

Series: Parables from the Master Story-Teller
Sermon: Parable of the Unforgiving Servant
Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35
Speaker: Matthew T. Gertz
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Good morning. It is good to be here with you. Today we will once again turn our attention to one of the parables that Jesus told to illustrate what the kingdom of God is like. Now, any time we see Jesus describe the kingdom of God, we are not just getting a description of the final triumphal kingdom of God when Christ will judge all people with perfect justice. Rather, God's kingdom has already broken into the world through the coming, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus and the sending of his Spirit. So when we see Jesus talk about the kingdom of God we should understand that he is talking about the way that things work in the family of God, in other words, he is talking about how we should understand ourselves as his children and how we should conduct ourselves as people who are part of his kingdom. In the parable that we're going to look at today, Jesus addresses how God's people are to deal with sin between themselves and what will happen if we don't deal with it properly. If you would, please turn to Matthew 18 and follow along as I read beginning with verse 15. Please stand with me in reverence for our Father, whose Word this is.

“Matt 18:15 (NIV) 'If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18 'I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 'Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.' 21 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.""

This is the Word of the Lord. You may be seated.

When my wife and I were expecting our first child, one of the gifts that we received was a little invention called the Diaper Champ. If you've never seen one of these, imagine a 2 ½ foot-tall white plastic fire hydrant, and you'll have a rough idea of what it looks like. The idea behind this device is that you put your kid's dirty diapers into it and they are safely isolated in plastic until it comes time to empty the bag. Sounds like a great idea. However, it didn't take us long to realize that the Diaper Champ is not airtight. If we let diapers sit in it for long it became apparent to anyone entering our nursery that there was something rotten in the house; if the diapers were left in the house even longer, the smell wouldn't just be limited to the nursery but would spread throughout the house. Now, after four years of experience in changing diapers, we have come to a conclusion about their proper disposal: If you don't want your house to smell like a latrine, you have to get the source of the smell out of the house. There is no other way to prevent the entire house from eventually becoming saturated with that smell. And so it is in God's household—there are going to be times when one of us offends God and our brothers and sisters with some sort of sin, and we must not, indeed, we are not allowed to, let the rottenness of that sin to sit among us. If we let sin persist untreated here, this body of believers will die a death by attrition, either slowly or quickly, and the longer we wait, the more drastic the amputation will need to be to restore us to health. Instead, Jesus tells us to get sin out from among us as quickly as possible, and he has given us clear commands in verses 15 to 20 of our passage about how that is to take place. It is this set of commands that forms the background for the parable that Jesus told in our reading today. So how would God have us deal with sin in our families and here at First Free?

If we are the offending party, obviously, we should be quick to turn from our sin, seek forgiveness, and make restitution to the person we've sinned against when that is possible. However, when we are the ones offended, we still have an obligation, and it is perhaps more difficult because we have not done anything wrong and yet we are responsible for the situation. We need to seek after the offending party with the intent not just that we receive a proper apology, but so that they would be restored both in their relationship to you and to God. Now there are going to be some of you who are more timid or not easily offended, or you may be extra especially patient, and you will be less inclined by disposition to ever say something when someone sins against you. But if you fall into any of these categories, you must realize that the purpose of Jesus' command in correcting your brother or sister is not just to resolve some internal tension that you may or may not be feeling over being wronged but to maintain purity and peace within the community of God's people. We need to cultivate the habit of correcting sin gently and quickly. Then there will be peace in God's family and he will be pleased to work among us by his Spirit. Then the aroma we bear will be that of Christ.

Now Jesus' commands in verses 15 to 20 illustrate what we are to do, but the following parable illustrates what sort of people we are to be as we seek to obey these commands. The occasion for the parable is Peter's question regarding how many times we should go through the process of rebuke and restoration that Jesus has just detailed. Peter understands what Jesus is saying, but he wants clarification about how many times he must go through this process before his duty is fulfilled. He didn't yet understand that Jesus was not just talking about a duty that must be fulfilled but a disposition of the heart toward other people, and especially other Christians, that is driven by the great love that we have received from God in Jesus—one that delights in the restoration of people to a right relationship to others and to the Father. With that in mind, let's turn our attention to the parable that Jesus told to illustrate the standard of forgiveness in the family of God. Jesus presents our situation using two main characters: the king, who represents God himself, and the indebted servant, who represents each of us.

