

The Sermon on the Mount
Forgiveness: A Spiritual Diagnostic
Matthew 6:14-15
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This morning, it is our joy to return to the Sermon on the Mount. We have completed our study of the Lord's Prayer, and today we move to the next section, the next couple of verses of this wonderful sermon.

On January 31st of this year, we are all aware that our city was rocked by the news that the Assistant District Attorney of Kaufman County, Mark Hasse, was gunned down outside the courthouse there. And on March 30th, two months later, District Attorney Mike McLellan and his wife Cynthia were shot and killed inside their home. We were all shocked by such brutal, cold-blooded murders. As you know of course, within the last couple of weeks, Eric Williams, a former Justice of the Peace, and his wife Kim have been arrested and charged with those brutal murders.

What exactly were the motives behind those murders? Well, of course as you know, for a long time there was a lot of speculation. Even conspiracy theories arose about who might have been involved, including even the Aryan Brotherhood perhaps were after these two men who served as district attorneys. But it turns out the motive was much simpler than that. Listen to the USA Today reporting on this incident. They write: "McLellan and Hasse had both vigorously prosecuted Eric Williams in 2012 for the theft of public property for stealing three computers. A jury found Williams guilty. He received two years' probation and he lost his law license and his position as Justice of the Peace. After Williams' conviction, the two prosecutors both believed he blamed them personally for his downfall, and they considered him a threat to their personal safety." It turns out the motive behind those brutal killings was revenge.

As I thought about that, it occurred to me that it is very unlikely any of us seated here this morning will ever commit murder, but we need to understand that the heart sins that motivated the Williams to commit murder, are in fact common to every single one of our hearts. All of us understand, and in fact have been guilty of, the sins of anger and bitterness and revenge. But our Lord, in the Sermon on the Mount, as He speaks to His disciples and today as He speaks through His Word to us who are gathered here, commands us who are His followers to put off those sins, and in their place to put on a heart of mercy and the practice of forgiveness.

We've just completed the study of the Lord's Prayer. And to the fifth petition, Jesus attached an intriguing statement. Look at Matthew 6:12: "And forgive us our debts, (*and then He adds*) as we also have forgiven our debtors." This is the only petition in the Lord's Prayer to which Jesus attaches a caveat like this. And after He had finished teaching us how to pray, He returned to only this one petition, and He briefly expanded on it. You'll notice verse 14 begins with the little word *for*. This, in verses 14 and 15, is an explanation of Jesus' rationale in that brief statement He made at the end of verse 12. The fact that Jesus came back to this issue, and only this issue, underscores just how important this is to Him, and therefore must be to all of us who are His followers. Let me read it for you. Just to pick up the context, let's go back to verse 12. He taught us to pray this: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" Verse 14. "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."

What our Lord wanted us to know in these two brief verses is that our forgiveness of others is a diagnostic of our own spiritual health. The way you respond to those who sin against you is in fact a spiritual barometer of your own spiritual condition. Verses 14 and 15 are really making just one point, and that point is: there is a direct relationship between our forgiving others and God's forgiving us. Jesus states this point positively in verse 14, and then basically says the same thing, but says it negatively in verse 15. And I think Jesus does it this way because He doesn't want us to have an escape clause. You know, when we want to make something crystal clear (for example, in a doctrinal statement), often it will say: We affirm this...and we deny this. That's to make sure that there's no wiggle room, there's no way for somebody to escape the implications. And I think that's what our Lord intends to do here by stating it first positively and then negatively. There's no misunderstanding. There's no lack of clarity. We can only respond.

So verse 14, then, is a promise if we do forgive and verse 15 is a threat if we don't. So let's, first of all, consider when God promises to forgive. Look at verse 14: "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." Now Jesus describes our problem with sin in two different words. Back up in verse 12, notice He uses the word *debt*. We learned when we studied that verse that the language Jesus spoke most frequently in the first century was Aramaic, and the most common word for *sin* in Aramaic is the word *debt*.

