

<sup>21</sup> 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?”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ <sup>27</sup> The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

<sup>28</sup> “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.

<sup>29</sup> “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

<sup>30</sup> “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

<sup>32</sup> “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ <sup>34</sup> In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

<sup>35</sup> “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

“How much should I forgive?” Peter asked. And there’s a reason he asked it. See, Jesus had just gotten done teaching his disciples about what to do when a brother sins: Rebuke him, call him to repentance, assure of God’s forgiveness. And Peter’s still thinking about that. So...what if the sin is against *me*? And what if it happens more than once? “Just **how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?**”

The Jewish rabbis in Jesus’ day – they had an answer to that question. How much should you forgive? “Three sins,” they said. If someone sins against you once, forgive him. If someone sins against you twice, forgive him. If someone sins against you three times, forgive him. But four strikes, and they’re out! You no longer owe that person any forgiveness.

So, Peter, he poses the question, but he offers his own answer. “Up to seven times?” Peter thought he was showing Jesus how good he was. “Not just three times, Jesus...three times two, and add one for good measure.” Maybe he expected Jesus would pat him on the back and say, “Wow, Peter, you’d forgive that much? That’s so gracious of you.”

But Peter’s question showed a problem in his heart. Do you see it? If Peter wants to put a limit on forgiveness, does he really want to forgive? I mean, think about it, if Peter was eager to forgive others, he wouldn’t even ask, “How much do I have to forgive?” No, the question shows he’ll forgive if

he has to, but grudgingly. And only to a point. He's attaching a condition to his forgiveness: "If you shape up after 7 times, I'll forgive, but if you haven't learned your lesson, well..."

Friends, are you starting to see why we need Jesus' words in this lesson just as much as Peter did? Our "forgiveness" too often looks more like Peter's. We already know the answer Jesus gives to Peter's question: "**Not seven times, Peter, but seventy-seven times.**" In other words, your forgiveness should be as limitless as God's. We know the answer to the question – that's not the problem. The problem is we share the same heart behind Peter's question. A heart that really isn't eager to forgive. That thinks of it as a "have-to," not a "want to." That forgives grudgingly. A heart that attaches conditions to forgiveness: "If he apologizes, I'll forgive him." "If she shows she's sorry, I'll forgive her." "Just don't let it happen again!"

So, thankfully, Jesus does more than just answer Peter's question. He sets out to change our hearts, our whole way of thinking about forgiveness. I'd imagine Peter's jaw dropped when he heard Jesus say, "Seventy-seven times." If we're honest, ours do, too. That kind of forgiveness is totally unreasonable to us. If someone hurts us once a day for a week, are you still forgiving by day seven? Now add ten more weeks of daily hurt...can you imagine saying on day 77, "I forgive you?" Who in their right mind could forgive that much?

And Jesus looks at us and says, "Let me tell you about a king." The kingdom of heaven is like, he says. In other words, I know how things work in this world, but in my kingdom, things are totally different. The kingdom of heaven is like a King settling accounts with his servants. He brings everyone in to check the accounts, see what is owed him, and what he owes. They brought one man in, and they looked up his debt: 10,000 talents. Know how much that is? If it's gold, it'd be like \$11 billion dollars today. Your first thought might be: how could you possibly rack up a debt like that? Jesus wants you to think that – this debt is so enormous it's ridiculous. Clearly, he has no hope of ever repaying it.

So the king issues a very just judgment. To recuperate a little of what he's owed, he says, "Sell him. Sell his wife, kids, into slavery, sell everything else he has, and apply it towards his debt." But when that man saw his freedom, his children's freedom, everything he has slipping from his hands, he falls to his knees, begs for mercy. "Just give me time, and I'll pay it all back." Now, how ridiculous is that. If you owe \$11 billion, you'd need something like 150,000 years wages to pay it back. This guy is never gonna be able to pay this back. He begged the king for mercy...but what good would that do him?

No, the king didn't just show mercy...he gave him grace. His heart fills with compassion...and he doesn't just not punish this man. He does more. He says, "Cancel the debt – all of it." Think about that. The words make it sound easy, but you do realize that by canceling the debt...this king is deciding to take the hit himself? Shoulder the \$11 billion loss this guy was responsible for? And he does it in a heartbeat, such is his compassion for this man. No conditions. No strings attached. Just gone.

