

Forgiven People Forgive, Part 2:

The Unforgiving Slave

Matthew 18:21–35

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Introduction

Well, turn with me in your Bibles again to Matthew chapter 18, as we settle for a second consecutive week on verses 21 to 35. I mentioned last week that, as we come full-swing into the Christmas season, my mind has been drawn to the biblical doctrine of forgiveness—and for two reasons. The prospect of a coming new year beckons us to wipe the slate clean, to put conflict to rest. We even sing about it: “Hark! how the bells, / sweet silver bells, / all seem to say / *throw cares away*. / *Christmas* is here!” It’s natural for the season to prompt us to “throw cares away,” and if we are to do that responsibly, as Christians, that will involve seeking and granting forgiveness.

But even more than that, we mentioned that Christmas is *about* forgiveness! The whole reason that Jesus is born is so that He might live, die, and rise again on behalf of sinners—to purchase our forgiveness by bearing the curse of our sin in our place. The very purpose of the incarnation is that “the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance *for the forgiveness of sins* would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations,” Luke 24:46–47. Christmas is about forgiveness!

But God’s forgiveness of our sins through the work of the incarnate Son is inextricably linked to our forgiveness of one another—especially within the church. The Bible teaches that those who are forgiven are those who are forgiving. Ephesians 4:32 says, “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, *forgiving* each other, *just as God in Christ also has forgiven you*.” We read the same in Colossians 3:13: We are to be “bearing with one another, and *forgiving* each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; *just as the Lord forgave you*, so also [must] you.” Forgiven people forgive!

It is a lesson that we all need to learn. And, in particular, it is a lesson that GraceLife needs to learn—and to practice—in this specific season of our life together as the body of Christ in this place. This very moment, marriages are suffering because of a refusal to practice the biblical doctrine of forgiveness. Marriage is a picture of the Gospel of Christ, the bridegroom, who lays down His life for His bride, the Church, who eagerly submits to and joyfully respects Him. And some of you are muddying up that picture of the Gospel in your marriages—so that the Lord Jesus is robbed of the glory He deserves in your marriage—because of unforgiveness. And it’s

not just marriages specifically, but families are torn apart, because some family members simply cannot abide what they perceive to be a pattern of sins committed against them, and they refuse to pursue reconciliation by forgiving as they have been forgiven. Men and women, who could be so useful in ministry, are hampered and hindered and handcuffed by a critical, fault-finding, unforgiving spirit. And the result is that the Lord is robbed of the glory He deserves in the proper working of His church. Churches that could otherwise withstand the attacks and persecution of the enemies of the Gospel are rotting from the inside because they can't bring themselves to forgive one another for past offenses. Genuine spiritual friendships that are supposed to be rooted in the affection of Christ Jesus are uprooted by the refusal to reconcile. Where the members of a church are disunified, they have no hope of standing firm against the onslaughts of the world, the flesh, and the devil. As Paul says in Philippians 1:27, we “stand firm *in one spirit*, with *one mind* striving *together* for the faith of the gospel.” There can be no steadfastness where there is not unity, and there can be no true unity where there is not the consistent humbling of ourselves to seek and to grant forgiveness. Pastor John speaks along those lines when he writes, “Forgiveness is therefore the key to spiritual unity in the church, because it is the key to love and the key to all meaningful relationships” (MacArthur, 143).

And so we need to learn the lesson of biblical forgiveness—and not just to learn the theory but to learn to practice it. And to learn this lesson, we have turned to Matthew 18 verses 21 to 35, where Peter asks Jesus how often he has to forgive a brother who sins against him and yet comes to him repenting and seeking forgiveness. And rather than wait for a response, Peter immediately offers his own. He says, “Up to seven times?” He doubles the rabbinic tradition of three and then adds one for good measure. And though he thinks he's being very magnanimous, Jesus responds in verse 22: “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”

And we spoke about how Jesus is not intending to say that 490 is the limit, but then you can unleash vengeance on 491. No, it's hyperbole that stands for an uncountable number. Jesus' point is that, for His followers, forgiveness doesn't have a limit, because, as we see in 1 Corinthians 13:5, “love keeps no record of wrongs.” Love doesn't keep score. “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.” And so love *forgives*. In fact, in Luke 17:3–4, Jesus says, “If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you *seven times a day*, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” Not just seven times, but if it was seven times a day, we are to forgive.

