

September 13, 2026
Matthew 18:21-35

Pentecost 16
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Heart of the Matter”

“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 beginning of a new school year always brings back memories of my years as a student and what greeted me when I returned to school, both during my years as a student in my hometown and later in university and seminary. One of the memories that comes to mind was during university orientation, when new students were introduced to what the school called the “Rule of Four.” It dictated that in all classes, any paper or assignment that contained four or more errors – spelling, grammatical, or otherwise – would immediately receive a failing grade. Students were able to correct and resubmit the assignments, but it was an uncompromising rule that forced students to be very careful in reviewing their work before submitting it. Even though no one liked this rule, it did discipline us to be careful in our work so that what we submitted was an assignment that reflected not only our mastery of the subject matter but the care we took in making certain that our work was free of careless errors.

While I am not aware of any other school who enforces a “Rule of Four,” there are many circumstances in which there is a limit placed on how many times a person can make an error before a punishment is inflicted upon the offender. As, even people who are not fans of baseball know the rule of “three strikes and you’re out,” many organizations and communities have adopted “Three Strike Rules” to set limits on tolerance of errors or judgment or negligence in one’s duties. There is even evidence in the history of Israel that rabbis adopted a “Three Strike Rule” in which it was considered sufficient for a person to forgive the transgressions of another person three times for the same offense. This is the context in which Peter asks Jesus about the limits of forgiveness in today’s Gospel lesson: *“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”* (Matthew 18:21). Peter’s question immediately follows Jesus’ teaching on now the faith community is to pastorally address the problem of serious sin within the congregation, with the focus always being on repentance, renewal, and reconciliation. Peter’s question shifts the focus on how a person is to respond when a brother or sister sins against them personally. Matthew presents this episode in the form of a pronouncement story which serves to guard the community from rigid or

vindictive application of any rules of conduct; “*only a community that operates in this spirit may act according to 18:15-20.*” (M. Eugene Boring).

Peter’s proposal to forgive sins seven times sounds generous on the surface, especially since there is no mention of repentance by the offending party (unlike the teaching in Luke in which Jesus states that “*if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.*” – Luke 17:4). The offer of sevenfold forgiveness reverses the sevenfold pronouncement of vengeance in Genesis in which Lamech recalls the fratricide of Cain and his concern that he would be killed for murdering his brother Abel: “*Then the LORD said to him, ‘Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.’*” (Genesis 4:15). Peter may have understood his suggestion of a sevenfold forgiveness to not only be generous but based on the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount: “*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*” (Matthew 6:14-15).

But Jesus’ response is not to congratulate Peter for his generosity of forgiveness but to teach all in his presence that true forgiveness sets no arbitrary limits on how often a person may receive absolution, no matter how generous the offer may be: “*Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’*” (18:22). The number Jesus cites can be translated as either “seventy-seven times” or as “seventy times seven.” (18:23). But this should not be understood as merely the proposal of a higher limit to forgiveness; the phrase is really shorthand for an unlimited amount of forgiveness (like stating that we are taking something to the “nth degree”). The difference between Peter’s proposal and Jesus’ pronouncement is not a matter of math or linguistics, but of the nature of forgiveness. Whoever counts the number of times they have offered forgiveness has not forgiven at all but is merely biding their time. The kind of forgiveness that followers of Jesus are to practice is beyond all calculation. As Cain’s descendants responded to their enemies with unlimited vengeance (“*If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold*” – Genesis 4:24), Christians should respond to sins committed against them with unlimited forgiveness.

- “God’s kingdom, the forgiveness of sins, has no limit, as the text of the Gospel so beautifully shows when Peter asked his question of the Lord ... since God in his kingdom forgives us so much out of sheer grace, we ought also to forgive our neighbour a little.” – Martin Luther, 1524.

To illustrate his point, Jesus tells a parable about a king and an unforgiving servant in which *“the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.”* (18:23). The servant in this story is not a household slave but one who is responsible for the management of the king’s finances. The enormous debt that was incurred happened through mismanagement of the king’s resources and/or failing to raise taxes from subject nations, not by personal expenditures. The figure that Jesus cites – *“ten thousand talents”* – is not a realistic figure; it would have exceeded the taxes for all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria. It is an amount that is *“fantastic, beyond all calculation”* (Boring); it is unpayable, utterly beyond the possibility that the servant can repay this debt, no matter how much time he is given. When the king discovers that his servant cannot repay this debt, *“his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made”* (18:25). The enslaving of debtors was a common practice in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman world and cited frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures:

- “Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, ‘Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves.’” – 2 Kings 4:1.
- “Thus says the LORD: Where is your mother’s bill of divorce with which I put her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? No, because of your sins you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was put away. – Isaiah 50:1.
- “Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals” – Amos 2:6.

When the king ordered the servant and his family to be sold into slavery, the servant falls on his knees and begs for more time to repay this unpayable debt: *“So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’”* (18:26). While both the king and the servant know that there is no way that this enormous debt can be repaid, the story takes a surprising turn when *“out of pity for him, the lord of the slave released him and forgave him the debt.”* (18:27). The servant’s situation is hopeless. He begs for forgiveness, knowing that such a request is futile; but *“contrary to all expectations, the king responds with compassion”* (Boring).

