

**Matthew 18:21-35**

<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup>“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup>When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. <sup>25</sup>And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup>So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup>So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup>He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup>Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup>And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup>So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Revenge. That sweet *sweet* taste of getting back at someone for the wrong they did to you. Everyone loves a good revenge story. Danny Ocean robs not one, not two, but three casinos to get back at one ruthless Las Vegas big wig for stealing his ex-wife from him. Maximus, a former Roman general, is plunged into slavery after being betrayed by the evil emperor Commodus, only to ultimately strike down his arch nemesis in the ring of the Colosseum. The young lion cub Simba, who watched his father Mufasa die by the paws of his evil uncle, Scar, battles his uncle and his posse of hyenas for the honor of his father. And finally, “My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die!” Revenge is sweet! It entertains us, but why? Oftentimes it’s because we can see ourselves as the victim in the story getting back at the wicked antagonist who wronged us.

Yet no matter how sweet that revenge tastes, no matter how satisfying that sensation of getting back at someone feels...revenge is still sin. But how can something that feels so good be so wrong? Because...it’s the polar opposite of what Christ commands us to do. When we are wronged Christ doesn’t tell us to “punch ‘em back and hit ‘em harder than they hit you!” He doesn’t tell us to mark down each time we’ve been sinned against, calculate it up, and then report their tax they owe to you. No. Jesus instead commands us to follow his example. **Because Christ’s Love Throws Out the Calculators.** His love has freely forgiven us, *and* His love empowers us to forgive.

As normal, Jesus is taking time to teach his disciples. In the section before our reading today, Christ teaches them that when someone sins against you to point out their sin to them *but* do so lovingly. You can almost picture the scene, right? Perhaps the disciples are walking and talking with Jesus or maybe they all are sitting in the shade of a tree to escape the warm

Palestinian heat, and after Jesus has talked about lovingly rebuking those who sin against you, Peter perhaps thinks to himself quizzically, “Well, if I have to lovingly rebuke someone who sins against me, that means I have to forgive them. But what if this person keeps sinning against me multiple times? I could forgive them three times probably...no no no Jesus would want me to be more generous than that. How about seven? Seven’s a pretty generous number! If I forgive someone seven times that’s pretty remarkable! But after that no way. Not anymore than that. Eight strikes and you’re out!” **Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”**

Jesus responds to Peter and he says “Not seven times, but *Seventy. Seven. Times.*” And what Jesus is *not* saying is “Peter seven’s pretty generous but you gotta dream a little bigger, my man! Seven times, no sir multiple that by eleven and *then*, after that many times *then* you cut them off.” No that’s not what Jesus is saying at all! He’s not telling Peter that once you get to a certain number then that is when you call it quits on forgiveness, and then after that number you *finally* have permission to take revenge. What Jesus is saying is: forgive. And forgive. And forgive. And don’t stop forgiving. There isn’t a number to how many times you should forgive someone, so stop counting.

Are you a counter? Do you keep a mental checklist of every time that your spouse wrongs you and you’ve forgiven them enough that now you remind them with specific examples of all the times they have not done what you wanted? Do you punch in the numbers of every time your parents were too hard on you and you remind them of that often? Do you keep tally marks of every time your co-worker, your friend, your sibling has bothered you and you shove it in their face when they have done it one too many times? And then when you take a look at that checklist, that only gives you more of a reason to taste sweet revenge, even on the people you are closest to.

Yet for the tally-markers, the calculator-punchers, the list-makers, and the revenge-takers, Jesus has a story for you: There’s a servant, whether he accidentally screwed up a large investment for his master or took out so many loans from him that he lost track, we don’t know. But what we do know is that he owed his master an *impossible* debt to pay back. 10,000 talents! **And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made** Now maybe that doesn’t mean much to you, and how much exactly a talent is we really don’t know. But through historic research what we can say is that what this servant owed his master was **OVER TEN TIMES WHAT KING HEROD’S YEARLY SALARY WAS**. This lowly servant owes his master over a decade’s worth of King Herod’s income, and not only him, but his entire family is going to be sold into slavery over it, and frankly that might still seem rather generous in comparison to what he owes his master. This servant drops to his knees and he begs, he begs for patience. He begs for understanding. He begs for pardon. He begs for more time to pay him back. And...the master cancels it. No return payment required. An impossible debt wiped clean!

Sounds familiar, right? What we owed God was more than a CEO’s income over a decade. It was more than the national debt. Even though those numbers may be big, eventually they end. What we owed God it didn’t end. An eternity in hell. That one time you took revenge, you owed God. That one time when you kept score of other people’s sins and didn’t forgive them, you owed God. And guess what, when you compare your sins to another person’s sins you both still owed God the same debt! But God didn’t leave it like that. Instead, God took the hit on himself, sacrificing HIS OWN SON in the most humiliating way on a cross so that instead of spending an eternity in hell you wouldn’t spend a *second* there! What king in the world would

ever do that? Your king did. And guess what? God doesn't punch in the numbers of our sin into his holy calculator to see how much we owe. He does not make account of our sins as if we have to pay in for some sort of tax. He throws all that out. The ultimate debt forgiveness that puts any mortgage and student loan to shame. Essentially, with this story Jesus is asking his disciples, "Do you realize how generous the Father is?"

But he doesn't just end with God's love freely forgiving us. He goes on, showing us that this love from God empowers us to forgive. Not only "do you realize how generous the Father is?" but also, "Do you realize how generous the Father wants you to be?" The servant didn't learn from his master. When it's his turn to forgive, he checks those tally marks, he puts the numbers into his calculator, he takes revenge. When another man owes the servant substantially less than the servant owes his master he chokes him and throws him in prison! And when the master hears of this, he's livid. He didn't learn his lesson, but just because this servant in the parable didn't, it doesn't mean that we can't learn from it.

Recognize how much God has forgiven you, because when you see how great God's forgiveness is for you, you see how great his *love* is for you. And when you recognize how much God loves you, how can you not love those around you? Forgiven is forgiving, if you fully comprehend how much you've been forgiven then grace will lead you to forgive otherwise. Grace leads us to forgive. Grace leads us to love. And for some of you this may be extremely hard. What some evil people in the world have done to you is horrible and it hurts my heart when I hear about it, but no matter what anyone has ever done to you, that does not determine your story. Christ determines your story. His love has set you free and your identity is found in him.

Jesus spoke in parables, he told stories. The Bible is filled with stories, but it's also filled with your story. Everyone loves stories, and as we can tell through literature and Hollywood, everyone loves a good revenge story, but what about a *great* forgiveness story. The story of God looking directly at you and saying, "*You. I love you.*"