

# THE PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT: THE SPIRIT OF FORGIVENESS MATHEW 18:21–35

## ***Introduction***

How often are we to forgive a person? Does God expect us to forgive and forgive — no matter the abuse and number of times the wrong is done? Christ answered these and many other questions in this discussion.

- I. The spirit and practice of forgiveness (vv. 21-22).
- II. The spirit of God's forgiveness: like a king who settles his accounts with his servants (vv. 23-27).
- III. The spirit of the servant's unforgiveness (vv. 28-31).
- IV. There is the great day of accounting (vv. 32-34).
- V. There is the point: an unforgiving person will be condemned (v. 35).

## **I. *Mathew 18:21–22 Forgiveness***

The spirit and practice of forgiveness. Note exactly what happened between Peter and Jesus.

1. Peter asked about forgiving a brother. Is forgiveness limited? Peter's concern was forgiving another Christian brother, a fellow disciple (See Mt. 18:5-10; 18:5). Christ also placed the discussion in the context of "the kingdom of heaven," that is, the Christian community or church. Peter was very generous in his concept of forgiveness. To forgive a person who has wronged one seven times is very generous, far more generous than what most do.
  2. Jesus answered that forgiveness is unlimited (See *Forgiveness, Relationship, Brotherhood, Unity*, Mt. 18:22).
  3. Jesus illustrated the spirit of forgiveness by referring to the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven in its present form includes some people who are servants of God, but they are servants in profession only. The servant in this parable professes faith in God, but his profession is false. He is in the church walking among God's people. In a desperate moment of dire need, God has met him and offered mercy and forgiveness but he has not personally learned anything about God's compassion and forgiveness (See note, Mt. 18:35).
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MATHEW 18:22  
FORGIVENESS, RELATIONSHIP, BROTHERHOOD, UNITY

*Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."  
Mathew 18:22*

The question is how often should we forgive a brother?

=> Peter: "Up to seven times?"

=> Jesus: "No. Seventy-seven times."

What Jesus meant is seventy-seven times and on and on through eternity. Forgiveness is a matter of the heart, not of the mind. The mind will only keep a record of wrongs. A spirit of forgiveness does not measure and limit the number of times it will forgive. A spirit of forgiveness will tolerate being wronged and hurt time after time. Why?

There are several reasons why the spirit of forgiveness knows no limit, no measure, no number of times that it will forgive.

1. Forgiveness is a thing of the spirit, a quality of the spirit. All spiritual things, substances and realities — such as love, mercy, grace, joy, forgiveness — cannot be measured or limited. They are by their very nature spiritual and not physical. Therefore they are without measure or limit, so they are to be known and practiced without limit or measure. We are to experience and practice love at every opportunity. We are to experience and practice forgiveness at every opportunity. Forgiveness is a reality of the spirit; therefore it is to be a spirit of life. The spirit of forgiveness is to forgive seventy times seven — ad infinitum.
2. Good human relationships are impossible without a forgiving spirit. Offending others is common to all. We are all sinful and we all offend one another — offend much too often. No one walks perfectly or anywhere close to what he should. If we kept score, there would be little time to do anything else. To keep relationships healthy, we need to know at least four things.
  - a. Coming short and sinning, failing and offending are common to us all. We all offend by failing...
    - to smile
    - to be good
    - to greet
    - to be humble
    - to love
    - to be gentle
    - to believe
    - to be controlled
    - to recognize
    - to speak
    - to be joyful
    - to acknowledge
    - to word things properly
    - to be unselfish
    - to be unprovoked
    - to be non-irritable
    - to be long-suffering
    - to be victorious

