

# **Forgiving**

## **Matthew 18:23-35**

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Sermon at St. Luke's Chapel, 23 October 2016

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### **Matthew 18:23-35**

*'Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*

*'At this the servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.*

*'But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded.*

*'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay it back."*

*'But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.*

*'Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on*

*your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*

*'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'*

*When someone wrongs me, it feels as if something had been taken away from me by the other. It feels as if the other had taken away my honour or reputation. Or justice. Or my sense of self-worth. We often do not know how to express this feeling to another. So I rather get angry towards the other, and avenge the wronging by the other. I might think that justice is done when getting back to the other and also taking away something from him. The ancient Code of Hammurabi is a typical example for this: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. If someone wrongs me, I'll pay tit for tat.*

*The consequence of this is usually that the other does not understand that we're even now. That we're quits now. No, on the contrary, now the other feels being wronged by me, and he will avenge my vengeance: thus begins a spiral of revenge, a "vicious circle", which only grows and worsens.*

*This is our natural human way of relating to each other. Naturally, none of us thinks about forgiveness or intends to forgive the other. Because forgiving the other would be like throwing away our belongings without receiving compensation. No ordinary person naturally chooses the way of forgiveness! An ordinary person, whose heart has not been softened and improved, pardoned and renewed by God, thinks and acts in such a way, and does not naturally forgive the other.*

*Of course, we must strive for peace and justice in the world, but perfect justice or righteous compensation for the evil done to us by another person or someone else cannot be achieved in this temporal life.*

*There are many reasons for this. The other person may not have the intellectual or material resources to compensate for the evil done. Or perhaps the other is no longer in the position to make a compensation: for example, he may be already dead or is mentally or physically incapable of putting things right and even between us.*

*That is why the Bible speaks so much about forgiveness. Only forgiveness can heal our broken relationships. Only forgiveness can fix the divisions in our relations with others. Forgiveness and love covers the divide or emptiness between us, which remains after we have attempted to compensate for each other's losses, or after we have tried to pay a compensation.*

*In addition to our relationships, our inner selves are being healed through forgiveness. It is the Holy Spirit that works a supernatural miracle and creates in us the will to forgive. It is always God's work. And let's note that the Holy Spirit can work in all people; God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, as our Lord said (Matthew 5). We cannot limit the work of the Holy Spirit (John 3).*

*Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant is in response to Peter's question: how many times should we forgive? Peter is surprised about the abundance of forgiveness: "As many as seven times?" This, however, is not yet enough for Jesus, and he replies to Peter: "Not seven, but seventy-seven times."*

*Forgiving 77 times means that a Christian must always be ready to forgive. Every day. Every moment. Today's text of the New Testament says: "Forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32).*

*The servant in Jesus' parable was absolutely unreasonable in relation to his king. He was greatly indebted to the king, but did not understand that he would never be able to pay his debts. He went sobbing on his knees and told his master: "Be patient! Yes I will pay you everything." The servant's 10-000 talent debt was, however, astronomical, billions of euros in today's money. At the time of the New Testament, 1 talent was worth 6000 denar. 10,000 talents corresponded to 60 million working days' salary. It has been calculated that at that time the entire tax revenue of Israel was only 800 talents, so the servant's debt was more than ten times the budget of the region.*

*Can you imagine that you should pay ten times of Finland's state debt. You couldn't possibly accomplish this. It would be quite an impossible task!*

*God has forgiven us a huge, infinite debt. Therefore, we must forgive each other!*

*Those debts that we ought to forgive between ourselves are for a pittance compared to the debts that God paid for us!*

*According to Jesus, fraudulent or partial forgiveness is not acceptable. Jesus emphasises this in his parable, as he gives a warning example with reference to the servant's fate: "In anger the king handed his servant over to the jailors, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

*The servant in Jesus' parable was not able to pay his debt on his own merits, therefore, the king pardoned him. The same applies to us: we could never repay the debt, which we owe to God and which he paid for us with Jesus. Without Jesus, we would still eternally be bonded to our debts and enslaved for all eternity. But through Christ we are bought free and adopted as God's children, and we are entitled to*

*inherit eternal life. Paul writes: "You are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir." (Galations 4:7).*

