

The Gift of Forgiveness

TEXT: Matthew 18:21-35

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 17, 2026

Arguably the most familiar section of the part of Matthew 18 that Neil just read is when Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive those who sin against him—and whether it should be as many as seven times. Jesus responds with not seven but seventy-seven. Seven is a symbolic number in the Bible, so we're not supposed to keep a running tab by our beds. Seven just means something that is complete, like the seven days of Creation. Jesus might also have said, "Not seven times, but I tell you to forgive until your forgiveness is perfectly complete, until it's part of your nature, seventy times seven."

Those two verses in that exchange with Peter get quoted a lot to tell people they have to forgive every wrong, every time, no matter how many times or how badly someone harms you.

I hope you've learned by now that pulling two verses of the Bible out of context causes problems; and this is no different. So, while Jesus' words to Peter are still a teaching to be considered, and we'll circle back to them, the idea of forgiveness becomes much more complicated when looking at the teaching of Jesus around it.

The section right before is very practical instruction for dealing with people in the same religious community who harm each other. I've seen some churches write it into their by-laws. It's pretty solid advice. We're told, if someone harms us, to first try to work that out directly with the person. If that is unsuccessful, have a second conversation with one or two others, so that it's not just one person's word against another, and maybe others can hear things that the two disputing parties can't.

If that doesn't work, it goes to the larger community, and if the person doesn't listen to even the church as a whole, Jesus says, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector." Now, bad things come from that approach, too. That's where the practice of shunning comes from, and it can be abused in any number of ways; especially when mixed in with racism, sexism, power dynamics, and other issues where even large groups always believe one demographic over another, no matter the evidence.

But, in that very specific, practical teaching about living together in a religious community in Matthew 18, at least in its ideal form, Jesus sees forgiveness as having limits. In that case, the limit is a person's inability to either recognize their sin or change their behavior—confession and repentance if you will. If those aren't there, they get the boot.

And it's right after that, where Jesus makes the remarkable claim that the gathered community of Jesus' followers—even as few as two or three—have Jesus' in their midst by default and therefore "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." There's lots of debate about what that means, but the context is forgiveness and the claim is that Jesus' followers can bind things as well as let them loose, which is worth considering.

Then comes the conversation with Peter about how many times he should forgive. What the English obscures in those two verses (about not just seven but seventy-seven) is that it's a conversation *with* Peter and *about* Peter. Peter asks how many times he, personally, must forgive, and the "you" in verse 22 is the second person singular, in the Greek. "Not seven times, but I tell YOU (you, personally Peter), seventy-seven times.

Just two chapters before Jesus singles Peter out as the rock on which he will build his church. It's possible to read the seventy-seven times as a higher-standard for the leader. Although the leader of the community would make the decision to remove someone who continues to harm members in verses 15-20; when dealing with those who sinned against the leader personally, forgiveness should be the default.

It's also possible that Jesus says that to Peter specifically because Peter tends to be a hot-head and less forgiving than others, so Jesus pushes him more on that issue. Could have been either of those things, or

something else entirely. The point is that it was a personal question from Peter about what he himself should do and a personal response from Jesus to him.

And THEN, there's the very uncomfortable parable Jesus tells right after that private exchange with Peter. In the parable, the issue is a financial debt owed to the king by one of his slaves. The king orders the man's sale to someone else, along with his wife and children and all their possessions. The man falls to his knees and begs for more time to pay. This touches the heart of the king who doesn't give him more time to pay, but just outright forgives the debt.

The king forgave a LOT of debt in that parable. Just **one** talent was equal to 15 **years** of wages for a laborer and the man owed the king 10,000 talents—that's 150,000 **years'** worth of wages that the slave owed the king.

It's forgiven. Done. No longer owed. His debt is forgiven, his family stays intact. But the parable doesn't end there.

That man, who just had a staggeringly large debt wiped off the books by the king himself, walks out and sees another enslaved man who owes **him** 100 denarii. One denarius was equal to one day's wage, so the man owed him just over three months of wages.

The man who just had his life handed back to him grabs the man who owes him a far lesser amount by the throat and demands that the 100-denarii be paid. The second man makes the same plea as the first—not for forgiveness, but for patience and time to pay it back. But for him there is not even pity, let alone patience, and certainly not forgiveness. Instead, there is retribution and the first slave throws the second into prison.

This kind of thing doesn't go well in the workplace. The other slaves saw what had happened, and the king got a whistleblower report. The first slave was summoned back and the point of the parable is summed up in verse 32 and 33 when the king says, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?"

The king then un-forgives the debt and a pretty gory judgment follows. So, again, the king—who is the God-figure in this parable—did not forgive even seven times, let alone seventy-seven. He forgave totally, even when forgiveness wasn't requested, but when that mercy was scorned by trying to shake down others and delivering harsh treatment instead of mercy to those with even less power in the same circumstance, that act of forgiveness was reversed, undone by the once-forgiven man's hard heart.

It's after that parable that Jesus does give an answer about forgiveness that applies across the board, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

While "Have mercy, or else" doesn't sound very Jesus-y, on a complex issue like forgiveness, we need to sit with its presence here.