And so the principle that must take root in the soil of every Christian's heart is that where there is repentance, there is forgiveness. Where there is the seeking of forgiveness, there is the granting of forgiveness. It simply cannot be that a brother or sister in Christ sincerely seeks our forgiveness and we refuse. No, we are to be an extravagantly forgiving people—a seventy-times-seven people, a seven-times-a-day people. Why? Because we are an extravagantly *forgiven* people. Because that is the kind of forgiveness that God in Christ lavishes upon us.

And this is nowhere more vividly illustrated than in the parable that Jesus tells in verses 23 to 35. It is a parable, as we saw last week, that illustrates the mercy of God to us in His forgiveness of our sins through the atoning work of Christ. But it also illustrates our Gospel-driven duty, on the basis of the forgiving grace that we enjoy, to forgive as we have been forgiven.

The first half of the parable, in verses 23 to 27, which we covered last week, is intended to be a heart-ravishing drama of God's bottomless grace in forgiving our sins. And so my goal last week was for us to be freshly affected by the weight of our own sin—by the sheer magnitude of the **incalculable debt** that we owe to God for the offenses we have committed against His holiness, by the fact that we have **no ability to pay** that debt of ourselves, and that therefore we lie open to the **deserved condemnation** of the debtor's prison of eternal hell. And then to be ravished by the scandalous mercy—by the free grace and boundless compassion of the forgiveness we have received from God through Christ.

How vulnerable we had been to the merciless beatings of the holy law of God and the execution of strict justice! And then, based upon no work of our own, but solely through an empty-handed **plea for mercy**, our great God and King **compassionately forgave** our debt of infinite punishment! And He did it all justly by demanding every last cent of payment from our Great Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ, “the Son of Man [who] came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life a *ransom* for many”—the eternal Son who, in the great eternal plan of redemption, says, “Upon Me, My Father, upon Me be all their debt! I am able to discharge it” (Flavel). O, how hopelessly indebted we were! And how freely we are forgiven! We ought to sing with the prophet Micah, who closes his prophecy in chapter 7 verses 18 and 19 with these words: “Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.

But as we come to the second half of the parable, in verses 28 to 35, we find that Jesus is going to apply that great Gospel of free and compassionate forgiveness to the conscience and to the practice of those who have received that forgiveness. And He is teaching His disciples to compare the mountain of our own sin against God, which has been freely forgiven, to the molehills of offenses that even our fellow-Christians commit against us. And in the light of that contrast, He calls us to bend out the very mercy of forgiveness that we have received to our brothers and sisters. This really is the whole ethic of the Christian life! “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel” (Phil 1:27). Ask yourself how God in Christ treats you in spite of your sin, and—not just in bare imitation but in the strength of that grace—in the same way, give grace to others.

But He does that via a negative example. He shows us what it looks like for a professing Christian, who claims to be the recipient of such astounding grace as the forgiveness of sins from the thrice-holy God, He shows us what it looks like when such a one refuses forgiveness to others. He shows us how unthinkable it would be for someone to be forgiven of such an incalculable debt, and then to withhold forgiveness from a brother or sister in Christ for what can only be an infinitely lesser offense than one's own against God. He shows us, in short, that **forgiven people forgive**.

And we'll work through this second half of the parable, like the first half, in **five scenes**.

I. The Slave's Sinful Reaction (vv. 28–30)

The **first** is **the slave's sinful reaction**. And we see this in verses 28 to 30. After being freely forgiven the incalculable debt of ten thousand talents, Jesus says in verse 28, "But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed."

And if you've been paying attention at all, when you get to this part of the parable, everything in you rises up in protest, in disgust, in outrage for what one commentator called "a moral monstrosity" (as cited in MacArthur, 153). And you see how masterfully Jesus tells this story, when you consider the sharp **contrasts** between the way the king dealt with this slave, and the way this slave deals with his fellow slave.

