

Many members. One body in Christ.

The Twenty-second Sunday after Trinity
St. Matthew 18:21-35
16 November, Anno Domini 2025

Beloved servants of the most merciful King of heaven and earth,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we draw near to the end of the Church Year and our attention is pointed toward the Last Day of this creation, the day when our Savior, once nailed to the cross in great humility will return in the fullness of His glory to pronounce public judgment of the living and the dead, we hear in the clearest terms a very stern warning from Jesus. “And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matt. 18:35) Forgiveness is serious business, truly a matter of eternal life and death.

If there is one thing that we are absolute in fighting to protect, it is our rights. When we have been wronged, the law clearly says that we have a right to justice. We have a right to fair compensation. We have an expectation that the one who stole from us or injured us will receive a punishment that fits the crime. Even God says “It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” (Deut. 19:21)

Most certainly, the king in today’s parable had a right to demand full repayment. He had a right to throw his debtor in jail. He had a right to seize his wife and children and property. No one would accuse the king of wrongdoing for meeting out such justice. And just as truly, the first servant had a right to the minor debt owed to him. He had just as much of a right as the king did. According to the law, his fellow servant deserved punishment because he had incurred the debt and had defaulted.

But this was a strange king, especially given the truly absurd size of the debt. One might even ask why he had loaned such an exorbitant amount in the first place. This would have been an incredible loss even for a king. At that time, a single talent was the equivalent of approximately twenty year’s wages for the common laborer. 200,000 years of wages was what this king was owed by this servant. Truly an impossible debt. And yet, even though the servant foolishly pled that he would pay the king back if he would just have patience, the king simply wiped the debt clean. He absorbed the entire loss himself and demanded nothing from the

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servant in return. Not. A. Thing. The servant must have thought it was a joke. Who would just forgive a debt like that?! That's completely irresponsible. How would the servant learn not to incur such debts again?

Yet, despite having been forgiven all that debt with a mere word, having been freed from a life of imprisonment and slavery, the man still had the audacity to go and demand repayment of a hundred denarii, which was the approximate equivalent of 100 days' wages for a laborer of the day. Now, just between the servants, that was a significant amount of money. But, of course, next to the debt owed the king it was absolutely nothing. And even though the first servant still technically had a right to every one of those denarii borrowed from him, everyone clearly understands how utterly absurd and evil it was for him to assert that right when he himself had been forgiven so much only moments ago.

The parable isn't hard to understand. "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."(Luke 6:36) The problem is that we struggle and perhaps even seek ways to justify why we are not AS merciful as our Father. Like Peter, we want to be able to shut off the fountain of mercy at some point. But ultimately what we are saying when we withhold true forgiveness from our brother, even though he has sinned against us seventy times seven times, when we say we forgive but make sure to file our brother's sin away in our memory for future use, then we are saying we don't accept God's mercy toward us and we want Him to hold us accountable to our debt to Him.

Our Redeemer tells this parable to Peter who is seeking to protect his rights from a brother who has the audacity to repeatedly sin against him. "How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Aren't I just confirming him in his sin after that?" Peter, like all of us, doesn't understand the true nature of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a disciplinary tool to modify behavior. It is not the carrot at the end of the stick. From God, it is a gift that has no limit. No single sin or volume of sins are impossible for God to forgive. Peter believes that there is and ought to be a limit to mercy. Later, Peter will be praising the God of heaven that he was wrong!

"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. Peter, how often have you sinned against God? How often have you taken the good bestowed upon you and wasted it? How often have you used His blessings for evil or received good from Him and then despised His Word and put your trust in a false god? How often have you grumbled against your Creator and thought to declare yourself god? Can you possibly number your faults? Could you even hope to ever make payment for

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the sins you are aware of let alone those you are not? Have you stopped to consider that even one sin makes you an enemy of God seeking His throne, let alone that every last fiber of your sinful flesh hates God and hates His Word and as such deserves only His righteous and eternal wrath?"

The full magnitude of the debt of our sin cannot even begin to be known by us. If God were to allow us to know it in its fullness we would die immediately of terror and despair. If God were to operate according to His rights as our Creator, He could and should consign us all immediately to the burning prison of eternal hell where never again will we experience even the smallest drop of His goodness and love. Imagining for even a second that there is anything we could offer to God in payment for our sin is madness and arrogance of the highest order, calling God a liar, and considering our sin to be nothing. The wages of sin is death, pure and simple because sin is the rejection of Him who is and who gives life.