Friends, the only thing more amazing than the story is the reality behind it. The parable isn't that hard to figure out, is it? The King is God. We're the servants. And the debt...well that you know. It's all those sins we've been piling up with God. How could anyone rack up an \$11 billion debt? Well...we know. It's a lifetime worth of sin. Day after day of time wasted, prayers left unsaid, good left undone...day after day of thinking and saying and doing what we shouldn't, and not thinking and saying and doing what we should. A lifetime's worth of sin that God says is piled up before him like an \$11 billion debt. And even if we had a thousand sinful lifetimes to repay it, we never could – it would just get bigger.

And so God responded in the most inexplicable way. He looked at us, who had nothing to plead but "mercy," and his heart was full of compassion. And he gave us more than mercy. He gave us grace.

He decided to cancel the debt. Of course, he knew what that would mean. It would mean taking the hit himself. Shouldering the debt that we were responsible for, suffering the loss we deserved. But such was his compassion for you that he did it in a heartbeat. Every last dime you owed, every last sin you accrued, Jesus took up as his own. And when by suffering what we deserved for it, he did what we in 10,000 lifetimes never could. He paid the debt in full.

Isn't it incredible? I mean, when put ourselves in this parable, we should look up and see God giving us the harsh but very just judgment that says, "You can't pay it, so you'll spend eternity paying for it in hell." Instead, we look up and see the king loving and smiling and saying all because of Jesus, "Debt canceled. Sins gone. So far gone I don't even remember them anymore." That doesn't make any sense! If someone owed you \$11 billion, it'd be hard to forget it, wouldn't it? God paid it off in full, in Christ, and when he looks at you, he doesn't even remember it anymore. He treats you as if it never existed.

Do you see what Jesus does, with Peter, with us? He doesn't just answer the question, "How much should I forgive?" He tells us we're asking the wrong question. The right question is, "How much has God forgiven me?"

And we wish the story could stop there. But it doesn't. Because Jesus has to show us what happens when we stop asking that question and marveling at the answer. The servant leaves. And you'd think he'd be a changed man, right? How could you not be grateful after \$11 billion were assumed by your gracious king and canceled from your account? But this guy, he goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes *him* a debt. 100 denarii – that's like 100 days pay. Maybe \$10,000.

Notice: Jesus doesn't downplay the seriousness of the sins committed against us. The spouse who doesn't love...the friend who hurts us...the boss who doesn't treat us fairly...Jesus doesn't say that's no big deal. \$10,000 is a substantial sum. Jesus recognizes – a debt is owed. Forgiveness is always costly – it means assuming that debt, taking the loss, so you can cancel it for someone else and treat them as if it never happened.

But that was more than this guy was willing to do. He grabs him by the throat, "Pay back what you owe me!" And the fellow servant says the exact thing he got done saying to the king: "Mercy, give me time, I'll pay back what you owe!" But this servant doesn't give grace or mercy. He sends him off to prison until he pays back every penny.

It's a horribly ugly scene, isn't it? The King has every right to call this guy "wicked." But the ugliest part of it is that we see him in us. Our tendency to hold on to hurts and nurse grudges...our tendency to hold forgiveness over peoples' heads until they've proved they're sorry...all the times we've repaid insult with insult, anger with anger...asked that question, "How much should I forgive?" and answered, "Not *this* much."

Do you see what Jesus is doing? He's bringing us in before the King again, calling us to account. Showing us another part of that debt we owed is all the times we've held on to the debts other people owe us. Leading us to fall on our knees before him as beggars. All so that we can hear it again as if for the first time: "Debt canceled. Sin forgiven. Even for all those times you've failed to forgive...I took the cost, I paid the price. And those sins, too, are forgiven and forgotten forever."

Friends, forgiveness will never be easy for us. It's always costly. And there will be times when we wrestle with Peter's question, thinking it's too much to forgive. That's why God doesn't stop leading us to ask the question that matters: "How much has God forgiven me?" That's why he doesn't stop leading us to marvel at the answer: "All of it." Because as he does, he changes us. He makes the question, "How much should I forgive?" irrelevant, because he gives us hearts that actually want to forgive. That don't

see it as an obligation...but a privilege. A chance to love with the same costly love that saved me. A chance to give the world a little glimpse of the grace that my King has showered on me. A chance to forgive from a heart more and more like God's. Amen.