*In Jesus' parable, the king pardoned the debts of the servant, but the servant did not learn from the king's mercy. The servant did not change in his heart, and he did not pass on the message of forgiveness when it was his turn to show mercy and forgive his debtor. The fate of the merciless servant was eternal imprisonment and indebtedness. This may apply to us too: even though we are forgiven through Christ, we may still live in relation to others as if nothing had changed in our lives.*

*Let's face it: we demand from each other more than from ourselves, and we are hardhearted. We do not forgive others, we do not ask for forgiveness from others, and we do not even accept God's forgiveness. If we continue to live our lives without forgiveness, however, we shall await a fate according to our real debts and thus encounter a harsh repayment claim by God. Compared to that, repaying the Finnish state debt would be a pittance.*

*The fact that I should forgive as I have been forgiven is not just a feeling that God puts in my heart, but it is primarily an act of the will. It is first of all a matter of my will, that I willingly decide to forgive.*

*So, I usually forgive because I am willing to forgive, not because I feel that I should forgive! It is also God's will that we forgive those who sin against us. Through the Holy Spirit "it is God who works in us to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose", as the Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:13.*

*You may now be thinking, "Well, I will decide to forgive person X!" This is all right and shall lead you into the direction of forgiving that person. Good if you can think*

*like this and decide to act accordingly. But experience shows that such a general decision and will to forgive is not sufficient to also feel that you forgive the other person. If you do not name the wrong act committed by the other person, then the issue is not clearly encountered. If you do not deal with the issue properly, you won't be able to feel that you have forgiven the other person. Thus, forgiveness may remain a mere expression of the will, perhaps even for a long time.*

*Of course, my will to forgive the other person is necessary, but it can sometimes be a long way that I will be able to also act towards the other person as if nothing had happened. And it can be an even longer journey that I can eventually forgive the other on the level of my feelings. So, it may take several years that my willful act of forgiving another person will actually affect my behaviour and emotional life.*

*Let's illustrate this with an example. A lady in South Korea was paralyzed in the face, the other side of her face was paralyzed. Her husband was a doctor, and he had done all the medical treatments to help his wife getting healed from her facial paralysis. But none of the treatments did actually lead to healing. The lady then talked with her pastor. The talk revealed a great resentment and bitterness of this lady towards her husband's relatives, as these had treated her very negatively and disparagingly. The pastor talked about the fact that God wants to forgive our debts, and he invited the lady to forgive every wrongdoing of her husband's relatives. When the lady finally agreed to do so, she was instantly healed from her facial paralysis. Forgiveness can have very concrete consequences!*

*Healing does not always happen so fast, but it is possible. And that's what God wishes for all of us.*

*Forgiveness, therefore, also involves being healed of our inner wounds. Perhaps we have willfully forgiven someone about something bad that he or she did to us*

*already many years ago, like in the case of the South Korean lady. But nevertheless we may feel that when we remember those bad things from long ago, that the memory of these does still bother us, even today. We would then rather not remember and think of these bad things. We would like to think of something other, nicer things! We may then even think that maybe we have not really forgiven our wrongdoers, at least not on the level of our feelings. And we feel that perhaps we are not really capable of loving the people that wronged us, as Jesus commanded.*

*However, this is not true. We have forgiven our wrongdoers of the past by means of a willful act of forgiveness, and commanded them into the love and under the mercy of Christ, but our inner wounds have not yet healed. And that kind of healing can take long, even many years.*

*Dear brothers and sisters in Christ! Let's be assured that the death of our Lord on the cross on Golgatha has made it possible for you to be forgiven. All our debts and sins have been paid for thanks to Jesus. Our debenture has been cleared, there is no more debt. Why, then, do we sometimes still bear resentment or want revenge against people that have wronged and hurt us in the past? Don't we want to take a step towards healing, towards peace, towards wholeness. And we who've already taken the first step, don't we want to continue to walk on the path of forgiveness and experience God's healing power. And then, don't we, once we have walked the walk of forgiveness to the end, enter eternal life – not by our own merits, but thanks to the work and walk already completed by our Lord Jesus Christ!*

*Let's pray: thanks to you, Almighty God, that you want to forgive all our sins and debts through Jesus Christ. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, that we can go on to continuously forgive those that sin against us, that we may show love and mercy towards them in the short and long run. Thank you that you wish to provide us with your Spirit and be with us always, to the end of the world! Amen.*