Dear brothers and sister in Christ, our Lord speaks these words not to unbelievers but to us who have stood before God in the terror of our guilt and heard the most impossible and extraordinary words "I forgive you ALL your sins." This very day, we have heard this unfathomable declaration from God. Those who believe the commandments of God and take them seriously, who ponder their own lives in light of the commandments and allow them to reveal the awful dark wickedness within will find God's absolution to be the most shocking and wonderful thing they have ever heard. Who would imagine in their wildest dreams that God would absolutely freely forgive my sin, no strings attached whatsoever? Who could imagine that God would gladly and willingly suffer the punishment that we deserve, not so that we could grovel before Him owing Him a different debt, but so that we may be His beloved children and inheritors of His kingdom? This is what all erring churches and religions finally stumble over - that God is truly, fully merciful; that there is nothing we can or must do in order to prepare ourselves to receive this gift or give Him in return. We always want to say "Your sins are forgiven but..." That is not what our Lord says. What He does say is "It is finished. Your sins are forgiven." That is it. The debt is wiped clean in full, not a single penny remains. If even one penny of our debt did remain, we would be lost forever because we cannot pay it. But your sins ARE forgiven, fully and freely. Your debt has been paid not with gold or silver but with the holy, precious Blood and the innocent suffering and death of God's only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Your sins have been removed as far from you as east is from west and God has promised that He will never look at them again. That is the promise of your Baptism. You ARE clean. God Himself has cleansed you and thus you can be certain that it is true. And in a few minutes, we will feast on the Body and Blood

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that suffered every last bitter drop of God's fierce and righteous wrath against our sin to make this forgiveness possible - His very own. He gives you to eat of the sacrifice so that you may be assured that you are a full participant in all of its benefits.

Having been so freed from the impossible debt of our own sin against God and relieved of the terror of eternal judgment, what possible reason could we have for holding any sin against our brother or sister? For what sin could we demand payment? God has forgiven us from the fullness of His heart. How foolish would it then be for us to not forgive each other, truly, from the heart? What a denial of the mercy shown to us if we were to forgive only outwardly while we secretly continue to color our fellow servant with his sin or expect that he will live the rest of his life owing us for our mercy. To the body of Christ, sin that remains between members is a deadly cancer that slowly spreads until it consumes not only those involved but the whole body. Thus our Lord only a few verses before our pericope today gives the formula for reconciling. And the very first and essential step is to put the best construction on everything and go to your brother who has sinned against you and speak, just the two of you, absolutely no one else, and be reconciled. Protect unity, your brother, and the body rather than your pride or rights or even being right. If this step is bypassed and we start involving more people right away the devil will have gained a great victory. On the contrary, the whole body and you with it have gained a great victory if you are lightning quick to forgive and slow as molasses to anger no matter what punishment may be deserved.

The very nature of mercy and forgiveness is precisely that they are not deserved. If something is done to obtain them then they are no longer mercy and forgiveness. Instead, our debtor has paid his debt and is granted the wages he has worked for an earned. And while that is possible among men, it is hopelessly impossible before God. Mercy and forgiveness are our only hope before God and those are exactly what God loves to bestow. He loves to give life. He loves to cover sin. He loves to pay your debt for you and fill you to overflowing with His rich blessings.

And this is exactly what He has freed us to do for one another. It seems foolish. And it absolutely means that we lay down any claim to rights just as our heavenly Father has done for us. It is a monumental, even a divine task. It is not something that we can do of our own power. It is a work that is worked in us as we ponder our own sin against God and then receive mercy from our Father. If it is true what our Lord says "He who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47), then it is also true that whoever is forgiven much, whoever knows that they have been granted a great

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forgiveness, loves much.

You have been forgiven much, even this very day. Likewise, forgive much. Have mercy on your brothers and sisters in Christ who cry out to God with you from the depths of their own guilt and plead for His mercy, who hunger and thirst with you for the forgiveness fed to us in the Holy Communion. This common forgiveness of which we partake binds us to one another. Indeed, by receiving it we are declaring publicly that we are fully reconciled with one another, that no division exists between us and joyfully so because Christ has united Himself to us and fully reconciled us to God.

May God so bless us with the peace of His forgiveness that we, in great eagerness, forgive one another truly, from the heart and so enjoy a foretaste of that perfect unity that will be ours in eternity.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.