The **first** contrast is revealed in that very phrase: "But that slave went out and found one of his *fellow slaves*." This is a phrase that gets repeated throughout this second half of the parable. It's here in verse 28. It's also in verse 29: "So his *fellow slave*..." And verse 31: "So when his *fellow slaves* saw what had happened..." And verse 33: "Should you not also have had mercy on *your fellow slave*..." Jesus is emphasizing the **equal station** between the forgiven slave and the man who is indebted to him. This man has just been forgiven by his king, his master, one who has authority over him and is his superior. And now he is refusing to forgive a fellow slave, a brother, one who is his equal in station and authority.

So also we have been forgiven by God Almighty, the Lord of heaven and earth, the sovereign of the universe. Can we refuse to show the grace we have been shown by One infinitely superior to our fellow mortals, with whom we stand on equal footing before our Judge?

The **second** contrast is the main one: "...who owed him a hundred denarii." Now, a denarius was one day's wage for a common laborer. Jesus tells the parable of the workers in the vineyard in

Matthew chapter 20, and in verse 2 He says that the landowner “agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day.” And so a hundred denarii is one hundred days’ wages—a laborer’s income for about three and a half months. And one observation to be made is: that is not an insignificant sum. If you make an annual salary of \$75,000, 100 days’ wages is just over \$20,000. That’s not nothing! This man owed his fellow slave a sizeable amount of money! There really was a debt.

And, understanding the point of the analogy, it’s not that fellow believers’ sins against us are insignificant. They’re not nothing! You say, “But he sinned against me! And it hurt! He treated me like I was worthless!” “She embarrassed me! She made a fool out of me!” “He was wrong!” Yes, it’s granted that there was a real offense committed against you. “Well then: righteousness demands that he pay back what he owes! Into the debtor’s prison with him!” But no: the ground of your forgiveness is not that the sin committed against you was insignificant. The ground of your forgiveness of others is God’s forgiveness of you. Is that how God dealt with you? “Well, strict justice requires that no substitution be made, that no forgiveness be granted. Into hell with you, until you’ve paid the last cent!” No! “The lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt” (v. 27).

And so the point is not that there is no real sin against you, or that the sin committed against you is so minor that justice demands you don’t insist upon it. No, \$20,000 is not nothing. The point is: \$20,000 is miniscule in comparison to eleven and a half billion dollars! Twenty thousand is 0.0000000174% of eleven and a half billion. This slave was insisting on being repaid a debt that was one six-hundred-*thousandth* of the debt that he was just forgiven. I mean, it is just absolutely absurd.

And yet that is how it looks to God, when we who have been released from the infinite torments of eternal hell insist upon our own rights for what is (granted) sin against us, but which cannot compare to the infinite offense of our own sins against God.

The **third** contrast appears next: “...and he *seized* him and began to *choke* him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’” This man’s king had a right to treat this slave that inhumanely. He was his superior, and he owed a debt 600,000 times greater. And yet verse 24 says that the slave, merely, “was brought” to the king. Not seized. Not choked. Just “brought.” And yet this man leaves the presence of his king, *forgiven*, and goes out and finds his fellow slave who owes him money. He doesn’t leave the king *bowed* to the dust, weeping in gratitude over the unfathomable mercy he’s just been shown, over the new lease on life he’s just been granted. No, his attitude seems to be, “Phew! Well, got out of that one! Let’s see how much more I can milk out of this day.” Just a corrupt, wretched disposition. And then he goes and grabs his brother by the neck, starts choking him, and demands the very justice that he had just been spared from.

And then, amidst an abundance of contrasts, verse 29 is a point of **comparison**—a point of similarity: “So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’” Sound familiar? This is exactly what the forgiven slave did and said in verse 26. This man has the good sense to leave off the word “everything,” but it’s virtually identical. And what’s the point? This fellow-slave’s plea for forgiveness ought to have reminded the forgiven slave of his own petition for mercy from his king, along with how freely and readily his king had forgiven him. And as a result of remembering how he himself was just in that same position and received mercy, he should have shown mercy to his fellow slave.