Originally, the word was used of a literal financial obligation, but later it came to be used metaphorically of something that was owed either to God or to people. Notice in verse 12 it's used both ways. In the first half of verse 12, it's used to refer to debts that we owe God because we have failed to keep His Law. You see, we owe God our obedience. He created us. He owns us. We belong to Him. He sustains us. He gives us everything to sustain life here. We owe Him our obedience. And when we fail to obey Him, we accrue debt with God; or more accurately, debts--that need to be forgiven. But notice the second half of verse 12 uses this same word *debts* not to refer to the debts we owe to God, but rather of the debts that others owe us. And that's because, as we are commanded to love and obey God, we are also commanded to love and obey others--the people around us. The people around us are obligated before God to love us. And

when they don't, those are debts that they accumulate with us. When they sin against us instead, those sins become debts.

Now notice in the second half of verse 12, the word is plural – “Forgive us (*Father*)...as we forgive our debtors.” Jesus, by making that plural, is stressing that throughout our lives, there will be multiple people on countless occasions who sin against us. This is a daily reality. And just as we become a debtor to God by failing to obey Him, others become our debtors when they sin against us. By the way, this really stresses, doesn't it, the seriousness of sins, not only against God, but the sins against others? In the mind of God, when we sin against others, we are accruing debts not only with Him but with them.

Now the second word for our sin problem is down in verses 14 and 15. In verse 12, He uses the word *debt*. In verses 14 and 15, notice twice He uses the word *transgressions*. This Greek word refers to a false step, a leaving of the path, a crossing of a boundary; in fact, sometimes it's translated *trespass*. In context, it's clear that the second half of verse 12 and verses 14 and 15 (when they speak of debts and transgressions) are referring to the sins that other people commit against us – whether it's a sin against my person, or a sin against my belongings, or a sin against my reputation. And Jesus says when that happens, I want you to forgive. Now why does Jesus need to tell us that? Because when people sin against us, our natural responses are always wrong and sinful. How do we naturally respond when people sin against us? Well if I had time, I'd take you to several different texts. But in the interest of time, let me just abbreviate it and give you a biblical list. Here are some ways we respond. First of all, in the moment when they sin against us, our first and chief response is what?--anger. We're angry. And the Bible uses two different words for anger. The New Testament uses a word which means the blowing up kind of anger, and it also uses a word for the clamming up kind of anger. Both are sinful anger. One person blows up like a volcano in anger. Another person clams up, holds that anger inward, and stomps off. That's how we're tempted to respond when we're sinned against.

Paul goes on in the latter half of Ephesians 4 to describe that then what happens is, that anger begins to display itself, and it displays itself in clamor. You say, I've never clamored in my life! Yes, you have. The word *clamor*, the Greek word, means yelling. Unfortunately, this is how people tend to respond—certainly, all of us before Christ. We get angry when we're sinned against and we yell. And the next word Paul uses is *slander*. That's not the kind of slander like happens, you know, when a lawsuit takes place. We're talking about name-calling. Unfortunately, many slip into vulgarities and cursing, but sometimes they're just words intended to hurt. So that's what happens--that's our natural response in the moment. But if that issue isn't addressed, if it isn't dealt with, if forgiveness isn't offered, then here's what happens. It grows and we begin to hold a grudge. It grows into bitterness, and it can eventually even grow into hatred of that person – rejoicing when they experience trouble, and revenge. That's how we all respond naturally.

But when someone sins against me, if I want to continue to receive the daily forgiveness for my debts against God, as I'm asking Him to in the Lord's Prayer, then Jesus said you have to meet the condition. What is the condition? Look at verse 14: "For if you forgive others for their transgressions..." Literally, the text says: "If you forgive men their transgressions..." Jesus is here drawing a deliberate contrast between our forgiveness of people and God's forgiveness of us. So the word *men* (or, as the NAS has it, *others*) here is all-inclusive. There is no person on this planet that you are not supposed to forgive. And the word *transgressions* is used in the New Testament of a wide range of kinds of sin, so it's all-inclusive as well – all offenses against us, however slight or however serious. In fact, listen to how Jesus puts it in Mark 11:25. He says: "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, (*so how inclusive is that forgiveness to be? Listen to Jesus. Whenever you stand praying, forgive*) if you have anything against anyone, (*that's pretty all-inclusive*) so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions."

