

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 18:21 - 18:35



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg discusses the parable from Matthew 18:21-35 and its relevance to the central message of the Christian gospel. He emphasizes the idea that Jesus' atoning death secured the ability for humanity to stand before God forgiven of sin. Through this parable, Gregg elucidates the importance of mercy and forgiveness in the Christian faith, and how unforgiveness can lead to ongoing and permanent judgment. He stresses the need for Christians to extend mercy to others as God has extended mercy to us.

### Transcript

We turn now to one of the more lengthy and detailed parables that Jesus told. And he told it in order to make a very cogent point. It is not simply a cute religious lesson that we learn in this, but actually a matter of life and death.

A matter of being right with God and being saved, or of being on the outside of God's mercy and being lost. The whole issue has to do with forgiveness of sins. You see, many people do not realize that forgiveness of sins is a major concern, or should be a major concern, to all persons acquainted with the reality of man's sinfulness and of the way in which sin alienates us from God and makes us unacceptable to him, and disqualifies us from any access to him and from heaven itself.

All have sinned, the Bible says. And the Bible says that the wages of sin is death, and that God is separated from us by our sins. In Isaiah, we are told that God's ear is not dull, that he cannot hear us.

His hand is not shortened, that he cannot reach us to save us. But it says, your sins have separated between you and your God. And the only hope of mankind is that this problem of sin may be remedied, and that the result will be that God forgives our sins, and on the day that we stand before him in judgment, he will say, your sins are forgiven.

Now, this is, of course, one of the central issues of the Christian gospel, that Jesus, by his atoning death on behalf of us, has secured for us the ability to stand before God forgiven of sin. However, the death of Jesus has not made it automatic that all men are forgiven.

In fact, I believe, although some have a different theological perspective, I believe that the death of Jesus does not guarantee that even one man will experience forgiveness.

The forgiveness is obtained through meeting certain conditions. This is taught in the Scripture. Although it is not taught in some theological camps, it is certainly taught in the Scriptures, that if you do not believe, if you do not repent, you will not be forgiven.

And therefore, belief and repentance are treated in Scripture as conditions for forgiveness. They do not earn forgiveness, because forgiveness is a gift of God. However, one who wishes to give a gift to another may do so upon conditions, and not on other conditions.

This does not make it any less a gift, so long as the thing itself is never earned by the recipient. The fact that certain conditions may be attached to receiving it is something we could be familiar with. We could think of analogies right here on the spot, how this might be so, that a gift may be offered upon conditions without it ceasing to be a true gift.

Now, forgiveness is a gift, but it is offered to us by God upon conditions, that we repent of our sins and that we trust in the atoning work of Christ. But there's more to it than that, according to Jesus. And this we find in the parable that is before us at the end of Matthew, chapter 18, beginning at verse 21.

When Peter came to Jesus and said, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times? Jesus said to him, I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king, who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

This is a measurement of weight, probably of silver, and of course, therefore, a value like an amount of money. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold with his wife and children, and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.

Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, and released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants, who owed him a hundred denarii, which is, of course, a much smaller sum. And he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me what you owe.

So his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and begged him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay you all. And he would not, but went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and they came and told their master all that had been done.

Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, You wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you? And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers, until he should pay all that was due to him. So my heavenly Father also will do to you, if each of you from his heart does not forgive his brother his trespasses.

Now this is a very sobering story, if one takes it at face value and considers its ramifications. Because it certainly makes it impossible for us to take for granted our salvation. It makes it essential for us to exhibit grace if we expect to receive grace.

Or as James put it in his epistle, He shall have judgment without mercy, who has shown no mercy. A person who has not been merciful himself will not obtain mercy. Thus Jesus said in the Beatitude, Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Or as we are told to pray in the great Lord's Prayer, as Jesus taught in Matthew 6, He said we should pray, Forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who are indebted to us. Now here we have the principle of reciprocal forgiveness. As we forgive others, then we receive forgiveness.

