

WEEK 8: THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

Matthew 18:21–35



The Place of the Passage

This week we transition from Luke to Matthew. Yet, as in Luke, the events recorded in Matthew 18 take place on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. On the way to his cross, Jesus teaches those who are part of his new community ("the church"; Matt. 18:17) about themes related to life together, including the greatness of servanthood, the covenant of marriage, and the forgiveness of sins.

The Big Picture

The parable of the unforgiving servant provides a summary of an essential part of Jesus' teaching on the radical kind of lifestyle needed for the church to live together in unity and love.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Matthew 18:21–35. Then think through and write your own notes on the following questions. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 1859–1860; online at www.esv.org.)

Why does Peter ask his question, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matt. 18:21)? Put differently, what in the preceding context prompts this question?

What does Peter’s question reveal about his view of forgiveness? Do you view the forgiveness of those who sin against you in the same way?

How does Jesus’ reply (18:22) reveal *his* view of forgiveness?

In the parable, the first servant’s debt is ten thousand talents¹ (v. 24). What does this debt represent?

In light of this astronomical debt, what does the king decide to do? What does the servant do and say that changes the king’s mind? How do the servant’s actions help us better to understand repentance? How does the king’s forgiveness of the debt help us better to understand God’s mercy in Christ?

After the first servant is forgiven, what is shocking about how he treats his fellow servant, who owes him a lot less than he owed the king (“a hundred denarii”;² Matt. 18:28)? Turn to Matthew 6:12. How does the first servant’s behavior disobey Christ’s clear instruction?

When the king (or “master”; Matt. 18:32) learns what has happened, how does he respond?

What do you think is being taught about the nature of the servant's punishment in verse 34? Does the master's anger symbolize God's wrath?

Is the man actually able to pay the debt? If not, does this represent eternal punishment in hell? Is he called a "servant" ("you wicked servant!"; v. 32) because he is still a forgiven Christian in God's sight, or does the statement indicate someone in the Christian community who is not a true believer (see Matt. 7:21–23)?

Last week we defined *end stress* as "the final line in a parable that summarizes or applies the crux of the whole narrative." Below are examples of the end-stress summary maxims that Jesus uses in his parables. Why are these important? What is the specific significance of the end-stress summary in the parable of the unforgiven servant (Matt. 18:35; compare 6:14–15)?

Matthew 20:16	<i>So the last will be first, and the first last.</i>
Matthew 22:14	<i>For many are called, but few are chosen.</i>
Matthew 25:13	<i>Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.</i>
Matthew 25:46	<i>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.</i>
Luke 10:37	<i>You go, and do likewise.</i>
Luke 12:21	<i>So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.</i>
Luke 14:11	<i>For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.</i>

Luke 15:7	<i>There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.</i>
Luke 18:14	<i>Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.</i>

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

ASTRONOMICAL DEBT. Our Lord taught us to pray, "Forgive us our *debts*" (Matt. 6:12; or "sins," Luke 11:4). But how much have our sins indebted us to God? The parable of the unforgiving servant informs us. Our debt is the equivalent to the first servant's debt ("ten thousand talents"; Matt. 18:24), which in Jesus' day was the largest imaginable amount. The implications are obvious. Jesus puts to rest any notion of works-righteousness. It is an unfathomable debt! Who can repay it? The only way that such a debt, and the collective debt of all of God's people (a multitude no one can number), can be forgiven is if Jesus gives "his life as a ransom"³ (20:28)—a full payment—for our past, present, and future sins. On the cross he paid the price. Jesus paid it all.

WE FORGIVE BECAUSE HE FIRST FORGAVE US. There is no mistaking Jesus' radical call to forgive others. We must forgive not seven but seventy-seven times, and always from the heart (Matt. 18:22, 35). In other words, there is really no limit. But where will we get the motivation to fuel this heart-level, boundless forgiveness? Jesus implies the answer with a story about a servant who was forgiven of an unfathomable debt but went on to demand repayment of a relatively minor sum. The point is that an unforgiving heart toward others is inconceivable for those who have been truly forgiven by God. When we see the kindhearted love of our Savior as the full weight of our sins is poured out on him at the cross, how can we then turn around and bitterly refuse to forgive someone else? The forgiveness of God, when truly grasped, transforms us to show this same forgiving grace to others (see Eph. 4:32).

