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# To Forgive is Human

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 13 September 2026

Romans 14:1-12 • Matthew 18:21-35

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

To forgive, and to forgive from the heart. What is it to forgive from the heart? We immediately say, “Honestly ... when you really mean it.” You say, “I forgive you,” and you really do forgive them. Can it be done? Can we really forgive completely, totally, without reservation? For small things, it’s certainly possible. “I forgive you for taking the last chocolate biscuit.” I shouldn’t have said “chocolate.” That might be unforgivable. OK, “I forgive you for taking the last biscuit.” But for big things? What if a brother or sister turns on you and deceives you and causes you harm, physically or mentally? When you had always been close? Can you forgive? Does it mean that things are exactly the way they were before? Can forgiveness be total, completely wiping the slate clean?

I recall an incident with a family member when I had done something wrong, and they called me on it. I apologised, but they were really angry, and came near to physically assaulting me. Now, I committed the original wrong, but now I felt wronged, because their reaction was so extreme (or so I felt). Now I felt that *I* had something to forgive. We had been close before, but it wasn't the same afterwards. I believe I have forgiven that person, and it was many years ago, although I don't know if they forgave me for the original wrong I did. But I don't know that I have forgiven them from my heart. I still carry a little bit of that hurt. Thus does sin mark you.

In context, Jesus is speaking about the forgiveness of a debt of money, but the money can stand for anything. The wicked slave received forgiveness from his master, but did not extend that forgiveness to the other slave who owed him money. Jesus, as he often does, uses a bit of exaggeration to press his point. The slave owed his master ten thousand talents. According to my commentary, one talent was equivalent to 15 years' wages for a labourer. So ten thousand talents is an unimaginable sum. How could the slave ever become indebted to that extent? But that's not the point. Jesus is simply saying, "A slave who owed his master a large sum was forgiven, but the slave did not himself forgive another slave who owed him a much smaller sum." We are meant to see the difference, not the absolute amounts.

That large amount makes another point. It is not always clear in Jesus' parables whom the various characters represent. Not so in this one. Jesus tells us in the last line: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." The master (or king) is God. Put yourself in the place of the slave, standing before God and acknowledging your debt. Could you ever repay all the blessings God has given you? This story asks us to recognise our debt to God, for our families, our friends, our homes, our very lives — and especially for God's love, which is eternal.

As great as our sins are, God's forgiveness is even greater. God will forgive all sins, individually or collectively. Think back to the cross. Jesus took away all the sins of the world in his one action of dying on the cross. When he died, the doors of heaven were open to us, which formerly were closed because of the sin of the people. The sign of this was the tearing of the curtain of the temple from top to bottom, opening the way for all to enter the holiest place, a representation of heaven. And since then, we have been able to confess our sins to God and be forgiven — not once, not twice, not seven times, but as many times as it takes. God's forgiveness is infinite. But in order to get that forgiveness, we must honestly confess our sins. That's how it works. Just as the king in the parable forgave the slave that absurdly large debt, which would have taken him 150,000 years to work off, God will forgive out sins, small or large.

Because of this, we live in greater freedom. We try to do our best, we try not to sin; but we know that if we do, we can confess and be forgiven. It is not a license to sin, as Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans. God forgives our sins through his grace, and if there is more sin, there is more grace; but should we sin in order to receive grace? God would see that pretty quickly! Sin may be inadvertent, or it may be intentional; but repentance and confession must always be intentional and sincere. It is like a safety net for us. We may go out into the world in confidence, doing our best to serve God through serving his people, because of the freedom the promise of grace gives us.

It's like when I was young and my mother took me to the dentist. It wasn't a pleasant trip, of course; I don't know anyone who *likes* going to the dentist. (Although, the dentist I have now is really good and I don't mind it so much!) It wasn't something to look forward to. But after the exam and the cleaning, the dentist would give me a lollipop (sugar-free, of course!). Now, I wouldn't go to the dentist just to get the lollipop, but in a way it made it OK to go through the discomfort of the visit.

So, in the parable of the unforgiving slave, God promises us forgiveness, if we truly repent. We also see the enormous debt we owe to God: our home, our families, our very lives — a debt we could never repay. Thanks be to God that he doesn't require it of us, as long as we forgive as he forgives. We are to be God-like in forgiveness, which through Christ and the Spirit we are able to be. To paraphrase Jesus, we do not forgive as the world forgives, partially or half-heartedly. We strive to forgive fully from our hearts, and live in peace with our fellows. This is what God expects of us, and what builds the kingdom here on earth. Thanks be to God. Amen.