- b. Offending others is usually unintentionally and unknowingly. All of us offend others, but we are often unaware that we have offended them. The reasons we fail others are innumerable, but common causes are preoccupation of thought, heavy hearts and minds, and trials and problems that consume our thoughts. Keeping this in mind will help us to forgive others when they offend us.
  - c. We offend others as much as they offend us. We are as human as the next person, and we need forgiveness as much as the next person. Remembering this will do as much to maintain healthy relationships as any other single fact.
  - d. The common response to being offended is to react: react by withdrawing, taking vengeance, or wallowing around in self-pity and in a spirit of unforgiveness. Many revel in the attention secured by being the subject of abuse instead of handling the matter quietly in a true spirit of reconciliation.
3. An unforgiving spirit shows that a person is basically ill-natured, self-centred, and spiritually immature. Unforgiveness reveals that a person has not grown to be like Christ in his nature of understanding, compassion, and love. A forgiving spirit understands the nature of man (sinful and offending) and the nature of God (spiritual and forgiving).
  4. Peace and health can be preserved only through a forgiving spirit. An unforgiving spirit causes as much disturbance and division as the offender. An unforgiving spirit has stooped to the level of the offender and has, in fact, become an offender. Think: as long as there is an unforgiving spirit, there can never be peace. Disturbance, conflict and division prevail. An unforgiving spirit also affects a person's emotions and mind and body. It is the lack of peace, the lack of a good relationship with God and man, that disturbs the normal functioning of the body, mind, and emotions. Ulcers, high blood pressure, disturbed thoughts and emotions, and on and on — all can and often do come from an unforgiving spirit.

*1 Pet 4:8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*

*John 14:27 "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." □*

## **II. *Mathew 18:23–27 The Spirit of Forgiveness***

The spirit of God's forgiveness. He is just like a king who settles the accounts of his servants. The parable is simple, yet very descriptive and full of meaning. God is the King, but He is a very unusual King. He is a King who rules justly as all kings should. But He is more. He is loving, compassionate, and forgiving; and He is even more than these. He is consumed with love and compassion — so much so that He forgives enormous debts, debts so enormous that they are inconceivable.

The king settles the accounts of his servants. He settles the accounts at varying times. An accounting is required at conversion and on those occasions when God leads us to evaluate our lives. Note how the seven steps related by Christ can be applied to either of these times.

1. All must give an account (v. 24). The words began the settlement (*sunairein*) means to take account, to make a reckoning, to settle accounts. This is the same word that is translated as “to settle accounts” in v. 23. The king began to check the province and the ledgers of his province: receipts and expenditures and the capital improvements. The king had a critical interest in what his servant had received through gifts and what he had used in the ministry.
2. We are all brought to the King, the Spirit, the Word, or some Christian witness (v. 24).
3. We are all led to see our huge debt of sin and service that we owe God (v. 24. See Psa. 19:12; 40:12.) The debt of the servant was huge. It was crores of rupees. It was probably the gross revenues of a province or state in that day. The servant was the high official placed over the province who was held responsible for its administration. The point is that God has given us life and made us overseer of that life. To sin is to mismanage that life and to cause loss; therefore, sin puts us in debt to God. The debt is infinite, beyond anything we can ever pay.
4. We are all bankrupt (unable to pay) before God (v. 25). Sin bankrupts man and puts him in debt to God. We are so bankrupt by sin that nothing can pay our debt.

=> Silver and gold, no amount of wealth, can pay our debt.

=> Neither a brother nor any other family member can pay our debt.

*Psa 49:6-7 Those who trust in their wealth and boast of their great riches? No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him.*

=> Good works cannot pay our debt.

*Titus 3:5-6 He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour.*

=> Making sacrifice and giving offerings cannot pay our debt.

*1 Sam 15:22 But Samuel replied: “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”*

Note that the man’s debts affected his family. His enslavement and loss would have meant their enslavement and loss. A man’s sins always affect both him and his family (Note, Rom. 1:24; See *Forgiveness*, Eph. 1:7. See Rom. 7:14-20.)

5. We face the justice of a just God (v. 25).

6. We cry for mercy (v. 26). Our only hope is that God loves us enough that He will simply forgive us in compassion and mercy.

***Eph 2:4-5** But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved.*

7. We hear the love and forgiveness of a loving God (v. 27).

**Thought 1.** Some of the things that bring us to God and cause us to evaluate and take account of our lives are trials, trouble, sickness, disease, a sermon or witness, tragedy, parents, friends, or special days or occasions (for example, the New Year).