Now by laying down this condition, our Lord does not mean that we earn His forgiveness in any way. We can't earn forgiveness. He doesn't mean that our forgiveness of others is the cause or the ground of His forgiveness of us. Forgiveness is an expression of God's grace. It can't be earned. Ephesians 1:7: "In Christ we have... the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace..." You can do nothing to merit or earn God's forgiveness. So you say, okay, well then what is the connection between our forgiveness of others and God's forgiveness of us? It's not the cause; it's the condition. And there's a huge difference between the two. Let me illustrate it for you this way. Assume for a moment that I, this week, came into a large amount of money (which I didn't by the way, but let's assume for a second that I did). And I decide I want to share a little bit of that with you. And so I came to church this morning and I'm going to give ten people here a thousand dollars. But before I arrived, I realize obviously I don't have enough to give to everyone, so I decide that I'm going to give that thousand dollars to the ten people who meet one condition – they brought their Bible. Now the ten people who brought their Bibles and whom I picked to get a thousand dollars each – they didn't earn that thousand dollars by bringing their Bible. That was simply the condition I decided. It was still grace. I was giving it to them completely undeserved and unmerited. I just established a condition on which I would extend that grace. That's how it works with our forgiving of others, the difference being that the condition Jesus set is directly related to God's forgiveness of us. Listen to how one commentator describes it. I like this. He says: "This certainly does not mean that our forgiveness of others earns our right to be forgiven. It is rather that God forgives only the penitent, and that one of the chief evidences of true repentance is a forgiving spirit. Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offense against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear, by comparison, extremely trifling. If on the other hand, (*he writes*) we have an exaggerated view of the offenses of others against us, it proves that we have minimized our own." In other words, if you refuse to forgive others, it shows that you are not truly repentant for your own sins, and it shows that you have not yet come to grasp the evil and the magnitude of your sins against God.

And by the way, let me just add here that forgiving of others is not the only condition of God's forgiveness. Before we can experience God's forgiveness, the Scripture also says there must be repentance and confession. For example, Psalm 32:5. David says: "I acknowledged my sin to You, my iniquity I did not hide; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord'; and *(then)* You forgave the guilt of my sin." There also has to be repentance. Proverbs 28:13: "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion." A willingness to turn from sin – that's repentance. Our Lord in Luke 24:47 telling His disciples that He wanted them to go to all the earth – He says I want you to go and preach "that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed to all the nations..." So there are other conditions to God's forgiveness. There has to be confession of sin to Him. There has to be repentance, a willingness to turn from that sin. And He's added another condition here, and that is we have to have a forgiving spirit toward others.

Scripture says we owe forgiveness to everyone who sins against us, but the question is what does that mean? What is forgiveness? Well, biblical forgiveness expresses itself in two specific responses. First of all, it is a spirit or an attitude of forgiveness toward everyone (and this is important), even if they are unrepentant – a spirit or an attitude of forgiveness toward everyone, even the unrepentant. We're encouraged throughout the Scriptures. In fact, here in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:7, as Jesus is going through the beatitudes, as He's explaining the character of those who are in His kingdom, He says this: "Blessed are the merciful..." If you're in My kingdom, He said, then you're merciful, you're full of mercy. And only those "will receive God's mercy." We are to have that merciful heart toward the sins as well as the weaknesses of others. I mentioned Mark 11 a few minutes ago, Mark 11:25. Listen to it again: "Whenever you stand praying, forgive..." In the first century context, that meant here's a man at the temple. And as he's at the temple, he remembers that somebody has sinned against him in some way. And Jesus says at that moment, I want you to forgive. He doesn't say go first and make it right, although in other places we're urged to do that, particularly if we're the one who has sinned. But He's saying I want you to have a spirit of forgiveness. Our Lord exemplified this, didn't He, on the cross. In Luke 23:34: "Jesus was saying, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'" Hadn't been any repentance yet, but Jesus had a forgiving spirit toward them. In Acts 7:60, we see it in Stephen. You remember, Stephen's being stoned. And in the moment of being stoned, "falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!'" They certainly weren't repentant. The stoning was still in process.