That also applies to us. Any time you hear the words, “Will you please forgive me?” you ought to hear your own voice! You ought to say, “Hmm, that question sounds familiar. Oh yes! That was from this morning, when I asked the thrice-holy God of the universe for forgiveness for the 20 millionth time and received the unfathomable grace of His unhesitating forgiveness for Christ’s sake! Will *I* forgive *you*? Of course I will!” You see, that is just how grace talks! That is how a heart that has been regenerated by the grace of the Gospel reasons! “‘Will you forgive me’? That’s *my* line! What a delight it is for me to be on the other side of that question! And what a delight it is for me to imitate my gracious God and Father, for the sake of Christ, and bend out the grace I’ve been shown, and joyfully grant you my forgiveness as you’ve asked!”

But that’s not what happened in the parable. Verse 30 says this slave “was unwilling” to forgive. And that verb is actually in the imperfect tense, which means he continued in an ongoing disposition of unwillingness and unforgiveness. As one commentator put it, “his will was set against clemency” (Morris, 475). That makes a **fourth** contrast. When his king had heard his plea for mercy, the king’s heart was “filled with compassion.” When he heard his brother’s plea for mercy, his heart was hardened with unwillingness. And then, **fifth**, instead of releasing and forgiving him, as his king had done, he “threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.” As one commentator put it, “He will have his rights” (France, 707). “It’s only right! It’s only fair! It’s only just! He sinned against me, and I will not compromise righteousness!” That sounds an awful lot like some of you. The question is: if God treated *you* that way, where would you be?

Here is a slave whose king forgave him a debt equivalent to 165,000 years’ wages because his king was compassionate to him, now, with his heart hardened, seizing and choking and casting into prison a fellow slave who owed him the equivalent of 100 days’ wages. Such a display of blatant hypocrisy—of arrogant mercilessness in response to being shown mercy—ought to turn your stomach. But while we, like David, burn with anger against the wickedness of this slave and even call for his punishment and death (cf. 2 Sam 12:5), remember that Jesus, like the prophet Nathan, only tells us this story to look us in the eye and tell us: “You are the man!” (2 Sam 12:7). You are this unforgiving slave when, as those who profess to be forgiven by God our King of an infinite debt, you turn around and insist on your own rights and on strict justice, and refuse to

forgive a sin against yourselves that could only be described as miniscule by comparison to your sin against God.

II. The Fellow Slaves' Sorrowful Report (v. 31)

Such is the slave's sinful reaction. That brings us, secondly, to **the fellow slaves' sorrowful report**. Verse 31: "So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened."

Those other slaves of the king witness this one slave's mercilessness and mistreatment of the other slave, and, the text says, they were deeply grieved. This is the same phrase that is used of the disciples in Matthew 17:23, when Jesus tells them He will be killed by the Jews. It's the same phrase used to describe the disciples' reaction in Matthew 26:22 at the Last Supper, when Jesus tells them that one of them would betray Him. This behavior is so far out of accord with the principles of Christianity that it evokes a grief described in terms which elsewhere only describe the response to the betrayal and murder of Jesus Himself. That's how grieving unforgiveness is to true servants of the King. And being so grieved, these fellow slaves go and tell their king—not out of spite against the unmerciful slave, but out of sincere **sorrow** for the mistreatment of the minor debtor.

And what does that tell us? That when fellow brothers and sisters in Christ learn that one professing Christian refuses to grant forgiveness to those that seek it, it is exceedingly grieving to the people of God. And do you know what they do? At least, do you know what we should do, when we are witnesses to unforgiveness that is out of step with the Gospel? In their grief, the fellow slaves tell the King. The saints pray to God on behalf of the brother or sister who is being mistreated. Matthew Henry comments, "That which gives us occasion for sorrow, should give us occasion for prayer. Let our complaints both of the wickedness of the wicked and of the afflictions of the afflicted, be brought to God, and left with him." And the earnest cries of the Lord's people are never lost on Him. We learn that lesson all the way back in Exodus chapter 2, don't we, where, Exodus 2:23, "the sons of Israel sighed because of the[ir] bondage [in Egypt], and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God." Verse 24: "So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant," and before long the Egyptian army was drowned in the Red Sea. Our King will be attentive to the cries of His servants regarding those who misuse His mercy.