This is actually a teaching that Jesus gave on several occasions, but never did he give it at such length, with such elaboration as he did in this occasion. It began when Peter said, Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Now I'm not sure what circumstance had arisen to make Peter ask this question. It seems like it was a question born out of real life.

There must have been somebody whom Peter judged to have sinned against him. And he felt, well, I suppose I ought to be kind enough to forgive him. But man, when the guy repeats it again, twice, three times, you know, am I still supposed to forgive him? And Peter thought perhaps he should express as a suggestion what would be in most people's minds a very generous number.

How many times should I allow my brother to sin against me and still forgive him? How about up to seven times? Now seven times is really a pretty large number, don't you think? If somebody commits a sin against you and you forgive him generously, and he does it again and you forgive him again graciously, and he does it again a third time and a fourth time, and each time you forgive him, wouldn't you think yourself somewhat magnanimous if this man did the same thing to you seven times and you each time forgave him? Well, Peter was suggesting that. Perhaps he was feeling that he was putting a very heavy requirement upon himself by suggesting that he must forgive his brother seven times. But he wanted to know because perhaps in Peter's mind he could imagine a situation where a person continually sinned against him and where he was in the position either to forgive or not to forgive, even maybe more than seven times.

And he wondered whether seven times would be enough. After all, seven times, the

number seven to the Jew, in the numerology of the Jews, the number seven spoke of perfection or completeness. And perhaps Peter thought that by the time I've forgiven him seven times I've shown complete mercy, I've been as generous and magnanimous as I could possibly be, and I would have no further obligation beyond that.

But Jesus said to him, I don't say to you up to seven times. In other words, no, I don't agree with that number, seven times. I would be more inclined to say 70 times seven times, which would be, of course, 490 times.

Now, it seems almost inconceivable that in most relationships anyone would be in the position to sin against you 490 times. In most cases, that person would cease to be in your circle of friends long before that time. Even if you were very gracious, it might be that you wouldn't continue to make yourself vulnerable on a regular basis to someone who sinned against you almost 500 times.

Although there are situations where one might be sinned against that often, for example, in marriage or in a situation where someone has abusive parents or something, that in a lifelong arrangement or one that extends over many years where persons are forced to relate to each other and they are thrust together in a situation where they must endure each other, there are some cases where a drunken father or an abusive parent or an abusive husband might well sin against his wife or his children as many as 490 times in the course of a lifetime and maybe even more times than that. The question is, should the person forgive in such cases? Now, Jesus said up to 490 times, but we can be quite sure that he didn't intend for anyone to be keeping track of that many numbers. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says, Love does not maintain a record of wrongs done to it.

In other words, if you love somebody, as we are commanded to do, and we're even told to love our enemies, you do not keep a tally of the number of times they have taken advantage of you or wronged you. And therefore, of course, if you love someone, as Jesus wants you to do, you would soon lose track and wouldn't know whether someone had passed the 490 mark or not. So you'd lose track a long time before that.

And therefore, Jesus is not giving an exact number, but simply extending the number out to the point where no one would ever really know when that number had been reached. And therefore, the impact of what he's saying is you should never quit. You should always continue to forgive.

You should not exhaust your mercy upon someone who continues to sin against you. You know, a situation where one person might well sin against another 490 times or more in the course of a lifetime is our sinning against God. Certainly, every time that we act selfishly, and we are not acting out of love for God, because there is the command, of course, of Scripture, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Then every time we act in any way, or think or speak in a way that is not exhibiting ultimately love for God, we are violating that commandment, and we are sinning against God. Now, certainly, most of us, by the time we reach probably five years old, we have sinned against God in that sense far more than 490 times. And we can be no doubt certain that Jesus did not intend to say 490 is the limit.