You see, the spirit of forgiveness means that we must bear no malice, no hatred. We must abstain from revenge. And beyond that, we must even do good to those who have sinned against us and even are still sinning against us. Listen to Romans 12:19. He says: "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, *(here's someone who's been sinned against, who's been wronged. And he says don't you dare hold that and then try to exact your own revenge. Vengeance belongs to God)* it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.'" Listen. The Lord can set everything right. You don't need to do that. Instead, He says, here's

what I want you to do: “‘If your enemy (*so this person’s still an enemy. If your enemy*) is hungry, feed him, and if he’s thirsty, give him a drink...’” This is the spirit attitude of forgiveness.

But there’s a second manifestation of biblical forgiveness. Not only is it a spirit or attitude toward everyone even if they’re unrepentant, but it is, secondly, a decision to extend full and complete forgiveness and restoration when there is repentance. You see, Scripture commands that when someone repents, we are to forgive them and, as much as possible, be restored to them. Turn to Matthew 18. You’re familiar, of course, that here our Lord taught on church discipline. And in the process of that, He says: You know, if your brother hears you, that is, if he repents, you’ve won your brother. If he repents, you’re to forgive him. And so Peter’s processing that. And down in verse 21, Peter came up to Jesus and he said, Okay, Lord. I have a question, a follow-up question: “How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Now you may think he just sort of picked that number out of the air. He really didn’t. You see, the Talmud, the Jewish Talmud, taught (and I’ve read it, I could quote it to you) that you were responsible to forgive a person three times. The fourth time, he was done. And so Peter, here, (I think) thinks he’s being generous. He’s more than doubled what the Talmud taught. And he says: Up to seven times? Verse 22. “Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. (*490 times!*)’” Now that doesn’t mean when the guy gets to 491, he’s done. No, Jesus is saying don’t set any artificial limits on your forgiveness, just as God doesn’t on you.

Turn over to Luke 17, because this was a little bit later in our Lord’s teaching, and He sort of expands on this a little bit. Luke 17:3. He says: “Be on your guard! And if your brother sins, rebuke him, (*confront him*)...” Again, this doesn’t mean for every little personal offense that takes place every day in your home, you’re to confront and rebuke. We’re supposed to have a spirit of love that overlooks transgressions. But when there’s a sin that is a pattern, that is really hurting that person and is affecting their relationships, then we’re to go and we’re to confront them. And verse 3 says: “And if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, (*that day*) saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” The point isn’t that we’re to be gullible. The point is that we are to be eager to forgive. We’re to have a heart of forgiveness. Turn over to Ephesians chapter 4. I mentioned this text earlier. Ephesians 4:31. Paul first lists the wrong responses when people sin against us. Here is where we normally go when people sin against us. Verse 31. “...bitterness, wrath and anger (*there are those two Greek words for clamming up and blowing up – different kinds of anger*) and clamor (*yelling*) and slander (*name-calling. Don’t respond like that, he says*) Put those things away from you, along with all malice. (*all hatred. Instead, here’s how you respond if someone sins against you*) Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, (*and here’s the standard*) just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

This is how we are to forgive. We’re to forgive as we have experienced forgiveness. In fact, Scripture teaches that God responds to us based on how we respond to others. We’ll get there in

Matthew chapter 7. In Matthew 7:2, Jesus says this: “In the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.” You want to be harsh in your judgments with others? Then God’ll be harsh with you. If you’re merciful and kind in how you handle others, then God will be with you. Listen to James, James 2:13 – “For God’s judgment will be merciless (*that’s a frightening thought; God’s judgment will be merciless, without mercy*) to the one who has shown no mercy.” It’s like your response to how people sin against you is a mirror, and God simply mimics your behavior to those who’ve sinned against you, the way you treat them.

So we’re to forgive, we’re to seek reconciliation, but what does it mean to forgive in this second sense, this idea of a decision to restore the relationship? What does it mean to forgive in this way? Well, you know, it’s hard to quantify, but let me just give you a couple of things to chew on. I think these are at least implied. There is undoubtedly more, but think about this. First of all, it means you choose not to dwell upon the sin. You know how it is. We’re sinned against and what do we do? We march off and, in our minds at least, we’re saying something like: How dare he do that to me! I don’t deserve that after all I do. We’re not to dwell on that sin in our minds. Secondly, we’re to choose not to bring it up to that person or to anyone else. This is how God forgives us, right? He doesn’t bring it up again. It’s done. So that means the next time a disagreement comes up with your spouse or in your home, you don’t reach inside that gunnysack of past offenses--even ones that have been asked for forgiveness for and you have extended forgiveness for--and pull it out and sort of hold it in their face and say: Well yeah, and this is just like the last time. That’s not forgiveness. This isn’t how God treats you. Is that how you want God to respond to you?

