

Choose, the Kingdom or the World 2020
 Matthew 18:21-35 Colossians 3:1-2, 12-17

Matthew 18:21-35 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Colossians 3:1-2, 12-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Maybe it's been quite a while since you've been in a movie theater,
 but can you recall a time that you were watching a movie,
 when a particularly despicable or abusive character
 finally gets what's coming to them, retribution ...
... and the whole theater reacts with spontaneous applause?

It can feel very satisfying and even gratifying
 when our perceived scale of justice is tipped back into balance...
 ... which may be our 1st response to the parable that Jesus told.

The parable

is in answer to Peter's question about forgiveness, vs. 21.

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

In the previous passage of Matthew 18 that we looked at last week,
 as Jesus explained in a shepherd parable,

 it is not God's will or purpose that any should be lost,
 therefore the Lord never gives up on anyone not ever ...
 ... and so neither should we.

And according to Jewish understanding and tradition,
you might forgive someone who sins against you 3 times, but not 4,
so Peter recognizing how Jesus seems to perceive things,
more than doubles rabbinic teaching suggesting 7 times.

vs. 22

Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

That 77 times was a common idiom, meaning a number beyond counting,
and that according to **life within the Kingdom of God**,
faithful and obedient Christian forgiveness has no limit.

We are to forgive beyond our ability to count and keep track,
and in fact, if we're counting, then we haven't really forgiven,
but are waiting for them to exceed that boundary or limit.

In the parable Jesus tells, the numbers are way beyond reasonable.
10k talents represent more money than in all of Palestine,
way more than any king would possibly possess,
or ever allow a slave to run up such a debt.

The crowd may have chuckled when Jesus said that he owed that much.
And when the slave says, vs. 26,
'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'
they'd have realized the impossibility of paying off that debt.

vs. 27

And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.
That was an incredible act of grace to forgive what the slave owed,
and absolutely against the ways and expectations of this world.

Let's consider how the plot of this parable has unfolded.
The tension begins when the king demands an infinite payment.

The slave cowers and begs,
"Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."
The king has pity, accepts the cost, the huge amount owed,
and releases debtor from prison, forgives the whole debt,
breaking with the normal ways that this world thinks & functions
and demonstrating the gracious mercy of life in God's Kingdom.

The point is that our sin against God is a debt we could never repay,
but in Jesus Christ, God takes on our debt and freely forgives.
Forgiveness is a gift of grace, a reflection of God's love & mercy.
We are all saved by God's grace alone, which we accept by faith ...
... but even that faith, comes as a gift and mercy from God.
Yes, our faithfulness and good deeds do matter, but not at all toward our salvation.

The next scene, vs. 28-30,

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii;
and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him,

'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

The debt of a hundred denarii was comparatively a tiny amount,
and notice that his fellow slave uses the same words,
'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'

Jesus is emphasizing the contrasting size between these two debts.

The obvious expectation of that 1st slave,
is that having received such grace and mercy from the king,
that of course he too would forgive the tiny debt as well
out of gratitude for his massive debt being forgiven.

But rather than gratitude and sharing his good fortune,
the forgiven slave turns with surprising harshness,
throwing his fellow slave, fellow debtor into prison.

Angry and shocked at the 1st slave's unjustified harshness
his fellow-slaves report this unwarranted cruelty to the king,
whose severe response gratifies our sense of fairness,
as the scales of justice are tipped back into balance.

vs. 32-33

Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'

It seems right that the nasty, greedy & harsh slave gets punished,
and this parable matches our natural sense of balance & injustice
as it demonstrates how we expect the world to think & operate...

... and all is good until we get to vs. 35, where it gets too personal.

So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

If you isolate that one verse separate from the rest of the Gospel,
it is one of the most frightening-terrifying verses in the Bible...
... inferring that God forgives only to the degree
that I have forgiven all those who have harmed me,
and that God forgives me only after I have forgiven others.

But the truth is, **God's forgiveness always comes first,**
and is **not conditioned** upon our willingness to forgive.

The point is that God's grace, God's powerful and excessive mercy
can transform my attitude toward those who are unjust to me.

And yet

forgiveness when we've been betrayed or harmed doesn't come easy,
in fact it's really not something we can do entirely on our own.

Many years ago I was in business with a faithful Christian man,
and we had an agreement that I was a full partner in the business.

But after he died, his widow and her attorney plotted against me,
deceived, betrayed and cheated me in a major life-altering way
costing me that ownership and money I had already earned,
crushing the hopes and goals I'd worked so hard to achieve.

