

"Merciful Motivation" Matthew 18:21-35 Trinity 22 2022

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus rest upon each and every one of you this day.

What does it mean to forgive? I know most everyone here can offer up a definition, but I'm not asking for the dictionary entry. What does it mean to forgive someone? What does that look like in life? What does that sound like? More importantly, what does true forgiveness NOT look like and sound like? Perhaps the question we need to begin with is WHY do we forgive others? Which automatically leads to the question St. Peter asks of Jesus: How many times do we have to forgive someone who sins against us? There has to be a limit, right?

Let's begin with why we forgive others. The answer is simple. We forgive others because God has forgiven us. We love because He first loved us. Why did the king in the parable forgive that lousy servant? Because that's just who the king was. The steward had nothing to offer the king. All he could do was cry out to the king to be merciful, and the king was merciful. He had pity on the poor schlep. This guy owed him an impossible debt; a debt that can't even begin to be comprehended, let alone repaid (over 240,000 years worth of wages in silver and over 48,000,000 years of wages in gold). And yet... the king forgave it all. He spoke the word, and that was it—forgiven, erased, wiped clean. There was no IOU. There were no caveats or quid pro quos. There was no repayment plan established. The king stood to gain nothing, and would only lose (and lose heavily). And yet... in his mercy and grace, he forgave the guy, totally and completely.

I know I said I wasn't looking for a definition of forgiveness, but that right there is an excellent working definition of what it means to truly forgive. I'm not talking about forgive and forget. You can't forget. If someone hurts you, you will always remember that. It will always be

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there. You can't forget, but you can [and must] forgive. When someone wrongs you, they are indebted to you. To forgive someone is to not exact repayment from them. Even though you may remember what they've done, you don't seek repayment. You don't hold that charge against them. To forgive is to release the debt. This means you can't forgive someone, and then keep going back and seeking repayment. You can't forgive, and yet keep bringing up the sin they committed in an attempt to keep on exacting "payment" from them, be it more contrition and sorrow, more guilt, more apologies... what have you. Either they are forgiven, or they aren't.

Look at this way: What if your Lord forgave you the same way you forgive others? What if God forgave you in incremental measures? What if God's merciful love and forgiveness had a limit/capacity? "Sorry, you've gone over the limit. You're over-drafted. It's all wrath and no grace until the next billing cycle." What if God kept remembering and stewing over and bringing up your past sins/debts, holding them against you, re-establishing the debt and demanding more repayment? "I know I said it's finished. I know I said I forgave you, BUT..." Such behaviour would make God a liar! Such behaviour would ensure our condemnation and damnation. Who could ever repay the impossible debt that is an eternity's worth of sin? Remember: the wage of sin—just one single sin—is death. How can you possibly repay that sinful debt you owe? You can't... which is why God, out of His great mercy and grace, forgives you.

Now, this brings up an important point. God is a just God. He doesn't wink at sin or let simply sin slide. God is a great accountant. When God forgives us our impossible and incalculable debt of sin, it's not that the debt is simply erased from the books. That debt was paid in full with the bitter suffering and death of His own beloved Son. Jesus' blood and righteousness was the currency that paid our debt.

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His blood and righteousness is the ONLY currency that could make satisfaction for the debt of sin—your sin, my sin, and the sin of the entire world.

You need to think on this and let this sink in. This [the crucifix] is what God paid for your forgiveness, upfront. “While we were yet sinners (dead in our sin) Christ died for us.” This is why Jesus is often referred to as our “ransom payment.” God died for your sins. God died so that you could have eternal life. Make no mistakes though: This is all about forgiveness. God has never demanded anything of you before He forgives you. He has never established a repayment plan or merit system that enables you to earn your forgiveness in increments. No! He forgives you. He has forgiven you, in Christ and because of Christ.

“But Pastor... what about the Lord’s Prayer? We pray that God forgive us our sins/debts as we forgive others who are indebted to us.” Well... kind of. You see, that’s kind of a poor translation. The original Greek texts, especially the earliest manuscripts (the ones that still had ink drying while the apostles walked the earth) use the past tense when referring to the forgiveness we show others. Remember: Jesus gave this prayer to His disciples; to those who are already in the faith. As I said at the very beginning, we forgive others because God has forgiven us in Christ and because of Christ. “Forgive us our trespasses/debts, as we forgave those who’ve trespassed/are indebted to us.” God’s forgiveness is not a goal or endpoint. It’s the starting point. God’s forgiveness of our sins is the reason we forgive everyone. The forgiveness we show others flows forth from the forgiveness God has already given us. It sounds weird, but some theologians began translating with a present tense because they didn’t want people wrongly believing that God forgave them their sins only because they had already forgiven others as if God was now indebted to them. I understand why they made the translational change. They had good

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intentions, but the end result is now a bunch of Christians who believe that God will only forgive in proportion to your forgiveness for others. "Forgive us as we forgive others." That's not what our Lord teaches! The king forgives. His forgiveness comes first and is complete and unconditional.

Okay... but then why do we pray to God for forgiveness, especially as it stands in relation to forgiving others? You already know the answer to that! Do you still sin, despite the Good News of your forgiveness? Do you forgive others perfectly... like God forgives you? I don't. I try, but the good I want to do, I don't do, and the evil I don't want to do I keep on doing. Lord, have mercy! Forgive me my debts as I am trying to forgive others!

Therefore we pray to our Father. We don't forgive perfectly. We pray for His strength to help us forgive others; to release the sinful debts incurred against us. We pray for His forgiveness for our weak, corrupted, and imperfect forgiveness of others. He gave His life for them. He paid their sin in full, just as He did for every one of our sins. We cry out to Him to be merciful and patient with us in our own selfish sinfulness... and He is each time. If He's merciful with us every time we cry out, should we not show that same mercy to others who are indebted to us for FAR LESS?

Now... should we take our Lord's forgiveness for granted, it will not end well. "Mercy for me, but not for thee" will not end well. That's just fact. But, again, that's not what this parable is all about. Our Lord is teaching here on the unconditional and incomprehensible mercy and grace of God, our Lord and King. The focus is on the King. To take this Gospel lesson and "law it up" with demands and threats regarding what you need to do to be forgiven completely corrupts and destroys what our Lord is teaching us, His disciples and servants and children. The

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focus must be on our Lord and King; on His mercy, grace, and loving compassion. The focus must be on the forgiveness that is ours in Christ and because of Christ; the assurance and peace of total forgiveness that our Lord and King Himself baptizes us into and nourishes us with in His own Body and Blood. Folks: Here is the reason Christians forgive others! Here is WHY we are forgiven, and here is why we forgive, not occasionally or a certain number of times, but all the time. We forgive because we are forgiven. We love because He first loved us. That's all the reason faith needs.

May this cruciform Good News of your total, complete, and eternal forgiveness grant you peace. Forgive by never forgetting what Christ has done for you. Amen.