says so, but the refusal to forgive and share what you've been given angers God. That's a blatant misuse of your freedom in Jesus, which lands you in prison. Because when you refuse to forgive you're the one who ends up in your own solitary confinement!

Paul says in Ephesians 4:30-32, ³⁰ *...do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.* ³¹ *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.* ³² *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.'*

Forgiveness is the opposite of keeping score of sins or replaying things in your mind over and over again. To forgive means to forgo the right to get even.

- It means tearing up the score card.
- Not keeping a permanent record of past wrongs that you keep for another day or another argument.
- It means not counting peoples sins against them in your hearts and minds.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that there won't be any consequences flowing from sinful actions. Words spoken in anger or malice wound people and cause pain.

Forgiveness releases a person from the guilt of what they've done, but it takes time and nurturing love for the wounds to heal. You can forgive a person for committing adultery, but that person will need to build trust again which will take time and investment in the relationship.

5. Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me. For Christians who treasure the forgiveness God has poured into their hearts and lives in Christ Jesus – this statement makes no sense. It's nonsense! Even 7 times isn't enough.

The gospel of Jesus Christ breathes life and joy into a believer. Every time they open the Word they're reminded again that their debt has been paid in full by the King. In excess of \$6 billion wiped off the books and replaced with the words 'paid in full by Christ.'

That doesn't leave them un-affected. It fills their hearts with delight and rejoicing that can't help but draw in and include others. They don't want to see people suffering under the burden and weight of sin, when they have been forgiven so great a debt themselves.

Is that where you're at today – or do you need to do business with God and stop grieving the Holy Spirit?

- Do you leave here having been forgiven so great a debt that you want to share the same forgiveness with others?
- Will you tear up the scorecard and stop tallying the sins of others?
- When you've been hurt will you quit saying, "That's okay" and instead offer something of greater value saying, "I forgive you?"

Finally when you find yourself feeling like that unmerciful servant and wanting to wrap your hands around another person's neck, come back to the cross. Look again at the lengths God went to in order to cancel your debt of sin.

Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith *'who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.'* [Heb 2:2b-3]

May the peace of God that surpasses all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.