When God tells us to forgive others that many times, it is only because He wants us to be like Himself in mercy. And it means, of course, that God Himself is willing to forgive that many times, and no doubt far more than that. So long as we come to Him in repentance when we sin, He is willing again to forgive us.

Remember the verse in 1 John 1, 9, which says, If we confess our sins, He is faithful in just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. God is willing to forgive if we are genuinely, humbly repentant and confess our sins to Him as sin. And so He wants us to be like Him.

And the fact that He places a large number of times that He requires us to forgive others reflects the fact that He is willing to forgive us a similarly large number of times. And what He is expecting of us is only what He Himself is willing to do toward us. And He expects us to reflect the same generosity toward others.

Now Jesus gives this parable in which a king is settling accounts with his servants. And there is one who has owed him a great debt for some period of time. The exact amount of this debt in modern currency would be hard to calculate.

It says he owes him 10,000 talents. Now a talent is a certain measurement of weight. And if the talent was, for example, of silver, then the amount would be a certain figure.

But if it's a talent of gold, as is sometimes intended, it would be a much larger figure. And therefore we can't not be sure of the exact amount. But even conservatively, the amount would be probably in excess of a million dollars in today's currency.

So here's a man who's got an overwhelmingly large debt. And he cannot pay it. He is called into account.

His master says, Pay up. And the man can't pay. And when this is discovered, the master says, Okay, we'll settle it this way.

We'll sell you into slavery. We'll sell your wife and your children into slavery. We'll take all that you own into our possession in exchange for the debt.

Now, of course, this settlement is far from satisfactory to the man himself. And really, the king himself doesn't gain back a million dollars' worth of value from that settlement. So it's not really settling matters satisfactorily for the king either.

But it is the best that can be done to satisfy justice. The man has to pay a debt. And therefore everything he has, including his own life and family, is to be taken toward the payment of that debt, even if that falls short of the actual value of the debt.

Well, the man, of course, undesirous to be sold into slavery and to separate from his family in this way and all, he falls down and begs the king to grant him more time. He says, Listen, I will pay you. Just give me more time.

Well, the king knew very well that the man never would pay him and could not pay him. And yet the king was moved with compassion toward him. He saw that the man cared a great deal to settle this matter but was simply in a position that he could not.

And so out of compassion to the man, he forgave him the whole debt. He did not extend the period of time for payment. He did not say, Okay, listen, you seem like a fairly decent fellow and an honest man.

I realize that times have been hard and it may take a little longer for you to scratch the money together. Why don't I give you another two years or five years or ten years to pay off this debt? That's not what the king did. The king says, Well, listen, this debt is a crushing burden upon you.

It's obvious. I'll just forgive you the debt. I'll just say you don't owe me anything.

How's that sound? Well, you can imagine the elation of the man who one moment earlier had been consigned to be sold into slavery and all his possessions and his family taken from him. And the next moment, all of this is restored to him and he's given a clean slate with no debt. He hadn't even dared to ask for that.

He had asked for more time to pay it. He had not even dared to ask to be forgiven of the debt. And yet, out of the generosity of the king, this is what he received.

Now, there can be no doubt. Those who interpret this parable are not really of two minds as to what it's about. This is one of those few parables that really cannot be mistaken in its meaning.

The king in this parable represents God. And the man who owes him this crushing burden of debt is the average man. Every man owes God a great debt.

And what is that debt? It is the debt of complete obedience to him. When God made us, he owns us. And he has every right to expect of us obedience and service which he made us for.

But we have not rendered to him what he deserves. We have cheated him. Every day that we have lived for ourselves instead of for him, we have cheated him.

We've robbed him. We have incurred a debt. And on a day of reckoning that is yet to

come, perhaps, there will be a time where that debt is called.

The loans are going to be called in. And God is going to say to each man, Okay, you owe me terribly. You have cheated me repeatedly.

Your life has been a life of sin. You have cheated me out of what I deserved to receive from you, namely your love and your obedience and your loyalty. You have cheated me out of those things.

