

“Merciful Me”

Tell Me the Stories – part #4

Matthew 18:21-35

[Title slide] *Welcome, prayer.*

[Picture of house and money]

I remember the first time my wife and I took out a mortgage to buy a house. It was the largest amount I'd ever borrowed before, and when the banker showed me how long it would take to pay it all off, I was honestly shocked. How could I afford that? When we finally sold the house and paid off the debt, we breathed a huge sigh of relief. It felt so good to have that burden lifted.

We all incur debt at some point in life. Many people have debt from car loans, houses, and credit cards, and many financial experts worry that our country is addicted to debt. Debts cause us stress and worry.

[Picture of relay racers]

There is another type of debt; not financial, but relational. For example, one Saturday of my senior year of high school, I missed the regional track finals because I overslept. My race, the 4x800 relay, was the first event of the day. I not only let my team down, I disappointed my coach, who was also my favorite teacher. That next Monday morning, I brought two dozen glazed donuts to class as a sign of my penance. Deep inside, I knew I could never make it up. I couldn't go back in time and undo my mistake. Part of me thought there was no way I could ever be forgiven.

You know what? My coach did forgive me. The grace he offered me - never bringing up my failure again and supporting me as I applied for college - was one of the best feelings of my life. Forgiven and free - what could be better?

[Picture of toy figure under stones.]

Have you ever felt the burden of a debt you could not repay? Maybe it was money, and you had to beg for mercy from the bank, from a relative, from a friend. I happen to think those debts are easier to deal with than the non-financial debts: Words you have spoken that you wish you could take back. Promises you didn't keep. Past mistakes that haunt you. When you are released from any of these, you feel great. But if not, you struggle under a great burden.

[Picture of couple fighting]

We all agree that forgiveness is great, but the question we really struggle with is, if someone else hurts us, how many times do we have to forgive them? Is there a limit to forgiveness? The disciple Peter wondered this, too, and he asked Jesus about it. What about seven times? That seems like a big number. Would that be enough?

[Scripture Matthew 18:21-22]

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven." (Matt 18:22) This isn't a math quiz (although the answer is 490). No, Jesus is saying, "Times without number. If you are counting how often you forgive, you're missing the point."

This is troubling. "Always forgive"? Really? That seems impossible. I'm sure Peter felt the same way. What if someone really hurt you badly? Surely there must be an acceptable time to say, "I can't forgive you." Right?

Not in God's kingdom. If we expect to follow Jesus, we need to know the truth about unconditional forgiveness. Fortunately for us, Jesus explained this in the parable in Matthew 18.

[Picture of king and servants]

To recap, there was a king who wanted to "settle accounts." Maybe he was retiring, maybe he owed someone else money, or maybe he had plans to work on a big project. The Bible doesn't say, and it doesn't matter. What does matter is the amount that one certain servant owed his king was 10,000 talents. The NIV translates this into "bags of gold." I don't know about you, but I've never seen a bag of gold, much less owned one. A talent was the highest unit of money in the Roman world, and 10,000 was the highest accountable number. This debt was extreme. Ten thousand talents would have been millions of dollars in today's money. It was not possible for anyone to pay it off, let alone a lowly servant. By comparison, Josephus, the Roman historian, said that all of Judea paid just 600 talents a year in taxes. (ANTC, Matthew) What this servant owed his king was insurmountable – it could never be paid off.

[Picture of servant begging for mercy]

Facing the facts, the king decided to cut his losses. He would sell his servant into slavery, along with his wife and children, and liquidate everything the

man owns, to try to recoup his losses. This punishment, however, was too much to bear. The servant dropped to his knees and pleaded for mercy. Look at verse 26. “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.” That’s kind of pathetic. It was not even possible for him to pay off this debt.

[Picture of king showing mercy]

Jesus says, the king was moved with compassion. The NIV translation, “he had pity on him,” literally means his guts ached. He felt deeply for this poor servant and instantly decided to forgive him. The whole debt was canceled. I don’t know much about business, but that’s crazy. It’s inconceivable. It’s beyond amazing.

For a moment, try to put yourself in this servant’s position. How would you feel to have that burden lifted? It would be great! You would be crying, laughing, singing, skipping, dancing, and happy out of your mind, right? You’d walk out that door with a smile on your face and joy in your heart.

