



Preach **Matthew** notes

(Year A Proper 19)

RELATED

Gen 50:15-21
Ps 103:(1-7)8-13
Rom 14:1-12

CONTINUOUS

Ex 14:19-31
Ps 114 (or canticle)
Rom 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35 (NIV) The Parable of the Two Debtors

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

In this parable the theme of financial indebtedness, an ever present reality in Jesus' day as in ours, is used to illustrate the theme of forgiveness. The Greek verb *aphienai* literally means to cancel a debt and comes to mean forgiveness. By taking a back bearing from the understanding of forgiving grace taught in the parable we can draw some conclusions about handling financial matters in the light of the kingdom life to which Jesus calls us.

Matthew has brought together a parable from his own source material and a saying of Jesus in 18:21-22 in answer to a question from Peter about the limits of forgiveness. This saying has a parallel in a saying of

Jesus in Luke 17:4 which Matthew has edited to now be a question on the lips of Peter. Some point to an inconsistency between the saying of Jesus and the point of the parable: while Peter is urged to forgive without limit, the lord in the parable forgives only once. Others suggest that in the original parable the debt to be repaid was a more realistic sum and that Matthew has exaggerated by inserting "many talents" – making the debt an impossible sum of money to repay. Both interpretations appear to miss the point of the parable.

The phrase "many talents" is deliberate hyperbole. This is a debt that could never be paid and the offer to repay is entirely inadequate to the debt incurred. The



servant asks for time, what he encounters is grace and mercy. The debt is cancelled and he and his family are set free. The key word here is grace, which in this context means forgiveness and release from an unpayable debt. This is the heart of the Gospel; with release should come both freedom and joy.

But an encounter with grace brings a corresponding obligation. The heart of the parable is v33 – “should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?” This imperative of grace is expressed by the Greek word *dei* (it is necessary). This same Greek word is found in Mt 16:21 where it stresses the divine necessity of Jesus suffering and death. But we must be clear that the obligation of grace is not to repay an impossible debt but to extend that same grace to others. We are not invited to compensate for grace received by giving something back but to embrace the grace that freed us and extend it to others.

Here in this parable that grace is not extended and a second servant with minor debt is

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imprisoned. This is despite a plea for mercy in v 29b the wording of which is identical to the request for time to pay made by the first debtor. If we do not believe that we are truly debtors then we cannot grasp the gift of grace for ourselves and we cannot extend that grace to others. The illusion of self-sufficiency, the feeling that we are in charge is a poor conductor of grace. The plea is for time to pay; the need is for forgiveness and release. When people find themselves in serious debt (and millions do) recognising the problem is the beginning of the solution. But the temptaion to deny a problem exists

by ignoring letters, blaming other people or falsely believing it is under control mask recognition of the real problem.

The economics of grace is cyclical. In extending grace there is the promise of blessing, a deeper experience of the saving and renewing grace of Christ. By contrast there is a judgement on those who will not extend that grace. This is not a vindictive punishment but the retention of the debt incurred. The experience of grace should result in the extension of grace. Grace not extended is grace not received.

▼
Peter proposed a rich and generous rule of life; Jesus called him to grace.

For the Pharisees forgiving three times was sufficient. Peter’s offer of seven times was born of a glimpse of grace but even this generosity is inadequate. Jesus calls Peter to forgive seventy times – or even seventy times seven. The Greek phrase is found in Genesis 4:24 where it is used of unlimited vengeance; here it is used to express unlimited grace in forgiveness. Peter proposed a rich and generous rule of life; Jesus called him to the extravagance of grace.

Stewardship reflections

The parable uses a shocking and unrealistic method of handling financial debt as an illustration of the liberty of grace that God brings. Those who are in the community of grace will need to handle money in a gracious way, a manner different to the worldly-wise ways we have learned.





Core

We can understand Peter's need to put a price on generosity - seven times? We need to know what we ought to do. But Peter was called beyond calculated generosity into grace. To be true to grace we need to move beyond the question, "how much I should give back to God?" It is important that church members are aware of financial need to enable a realistic response. Ambiguity about actual cost is fatal. But as we mature in discipleship and therefore in our attitude to giving we need to ask a deeper question: "does my giving really reflect who I am and what I have received from God?" In practical terms we need to begin ask, "What proportion of my income should I be giving to God?"

Congregation

Sharing is the key to receiving blessing. Failure to share means that we will ultimately lose what we ourselves have received. This is no different from Jesus teaching in the Lord's Prayer that the forgiveness of our own sins is in some manner related to our willingness to forgive others. It is not a threat; Jesus is simply saying that this is how grace works. This is also true of the totality of our discipleship – our treasure no less than our time and our talents.

Fringe

A parachute jump does not actually involve any jumping – but it does involve letting go of the plane to experience something new and exciting - and terrifying! This parable asks us to let go of being in charge, of believing that we have all the answers and to find a new freedom and joy. It is not easy to let go

but it is worth it. So too learning to give, to let go of our money is not easy but the freedom and the joy that giving brings is worth the cost. ■