I felt devastated, the future I thought secure was gone & destroyed
and my bitterness ran deep, filled with hatred, venom & revenge.

I couldn't seem to move past it and get on with my life and living,
and this Matt. 18 verse just added to my sense of guilt and shame.

I was stuck, for how could Jesus really expect me to forgive,
just accept and walk away from what had been taken from me?
Why would I want to forgive when resentment felt so much more satisfying?

I remember standing along the shoreline of a lake at sunset one time
and marveling at the beauty and wonder of Creation before me...
... which turned into one of those amazing God moments.

As I thought about my burning rage and sense of injustice,
this Matt 18 parable came to mind, and spoke to me in a new way.

As I thought about all the times I had rejected God's will and ways,
of all the people I had hurt during my life, my sin and harm done,
including me needing to be forgiven for my refusal to forgive,
and how readily Jesus had loved and forgiven me
at such a high and terrible cost on the cross...

... at that moment, overwhelmed by the incredible depth of that love,
I knew what Jesus did for me was so much more than was done to me.

I was allowing bitterness & hatred to define me and my perspective,
when actually I was a blessed and precious child of God,
defined by the love, grace, mercy and promises of God...
... or as described in Col. 3:12, one of God's chosen ones, holy and beloved.

Those three words, "chosen", "holy", and "beloved"
help define, characterize and describe who each of us are,
the children of God's grace, forgiven to follow Jesus Christ.

*chosen, meaning that the gracious love of God
preceded any righteousness on our part,
and that we didn't chose Him, but the Lord God chose each one of us.

There is a strong sense of being favored and blessed,
that's not earned or deserved, but simply chosen to be loved,
and that we are defined by God's grace toward us.

So in response,
we're called to live as advertisements out in the world,
declaring by the way we live and relate to others,

that God's love and healing **can change human lives,**

for knowing that we are loved and secure in the Lord,
leads to a different perspective than this world,
especially how we treat others, also loved by God.

*holy, meaning that we have been and are set apart
according to God's healing and redeeming purpose,
**and called out from this world's corruption and darkness
to live lives that reflect God's light and compassion.**

*beloved, meaning that regardless
of our past or present problems and failures,
our God never gives up on us or stops loving us.
**There is always another second chance to receive grace afresh
and to participate in the abundant life God intends for us
by changing our response to things that happened in the past.**

Because we are God's own chosen, holy and beloved, vs. 12 & 14,
...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Above all, clothe
yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

I'm reminded of watching someone get baptized when I was in Ghana.
They burned their old clothes, and then put on some new clothes-
- symbolizing a fresh start and **a new life in Christ.**

But it's not always easy to trust & live that out faithfully & fully.
Sometimes we continue to fall back or wallow in our old ways,
because we have what you might call, "**a zombie problem**"—
- **our old self of sin and selfishness are still lurking around,
and still influencing our attitude, behavior and perspective.**

Instead of living joyful, and hope-filled lives, **transformed
by the gracious love of God and the Holy Spirit at work in us,**
sometimes we slip back into our old dead ways,
taking up the values of this broken and corrupt world...
... and **living far less than the blessed lives intended by God.**

Sometimes we forget who we really are, (chosen, holy and beloved),
and the gracious gifts, promises, hope and blessings of God,
instead we take on the deadly corruptions of our culture
and the flawed values, ways and ideas of this world.

That is our ongoing walking-dead **zombie problem**, that,
**sometimes we fail to live transformed and exceptional lives
that truly proclaim the truth and Gospel of Jesus Christ,
and faithfully reflect the forgiveness, grace and mercy of God.**

Our call & hope is to remember what it means that God forgave us,
and keep that grace of Jesus Christ at the center of our lives,
by seeking first an authentic relationship with Christ

that leads to meaningful, faithful & joyful discipleship...
... so that together, we live lives that declare, "Jesus is our Lord".

To forgive is not to condone or acquiesce to wrong and injustice,
but is our simple refusal to let it overwhelm and destroy us,
or to alienate us away from God's love & from each other.

The choice is between
living the Kingdom of God, the gracious forgiveness of Christ,
or the ways of this world; unforgiveness, bitterness & hate.
That is the issue at stake especially today,
as the election rhetoric gets heated and the Covid-19 persists.

So what if, starting right now,
we as Christians, were to refuse to participate **in any way**
that adds to the polarizing hatred, rancor & unforgiveness
so prevalent in our world, our culture and social media—

- and instead seek to break the cycle of retribution and revenge
with a new attitude of hope and gratitude and forgiveness
toward a life closer to God's heart and the Kingdom of God?

For as Jesus assures us in Matthew 6:33
But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.