[Picture of servant being cruel]

That’s what we all would expect. And in a deft twist, Jesus says, the exact opposite happened. This unmerciful servant went out and immediately found a fellow servant who owed him a few hundred denarii – the equivalent of a few hundred bucks. A sum that could be easily repaid in a year or so. And he grabbed the second man by the neck, choking him, demanding his money back. Notice the reaction of this second man – just like his accuser, he dropped to his knees and begged, “Please be patient with me, and I will pay it back.” The parallel is intentional, and the contrast in reactions is extreme. The unmerciful servant threw his colleague into a debtor’s prison to force him to pay off the loan. The idea was, if you were incarcerated, someone else would come and bail you out. All this for a few hundred bucks.

[Picture of king arresting the cruel servant]

Those looking on were rightfully upset – their stomachs turned. And when they reported it to the king, he confronted the unmerciful servant. “How could you do this, after all that I forgave you?” Look at the words – “You wicked servant.” (verse 32) Let me translate for you: “You evil, scummy, slimebag. How

could you not show mercy after what I did for you?” The king threw his servant into jail to be tortured until the debt was repaid; in other words, forever.

This is not bedtime reading. This is not a happy-ending story. It’s tough, it’s troubling, and that is exactly the point. Our teeth clench and our guts turn when we hear of this obvious injustice. And then Jesus slams home the final point – this is how God will treat us if we refuse to forgive others.

Ouch. Forgiveness is serious business in God’s kingdom.

[Picture of man before king]

When confronted with this truth, we have two ways to react to this story: in fear (which is a powerful motivator), or in gratitude. The truth is, God has forgiven us of more than we could ever imagine. There is no way to repay our debt. No way to make up for our sin. We are the rebels, the renegades, the ones who have rejected God. We have all lied, cheated, stolen, hated, and much, much worse. And the fact remains, despite all of our brokenness, Jesus died to save us. When we confess, God forgives us every time, and God doesn’t keep count. That is the gospel truth.

But what happens? When we don’t get our way, we still complain. When someone hurts us, we still hold grudges. We throw our relationships into virtual prisons by avoiding people, being passive-aggressive, gossiping, and looking for revenge. Me. You. All of us.

[Picture of the word GRACE]

There is only one problem in the Christian Church today. It’s not finances. It’s not lack of biblical knowledge. It’s not poor leadership or ethical dilemmas. It’s related to all of those, but at the core, the one thing most Christians lack is a proper understanding of how good God’s grace is. We act self-righteously, believing God owes it to us because we’ve been “good.” The truth is, we all need to come to grips with how bad our sin is and how good God’s mercy is. Our justification, our salvation, came at a great cost, more than all the money in the world. Our sin-debt was paid by the blood of the precious Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. If we could just grasp this one fact, how incredible it is that God forgives us, we would find that all the rest of our priorities would fall in line, whether it be relationships, finances, worship preference, or anything else in life.

This parable is not meant to scare us but to embolden us to be forgiving. The truth is, God does forgive. God has forgiven and will continue to forgive. We cannot allow ourselves to become hypocrites who proclaim the forgiveness of God without showing that same forgiveness to others. I don't always read the Bible literally, but if I read Jesus' words that way, that is sufficient motivation for me to try to make amends with anyone who has hurt me. I don't want God to reject me!

[Picture of young girl praising God]

The cornerstone of Christianity is forgiveness. It is the foundation for everything else we do. Why do we worship God? Because he forgave us. Why do we give to the church? Out of gratitude for God's forgiveness. Why do we evangelize? To tell others about God's forgiveness. Why do we teach Sunday School? So children will live in the knowledge of the love and forgiveness of Christ. Why do we sing? To tell about God's forgiveness. Why do we shovel the sidewalk, keep the lights and heat on in this place, give to the food pantry, hold VBS, submit to an denomination that moves our pastors? Because we are forgiven, and forgiven people live in humbleness and obedience to the cross. All of the things we do in this place are to tell others about the forgiveness of Christ.

Do you know how much you are forgiven? Is there an area of your life that you need to change so that God and others will see the gratitude you have for your forgiveness? This is the one thing that will build up or destroy the church – whether or not we choose to live as forgiven people. All other words, thoughts, and actions will flow from this one thought.

[Title slide]

Hear the good news. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. That is proof of God's love toward us. (Romans 5:8) In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Now go and live out that forgiveness by showing love and mercy to your neighbor! Amen.

Memory Verse: Matthew 18:33

"Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"

Thoughts for reflection:

- What is the greatest debt you have ever owed? Did you repay it? How?
- Think about a time when someone hurt you. Did you forgive them? Was it easy?
- In what ways have we incurred a “debt” to God? How have our sins broken our relationship with God?
- Do you know that you are forgiven? Have you experienced the grace of Christ?
- Whom do you need to forgive so that God can continue to show you the greatness of his forgiveness?