

Matthew 18:21–35 (Trinity XXII)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
November 13, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Our Gospel lesson this morning comes right after our LORD outlines how to deal with sin in the church. If your brother sins against you, tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. If he does not listen, take some witnesses along. If he refuses to listen to them, take it to the church. And if he refuses to listen to the church, have nothing to do with him anymore. When someone simply will not be reconciled, we commend them to God, shake the dust off our feet, and move on. The last step of this operating procedure for dealing with sin in the church is known as excommunication. It rarely reaches that point because generally when people get upset they simply go to a different church or they give up on church altogether. Our age considers church a social club, an extracurricular activity that can be forfeited when it becomes uncomfortable or difficult. Unfortunately, a spirit of indifference even prevents many from taking those first steps towards reconciliation: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” For whatever reason, whether conflict avoidance or ignorance of God’s Word, many in the church will not confront sin when they see it, even though Jesus tells us step by step what to do.

Peter’s response to our Lord’s instructions also gives a clue as to why many avoid dealing with sin, even in the church. People refuse to seek and offer reconciliation because they do not understand the depth of our sin, nor do they understand the depth of God’s mercy. Peter came up to Jesus and said: “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Our fallen human nature turns us into legalists. As sinners, we are always

quantifying and counting, asking: “How much?” How often do I have to go to church to be considered a Christian? How many good things do I have to do to make up for the bad things? How much do I have to give? How many times do I have to forgive someone before I say: “Enough!” Even as Christians, the Old Adam in us wants to know the bare minimum we are expected to do. Then we can check those boxes off our list and move on to what *we* want to do. The sin that still clings to us in this life turns our focus inward, on ourselves and on our desires, and away from God and our neighbor.

So how many times are we to forgive the one who sins against us? Up to seven times? Jesus responds: “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven?” So 490 times? The sinful legalist within us is still looking for a number! Our Lord’s point is that we forgive any and every time someone sins against us. It doesn’t matter how little or how often, how small or how great the sin is. Anytime someone sins against you and is willing to be reconciled, anytime the person listens to the witnesses or to the church, then you have gained your brother. And even if someone refuses to be reconciled and leaves the church or is excommunicated, we on our part maintain an attitude of love and reconciliation. The goal is to bring that person back into the fold. Excommunication is not a punishment or God’s final verdict on that person. It’s supposed to be a wake up call to bring openly unrepentant sinners back to the forgiveness we have in Jesus Christ.

To illustrate the unlimited nature of God’s forgiveness and how we ought always forgive those who sin against us, Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant. The king wished to settle accounts with his servants. God wished to settle our account. The first servant owed the king 10,000 Talents. This sum is beyond anything you could wrack up in your lifetime from student debt, credit card debt, your house mortgage, and anything else you can think of. 10,000 Talents would be something like 3.5 Billion Euros/Dollars today. One Talent comes out to about

16.5 years of labor, so just multiply that by 10,000. This servant incurred a debt he obviously could never repay, even if he lived thousands of lifetimes.

The servant's unimaginable debt is a picture of the unimaginable weight of our sin. James 2:10 says: "whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it." You can't just break one little part of the Law. You either break the Law, or you don't. It all hangs together. When you sin, you become a transgressor of the Law. So even if we could quantify our sin and count the exact number, it wouldn't matter because just one sin is enough to condemn us to Hell. And how often do we sin? Everyday we sin not just once or twice. Anyone who truly reflects on God's Law and on the power of sin in our lives will recognize we've incurred a debt we could never pay. Our sinful lives are held up to the standard of God's holy Law and we are found wanting, not just a bit, but entirely. The King's servant cannot repay his debt, and so he and his family are to be thrown in prison. Our fate is even worse. The wages of sin is death, both now and eternally.

When the servant understood the weight of his offenses, he fell on his knees imploring the King: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." Of course, the servant could never pay back his debts. We, too, are crushed by God's Law and the eternal gravity of our sins is too much for us to bear. And yet we are so deluded as to think we can somehow, someday make it up! But out of pity for the servant, the King released the servant and forgave the debt. Whatever the servant owed, the master put on his own account. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Forgiveness of sins is free for the sinner, but costly for God. Our Lord Jesus Christ suffered for the debt of sin we owe. He took our sins and our offenses, our debts, upon Himself and suffered our punishment on the cross. Jesus paid the ultimate price to free us from the eternal death we deserve for breaking God's Law. The eternal weight of our sin is then canceled out by the eternal redemption we have in Jesus Christ.

And yet, what does that same servant who had his massive debt forgiven do with his newfound freedom? He turned around and found a fellow-servant who owed him 100 denarii, or 100 days wages—still a large sum, somewhere in the tens of thousands, but not impossible to repay like the 10,000 talents. Instead of forgiving the fellow-servant as he had been forgiven, this unforgiving servant demanded repayment, going even further than the master by throwing his fellow-servant into prison. The unforgiving servant refused to treat another as he himself had been treated. He owed his master everything—his life, multiple times, and the lives of his family members—yet the master forgave him. And this man could not forgive another servant such a miniscule debt by comparison. The King caught wind of what happened and threw the unmerciful servant into prison until he could pay the last penny—an impossible task.

Jesus closes the parable with a warning: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” To refuse to forgive what others have done to us after God has forgiven us our eternal debt is to despise God’s forgiveness. Yet, the old Adam, our sinful nature that still clings to us, prompts us to magnify the offenses of others. Sin blinds us to God’s forgiveness and tempts us to withhold forgiveness from others. And so Jesus cannot be any clearer in His warning: A Christian who refuses to forgive is no longer a Christian. As we pray daily in the Lord’s prayer: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Jesus explains this petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:14–15). If God did not forgive us without stopping, we would be lost. So how could we fix a limit on the number of times we forgive someone else?

We are still tempted to quantify God’s grace just as we are tempted to quantify our sins. We sometimes think of sin and grace as transactions, that each sin costs so much, sometimes

more, sometimes less. But God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus is like a well that never runs dry, like an ever-flowing stream. Anytime the knowledge of our sins burdens us, we have access to the eternal forgiveness in Jesus Christ. This ever-flowing stream of God's forgiveness then flows through us to other people. We don't quantify our sins and God's forgiveness because God does not. In the same way, then, we do not measure sins against us or the forgiveness we have for others. Instead, we are kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave us (Eph 4:32). As Jesus says in Luke 6[:36]: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

Only in Christ Jesus do we learn how to endure patiently when we are mistreated or sinned against. Jesus never sinned against God or other people. He is the only one to live a perfect life. But look at how Jesus suffered in His innocence. His perfect love was met with hatred. His innocence was despised and rejected. And yet even when hanging from the cross, Jesus could pray: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). There, at the cross, we see the depth of our sin, but we also see the depth of God's forgiveness for us. Jesus could look lovingly upon those who were torturing and killing Him, and pray that our Father in Heaven would forgive their sins. Jesus loved His enemies to the very end, even dying for them. Dear Christians, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:11). In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.