III. The King's Stern Rebuke (vv. 32–33)

The king in the parable certainly was. And that leads to our **third scene**. We've had the sinful response and the sorrowful report. Now we come, number three, to **the king's stern rebuke**. Verses 32 and 33: "Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you

all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?” What is God’s estimation of those who profess to be recipients of His forgiveness and yet who refuse to extend forgiveness to others who sincerely seek it? “You *wicked* slave. Your hard-hearted cruelty to your fellow Christians demonstrates that My goodness has made no genuine impression on your soul! You have no appreciation whatsoever of what it meant to be forgiven of ‘all that debt’!”

But notice the way the king reasons with the slave. “Should you not have had mercy on *him* the way *I* had mercy on *you*?” And that’s really not a forceful enough translation of the original. The Greek says, literally, “Was it not *necessary* also for you to have mercy ... as I had mercy on you?” You see, it’s not “should,” like, “You really *should* get regular exercise.” This is: “It is *necessary*.” There is a solemn moral obligation upon the *recipients* of grace to *extend* the grace they have been shown to others. We who have been saved by the Gospel are commanded to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel, Philippians 1:27. This is why he calls us in Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13, as we read before, to “forgive each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

When we fail to have mercy as we have been shown mercy, when we fail to forgive as we have been forgiven, we are living in a hopeless incongruity with the Gospel. We are walking contradictions! Friends: When we refuse forgiveness—when we nurse bitterness and cherish an unforgiving spirit—we are just as much out of step with the Gospel as the professing Christian who lies, uses foul language, gets drunk, fornicates, or commits adultery. And that ought to be unthinkable to us.

The king says, “Wasn’t it necessary for you to have mercy on him the way I had mercy on you?” And how, friends, does God our King express to us the mercy of forgiveness?

He does it (a) immediately; He doesn’t make you wait for it.

He does it (b) freely; He demands no acts of penance—no ritual cleansing or self-atonement; nothing but confession and genuine repentance.

He does it (c) eagerly; Psalm 86:5: “For You, Lord, are good, and *ready* to forgive.”

He does it (d) completely; He does not resurrect your sins and throw them in your face; when they are forgiven, they are gone forever. And there are so many beautiful images of this that I wish we could spend a whole sermon on them. But just briefly: Psalm 103:12 says He’s removed our transgressions from us “as far as the east is from the west.” And never the twain shall meet! In Isaiah 38:17, Hezekiah says, “You have cast all my sins behind Your back.” He says, “Before, when my sins clung to me, they were, as it were, before God’s very face, so that whenever I

sought any communion with Him, they were a barricade between us. But now that He has forgiven me, He has taken my sins and put them behind His back, so that He can look upon me with favor, and so that I can look upon Him with peace (cf. Martin). Glorious!

In Isaiah 43:25, Yahweh Himself says, “I, even I, am the one who wipes out [or blots out] your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins.” He blots out our sins like blotting out ink from a parchment. It’s as if our sins are pictured as recorded in a book, and God comes along and, with divine whiteout, He blots out every record of our sins. And with what result? That He remembers them no more. And that of course does not mean that Omniscience becomes incapable of remembering. It means that He makes a commitment of His will to refuse to call them to mind in His dealings with us. They no longer have any effect on the relationship between Him and us. They’re buried in the depths of the sea, as we read before in Micah chapter 7 verse 19. They are gone forever—at the bottom of the ocean floor! In Jeremiah 50:20, He says, “Search will be made for the iniquity of Israel, but there will be none; and for the sins of Judah, but they will not be found; for I will pardon—I will forgive—those whom I leave as a remnant.” Search may be made for your sin, but there will be no sins to be found! They’re behind His back, out of His mind, in the depths of the sea!

And not only does He forgive immediately, freely, eagerly, and completely. He also forgives (e) unboundedly, without limit. Seventy times seven! As often as He is asked! So long as Christ’s blood is powerful and precious to Him!

Oh dear people: if Almighty God—who dwells in unapproachable light, who is Light and in whom is no darkness at all, who is of purer eyes than to look upon evil, who is justly repulsed at all unrighteousness, who is the God of all holiness—if He can put away my sin for the sake of Christ, how can I, a creature of the dust, who should have been suffering in the torments of hell for years already, refuse to put away the sins of those who seek my forgiveness?

