

“Let God Lead”

September 13, 2026

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Matthew 18:21-35

There are several things that keep this morning's Scripture lesson from getting a fair hearing. To begin with, it starts out with "a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves." First problem, we don't like kings. We live in the United States of America and we have been raised with a disdain for kings and queens and the whole concept of royalty (except when our daughters and granddaughters want to be Disney princesses. For some reason, that's ok.) Secondly, we not only don't do slavery, but the history of slavery in America has no concept of a king settling accounts with his slaves. Slaves don't have accounts. Slaves don't have money, don't own anything, and have no way of making money to pay off any debts. Thirdly, Jesus' parable uses finances to illustrate forgiveness. We may not do kings and slaves, but we do credit. Being able to borrow and pay back loans is essential in our world. Forgiving those debts would put our financial system into a tailspin. Sure, some of the predatory credit card rates might be seen as evil, but we need our home and auto loans, as well as the system that upholds them. Finally, who do these other busy-body slaves think they are, telling the king that one of his slaves demanded payment of a legitimate loan. That discussion was between A and B and everyone else can just C their way out of it. Stay in your lane.

I invite you to look past all that and try to hear what Jesus is saying. This is not about kings, not about slaves, not about money, and not about tattle tales. Don't get so lost in the characters of the story that you miss the point. Jesus is not exactly being subtle here. Jesus is saying God has forgiven you in a huge way. The amount the initial slave was forgiven is hard to figure, but was somewhere between 10 million and 400 million dollars. You cannot pay that back, so pay it forward by forgiving others. If you do not, you are the person in the story, and God will take back God's forgiveness of you and the harshest of harsh punishments will be yours. Forgiveness is not optional. It is a requirement in this life. Jesus' teaching on this is consistent from chapter 5's Sermon on the Mount that proclaims, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" to chapter 6 when Jesus taught us to pray, "And forgive us our debts/sins/trespases, as we forgive our debtors/those who sin/trespass against us"; forgiveness is conditional. We must forgive in order to keep our forgiveness.

With that said, a couple things to remember about forgiveness. One, forgiveness does not make what the other did acceptable. If someone intentionally hurts us, physically, emotionally, financially, or spiritually, that is not okay. If someone lies to us, cheats us, deceives us; when a marriage vow is broken, when financial agreements are disregarded, when promises are not kept; when a crime is committed, when a future is destroyed, when one person takes advantage of another simply because they can; forgiving them does not make what they did

okay or acceptable. In the same way, when we put our job or our recreation or even our family ahead of God, when we make decisions based on what others have done to us as opposed to what God has done for us, when we make a dollar and don't set aside 10 cents for God; that is not okay. When we misuse the Lord's name, when we covet other people's stuff, when we fail to respond in compassion and love to the stranger, the church member or a member of our family; that is not acceptable. When we hate our enemy, when we judge from how we see things, when we divide into groups; we are hurting God and it is not okay. Just because God forgives us for it, does not make it acceptable.

When God forgives us and we forgive others, it is not saying what was done was okay. Forgiveness is not just pretending it didn't happen either. What forgiveness is giving up your right to retribution – giving up your right to punish them. Forgiveness doesn't excuse what was done, but rather releases personal bitterness, offense, and the desire for revenge so that relationships can be restored. Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness, but of incredible strength.

Another thing we need to remember is forgiveness is part of something bigger. Through the whole 18th chapter Matthew, Jesus is sharing practical wisdom on relationships with the community of faith. The chapter begins with a lesson on humility, moves to caring for the new, the weak and the vulnerable within of the faith community, warns us to stay away from sin, and then moves to how to work with those in the community who sin against you – go to them personally, one on one and talk about it. Only invite others into the conversation if the person to person does not work. Well, the next logical step after helping a person see and change their sinful behavior toward us is forgiveness. The goal of each one of these lessons is to keep the community together and not let isolated issues come between an individual, the church and God. Forgiveness is essential in making that happen, because things are going to happen. Feelings are going to get hurt, toes are going to get stepped on, personality clashes are going to happen. People are going to sin against each other. Once those issues are resolved, forgiveness brings the church together again.

Notice these instructions are for those within the church. Within the church there needs to be both justice and mercy – the change in personal behavior (justice) and the forgiveness which allows them to remain in the faith (mercy). Working with both justice and mercy at the same time is not easy. Perhaps the best example of this on a large scale in my lifetime was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was authorized by Nelson Mandela and chaired by Bishop Desmond Tutu in post-apartheid South Africa in 1996. The racial discrimination and abuse through Apartheid was brutal and not something that could be undone, but with the end of Apartheid, the oppressed and the oppressor had to find a way to move forward as a nation. Traditionally, when the formerly abused, oppressed, enslaved people came to power, they used that power for a revenge tour. They arrested, abused, oppressed, and murdered those who arrested, abused and murdered them. But under Mandela and Bishop Tutu's leadership, former

abusers were given an opportunity to see what they had done and show remorse. Both party leaders and foot soldiers were given the opportunity to come before the commission and both name and take responsibility for wrongful, wounding conduct. Those who were able to recognize their role in these human rights violations and take responsibility for what they had done were forgiven – no retribution, no jail time, no having to leave the country – forgiven. It was justice and mercy in a way that allowed the community to move forward together. Those whose pride kept them from seeing their human rights violations or who refused to take responsibility for their actions were brought to the regular court system and sentenced by traditional means, but the commission offered forgiveness. Of course the commission's work was not without its detractors and critics, but it found a way for former enemies to move forward as neighbors. And isn't that God's goal in forgiving us? That we and God could move forward together.

Now there is no question, there are other significant side-effects that come with forgiveness. Perhaps the leading one was originally recognized by Lewis B. Smedes who studied people who had been hurt by others and how they often brewed and stewed and plotted and planned and became obsessed with revenge. And how when those same people forgave the person who hurt them, they set a prisoner free. And the prisoner in question turned out to be themselves.

Our own healing is an incredible side-effect of forgiveness, but that is not why we do it. We do it because God has forgiven us first, and Jesus requires it. It is kind of ironic that last week we celebrated the God who, after the great flood, pledged to never give humans what they deserved or do to them what they did to God, but rather be compassionate and life-giving because that is who God is. God will be God and do Godly things in Godly ways regardless of what we do to provoke God. Ironically in today's story, the slave was supposed to forgive his fellow slave because the king forgave him. You know, do unto others as has been done to you. Which is the opposite of last week. So which is it? Do we do unto others what has been done to us (this week's lesson), or do we just do us, and not be affected by what others do to us (last week's lesson)? The difference between the two stories is who the other person is. In the flood story, the other person was a human, with "every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts only evil continually." A human. God pledged not to respond to them in kind. In today's story, the other person is God. God is the one who forgave an insurmountable debt and says because I forgave you, you should forgive others. The criteria is actually the same. If the other one in the story of our lives is a person, respond not by what they have done, but by what God has done. If the other in our lives is God, respond not by what you as a human would do, but by what God has done. Always go with God. Let God lead, and you follow. That is what it means to be a Jesus follower.

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