

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, September 17, 2023**

**“As I Had Mercy on You”  
Matthew 18:21-35**

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“Then Peter came and said to [Jesus], ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’” (v. 21). Peter asks about the limits of forgiveness: how much is enough? Peter proposes 7 times, which is certainly generous; few of us offer even second chances, let alone seventh chances.

But surprisingly, Jesus rejects even that generous ceiling on mercy: “Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times’” (v. 22). The numbers are not totally clear here; the figure may actually be 70 times 7, which is 490 (trust me; I did the math). The point is, it’s not just that the number is big—it’s that it’s almost impossibly big: who can manage to forgive 7 times, let alone nearly 500 times?

It’s almost like Jesus is telling Peter that there’s really no limit to be placed on forgiveness. For us, that doesn’t compute; it feels kind of irritating that, instead of commending Peter for his willingness to forgive 7 times, Jesus throws back these seemingly impossible numbers. But then Jesus offers a parable: “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made” (vv. 23-25).

This servant had managed to squander ten thousand talents. That sounds like a lot, right? But thing is, most of us have absolutely no idea what a ‘talent’ is—or rather, what that was worth in ancient times. So, just one talent was an enormous sum of money—let alone ten thousand! I did some figuring and, ballpark, in Canadian dollars and adjusted for inflation, this servant has managed to get himself in debt by about 7 billion dollars – that’s billion, with a ‘b’! It makes you wonder, what exactly has he been doing? The guy’s been buying aircraft carriers and charging it to the boss’s tab. This took years of persistence, right; I mean, you don’t rack up a debt like that from just one bad night at the craps table. Spending that much money, he’s got repetitive stress injuries from typing in his PIN number.

Then—then the good times stop rolling. He tries to buy one last big-ticket item, but this time, the credit card’s rejected, his Ponzi scheme collapses, and the king asks, “Where’s my money?” The scam comes to light, the fraud is exposed—and the king orders punishment... And “So,” Jesus tells us, “the slave fell on his knees before [the king], saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything’” (v. 26).

This guy is absolutely shameless. “Don’t worry, I’ll pay you back, honest.” Lying is what got him into this mess, and—he figures—lying will get him out of this mess. The promise to pay it back

is, of course, a farce: the guy's blown billions of dollars, but he's going to pay it back—what, on a layaway plan? Assuming a labourer's standard wage in the first century, to make up what he owed, he would need to work full-time for around 200,000 years (give or take a few months). This is a desperate ploy, and everyone sees right through it... But then comes the shocker: Jesus says, "And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt" (v. 27). That shameless, thieving servant gets off scot-free.

Now notice *why* the king forgives. Jesus says it was "out of pity" for the servant. The original language is powerful here (σπλαγχνίζομαι): the king is "moved with compassion," "moved in his innermost being"; I think the closest equivalent we have in English would be say "his heart went out to him." It's very clear that the king was not fooled by the servant's empty promises; rather, the king is moved to forgive by pity, compassion, even love. From where we're sitting, it's hard to have much sympathy for this servant. Yet still, this unrepentant servant receives forgiveness, not because he's got any merits in his favour but simply because this king has compassion.

Notice also what *doesn't* happen: the king does not ignore the servant's behaviour, or condone what the servant has done. The king doesn't say: "It's okay: it wasn't your fault." The servant is accountable and guilty. He's forgiven, but forgiveness assumes fault: forgiving means asserting that someone did wrong. This forgiveness doesn't excuse the behaviour, but it does cancel the consequence. As one writer puts it: "To forgive is [...] to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be" (Thomson).

Now we have vocabulary in the church for what's happened to this servant: this is what we call 'grace.' He had nothing in his favour, but the king freely shows unexpected, extravagant, overflowing love; this king wipes clean every fault and failing, every lie and deception, and sets the servant on his way—a new man with a new beginning, liberated from the weight of his past. For years he'd wondered when his lies would catch up with him, but he never expected that the one he was stealing from all along would be the very one to redeem him. He emerges from the king's court feeling unburdened, energized, alive again: his past is past, and now he can start fresh. Though that's not how this parable ends...

"But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt" (vv. 28-30). The effects of grace here are sadly short-lived: mercy flows in, but not out. The king's words, "I forgive you," still hover in the air when the servant sees a fellow servant who owes him. This other debt is trivial compared to what's just been forgiven; the king had just forgiven him a debt that was about 600,000 times larger. And also, keep in mind: any money that crooked servant had lent out these past years was stolen to begin with! And when this second servant makes the same plea we heard before—"Don't worry: I'll pay you back"—this time the promise is plausible. He might even be able to pay that amount back within a few years.

But the servant who'd received mercy doesn't share it; he is forgiven but not forgiving; freed by the grace of his king, he shares no grace at all. The compassion that moved the king to forgive

has no further effect, and the dishonest servant gets his small-time debtor locked up. Then, Jesus says, “When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘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?’” (vv. 31-33).

Everyone sees the contrast between how the servant’s been treated and how he treats others: he’s been forgiven but won’t forgive, he’s received mercy but won’t share it, he’s redeemed by the grace of his king but withholds that grace from a fellow servant. We see it, and we wonder, “How could someone be so dense, so callous? How could someone who has been forgiven so much fail to forgive? How ridiculous!” (cf. Campbell).

And it’s at this point that our parable starts to look uncomfortably like a mirror: this parable makes us uncomfortable and challenges us, because that foolish servant, forgiven much but forgiving little—that servant is us. God in Christ has forgiven us lavishly: we live our lives knowing that God’s love for us overcomes our faults and failings. God, out of kindness, forgives us; and yet we, servants of a merciful King—we fail to forgive one another even when the debt is trivial. The comfort of this parable is that God forgives extravagantly; the challenge is that God’s extravagant forgiveness calls us to share God’s gift of forgiveness with others. It’s not easy, and I doubt many of us will manage to forgive 490 times or 70 times or even 7 times; but, knowing God’s mercy for us, could we each start by forgiving once?