And especially when it’s a fellow believer, which of course is the context here. When a fellow Christian comes to you seeking your forgiveness, reason with yourself! “The God of infinite holiness can bury this person’s sin in the depths of the sea and remember it no more, because the precious blood of His Son has satisfied divine justice in their case. But *my* standard of righteousness is higher than God’s! I am of such exalted dignity that, when I am sinned against, the blood of the God-Man, the Lord Jesus Christ, the spotless Lamb of God, is insufficient to satisfy the just demands of my wounded honor! And so no, I refuse to forgive the sin that Christ died for! I refuse to forgive the sin that Holy God has forgiven!” That is absolute lunacy! It’s spiritual madness! And though few of you would dare to give voice to those thoughts, even in the quietness of your own heart, nevertheless that is the infernal reasoning that is at the bottom of every hesitation to forgive your penitent brother.

No, we must forgive as we have been forgiven. When our fellow believers, our husbands and our wives, our mothers and our fathers, our sons and our daughters seek our forgiveness, it is *necessary* for us to forgive them immediately, freely, eagerly, completely, and unboundedly—to cast their sins behind our backs, to wipe them out of our record books, and to refuse to remember them. It is, dear people, to make a decisive commitment of our will to refuse to call those sins we say we have forgiven to mind, to refuse to allow them to be a barrier to a restored relationship. They are forgotten, put away, done with, at the bottom of the ocean, never to be brought to bear in our dealings with one another again. They are *that*, or we have not forgiven as God has forgiven us.

IV. The King’s Severe Revocation (v. 34)

But the king doesn’t just rebuke the slave. We find in verse 34 that the situation is much more dire than that. **Scene number four: the king’s severe revocation.** “And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.”

In verse 27, this king “felt compassion.” And you remember the term *splangchnizomai*—to have the bowels yearn with pity. Before the king was “moved with compassion” (cf. Mark 1:41) and forgave. Now, he is moved with anger, and he comes to punish. And he reinstates the debt that this man owed. He **revokes** the very pardon that he had issued in verse 27, and he reinstates the punishment that he ordered in verse 25. He throws the slave into the very debtor’s prison he deserved all along—not, as R. C. Sproul wisely observes—not for mismanaging the king’s *money*, but for mismanaging the king’s *mercy* (509).

And Jesus pictures this debtor’s prison as especially horrific, by commanding that the slave be handed over to the *torturers*. *Basanistēs*. This is the same word that’s used of the centurion’s servant in Matthew 8:6, where the centurion tells Jesus that his servant is “lying paralyzed at home, fearfully *tormented*.” In chapter 14:24, it speaks of a boat being “*battered* by the waves.” You remember that story from Pilgrim’s Progress I told last week, where Faithful tells Christian how he kept being beaten by a man who they later discovered to be Moses, illustrating how the law beats us to death unless Gospel grace makes it forbear? This slave is placed back under the yoke of the law, and those very beatings are reinstated. This is Jesus’ way of speaking about hell, just as He was in verse 25.

V. The Lord’s Startling Revelation (v. 35)

And if that makes you uncomfortable, buckle up, because that leads us in the **fifth** place, to the **final scene** in this parable. And it is: **the Lord’s startling revelation.** Verse 35: “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

What is Jesus saying? He is saying that if you are not a *forgiving* man or woman, you will not be a *forgiven* man or woman (cf. Martin). He is saying nothing other than what He said as He taught His disciples to pray in Matthew chapter 6 verse 12: “And forgive us our debts, *as we also* have forgiven our debtors.” “Well, what if we haven’t forgiven our debtors?” Well, then, God won’t forgive you. You say, “Wait a minute! The text doesn’t say that!” Sure it does! Two verses later, Matthew 6:14–15: “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” Do you see? Your forgiveness of your fellow-believers who repent and seek your forgiveness is a matter of heaven and hell.