This story is set in the context of a king settling accounts with his servants—a sort of judgment day, when the king deals with each of his servants according to what he has done. Think of it as tax day times ten. You know the feeling of adding up all the numbers and praying that somehow the government will end up owing you more money than you owe to it. That's what these servants would be feeling and then some. As the first of the king's servants is brought before him for settling accounts, we find that his situation could not be worse. Since we don't usually do business in talents, we may not have a good sense of exactly how much this servant actually owed the king. A talent is a measure of weight equal to about 75 pounds. So taking the current price of gold into account, this servant is in debt to the tune of about 3½ billion dollars. At this point in the story we may well wonder how it is that a servant gets in debt beyond the annual gross national product of some countries and why a king would allow such a large debt to accumulate, but of course, that is beside the point. The point is that the servant's debt is truly enormous—completely beyond his, or anyone else's, ability to pay off, and consequently, he is about to lose everything that he has. He is not just facing the loss of all his material possessions but of his children, his wife, and of himself, as he and his whole family were about to be sold into slavery so that the debt would be repaid to the fullest possible extent.

And so it is with you and with me. Our sin before God has put us in his debt completely beyond our ability to make restitution to him. That's why Paul writes in Galatians 3 that "if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law." In other words, if there were duties we could do or works that we could perform to repay what we owe to God, we would do them! There would be no need for Christ to die for us because we would have the resources in that case to repair our situation with God. If anything, our debt before the Lord is far greater than the 10,000 talents would suggest, which brings us to our next point: Not only is there no hope of repaying our offenses, but a penalty is coming, and it is both severe and just. In Scripture Hell is described as an experience of pain, despair, darkness, isolation and regret, day after day without end, forever. Have you taken the time to wrestle with what you were destined for before Christ saved you? Have you really let the end result of your condemnation sink in? And this punishment would have been exactly just for the immensity of our sin. As terrible as it may be, the awfulness of hell is an accurate reflection of the horror of our own sin. Hell is just. And as we ponder this truth, we will

begin to realize how heinous and repulsive our sin really is and how great is the One against whom each of our sins has ultimately been committed. If you are here apart from faith in Christ today, you must understand for the sake of your own soul that your day of reckoning hangs over your head. You will be found in debt to the Great King beyond your ability to pay, and your just punishment will result in your complete and eternal ruin. If that describes you, turn now to Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. If you belong to the Lord, however, my challenge to you today would be to take time to wrestle with the immensity of what you have been saved from in Christ and to understand that those without Christ still carry the burden of their debt and pending destruction. Understanding our debt is key to understanding God's love for us, and it is to his love that we turn now.

In light of his great debt and of the pronouncement of his resulting sentence, the servant exercises his only remaining option. He begs the king for more time. Now most of us are familiar with patient creditors. They usually take the form of credit card and mortgage companies, and both are more than happy to extend the length of time that we owe them money, because they profit more from it. But that is not the kind of creditor that the servant finds the king to be. He finds that the king is not just patient, but merciful. The servant requests more time to make restitution only to find that the king has cancelled his entire debt instead. It is as if you went to make your next mortgage payment only to find that your debt had been paid in full. Imagine the servant's relief as he comes to the realization that not only does he not have to work the rest of his life just to begin to pay off his debt, but more importantly, he does not have to be sold himself or lose his family. He has his life back, and he owes it all to the graciousness of his master. Likewise, we understand two great truths about God from the example of the king in this regard.

First of all, the king loves his servant and doesn't want to carry out the just sentence that he has imposed. When he sees the desperate situation and repentance of his servant, he cannot bear to carry out his sentence, so he cancels the debt that the servant owes, freeing him from the legal consequences of his debt. In the same way, God has no desire to carry out punishment on the guilty, but instead desires that they repent and come to know him. It is not uncommon to think that somehow God delights in bringing destruction on evil people, and that he is waiting just to snap in judgment toward any who disobey him. But if there is anything that should be apparent from experience and from Scripture, it is that God is patient with sinners and delights to be that way in order that they might come to repentance. If God did not delight to be patient with sinners, who among us would be here today? I know I wouldn't. It is just because of his great love and patience that any of us live long enough to be saved in the first place. As it is written in Lamentations 3:22, "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail." Since we have a God who is so gracious and compassionate in light of so great a debt, what choice do we have but to turn to him for shelter from our impending doom?