Thirdly I think it means treat the person, as much as possible, as if the offense had never occurred. We see this in Joseph’s forgiveness. Go back to Genesis 50. You remember the story. The father dies. And when Joseph’s brothers understand that their father is dead--verse 15 of Genesis 50: “They said, ‘What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and now he’s going to pay us back (*he’s going to get revenge*) in full for all the wrong which we did to him!’” And it was really, really wrong. Think of what Joseph endured. Psalms tells us that he spent time in neck irons and foot irons in prison. And so they seek his forgiveness --the end of verse 17:

‘ . . .now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.’ And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, ‘Behold, we are your servants.’”

By the way, here’s real repentance. If you’re the sinning party, don’t you dare downplay your sin. They got it, because what did they do in sinning against Joseph? They sold him into (what?) slavery. And now they come, in seeking forgiveness, and they say, Make us your slaves. They understood the magnitude of their sin and they’re truly repentant. I love Joseph’s response. Joseph said to them:

‘Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? (*I’m not God.*) You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good... (*and here’s his response. Here’s the restoration of the relationship. Verse 21*) So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and for your little ones.’ So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (*literally, he spoke to their heart*)

That’s what forgiveness looks like.

Now let me just say as a small caveat to this, that forgiveness and restoration does not mean that there are never consequences to a person’s sin. For example: Let’s take an elder for example who sins in a disqualifying way. That elder can and must be forgiven if he repents, but that doesn’t mean that he should be reinstated to his position. There are consequences that come with sin. And sometimes even in personal relationships, the sin is so horrific against the relationship, (marriage in some cases) that there are lasting consequences of that. But as much as possible, if you’re the one sinned against, Jesus says you are to have a spirit of forgiveness. And where there’s repentance, you are as much as possible to seek a reconciliation.

Jesus says if we forgive others, He makes us a promise. Notice the promise in the second half of Matthew 6:14: “If you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” Here’s a promise from our Lord Himself. If we will confess our sin in repentance, and if we have exercised a forgiving heart toward those who sin against us, then Jesus said God will gladly extend forgiveness toward us. By the way, there’s really an encouragement in this as well. Listen to Calvin. He writes: “By this word, the Lord intended partly to comfort the weakness of our faith. For He has added this as a sign to assure us that He has granted forgiveness of our sins, just as surely as we are aware of having forgiven others.” Here’s how Matthew Henry, the Puritan commentator, explained it. He said: “We must forebear and forgive and forget the affronts put upon us and the wrongs done us. It encourages us to hope that God will forgive us, for if there be in us this gracious disposition to forgive others, it is wrought of God. How do we respond naturally? All the other ways – with anger and all those bitterness and other things. But if we respond with forgiveness, if there be in us this gracious disposition, it is wrought of God. And it will be an evidence to us that He has forgiven us, having worked in us the condition of forgiveness.” You see, we don’t by nature forgive. So if you consistently begin to forgive others, it’s God’s encouragement to you that He’s forgiven you. So if we who are in Christ are willing to forgive, then Jesus promises us that the Father will forgive our sins if we confess and repent.

So that’s when God promises to forgive, but I want you to notice secondly when God threatens not to forgive. Look at verse 15: “But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” It’s pretty straightforward. If we refuse to exercise a forgiving spirit toward everyone, and if we hold a grudge and if we allow our anger to grow into bitterness and hatred, if we contemplate or actually seek personal revenge, then Jesus says here is both a threat