Whole-Bible Connections

LORD. The word "master" in the parable is the Greek *kyrios*, most often translated "lord" throughout Matthew. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of

the Old Testament) it is used of Yahweh more than six thousand times! It is used of God the Father in the New Testament, but also of “the Lord Jesus” or “the Lord Jesus Christ.” For example, when it is said of John the Baptist that he is preparing “the way of the Lord” (Matt. 3:3, quoting Isa. 40:3), this “Lord” is Jesus. Repeatedly, those who seek help from Jesus petition him as “Lord” (e.g., the leper who begs, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean”; Matt. 8:2). Both Matthew’s Gospel and the rest of the New Testament make clear that Jesus “has authority on earth to forgive sins” (9:6). And, to tie into this week’s parable (and this week’s second Gospel Glimpse), Christians “must forgive” one another “as the Lord [*kyrios*] has forgiven” them (Col. 3:13). When Paul refers to the “Lord,” he is invariably referencing the Lord Jesus Christ.

FORGIVENESS IN CHRIST. Believers in the Old Testament received forgiveness for their sins by casting themselves upon God and pleading for his mercy through the sacrificial system and the ultimate sacrifice to which it pointed. Daily and yearly reminders of sin were built into the sanctuary and the sacrificial system (Heb. 7:27; 8:3). And in the new covenant Christ deals with sin once and for all (9:24–28), as God remembers our sins no more (8:12; see also Jer. 31:34). The Old Testament sacrifices pointed forward to the one who would offer himself as a sacrifice for sin (Isa. 53:10; Gal. 1:4). All who turn from their sins and trust in Jesus Christ experience God’s forgiveness (Acts 2:38). In him alone our transgressions are removed, as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12).

Theological Soundings

THE CHURCH AND DISCIPLINE. The Greek *ekklēsia* is often used in the Septuagint to render the Hebrew “assembly,” and in the New Testament it is typically translated into English as “church.” This word, found more than a hundred times in the New Testament, is used only three times in the Gospels, all in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 16:18; 18:17 [2x]). In Matthew 18:15–20 Jesus teaches about church discipline, outlining a process for responding to one disciple who sins against another. First, we must not ignore sin in the lives of Christian brothers and sisters: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault” (v. 15). Second, sins are to be dealt with first personally and privately. Only if there is a refusal to repent should the process progress to a conversation with two others. Then, if necessary, “the church,” the whole believing community (vv. 15–17), should be consulted. Finally, the motivation throughout must be love, and the goal is restoration: “If he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (v. 15). The goal of church discipline for the wayward sinner is repentance and restoration, and the result is a joyful celebration (v. 13). In addition, church discipline protects the peace and purity of the church, signals the importance and seriousness of dealing with sin, and honors and glorifies Christ, the head of the church.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Matthew 18:21–35 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the *Personal Implications* for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) the passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Matthew 18:21–35

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Jesus' parables. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight or underline these to review again in the future.

Definitions

¹ **Talent** – In Old Testament times a unit of weight equaling about 75 pounds (34 kg). In New Testament times a unit of monetary reckoning (though not an actual coin), valued at about 6,000 drachmas, the equivalent of about 20 years' wages for a laborer. In approximate modern equivalents, if a laborer earned \$15 per hour, at 2,000 hours per year he would earn \$30,000 per year, and thus a talent would equal \$600,000 (USD). Hence "ten thousand talents" hyperbolically represents an incalculable debt (\$6 billion, in this example!).

² **Denarii** – Plural of denarius, a relatively small amount of money. A common laborer earned about one denarius per day.

³ **Ransom** – A price paid to redeem, or buy back, someone who had become enslaved or something that had been lost to someone else. Jesus describes his ministry as serving others and giving his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).