

Leader's Corner

Forgiven People Forgive

Matthew 18:21-35

The Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor

Main Idea: The gospel is not simply about receiving forgiveness from God—it transforms us into people who extend forgiveness to others. Those who truly understand the immeasurable mercy they've received are invited to release others from the debts they owe us. Forgiveness does not excuse evil, ignore justice, or require remaining in abusive situations, but it does free us from the prison of bitterness and entrust justice to God.

Main Passage: Matthew 18:21–35

Main Practice: Receive God's forgiveness deeply so you can extend forgiveness freely.

Prayer and Praise

Opening Prayer:

Gracious Father,

We come before You grateful for the mercy You have poured out through Jesus Christ. Thank You for forgiving the debt we could never repay. As we open Your Word today, soften our hearts where they have become hardened, heal places that still carry pain, and teach us the freedom that comes through forgiveness.

For those carrying deep wounds today, surround them with Your comfort, wisdom, and protection. Give us courage to forgive where You call us to forgive, wisdom to establish healthy boundaries where needed, and faith to trust that You alone are the perfect Judge.

May Your Holy Spirit shape us into people who reflect the grace we have received.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Worship Suggestions:

- Living Hope – Phil Wickham
- Lord I Need You – Matt Maher
- Yet Not I But Through Christ in Me – CityAlight

Prayer & Praise:

- Where have you experienced God's forgiveness this week?
- Who has been an example of grace and mercy in your life?
- Pray specifically for those carrying wounds, broken relationships, or struggling with unforgiveness.

Group Discussion

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Jesus tells one of His most sobering parables after Peter asks, “How many times should I forgive?” Peter assumes forgiveness has limits. Jesus responds with a number that points beyond mathematics to a lifestyle: forgiveness becomes the rhythm of God’s Kingdom.

The story unfolds in three movements:

- Sweet Forgiveness: A servant owes an impossible debt that can never be repaid. The king compassionately cancels everything.
- Bitter Unforgiveness: The forgiven servant immediately refuses to forgive someone who owes him comparatively little.
- A Loving Warning: Jesus reminds us that refusing to forgive ultimately imprisons our own hearts.

This parable is not teaching that we earn God’s forgiveness by forgiving others. Rather, it reveals that a heart transformed by God’s grace becomes a forgiving heart. When we lose sight of the mercy we’ve received, we naturally magnify the offenses committed against us.

Forgiveness is often a process rather than a moment. Some wounds require repeated surrender to God over months or years. Forgiveness also does not mean pretending abuse never happened, removing healthy boundaries, avoiding consequences, or staying in dangerous situations. Safety, justice, counseling, and involving trusted authorities can all be faithful responses while still pursuing forgiveness in our hearts.

Ultimately, forgiveness is less about releasing someone from accountability and more about releasing ourselves from the grip of bitterness.

Main Discussion:

1. When you hear the word forgiveness, what emotion or picture immediately comes to mind?
2. Read Matthew 18:21–22. Why do you think Peter believed forgiving someone seven times was generous? What does Jesus’ answer reveal about the culture of God’s Kingdom?
3. Read Matthew 18:23–27. Describe the servant’s debt. What does the king’s response teach us about God’s grace toward us? How does remembering our own forgiveness change how we view other people?
4. Read Matthew 18:28–30. What surprises or shocks you about the servant’s actions? Why is it often easier to receive grace than extend it?
5. Read Matthew 18:31–34. Why are the other servants so disturbed? How does unforgiveness affect not only us, but the people around us?
6. The sermon described sweet forgiveness and bitter unforgiveness. Which one tends to shape your responses during conflict? What signs help you recognize bitterness beginning to grow?
7. The sermon emphasized this passage as a warning, not a threat. How does Jesus lovingly warn us about what unforgiveness does to our hearts? In what ways can bitterness become its own kind of prison?
8. Forgiveness is not the same as trust, reconciliation, or removing healthy boundaries. Why is distinguishing these ideas so important, especially in situations involving deep hurt or abuse? How can someone pursue forgiveness while also pursuing safety and wisdom?
9. Think about the people in your life. Is there someone whose “small debt” feels much larger because of ongoing hurt? What would it look like to begin entrusting that situation to God rather than carrying it alone?
10. Closing Reflection. Spend a few quiet moments asking:
 - Have I forgotten how much God has forgiven me?
 - Is there bitterness I’m still holding?
 - Is there someone I need to begin forgiving?
 - Is there someone I need to seek forgiveness from?
 - What is one step of obedience God is inviting me to take this week?

Close together by praying for one another.

Practice

Together:

As a group, spend time praying specifically for people who are carrying relational wounds. Without sharing unnecessary details, pray for courage to forgive, wisdom to establish healthy boundaries where needed, healing for broken relationships, and protection for those in unsafe situations.

If appropriate, read aloud Colossians 3:12–15 as a reminder of the kind of community Jesus calls His Church to become.

Individually:

This week

- Spend time thanking God each day for His forgiveness.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any bitterness that may be taking root.
- If appropriate and safe, take one practical step toward forgiveness (a prayer, a conversation, writing a letter you may never send, or releasing the offense to God).
- If you're carrying wounds from abuse or ongoing harm, prioritize safety by reaching out to trusted pastors, counselors, friends, or appropriate authorities. Forgiveness never requires remaining in danger.

Further Study

Supporting Scriptures:

- Matthew 6:12–15
- Luke 7:36–50
- Luke 15:11–32
- Romans 12:17–21
- Ephesians 4:31–32
- Colossians 3:12–15
- Hebrews 12:14–15
- Psalm 103:8–14
- Genesis 50:15–21 (Joseph forgives his brothers)

Helpful Quotes:

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.” — Lewis B. Smedes

“Forgiveness is giving up my right to hurt you for hurting me.” — Anonymous

“Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning.” — Dallas Willard

Final Encouragement:

The Christian life is not measured by how little we've been hurt, but by how deeply we've experienced the mercy of Christ. We forgive because we have first been forgiven. As we continually remember the King who canceled our impossible debt, we become people who extend grace, pursue wisdom, seek justice where necessary, and walk in the freedom only Jesus can give.