You say, “How can that possibly be? Are you saying Jesus is making our granting others forgiveness a condition of our salvation?” I’m just reading the verses, friend. That’s not me saying it; that’s Jesus saying it. You say, “But how is that not some sort of salvation by works? We believe in justification by *faith* alone, not justification by *forgiveness* alone!” And that’s a good question. But the answer is: Jesus understood *sola fide*! He’s not saying that we’re saved *by* our forgiveness. He’s saying that if there does not dwell within you a cheerful disposition of gracious, magnanimous, eagerness to forgive, if your heart is untouched by the grace you’ve been shown in God’s forgiveness of your incalculable debt of sin through the sacrifice of Christ, such that you long to bend out such forgiving mercy to anyone who sincerely seeks it, then you give evidence that your heart hasn’t been touched by that grace—that you’ve never been forgiven at all, that you are not now and never have been a believer in Jesus.

Because those who have been genuinely saved by the Gospel, have been recreated by that Gospel. They have been given the Holy Spirit of God to dwell inside them, and to cause them to walk in the way of that Gospel, in a manner worthy of the Gospel. They’ve been given a new heart: “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation.” And someone who has been given a new heart delights to imitate their gracious heavenly Father in extending to others some measure of the grace that they have been shown. Matthew 5:7: “Blessed are the merciful, for *they* shall receive mercy.” Dear people, what is the implication? “*Curséd* are the *unmerciful*, for they shall *not* receive mercy.”

Or Matthew 7 verse 2: “For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.” Here is a verse that ought to strike every last one of you to the depths of your conscience. You who cherish an unforgiving spirit, who fudge on this biblical commandment to forgive your penitent brother or sister: will you test your actions at the bar of this verse? Will you test your conscience with this principle, and say, “Lord, will You forgive me in precisely the same way I am prepared to forgive others?” “Lord, will You deal with me in my communion with You in precisely the same way I have dealt with my husband? with my wife? with my mother or father?” Will you dare apply this verse to your practice? I can barely stand that thought. I want to say, “Lord! Please don’t treat me the way I have treated others! Please use

a more merciful standard in Your dealings with me than I have used in my dealings with others!” And I tell you: there is perhaps no other thought that makes me want to be more merciful to others than this. I want to be measured by the most merciful standard there is! And so therefore I must use that supremely-merciful standard in my dealings with my fellow believers.

I’ll never forget a counseling case I had a little over five years ago. A couple who had been married for 40 years sat in my office, the husband seeking forgiveness for what were, no doubt, very serious transgressions. But the wife just couldn’t bring herself to do it. And I understood that. These things take time. And so I continued to pray for the both of them and continued to counsel with them over a several months—maybe even as long as a year. And throughout that time, I would try to gently bring this principle to bear. I took them to this very text in Matthew 18. “Consider how great a debt you’ve been forgiven by God! Consider what Jesus says will happen if you don’t forgive!” And I’ll never forget it: after nearly a year of pleading and seeking to apply the Gospel, she looked at me and said, “I would rather go to hell than forgive him.” And I looked back at her, trying to hold back tears, and said, “You will.”

That was already several years ago now. She was already in her mid-70s back then. I haven’t heard from her in years. It may very well be that she is with the torturers as we speak. But dear friends, Jesus says the same thing to you. If you would rather go to hell than to forgive the transgression of the one who earnestly and sincerely seeks your forgiveness, you will. “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you...”

James 2:13—a verse you cannot miss; write it on your heart: “For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy.” And I don’t want that for you.

So you say, “Ok, fine. I guess I *have* to forgive him. I mean, I don’t want to go to hell! I’ll forgive. But I won’t forget!” If that’s your attitude, don’t miss the last three words of this parable. Look again at verse 35: “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother *from your heart*.” Jesus does not say, “...if each of you does not begrudgingly utter the *words*, ‘I forgive you.’” He doesn’t say, “...if each of you leaves the underlying problem unresolved and lies to yourself that you’ve ‘let it go’ but then never talks to the person again.” No, the only forgiveness that exists—the only forgiveness that is worthy of the name—is forgiveness from the heart: a genuine, warm forgiveness, that relentlessly pursues the full restoration of the relationship; that buries the offense in the depths of the sea, as we’ve said before; that casts all their sins behind your back, so that you will remember them no more.