**Thought 2.** Note that the false servant had not cried out for mercy until he was brought face to face with the king. We are often careless about sin until we are called to account. How fewer trials, sufferings, and temptations we would face if we turned from sin immediately.

### EPHESIANS 01:07 FORGIVENESS

*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. **Ephesians 01:07***

The word forgiveness (aphesin) means to send off, to send away, to release, to let go. The word for sin (paraptomaton) means transgression, trespass, a falling by the way, or deviating from the way. All men...

- have transgressed the law of God
- have deviated from God
- have fallen from the way of God

Therefore, all men stand guilty of having broken the law of God, and the penalty for breaking the law is death. However, the blood of Jesus Christ brings forgiveness to men. How? Jesus Christ died for man. He took the penalty of sins and bore the punishment Himself. He was able to do this because He was the Perfect and Ideal Man, and as the Ideal Man, He could stand for and represent all men. When He died, He died as the Ideal Man, as the Representative for all men. Any person who really believes that Jesus Christ died for him is forgiven his sins. God takes his faith and counts it as the death of Jesus Christ. God sees the man as being in Jesus Christ, as being in the death of Jesus Christ. God counts the death of Jesus Christ for the death of the man. Therefore, the guilt and penalty for breaking God's laws are completely removed. The man's sins and guilt are sent away or washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ.

*Acts 5:31* God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.

*Acts 13:38* “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.”

*Acts 26:18* ‘To open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me [Christ Jesus].’

*Eph 1:7* In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace. □

### III. *Mathew 18:28–31 The Spirit of Unforgiveness*

The spirit of the servant’s unforgiveness. The very steps taken by the servant are the steps involved in an unforgiving spirit.

1. He faced a person who owed him, that is, who had offended him in some way (v. 28). In comparison, the debt or offense was very small. It was not even a millionth of the debt owed by the unforgiving servant. The proportion was over 1 to 1,250,000 - an enormous difference (A. Lukyn Williams, St. Matthew. “*The Pulpit Commentary*,” Vol. 15, ed. by HDM Spense and Joseph S. Exell. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950, p. 215). This shows the enormous difference between our sin against a brother and our brother’s sin against us. When we really see this, an unforgiving spirit toward a brother is inexcusable. We can forgive anything.
2. He reacted severely (v. 28). He attacked the debtor; that is, he exercised his authority over the debtor and attempted to squeeze the payment out of him. He got angry and showed malice. There was no need for this kind of behaviour; it was inexcusable. Remember the king’s mercy to him.

The king had not pressed charges against him; the king had even forgiven his debt. How we need to remember the love and forgiveness of God! God’s love and forgiveness need to become the controlling factors of all our relationships.

3. He rejected the cry for mercy and refused to forgive (v. 29).
4. He acted selfishly and worldly, according to law and justice (v. 30). The man really owed the servant. The debt was a just and legal debt. The servant had every right to demand and force payment. Such was justice, but again, remember the point Christ was making. The King, God, does not act toward us legally, executing justice. He has compassion and mercy upon us and forgives us, wiping out all our debts.

The question is, how often should we forgive our brother? “Seventy-seven times,” Christ said. “Have compassion and mercy; do not demand justice. Do not execute



the law against a man. Do not trample him underfoot. Do not act cruelly, swallowing him up and destroying his spirit. Love him and forgive him ‘just as Christ in God forgave you’” (Eph. 4:32).

**Thought 1.** Note what it is that made this servant go to law and demand justice: money. He was materialistic and worldly minded. The debt was owed, so it was a true debt. It was money that made him selfish. How often money, materialism, and worldliness destroy a person!

**Thought 2.** Note another point: he had just gone through a frightening experience himself — an experience that had carried him into the depths of insecurity. Such an experience was bound to affect him. He would thereafter want to make sure he had enough to care for himself and his family. Humanly speaking, he had every right to demand payment of those who owed him. No man would object to his demand in light of his experience. However, there was something objectionable, something missing in his heart and life. He was hard, not soft. He was exacting, not understanding. He was just, not compassionate. He was legal, not loving; He was the very opposite of God. God is loving, compassionate, merciful, and forgiving; and God expects His servants to be as He is.

