

The Heart Work of Forgiveness

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Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew 18 is one continuous message of Jesus on the characteristic of childlikeness in believers. Peter's question in verses 21-22 is the only interruption. Quite possibly, Jesus is in Peter's house in Capernaum and is holding a child as a living illustration. The chapter traces the full life of children of God:

- Enter the kingdom of heaven like a child (**Matthew 18:3**)
- Protected like children (**Matthew 18:5-9**)
- Cared for like children (**Matthew 18:10-14**)
- Disciplined like children (**Matthew 18:15-20**)
- Forgiving one another like children (**Matthew 18:21-35**)

Forgiveness in full is illustrated throughout Scripture:

- **Genesis 50:19-21** – Joseph forgives his brothers for selling him into slavery.
- **1 Samuel 24** – David forgives Saul as an enemy.
- **Philemon** – Paul writes to Philemon to forgive Onesimus of his wrong done to him.
- **2 Corinthians 2:5-11** – Paul and the Corinthian church's response to a disciplined member
 - The sin caused sorrow to the entire body of the church (**2 Cor 2:5**)
 - The punishment was sufficient for the wrong committed (**2 Cor 2:6**)
 - The time is now to forgive (**2 Cor 2:7**)
 - Reaffirm the offender in love (**2 Cor 2:8**)
 - Be like Christ, rather than opening the door to Satan's designs on you (**2 Cor 2:10-11**)
- **Matt 6:12, 14-15; Jms 2:13** – The believer, who refuses to forgive, lives under the chastening of the Lord.

I. The Question of Forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-22)

- A. **Peter's Question - Matthew 18:21**, *Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"*
1. Seven was considered a full and generous number in Jewish tradition; Peter likely expected a pat on the back! (Jewish tradition, based loosely on **Job 33:29**, said God would forgive 3 times)
 2. However, Peter's question assumes forgiveness has a ceiling, meaning at some point, the account may be closed and forgiveness is no longer available.
- B. **Jesus's Answer - Matthew 18:22**, *Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."*
1. Jesus reply "70x7" or 490 times. The Lord was not expanding the ceiling; it was a statement that keeping count was the wrong approach.
 2. **Luke 17:3-4**, *Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, 4 and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."* Even 7 times in day, the believer is to forgive.

II. The Framework of Forgiveness

- A. It is a full release from a debt.
1. Sin and wrongdoing have a close relationship to financial debt in Scripture
 - a) **Matthew 6:12**, *And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*
 2. But not all wrongdoing results in financial debt (**Psalms 73:3**).
- B. It is a release from obligation.
1. **Numbers 30:5**, *But if her father opposes her on the day that he hears of it, no vow of hers, no pledge by which she has bound herself shall stand. And the Lord will forgive her, because her father opposed her.*
- C. It is remembering the offense no more (**Ezekiel 33:14-16**, *Again, though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, 15 if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 16 None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against*

him. *He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live.*)

- D. It is not counting the offense against someone (**Romans 4:8**, *Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.*)
1. **2 Timothy 4:16**, *At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them!*

III. The Parable Examined (Matthew 18:23-34)

- A. The Indebted Servant (**Matthew 18:23-27**)
1. The King decides when debts will be settled (**23**). This is likely a regional governor with fiscal responsibility.
 2. The Staggering Debt (**24**)
 - a) 1 talent = 20 years of labor. 10,000 talents was approximately 200,000 years of labor; a sum that could never be repaid; incalculable.
 - b) It is a picture of a sinner before God with an unpayable sin debt.
 3. The Day of Reckoning (**25**)
 - a) Justice demanded a reckoning. The servant's inability to pay did not cancel the obligation.
 4. The Plea for Patience (**26**)
 - a) The promise was impossible to keep — but the servant's desperation was real.
 5. The Mercy on Display (**27**)
 - a) Pity — to be moved deeply in one's inner being, especially in sympathy and compassion; a gut-level response.
 - b) This is the same word used of Jesus throughout the Gospels when He was moved with compassion toward those in need.
 - c) **Philemon 12** *"I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart."* — pictures this kind of deep, interior compassion.
 - d) The master did two things: he released the servant and he forgave the debt entirely.
- B. The Unforgiving Servant (**Matthew 18:28-31**)
1. The fellow servant's debt — 100 denarii (one day's wages). A debt that could be repaid (**28a**).
 2. The grotesque contrast (seized him, choked him, demanded payment) (**28b**).
 3. The identical plea (**29-30**)
 4. The reaction of the witnesses (**31**)
- C. The Just Master (**Matthew 18:32-34**)
1. The Verdict (**32-33**)
 2. The Judgment (**34**)

IV. Light for Our Path

- A. Forgiveness is not dependent on the scope of the transgression; God teaches us to forgive regardless of the transgression.
- B. Forgiveness is not by degree; it is full or not at all.
1. We are never more like God and His Son Jesus Christ than when we forgive. We are never more unlike God than when we don't forgive.
 2. **Proverbs 19:11**, *Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.*
- C. Unforgiveness is a wide-open door for Satan (**2 Corinthians 2:11**, *So that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.*)
- D. Believers are to forgive because they have been forgiven (**Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13**)
- E. Unforgiving believers face God's chastening discipline (**Matthew 6:15; Matthew 18:34-35**)