You owe me a great deal. And how are you going to pay up? Well, of course, you can't pay up. There's nothing you can do to go back and relive those previous years.

You could say, Okay, God, I'll tell you what. How about if for the rest of my life, I live in complete obedience and loyalty and love for you? Well, that wouldn't pay the debt of the past because, of course, whatever you have left of your life, you're obligated to do that anyway. If you simply stop cheating God for the rest of your life, that doesn't repay the years that you cheated him earlier.

You cannot undo the past. This is a debt that you are incapable of paying. By the very nature of it, it is impossible to pay this debt.

And therefore, you stand to be condemned before God as one who has not paid his debt and to be treated in the way that is analogous to how this king was going to treat this man, sell him into slavery, take everything from him, and so forth. In the case of God and man, it is not so much a matter of slavery as it is a matter of ongoing permanent judgment in what the Bible calls hell. Now, here's a man who finds himself in this position of an unpayable debt, just like you or I. When we realize that we have wronged God, we are indebted to God, and we cannot pay this debt.

Well, if we beg for mercy, we find that God is merciful. He has moved with compassion. You may remember a story Jesus told in Luke 18, I believe it is, or 19, about two men who went up to pray in the temple.

One was a tax collector, one of the lower despised elements in society. The other was a Pharisee, a religious leader. And the religious leader said, God, I thank you.

I'm not as other men. I'm not a fornicator. I'm not an idolater.

I'm not a covetous, or he didn't use that word. He said, you know, I'm not an adulterer like this. Even like this man, this tax collector over here.

He says, I pay my tithes of everything I have, and I fast twice a week. And so here a man stood before God congratulating himself that he has paid his debt to society and to God. The other man, the tax collector, who cannot make any such claims, simply beats his breast in agony and says, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

And upon doing so, Jesus makes this comment, that man, that is the sinner, that man went down to his house justified rather than the other. In other words, God forgave that man. Even though he did not say, God, I've paid my debt to you, or he does not even claim he can pay his debt to me.

He says, God, just be merciful to me. I'm a sinner. And God forgave him simply out of the abundance of God's generosity and God's mercy.

This is what happens in this parable. The king sees the agony of the man. The man is begging for mercy, and the king grants him more mercy than he even expects.

And says, I forgive you the debt. Go your way. And that is what God does when we come to him genuinely, humbly, brokenly, and say, God, I cannot repay you what I owe you.

And he says, okay, your sins are forgiven. But then this man goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him what is in comparison a tawdry amount, a small amount. The man begs for mercy the same way as the first man had, but does not receive mercy from this servant.

The servant who had received forgiveness has failed or refused to extend the same mercy to his fellow servants. And this gets reported to the king. And this, of course, makes the king angry, who calls him back in, rebukes him, and says, I showed you great generosity.

Why did you not show the same generosity to your fellow servant? Now, of course, it goes without saying that this man was way out of line to not extend mercy. I think just common sense tells us that a man would have to be incredibly indecent and harsh to not show mercy to one who owed him so little, when he had just been forgiven so much. And that is, of course, the position we are in when anybody wrongs you or me.

It is a small matter compared to the way we have wronged God. And, of course, we should pay the same generosity to them that God has given to us. We should forgive.

In fact, the Bible commands us to. We are not given the option. And this king turned this man over to torturers until he should pay his whole debt.

The scary thing about this parable is that Jesus says, So shall my heavenly Father do to you if each of you from his heart does not forgive his brother. In other words, if you do not forgive, then God, who has already forgiven you, will not forgive you anymore. He will turn you over to torturers.

He will invoke that debt upon you again. In other words, forgiveness of sins is not contingent only upon repentance and faith, but also on our forgiving others. We need to take that very seriously.



Jesus did not intend for this to be a light matter. And it certainly isn't. Read this parable again in Matthew 18 and let it instruct you.

Because you must show mercy if you want to obtain mercy.