5. He grieved others (v. 31). Note the words “they were greatly distressed.” God’s true servants are always grieved to see people mistreated, abused and trampled upon. Cruel and mean treatment always troubles God’s people. Suffering, pain, hurt and death cut the heart of God’s people.
  - a. They feel for the afflicted: their suffering, pain and hurt.
  - b. They feel for the just but sinful man: sinful in that he is unmerciful and not compassionate. His strict justice causes more and more trouble and disturbance and oppression of people. God’s people took the only recourse; they did the only thing they could. They took the matter to God. They could not remain silent and allow the license of oppression and legalism to destroy a human spirit.

#### **IV. *Mathew 18:32–34 Death, Judgment and Wickedness***

The great day of accounting. This is a day that lies out in the future for every man. It is both the summons of death and the summons to stand before God to be judged. It is the death and the day of judgment that every man must face (Heb. 9:27). Note the two bases for judgment.

1. The first basis of judgment is God’s forgiveness. God’s forgiveness is provided in Christ and is always available. Christ “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:2).

**John 3:16, 18** “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Whoever believes

*in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."*

2. The second basis of judgment is man's wickedness. It is important to understand what wickedness and sin are. Wickedness and sin are primarily coming "short of God's glory," coming short of what God is. This is clearly illustrated by this wicked servant (church member). He was a just and lawful man. He was a high official in government and politics, serving directly under the king. He was well respected and honoured, an outstanding citizen, but he was not like God. He was not compassionate and merciful, loving and forgiving in his dealings with others. There are two great commandments that a servant of the king must obey. This servant tried to obey the first one, "Love the Lord your God...."; but he ignored the second one, "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Mt. 22:39).

Very simply put, a wicked man is a man who does not honestly believe God nor diligently seek to live as God lives (Heb 11:6). He is a man who does not believe that God exists, does not believe to the point that it changes his life. His life is not compassionate, merciful and forgiving. Because of this, he shall face the judgment of the King and be condemned.

**Rom 2:4** *Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?*

Note the judgment and condemnation that man is to experience.

1. Man shall experience the Lord's anger. Two things are extremely detestable to God and arouse His anger: not believing Him and not being compassionate and merciful nor loving and forgiving toward others.

**Heb 10:26-27** *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.*

**Jer 10:10** *But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath.*

2. Man shall experience justice. Note two critical things about the justice executed.
  - a. The unmerciful servant received perfect justice. He received exactly what was due him. He had to pay; he was punished only for what he owed — no more, no less. He received the exact penalty, the exact punishment due him.
  - b. The King, God, was perfectly just. He merely executed perfect justice. He executed what the servant himself had chosen: due payment for due debt.

**2 Th 1:6** *God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you.*



**Heb 2:2-3** *For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.*

**Ezek 9:10** *So I will not look on them with pity or spare them, but I will bring down on their own heads what they have done.*

**Ezek 11:21** *But as for those whose hearts are devoted to their vile images and detestable idols, I will bring down on their own heads what they have done, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

## V. **Mathew 18:35 Judgment**

This is the point — an unforgiving person will be condemned. The point is clear and critical. It is critical because it determines our eternal destiny. We must not only forgive, we must live a life of forgiveness and mercy. We must develop a nature of forgiveness and compassion and mercy and love toward others. If we do not forgive from our hearts, neither will God forgive us. Note three things.

1. Forgiveness comes from the heart, from a new nature wrought in Christ.
2. Christ says “My Father,” not “your Father.” God was not the servant’s Father. The servant was not a genuine follower of God. He only professed to be.
3. The person who does not forgive others does not know the forgiveness of God. Having a spirit of forgiveness is so important that Christ taught it time and again.

**Mat 5:7** *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”*

**Mat 5:44, 48** *“But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* (see Lk.6:35-36)

**Mat 6:12, 14-15** *“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”*

**James 2:13** *Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! ■*