

Session 1

CANCELLED

Not seven, but seventy times seven.

Matthew 18:21-35

Imagine owing a debt so vast it feels impossible to repay. Now picture someone erasing it all, offering unimaginable forgiveness. Yet, that same grace is denied to another in dire need. This perplexing scenario unfolds in Matthew 18:21-35, a parable that challenges our understanding of forgiveness.

Have you ever struggled to forgive someone? What made it difficult? Share a time when someone forgave you for something significant. How did it affect you?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT:

Imagine Jesus, surrounded by His disciples, fielding their whispers of ambition. "Who is the greatest?" they questioned, reflecting the social currency of their time. Jesus' answer? A child nestled in his arms. Not a conquering hero, but a symbol of vulnerability, dependence, and trust. This is the surprising lens through which Matthew 18 unfolds, challenging our notions of greatness and unveiling the heart of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus doesn't merely advocate for children's rights. He uses them to expose the pride lurking in our hearts. We are invited to shed the facade of self-sufficiency and embrace the humbling truth: we need each other, and we need God. Just as a child relies on its parents, we depend on God's grace and the community formed by his love.

Yet, the journey doesn't end there. We are called to actively protect and nurture others, especially the vulnerable. Like shepherds leaving the ninety-nine sheep to

seek the lost one, we are urged to prioritize the lost, the forgotten, and the broken. Forgiveness becomes the bedrock of this kind of community. Our Sunday morning environments are not obligatory meetings but are voluntary groups that reflect God's boundless mercy towards us. The parable of the unforgiving servant starkly reminds us that refusing to forgive shackles us to bitterness, while true forgiveness sets us free.

As readers of Matthew 18, we are challenged to confront our own desires for recognition and power. Are we building our lives on the shifting sands of worldly ambition, or are we laying our hearts at the foot of the cross, embracing the humility and service that mark the true citizens of the Kingdom? This transformative chapter doesn't offer easy answers, but it invites us to embark on a journey of self-discovery, fueled by God's grace and guided by the quiet strength of a child's trust.

Read Matthew 18:21-35. Briefly summarize the story in your own words.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE QUESTION WE ALL WRESTLE WITH (Matthew 18:21-22)

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Peter's question reveals a common misconception - viewing forgiveness as a transactional act with limitations and boundaries. He suggests seven times as a reasonable measure, perhaps influenced by societal norms or personal expectations. However, Jesus shatters this limited perspective with a stunning answer: "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven times."

This numerical exaggeration defies any literal interpretation. It symbolizes the radical and unbounded nature of God's forgiveness. Jesus emphasizes that true forgiveness

isn't governed by numerical quotas but by a heart overflowing with the divine capacity to forgive endlessly.

This verse has significant implications for our understanding of forgiveness. It challenges us to move beyond a conditional approach, where forgiveness depends on the severity of the offense or the likelihood of change. Instead, it calls us to cultivate a heart rooted in God's unconditional love and extend forgiveness as freely as we receive it.

However, the verse doesn't imply condoning sin. Forgiveness separates the offense from the offender, offering grace without minimizing the wrongdoing. True forgiveness also requires personal responsibility and reconciliation where possible.

What does Jesus' response to Peter's question reveal about God's desire for forgiveness?

BIBLE SKILL: Compare similar passages on forgiveness.

Compare Matthew 18:21-35 with Luke 15:11-32 and Matthew 6:14

The Forgiven Servant (Matthew 18:23-27)

²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ 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.

²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

A CEO wanting to shore up his balance sheets before the end of quarter is a common rhythm of doing business in our day. Whenever this situation occurs, owners often discover the health of their vendors. Some vendors can pay. Some vendors need another 30 days. Some vendors fail to return calls. Jesus is referring to such a parable in his time and context.

This parable highlights the vastness of God's forgiveness compared to human debts. A business owner might be able to hold off on accounts payable. He might be able to write off particular losses. Or he might take a vendor to small claims court. But rarely are CEOs able to forgive debt entirely. Accountants need to keep record and key stakeholders need accountability.

But God's Grace is bad math. He who has much debt is forgiven. He who has little debt is forgiven. Kindness is always extended. God pleads with us to repent. The accounting doesn't add up. This kingdom math leaves key stakeholders scratching their heads. Grace doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense to us and it doesn't make sense to extend it to others.

God's Grace Is Bad Math.

What do you make of God's deliberate choice to extend grace to everyone, including the worst of sinners?

The Unforgiving Servant (*Matthew 28-35*)

²⁸ "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.

²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Scholars note the parable's connection to debates about forgiveness within early Judaism. Some argue it critiques a legalistic understanding of forgiveness, emphasizing God's unconditional grace. Others see it as advocating for a more relational approach, where forgiveness within the community reflects God's forgiveness. Either way, this type of forgiveness was a radical departure from the kind practiced in early Judaism.

The parable's harsh ending, with the unmerciful servant facing punishment, has also sparked debate. Some see it as a warning against hypocrisy, highlighting the consequences of not extending the same forgiveness we receive from God. Others argue it portrays God's justice alongside mercy, suggesting that while forgiveness is offered, accountability for our actions remains. Grace is still bad math. But that is not mutually exclusive from the Holy Spirit's prompt conviction.

The parable's emphasis on repeated forgiveness (seventy times seven) has been interpreted in various ways. Some view it as a call for limitless forgiveness, while others see it as hyperbole highlighting the ongoing nature of forgiveness within relationships. Whether forgiveness is limitless or ongoing, one thing is for certain – forgiveness will require more of us than we are ready to give. This is why we need a savior who is able to give more than we can ask or imagine.

Imagine yourself in the parable. How would you have reacted in the servant's position? Are there situations in your own life where you struggle to forgive?

APPLYING THE TRUTH

- Grace is bad math.
- God forgives us in an ongoing way with no limit.
- The Holy Spirit reminds us to forgive others in an ongoing way with no limit.
Because Jesus will fill up whatever we are lacking.

Share your personal experiences with forgiveness, both giving and receiving.

Discuss the challenges of practicing radical forgiveness in a world that often emphasizes revenge and justice.

How can we overcome these challenges and cultivate a more forgiving spirit?

As a group or class, what practical steps can we take to move towards a lifestyle of forgiveness, as modeled by Jesus?

Prayer Needs

