

# Matthew 18:21–35

## Forgiveness Without Keeping Score

### Introduction

- Peter's question follows Jesus' teaching about conflict, accountability, and restoration in Matthew 18:15–20.
- He asks, "How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"
- Peter is willing to forgive, but he still wants a limit.
- Jesus answers:
  - Not seven times
  - But seventy-seven times
- Some translations read "seventy times seven."
- Jesus is not giving Peter a larger number to count.
- He is telling Peter to stop keeping a forgiveness ledger.
- Jesus then tells a parable about:
  - An impossible debt
  - Extraordinary mercy
  - Mercy received but not shared
- The central truth is clear: **people who live by God's mercy are called to become merciful people.**

### Background

- Matthew 18 focuses on life within the community of disciples.
- Jesus teaches about:
  - Humility
  - Protecting vulnerable people
  - Seeking those who wander
  - Confronting sin
  - Restoring relationships
  - Forgiving one another
- The order of the chapter matters.
- Jesus teaches accountability before Peter asks about forgiveness.
- Forgiveness therefore does not mean:
  - Ignoring sin
  - Pretending harm did not happen
  - Removing wise boundaries
  - Restoring trust immediately
- Jesus' words "seventy-seven times" may echo Genesis 4:24.
- Lamech boasts about multiplying vengeance.
- Jesus reverses that pattern:
  - Lamech multiplies revenge
  - Jesus multiplies forgiveness
- The kingdom of God interrupts the cycle in which one wound produces another.

### Matthew 18:21–22 — Stop Counting

- Peter wants to know when his responsibility to forgive ends.
- Seven times probably sounds generous to him.
- His deeper problem is that he is still counting.
- Jesus refuses to give forgiveness a numerical limit.
- Forgiveness becomes:
  - A way of living
  - A posture of the heart
  - A response to grace
- Jesus is not saying repeated wrongdoing must be tolerated.
- Matthew 18:15–20 has already allowed for:
  - Confrontation
  - Accountability
  - Witnesses
  - Boundaries
- Jesus is teaching that even when accountability is necessary, vengeance should not control us.

### **Matthew 18:23–27 — The Impossible Debt**

- Jesus tells of a servant who owes a king ten thousand talents.
- The amount is deliberately enormous.
- The servant has no realistic possibility of repayment.
- He begs:
  - “Be patient with me”
  - “I will pay back everything”
- His promise is impossible.
- The king gives him far more than he asks.
- He does not simply give more time.
- He cancels the debt completely.
- Grace begins with the king.
- The servant does not:
  - Earn forgiveness
  - Negotiate forgiveness
  - Repay enough to deserve forgiveness
- Mercy is given because the king is compassionate.
- This reflects the heart of the gospel:
  - God acts first
  - Grace comes before response
  - We receive what we could never earn

### **Matthew 18:28–30 — Mercy Received but Not Shared**

- The forgiven servant finds another servant who owes him one hundred denarii.
- The second debt is real and significant.
- Jesus does not say that the wrongs others do to us are unimportant.
- Betrayal, cruelty, dishonesty, and broken trust can cause real pain.
- The difference lies in the size of the debts.
- The first servant has been forgiven an impossible debt.
- Yet he:
  - Grabs the other servant
  - Demands payment
  - Refuses patience
  - Sends him to prison
- The second servant uses almost the same words the first servant used before the king.
- The first servant has the opportunity to give the mercy he received.
- He refuses.
- Grace has changed his circumstances but not his heart.

### **Matthew 18:31–33 — “Shouldn’t You Have Had Mercy?”**

- The other servants are deeply distressed by what they see.
- Unforgiveness rarely affects only one person.
- Resentment can damage:
  - Families
  - Friendships
  - Churches
  - Communities
- The king confronts the servant and reminds him of the mercy he received.
- He asks:
  - “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”
- That question is the heart of the parable.
- Christian forgiveness begins with remembering:
  - God’s patience with us
  - God’s forgiveness of us
  - God’s mercy in Christ
- We do not forgive because another person has earned mercy.
- We forgive because mercy is the foundation of our own lives.

### **Matthew 18:34–35 — Forgiveness From the Heart**

- The servant's refusal of mercy brings serious judgment.
- Jesus ends by saying that His followers must forgive "from your heart."
- Forgiveness does not earn salvation.
- The order of the parable is important:
  - The king forgives first
  - The servant is then expected to live differently
- Grace comes before obedience.
- Obedience reveals what grace is doing within us.
- Forgiving from the heart does not mean:
  - Pain disappears immediately
  - Trust is instantly restored
  - The offense no longer matters
- A person may forgive and still:
  - Grieve
  - Remember
  - Feel anger
  - Maintain boundaries
- Forgiveness means releasing personal vengeance into God's hands.
- Sometimes that surrender must be repeated as healing continues.

### Wesleyan Emphasis

- Wesleyan theology understands grace as both pardoning and transforming.
- Prevenient grace reaches toward us before we fully recognize our need.
- Justifying grace restores us to relationship with God through faith in Christ.
- Sanctifying grace continues shaping us into people who love God and neighbor more fully.
- The servant wants:
  - Pardon without transformation
  - Mercy without becoming merciful
- Randy Maddox describes Wesleyan theology as **responsible grace**:
  - God acts first
  - Grace makes response possible
  - We are genuinely called to respond
- Forgiveness is therefore not payment for grace.
- It is one of the ways grace begins reshaping our lives.
- Sometimes the honest prayer is:
  - "Lord, I do not know how to forgive this."
  - "Give me the grace to begin."

### Living the Passage

- Forgiveness becomes difficult when the wound has a name.
- We may struggle with someone who:
  - Betrayed us
  - Lied to us
  - Broke our trust
  - Hurt someone we love
  - Repeated the same behavior
- Jesus does not ask us to call those wounds small.
- He asks us not to let them control who we become.
- Resentment can keep us emotionally tied to someone long after the relationship has changed.
- Forgiveness does not change the past.
- It changes the power the past has over us.
- Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation.
- Reconciliation requires participation from both people.
- Forgiveness is not the same as restored trust.
- Trust may need to be rebuilt over time.
- Forgiveness can exist alongside:
  - Accountability
  - Boundaries

- Limited contact
  - Appropriate consequences
- Forgiveness must never be used to keep someone in an abusive or dangerous situation.
- Churches also need this teaching.
- Congregations can carry old wounds and disagreements for years.
- A church can preach grace while still keeping careful records of who hurt whom.
- Jesus calls His people to become a community where cycles of retaliation end.
- The question is not simply:
  - “How many times must I forgive?”
- The deeper question is:
  - **“How is the mercy God has shown me changing the way I respond to people who have hurt me?”**

### **Discussion Questions**

- Why do you think Peter wanted Jesus to give him a limit for forgiveness?
- What does Jesus mean by forgiving “seventy-seven times”?
- Why does Jesus make the first servant’s debt impossible to repay?
- Why is it important that the second servant’s debt is still real?
- What is the difference between receiving grace and being transformed by grace?
- How are forgiveness, reconciliation, and restored trust different?
- How can forgiveness and healthy boundaries exist together?
- What does forgiving “from your heart” look like when pain is still present?
- How does remembering God’s mercy help us forgive others?
- Where might God be asking you to release resentment into His hands?