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Sermon: October 25, 2009
Beverly ECC, Chicago, IL

“KINGDOM MERCY”
Matthew 18:21-35

□ In Matthew 18:21 **“Peter [comes] to Jesus and [asks], ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?’”**

■^a Jewish oral law teaches that {b. Yoma 86b} **“If a man commits a transgression, the first, second, and third time he is forgiven”** by God, yet **“the fourth time he is not.”** Consequently, first century rabbis say that humans must forgive offenders three times and no more.

So when Peter suggests **“Up to seven times,”** he thinks he is being generous to a fault – and, by the standards of the kingdom of the world, he is.

□ But Jesus replies {18:22} **“I tell you, not 7 times, but seventy-seven times”** (or **“seventy times seven”** – the phrase allows some wiggle room in translation).

■¹⁻² The answer should come as no surprise. The Lord has already taught his followers to pray: {Mt 6:12} **“forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”** He has also warned, **“if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Mt 6:14-15).**

Nevertheless, Peter seems to expect a pat on the back for suggesting he forgive **“up to seven times.”**

□ Instead of a pat on the back, Christ Jesus gives him a kick in the seat, in the form of the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant in verses 23-34.

- In vv 23-27 the first servant owes 10,000 talents. A talent is a weight-based unit used to measure precious metals. One talent equals 90 pounds. Multiply 10,000 by 90 and the product is 450 tons.

This servant must repay 900,000 lbs of gold! Historians calculate that it would take the average first century worker a minimum of {Snodgrass} 164,000 years to pay it back, if he devoted 100% of his earnings to debt repayment.

🕒 When the king sets this man free it is not with the expectation that he might someday cough up 450 tons of gold. It is an act of sheer, undeserved mercy.

☑ This is my story!

How often have I taken the Lord's goodness for granted?! How often have I worshiped Self rather than God?! How often have I substituted my list of do's and don'ts for genuine obedience to God?! I have always owed God my very best love expressed in profound gratitude, pure worship and quick obedience. Yet I have frequently given him the leftovers.

How often have I been impatient, stingy, envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, self-centered, easily angered, self-protective, suspicious, despairing, lustful and weak? How often have I asked, “Who is my neighbor?” rather than, “How can I be a good neighbor?” I have always owed it to God to love others with the best agape love expressed in thoughtful words and compassionate deeds. Yet I have frequently withheld it.

■³ “**The wages of sin is death**” (Rom 6:23). My soul was dying until a night in 1986 when I literally cried out to God. He me, {Mt 18:27} “**took pity on [me], canceled [my] debt**” and liberated me.

Sometimes I fall back into old ways, but God never gives up on me. He always draws me back into his mercy.

- In vv 28-30 the second servant owes 100 silver coins. The average worker earns 1 denarius a day, so 100 is worth about 3 ½ months wages. This is not a trivial sum, but neither is it a fortune. Even if he uses some for other expenses, he could probably repay it within the year.

🗨️ So when the first servant rejects his plea (even though the king has just forgiven his huge debt) it is an act of cruel and ruthless mercilessness.

☑️ This is my story, too!

I am not inclined to hold grudges. But at times I am more concerned to fulfill the bare requirements than to be extravagant with my forgiveness.

- In vv 31-34 the king confronts him: “**Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?**” and hands him over to be tortured.

? What are we to make of this hard section? Here are 3 concepts that might help us to nuance it.

① Parables are analogies, not allegories.

☞ An allegory is a complete metaphor. Every element corresponds to an aspect of real life.

☞ An analogy is a partial simile. Some elements correspond to real life, others don’t.

② Scripture interprets scripture.

The best way to clear our confusion is to examine other texts that address the same issue.

V 34 is the only time the word *basanistes* (“**to be tortured**”) appears in Scripture. There are 3 related words with the same root. These refer to: the physical pain of disease, the mental agony of being surrounded by evil, the battering of boats in a storm and the torment certain demons will inflict for 5 months on people who worship the Antichrist. Together these words describe the anguish that comes from sickness and sin: anguish which God permits, but does not inflict (with the possible exception of verse 34).

Scripture *does* portray the Lord as a judge who turns sinners over for just punishment. But those texts also reveal that He gives the wicked every opportunity to receive mercy. He sentences them only after they have conclusively rejected his pardon.

③ Scripture was written in context. Sometimes it is helpful to consider clues from outside.

The Book of Wisdom provides one such clue. It is an apocryphal writing that the Roman Catholic Church still publishes in its Bible translations.

Wisdom was written by Greek-speaking Jews in the 2nd or 1st century B.C. Toward the end of the 1st century A.D. Jewish authorities determined that it is not Scripture, and the Protestant Reformers followed suit; still, it was an influential book in the time of Jesus.

■^b Like Mt 18:34, Wis. 12:23 and 27 use *basanistes* to describe the punishment of sinners ~

“Those unjust also [God] tormented through their own abominations they were tortured by the very things they deemed gods.” The Lord has tormented the depraved by allowing them to experience the full consequences of their own sin.

The point of Mt 18:31-34 is not that God employs torturers; He does not. The point is: God condemns the sin of mercilessness.

- And so Christ ends with a warning in v 35 ~ **“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart.”**

- ⊕ Judgment is real, but the stronger emphasis in this parable is on the priority of mercy in the kingdom of God.

- ❖ Jesus reveals the priority of mercy in the kingdom when He...

- ⁴ Declares, {Mt 5:7} **“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy”**;

- ⁵ Teaches, {Mt 5:38-39} **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also”**;

- ⁶ Instructs us to pray, {Mt 6:12} **“And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us,”** then follows up with this caution: **“If you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your father will not forgive your sins”**;

- ⁷ Says, {Mt 7:2} **“in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you”**;

- ⁸ Deals patiently with Nicodemus {Jn 3:1-21}, and offers {Jn 4:10} **“living water”** to the woman at the well;

- ⁹ Breaks bread {Mt 9:11} **“with tax collectors and sinners”**;

- ¹⁰ Causes {Lk 7:22} **“The blind [to] receive sight, the lame [to] walk, those who have leprosy [to be] cleansed, the deaf [to] hear, the dead [to be] raised, and”** proclaims **“the good news...to the poor”**;

- ¹¹ Prays for his enemies as they are crucifying him, saying {Lk 23:34} **“Father, forgive them”**;

- ¹² Provides for his mother’s needs from the cross, saying to Mary {Jn 19:26-27} **“Woman, here is your son”** and to John, **“Here is your mother”**;

- ¹³ Restores Peter to fellowship and leadership after discipleship {Jn 21:15-19} despite Peter’s three-fold denial;

Christ Jesus continues to reveal the priority of mercy in the kingdom as He pursues us, reaching out with grace and goodness, folding us into his realm, and saying to his Father, “These are mine! These are citizens of our kingdom.”

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me?” – that is the wrong question. (In fact, when we keep count we are not forgiving at all – we are merely postponing our revenge.)

Here’s the right question: As the recipient of God’s incredible, undeserved kingdom mercy, how can I refuse to share it with others?