We would expect that this servant would be overjoyed after this experience of being forgiven such an enormous debt and would in turn be forgiving of others, but this is not what happens when moments after the weight of debt is lifted off his shoulder

when *“that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii”* (18:28). The debt of this fellow servant was microscopic compared to the debt that the first servant had been forgiven; a denarius was the *“usual daily wage”* (20:2) for a labourer in the ancient world (*“I will pay you a drachma a day as wages, as well as expenses for yourself and your son.”* – Tobit 5:15) but it was barely enough to maintain a family at a subsistence level. One hundred denarii would have represented over three months’ wages; while it was @ 600,000 times smaller than what the first servant owed the king, it was not a small amount for this person to repay. When this fellow servant falls to his knees as the first servant had before the king and pleads with him to *“have patience with me, and I will pay you”* (18:29), we would expect that the servant who had just been forgiven his enormous debt would in turn be as magnanimous in forgiving this much smaller debt owed him. But such is not the case; instead, after he violently seized him by the throat, *“he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt.”* (18:30). The outrageous contrast between the way the first servant is treated by the king and the way this servant in turn treats his fellow servant is not merely a contrast between the sums owed. There was no reasonable way the first servant could have repaid his debt; he could only be condemned or receive mercy. The one who received mercy does not respond to the second as he had been treated by the king; this act of condemnation is noticed by his fellow servants, who *“were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord what had taken place.”* (18:31). Not surprisingly, when the king hears of the conduct of his unforgiving servant he is outraged and summons the servant back into his presence. This time, there is no mercy shown to the one who refused to show mercy to his fellow servant; instead, the king pronounces the harshest sentence on the one who showed harshness to the one who had begged him for the same forgiveness he had once received:

- *““You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.”* – 18:33-34.

This is essentially a life sentence since there is no way the servant could repay this enormous debt. He is condemned to the harshest of punishments, a life imprisoned and tortured by Roman tormentors who would make his remaining days a living hell, a fate similar to the rich man who had ignored the poor man at his gate and found himself *“in Hades, where he was being tormented”* (Luke 16:23). Both parables serve as a cautionary tale that *“so my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”* (18:35). As Jesus had responded to Peter by teaching that our forgiveness of others must be as

generous and limitless as God's forgiveness of us, so disciples should forgive fellow disciples limitlessly because God has forgiven us without limit. This forgiveness must not merely be in words' forgiveness must be interior and genuine, flowing from the heart, the inner core of a person. It is the teaching at the heart of the petition in the Lord's Prayer in which we pray that God will "*forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*"

- "We ask in this prayer that our heavenly Father would not regard our sins nor deny these petitions on their account, for we are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it. Instead we ask that God would give us all things by grace, for we sin daily and indeed deserve only punishment. So, on the other hand, we too truly want to forgive heartily and to do good gladly to those who sin against us." – *Small Catechism*.

The parable of the unforgiving servant exemplifies a traditional Jewish teaching known as *kai vahamer*; a logical deduction from the lesser to the greater. Jesus' parable asks us that if God is willing to forgive the countless debts of humanity, how much more should we forgive the lesser amount of sin we encounter in our personal experience? Such an expectation can be heard in a teaching of the sage Jesus ben Sira written in the apocryphal book of Sirach:

- The vengeful will face the Lord's vengeance, for he keeps a strict account of their sins. Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does anyone harbour anger against another and expect healing from the Lord? If people have no mercy toward those like themselves, can they then seek pardon for their own sins?" – Sirach 28:1-4.

Forgiveness is at the "heart of the matter" for Christians. We believe that we have been forgiven the debts we have incurred through our own sinfulness not by our own actions, but by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. As like the unforgiving servant we were faced with a debt we could not pay, so also have we received full pardon and forgiveness of the weight of our sins not by our own actions but by what God has done for us through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our being "*justified by grace through faith apart from works prescribed by the law*" (Romans 3:28) is at the heart of our Lutheran understanding of the grace of God that is rooted in the teachings of St. Paul in Romans:

- "But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all

have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith ... For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. – Romans 3:21-28.

Shortly after he was elected as head of the Roman Catholic Church in 2013, Pope Francis traveled to World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro where he spoke of the importance of mercy in the life and work of the church. As God has been merciful to us in Jesus Christ, we as God's people in turn need to show mercy, grace, and forgiveness to others:

- : Mercy is in reality the core of the Gospel message; it is the name of God himself, the face with which he revealed himself in the Old Testament and fully in Jesus Christ, incarnation of Creative and Redemptive Love ... Everything that the Church says and does shows that God has mercy for man.”

Luther taught of the importance of confession and forgiveness in the life of the Church, rooted in our baptismal identity in which we are born anew as children of God through water and the Word. Since those who have been chosen as God's holy people are also human beings who sin and fall short of the glory of God, we return to the Lord to confess our sinfulness and to receive the assurance of forgiveness of sins. In many congregations, the regular practice of repentance and forgiveness is followed by the sharing of the peace, in which we seek to be reconciled to one another as we have reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. It is a reminder that as we have been forgiven by God of the enormous weight of sin that has once alienated us from God, we in turn need to be forgiving of one another so that we might be the “ambassadors of reconciliation” that Christ desires for his church.

- “In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus makes the first slave's debt the immense amount of twenty talents, which would be nearly impossible for a single person to pay down. Yet Matthew portrays Jesus' life as a super-abundant offering for the collective debt of his people Israel. On the basis of Jesus' payment on his people's behalf, Matthew expects grateful Christ-followers to offer vast amounts of forgiveness to those who would transgress against them.” – Nicholas J. Schaser.

I do not know if my university still enforces the “Rule of Four” (I was a student long before spellcheck and the advent of artificial intelligence filters) but the rule served the purpose of disciplining me in my writing and use of language. While such rules

may have their place in their academic settings, there is no place in the life of the people of God to place restrictions on our forgiveness of others or the manner which we offer the grace of God that has been poured out upon us without limit by our God of steadfast love. As there is a “wideness in God’s mercy,” may the mercy we share be as wide and limitless as the grace we have received from our God who is “*gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*” (Joel 2:13).

Amen.