That doesn’t mean that you suffer amnesia! And it doesn’t mean that there won’t be consequences for sin (just as with David and the death of his child, cf. 2 Sam 12:13–14). You may be physically able to remember the offense. But you resolve never to allow it to be brought to bear on the relationship again. It is no cause for enmity, no cause for contention. You might

even be able to forget it. Even better! One of my favorite things about being married to Janna are those times when one of us asks the other forgiveness for something, and the one being asked says, “When did you do that?” That’s the kind of disposition you want to cultivate: one that goes out of its way to forget the offenses that have been committed against you. After all, Proverbs 19:11 says, “It is [a man’s] *glory* to overlook a transgression.”

Conclusion

Dear friends: Does your heart pulse with that kind of forgiving spirit, with that eager disposition to forgive a repentant brother or sister? Some of you in this room have to answer “No” to that question. And if so, that can mean one of two things.

In the first place, it can mean just what we’ve spoken about: that you’ve never experienced that forgiveness of your own sins. For all of your professions and protestations of faith—all the years you’ve attended church, all the years you’ve called yourself a Christian—your settled unwillingness to forgive reveals a heart of stone that never has been changed into a heart of flesh. To hold onto grudges, to nurse bitterness, to brood in resentment—those are evidences of a natural human heart, untouched by the grace of God and devoid of the divine life of regeneration. Your unforgiveness may be evidence that you’re not a Christian at all.

And the remedy for that, friends, is to look to Christ. It is to raise your eyes to the cross, and to see in that cross how unspeakably offensive your sin is to a holy God—that sin is so abhorrent to God’s nature and character that He must punish it with the utmost severity. But it is also to see in that cross the great love of God demonstrated toward you, that He should give His only Son—His innocent Son, His righteous Son—to bear in His own person the full measure of divine wrath against the very sins that you committed. It is to see the Son of God laying aside the glory of heaven to take on human flesh. It is to see the Author of Life humbly submitting Himself to the most shameful kind of death, in order to pay the incalculable debt that your sin deserves but which you could never pay back. And in seeing Him there—in beholding the awful payment that your sin demanded—it is to mourn over your wretchedness, and to cry out to God in repentance, to beg His forgiveness on the basis of that perfect sacrifice. Dear friend, if you’ve never truly turned from your sins and trusted in Christ alone for righteousness—if you’ve never tasted the sweetness of divine forgiveness such that it’s given you a new *heart* of forgiveness—I plead with you to repent and believe the Gospel today.

But for those of you who do know the sweet taste of God’s forgiveness, and yet who struggle with an unforgiving disposition, it may not be that you’re unregenerate. It may be that. But it also might be that you’ve just lost your grasp on the enormity of God’s forgiveness of you—that the spiritual sight of the glory of Jesus has become clouded in the eyes of your heart. You’ve been

distracted from the amazing grace of God, and you're failing to bring the Gospel of Christ to bear fully on your life.

And the remedy for that, friend, is last week's message. It's to look to Christ afresh. It is to behold the loveliness of the Triune God, who forgives sin so lavishly, so freely, and so enduringly. And it is to have the heart warmed by the sight of that loveliness, so that all hardness of heart is melted away—so that we can forgive our brothers and sisters “from the heart.”

To my fellow Christians who are sinning against God by withholding forgiveness from others, look to Christ afresh. See in Him so much greater of a satisfaction than the false-pleasure that is promised by nursing bitterness and holding grudges, and repent. Be freed to open your heart in forgiveness to your brothers and sisters in Christ, and be reconciled to them.

Oh, if we grasped this principle, how the church would be unified! How marriages would be strengthened! How families would be reconciled! How strong our love to one another would grow! How strong *we* would grow to endure the hardship and persecution that is surely coming to us in this generation! This is the cornerstone! If we can gain a right apprehension of the magnitude of our sin, and the magnitude of the forgiveness we have been freely granted, we would be the most difficult people in the world to offend.

This Christmas, don't celebrate the incarnation of Forgiving Love, all the while withholding forgiveness from others. Rejoice that your debt has been canceled. And rejoice to cancel the debts of others.