Secondly, the king is not only willing but also able to absorb the great loss that would accompany the cancellation of such a great debt. Ten thousand talents is well beyond the annual tax revenues of any king of that day. The Bible records that the great King Solomon at the height of his wealth received less than seven hundred talents of gold per year from the surrounding nations, but in this story we see that this king is so rich that

he is able to forgive a debt that is unimaginably large; and that is just from one servant! Imagine the total amount of indebtedness that must be cancelled if all of the king's servants owe him the same amount. In the same way, our Father is able to absorb the loss that comes from his forgiving our great debt of sin. What this story does not explicitly tell us is how exactly it is that forgiveness is extended because the king just writes off the debt. But we know that for us to be forgiven requires the death of the Lord Jesus on our behalf to cleanse us from our immense debt of sin. It is only by the death of God's Son, that we can be made right with him. Our King forgives us out of his great riches, but it has not cost him nothing. In fact, it could not have cost him more. And he did it to extend mercy to you and to me. I mentioned previously that the immensity of our impending punishment in hell apart from Christ was a good standard by which to gauge the enormity of our sin, and that is true. However, the forgiveness of that debt for all who are found in Christ stands as an even greater testament to his unmatched perfection, power, greatness and glory. Christ is so great that he was able to take the sins of everyone who would believe in him and put them to death when he died on the cross, and now we are free; not because our sins are merely written off, but because they have already been punished in full in our Lord's death.

There are times, believe it or not, when I have to discipline my kids, and it hurts them, and it hurts me, and nobody likes it; but there is a part of it that I always love. When the punishment is over, I take whomever the small offending party happens to be in my arms and I hug them and kiss them and tell them how much I love them, and I reassure them that there is no longer any problem between us because the punishment has been given, and there is no longer anything left to settle or fix between us. And that is the point that Christ takes us to when he pays for our sins—the point where we can hear God's voice reassuring us that there is no longer anything that poses a barrier between him and us, and we are able to enjoy sweet fellowship with him. Our punishment has already been delivered in full, just not to us. It has fallen on Christ. And we are free.

Now I could only wish that this is where the story ended, but Jesus is just about to make his point, and it is a sobering one. The forgiven servant leaves the presence of the king, free from his debt, and he finds another of the king's servants that owes him money. The notes in your margin there may say that the debt amounted to a few dollars, but one hundred denarii is not pocket change—it would have amounted to between three and four months' pay. I don't know about you, but I could not easily afford to part with such a large proportion of my income, and that is obviously how the servant feels, too, because he demands immediate payment from his fellow servant. It is important to acknowledge that the debt here is a real one. It is not as if the first servant is imagining the debt; the second servant legitimately owes what is demanded of him and is obligated to pay. In the same way, when others sin against you and me they incur real guilt and are deserving of real justice. It is also important that we understand that the debt of the second servant to the first is not trivial, but substantial. In the same way, we have the ability to sin and be sinned against in ways that can crush our spirits and injure us down to the core of our being. Some of you have felt the pain of adultery, of abuse, of neglect or rejection, of slander or insult, of degradation or humiliation, or a host of other hurtful words and actions, some of them habitual. Jesus is not calling us to minimize the hurt or the damage that has been inflicted on us in any way by the telling of this parable. If anything, he is affirming the significance and seriousness of the harms inflicted on us, and we should

take them seriously too. I propose to you that we will not be able to grow like we should in the likeness of Christ if we just blow off the sins committed against us. We should not flippantly dismiss sin, but feel its full weight and then proceed to address it, or we will not be able to address it as God does.