and a promise: “your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” Now remember, this is Jesus. You think He knows the mind of the Father? Of course. He and the Father are one. And He says to us: Okay. You’re not willing to forgive those who’ve sinned against you? Then let Me make you a promise. God will not forgive your transgressions. God won’t listen to your prayer when you say, “Forgive us our debts...” It’s like Psalm 66:18 – “If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear...” So if you regard the wickedness or you treasure the wickedness of an unforgiving attitude in your heart, then the Lord is not going to hear your prayer, including your prayer for personal forgiveness. In fact, Charles Spurgeon says: “Unless you have forgiven others, you read your own death warrant when you repeat the Lord’s Prayer.” What did he mean by that? He was saying: think about what you’re praying when you pray the Lord’s Prayer: Lord, extend to me the same kind of forgiveness I’m extending to others. And so if you’re not extending that forgiveness, you’re essentially saying to God: God, I want you to hold a grudge against me. I want You to want to get even with me. I want You to want to punish me. That’s what I really want. And this isn’t arbitrary. I love what Alan Cole writes. He says: “We have no inherent right to be heard by God. All is grace and undeserved favor. But unless we forgive others, it shows that we have no consciousness of the grace that we ourselves need. And so it shows that we are expecting to be heard by God on our own merits, which cannot be.”

Now in these two verses, our Lord puts into two simple propositions the message of one of His most famous parables, and I want you to turn there with me. Look at Matthew 18. After Peter asks his question about forgiveness and our Lord tells him you need to forgive 490 times (in other words, don’t put any artificial limits on your forgiveness), Jesus then tells this parable. Look at verse 23: “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.” Jesus says here’s how I want you to think about forgiveness. Imagine an Asian monarch who is, on a particular day, settling accounts with his slaves. And the word *slaves* here doesn’t mean the lowest, most menial slaves in the household. In that kind of monarchy, even the highest officials were called slaves. Obviously in the context, these are men of influence and men of position and power. And so he calls them in to settle up. Verse 24: “When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.” Now that is shocking. If you knew what a talent was and you were reading this, it’s shocking because, in the first century, one talent was the equivalent to fifteen years’ wages. This man owes ten thousand talents. That means that this man had accumulated a debt equal to 150,000 years of wages for the average worker in the first century. What that means is this was no honest debt. You don’t accidentally get into 150,000 years of debt. This was embezzlement. This was gross and reckless negligence of what had been put into his charge. At the wages of the average wage-earner in the first century, it would have taken this man two thousand lifetimes to have repaid this debt. And that is only if he could have spent every cent he earned for those two thousand lifetimes into the debt, and if there was no interest accruing all that time. It’s an impossible debt.

Now look at verse 25: “Since this man did not have the means to repay, (*obviously*) his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.” The king realizes there’s no way I’m ever getting this money back and so I’m going to get as much money as I can out of this. I’m going to sell everything this man owns. I’m going to sell him. I’m going to sell his family into slavery. And that will be a little bit of income back for this massive debt this man has accumulated. And then I’ll just write off the rest as a bad debt. It’s done. This was the end for this man, the end of his life. He and his entire family is going into slavery, and that’s probably where the rest of his descendants will spend their lives as well. And so, verse 26:

The slave fell to the ground, prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ (*That was impossible – it would never have happened in two thousand lifetimes. But verse 27 says*) The lord of that slave felt compassion...(*There was in the heart of this monarch a sense of concern and grief and pity for the helpless and hopeless situation in which this man was. And it says in verse 27*) He released him and forgave him the debt.”

This is unthinkable. Obviously, Jesus intends here to picture an impossible, unpayable debt. And if you’re beginning to feel a little uncomfortable, you should. Because this is Jesus’ picture of what you owed to God and what I owed to God – this massive, unpayable debt. In two thousand lifetimes, it could never be repaid. We had squandered His resources with reckless negligence. We’d embezzled from God all that He’s given us. That’s the debt we owe God, and this is the forgiveness we come to enjoy. He had compassion and He wiped it away.

Now notice verse 28:

But that slave (*the slave that had just been forgiven*) went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ So this fellow slave fell to the ground, began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ (*almost the same thing that this man had said to his king*) But he was unwilling, and he went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.”