The start of chapter 18, before what Neil read, was also quite harsh in talking about those who mistreated children. Jesus says those harming them would be better off having a millstone hung around their necks and drowned, that people should cut off their own body parts if they lead them to sin against the children lest they be thrown into the eternal fire."

And to show that this is still Jesus enraged over the treatment of children, Jesus goes on to say, "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven." And then Jesus tells the parable of the shepherd going off to find the one lost sheep, ending that parable with "So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that even one of these little ones should be lost."

This morning's passage about sin in the church and the dealings with forgiveness directly follow those strong warnings about the treatment of children.

It's a complicated picture, but one that resonates with other places in both the Old and the New Testaments, with statements about reaping what we sow, telling us that the measure we use for others is the measure God will use for us, and even the end of the book of Esther where the gallows that Haman built for Mordecai ends up being his own.

The same sentiment is in the parable about the unforgiving servant in Matthew, and I think is perfectly reflected in James 2:13: "For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement." It's the full Gospel in one verse. Bad news: There will be judgment for our sin. Good news: Mercy triumphs over judgment. When we sin against God but then pass along the mercy God freely gives to us to those who sin against us, no sin is too great for a subsequent life of mercy to overcome. 1 Peter 4:8: "Above all, love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins."

Most of us have difficulty treading that fine line, both as individuals and collectively in churches. Some come down harsh on the judgement line and try to bring people in or keep members in the fold with threats of hellfire and damnation for the slightest step out of line. In reaction to that, others fall into the trap that Dietrich Bonhoeffer named "cheap grace." No worries about messing up, God will forgive it all, every single time.

Both of those positions are partially correct, but incomplete and dangerously wrong when the yin and yang of them are out of balance. Mercy is a form of love; and love can only be offered as a gift. It can't be demanded and must be offered, and accepted, freely.

The Greek word "forgive" in the Bible means to release, to let go, to leave behind. It doesn't mean you pretend something didn't happen or that the harm that someone experienced was acceptable or negligible. It also doesn't mean that a relationship will be restored to what it was. Maybe, but maybe not. Forgiveness is an act of mercy, given by the person/group directly harmed, that sets what would be appropriate punishment aside, in the hopes of turning cycles of harm and retribution into healing cycles of repentance and repair.

But that turn to forgiveness can be blocked or sometimes, as in the parable, even reversed. It can be blocked by accusing those harmed of violating their faith if forgiveness isn't forthcoming. This is a real problem in our culture. If the gun is literally still smoking and the guilt too plain to be ignored, those disregarded by society—especially women and African Americans in this matter—are condemned if they don't immediately and totally forgive the person, helping the perpetrators to get a more lenient sentence or to regain their place among society's righteous without serious consequence.

Forgiveness can also be blocked by the lack of authentic confession or repeated offenses that prove an apology hollow.

We read all of Psalm 51 as our Call to Worship this morning because it's the Psalm believed to be written by King David after he violated Bathsheba and had her husband murdered to cover up the resulting pregnancy. It's an almost perfect confession, in that it fully acknowledges the sin and God's right to lay whatever judgement God sees fit on him for it. It doesn't ask to be let off the hook for consequences, but to have his heart changed and a "right spirit" renewed in him. That is how it's done.

I want to leave you with a story. Decades ago, in a pastoral counseling appointment, I met a woman I'll call Mae. About 20 years my senior at the time, I knew nothing about Mae or what she wanted to talk about when she walked into my office. "Walked" is actually the wrong word. She shuffled in, shoulders hunched, looking down, making me glad there was a clear path from the door to the couch, where we sat side by side. She looked straight ahead, her body screaming, "Shame!"

I remember thinking, “Whatever she needs, it’s totally above my pay grade. It will take years of therapy with a professional to help her.” Mae began by telling me she couldn’t be a Christian anymore. I asked why, and she told me it was because Christians had to forgive, and she couldn’t forgive her father.

Mae’s father had died, so there was no pressure to be reconciled to him; but, as she described the horrific abuse she had suffered at his hand, it was clear both that the things he stole from her were beyond calculation and also that her inability to release it was crushing her.

I told her, “You don’t have to forgive him,” and she looked at me for the first time. We spoke for about an hour, and I explained what I have said to you. That forgiveness is a gift of love and it isn’t love if it isn’t freely given. It can’t be forced or demanded, not by the perpetrator and not by others.

I told Mae she had every right to withhold that gift and still claim the name of Christian. Her father had sinned beyond all imagining, never confessed or repented, never changed his ways. Something, something, millstone around his neck. Jesus would understand. **If** she found it to be more than she could carry and wanted to let it go at some later time, she could...or not. The gift was hers to give or to withhold.

When she got up to leave, Mae stood up straight. She was smiling, looking me in the eye. She walked with confidence out of my office. By the end of the week, I had a note from her saying that she had forgiven him. She took Disciple Bible Study with me, a changed woman. She did engage a professional therapist to do the much deeper work. But she couldn’t get to that point without the spiritual confidence that Jesus went with her, loved her, abhorred what happened to her, and would gladly claim her as his own no matter what she decided to do about forgiving her father.

Those with ears to hear, let them hear. Amen.