The real problem in our story does not fully materialize until verse 30. As the first servant demands payment, the second servant, like the first servant with the king, is willing to pay back his debt, but he needs more time. But not only does the first servant not show patience with his fellow servant, he exercises his full legal rights against him. There is no trace of the compassion that flowed from the king's heart to him, and he quickly has the second servant imprisoned; justly, but without mercy. I know that at times there are those in our lives that hurt us so badly that it is hard not to hold a grudge, to be bitter, or to begin to build walls around ourselves both emotionally and in practice so that we do not have to come into contact with them, and honestly, so we can inflict a little bit of punishment on them, too. It is especially easy for us to want to take revenge by the words that we say to or about other people. And these things can feel good because we think that our actions are justified by the wrongs done to us and we gain a sense that a sort of justice is being done when we harm those who harm us.

That is not at all how the king in Jesus' parable assesses the situation, however. What does he say? **'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?'** and Jesus goes on to say, **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."** So in response to the merciless behavior of his servant, the king rescinds the mercy that he had originally extended to his servant, and the final state of the servant is worse than the first. At first he was just going to be sold; now he is going to prison to be tortured until he can pay. We might well conclude that the servant would have been better off to accept being sold into slavery than to treat the mercy of the king with contempt. It's at this point of the story that we understand the king's forgiveness was not just intended to take care of his servant's monetary situation, but it was intended to transform the servant as well so that he would be like his king. When the servant proves to be unchanged by the mercy he has received, that mercy is revoked. That's what Jesus says here about our relationship with the Father. If we are not fundamentally changed by the mercy that we have received through Christ, we will cease to experience the benefits of salvation. Certainly, in the life of the believer this may take the form of lack of peace and fellowship with God, not being heard in prayer, and internal anguish as our peace before the Lord diminishes and our guilt looms large in our minds. However, the imagery that Jesus uses is that of everlasting torture, because the servant will be tortured until he pays what he owes, and he has no ability to ever pay. Thus, the most natural connection to draw is that if we do not completely forgive those who sin against us we are demonstrating that we don't really belong to our King and that we are thus still in danger of being fully condemned for our sins eternally.

Friends, our Father loves mercy. He loves to free repentant people from the burden of their sins, and if we love him we will love showing mercy, too. That is why John writes in 1 Jn. 2:9-11: **9 Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. 10 Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and**

there is nothing in it to make him stumble. 11 But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him. The most explicit teaching that Jesus gives us in this regard is included in his giving of the Lord's Prayer and his comments on it, found in Matthew 6, verses 9 to 15. **Matthew 6:9 "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10 your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread. 12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. 14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.** As you can see, Jesus directly connects our forgiveness of others with the forgiveness that we can expect to receive from God, and so do we, every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, whether we mean to or not. And don't think that you can dodge the issue by omitting the last phrase of the forgiveness clause as you pray. Jesus taught the prayer in this form so that we would understand that our conduct toward others is the measure of the forgiveness we will receive. As members of God's family and subjects of his kingdom, our relationships with others must be governed by what God has done for us, not what others have done to us. So does this mean that we are saved by faith and our forgiveness of others, as if we had to work our own salvation? Not at all. As Paul writes, we are saved by grace through faith, and it is God's gift to us and not by our works. Therefore, if we find ourselves with unforgiving hearts, we must ask whether or not the grace of God has actually reached us and whether or not we have understood it. Unless we wrestle our way to a definite answer on this issue, we may find in the end that we have been deceiving ourselves about belonging to Christ in the first place. If we hate our brothers, we are still in darkness, and if we do not forgive, we are not forgiven. See to it, then that you belong to Christ and that his love flows out through you, even to those who least deserve it. For if we fail to extend mercy to others, we will ultimately forfeit it for ourselves. We do not have to be concerned that justice will not be done concerning the wrongs done to us. In the end they will either be fully paid on the cross of Christ, just as ours have been, or they will be perfectly dealt with on the Day that Jesus returns to judge the world. Also, we will be fully compensated from the Lord's hand for conducting ourselves in a manner pleasing to him with regard to forgiving others. God will see to it that justice is done. In the meantime, we must defer judgment to the one who judges perfectly and continue to do what is right. May our Father grant us grace, by his Spirit, to reflect the mercy we have been given so richly in Christ. Always, but especially today as we come to the Lord's Table, let us resolve to honor him with hearts and lives that reflect the mercy that he has so richly extended to us in his body and blood.