That forgiven slave leaves that staggering moment of forgiveness, and he either goes out looking for this fellow slave or he comes across him. And this fellow slave owes him a hundred denarii. Now a denarius was a Roman silver coin that was roughly equal to an average worker’s daily pay. So a hundred denarii was equal to about three months of income in the first century. You compare the debt. Two thousand lifetimes... three months. And he says, ‘Okay, you can’t pay me? No, I’m not forgiving you.’ Verse 30: “He went and threw him in prison till he should pay back what was owed.” He couldn’t sell him because what he owed was less than his value as a

slave. So he only had one other alternative to try to recoup this loss and that was to put this man in debtor's prison. And the mindset behind debtor's prison was, you put him in there and you put pressure on his family and friends to come up with the money. So that's what he decides to do. Verse 31:

When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and they came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt (*and in the Greek text, this sentence is built so that the focus is on the size of the debt. I forgave you all that debt*) because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way I had mercy on you?' And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him."

And then Jesus leaves the parable and He makes this shocking statement. Look at verse 35: "My heavenly Father (*He's talking to His disciples – My heavenly Father*) will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart." Wow. Jesus is saying the unforgiving Christian will not be forgiven. And if you, as a believer, aren't forgiving, what you can expect from God is to enter His severe discipline. But I think there's even more than that here. I think there's a solemn warning here in this parable in verse 34. I think there's a warning that the person who claims to be a Christian but continually (as a habit of life) refuses to forgive someone else has in fact never been forgiven. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it this way: "The proof that you and I are forgiven is that we forgive others. If we think that our sins are forgiven by God and we refuse to forgive somebody else, we're making a mistake. We have never been forgiven. The man who knows he's been forgiven only in and through the shed blood of Christ, is a man who must forgive others. He cannot help himself. If we really know Christ as our Savior, our hearts are broken and cannot be hard. We cannot refuse forgiveness." He concludes by saying: "If you are refusing forgiveness to anybody, I suggest that you have never been forgiven."

Folks, there are many people who have sinned against every one of us, and there will be many who do so in the future. And Jesus our Lord demands that we have a forgiving spirit toward them all and that we eagerly forgive and seek restoration when they express repentance. Let me ask you this morning. Is there someone whom you struggle to forgive? Is there someone that frankly you just want to get even with, you want to punish them, you want them to hurt? Is there someone that you have refused to forgive even when they've asked for your forgiveness? Who has sinned against you most frequently in this life? Who has sinned against you in the greatest way in this life? Or who has come to you just too often seeking forgiveness and they've simply used it up? Jesus says you must forgive them as God has forgiven you. You must give what you have received. Now don't misunderstand. Christians can struggle for a time granting forgiveness. Christians can struggle with the temptation to bitterness even after they've forgiven. But if as a believer you are resistant to forgive, you will not receive God's daily forgiveness but

you will experience God's severe discipline. That's what Jesus said. And if you simply go on refusing to forgive, there's only one reason and that's because you've never experienced forgiveness yourself. If you continue to live in a pattern of anger and bitterness and unwillingness to forgive, you prove that you aren't really a believer at all.

Now why is it so important to God that we forgive others? Because it's His nature. This is who God is. You remember in Exodus 34 when Moses said, God, declare Your name to me. Tell me what You're like. And God says, as part of His nature, He says I'm gracious, I'm compassionate, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin. This is who I am, God said. In Psalm 86:5: "For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in steadfast love to all who call upon you. Do you understand, believer, that you are never more like God than when you forgive one who's sinned against you? It's true that to err or to sin is human, but it's doubly true that to forgive is divine. Jesus came to earth to purchase our forgiveness. How can we enjoy that forgiveness from His hand, when He had to die to purchase it, and then turn around and withhold that forgiveness from others? Jesus says if anyone sins against you, forgive. Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for Your Word to us. It cuts us to the heart because, Father, we are by nature prone to respond in all the wrong ways when people sin against us. Father, forgive us. Forgive us as we commit to You to forgive those who sin against us. May our treatment of those who sin against us be mirrored in Your treatment of us. Father, I pray that You would help us to practice what we have learned today from Your Word. I pray for believers here today who have, for some time, struggled with this issue. May this be the day when they seek Your forgiveness and when they seek to see relationships restored.

Father, I pray for those here today who have, as a pattern of life, lived in anger and bitterness and resentment. I pray that You would help them to see that they have never experienced forgiveness; and may this be the day when they do, and then can show that forgiveness to others. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.