

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 13, 2026

Text: Matthew 18:21-35 (Gospel)

Other Texts: Genesis 50:15-21 (Old Testament); Romans 14:1-12 (Epistle)

“Merciful Servants of a Merciful God”

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

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is generally well known amongst us. It is taught in Sunday School and is an appointed reading in the lectionary every three years (today!). In addition, it is regularly either a source for devotions or at least referenced within them. It beautifully shows the incredible grace of God towards us sinners. Yet, it is challenging as well, forcing us to deal with forgiveness, not in an abstract way, but in a very practical manner which leads to questions, concerns, and challenges.

The parable itself is not difficult to understand. The king is a picture of God, who forgives us the debt of our sins which is impossible for any of us to pay. We Christians are His servants. We have been forgiven “the mountain” of our sins against God, as every sin is finally against Him. And so we are now expected to forgive “the molehill” of sins that others commit against us, for no sin or sins against us, no matter how serious they might well be, even remotely compare to our debt of sin to God which He has fully and freely forgiven us. So if we refuse to forgive others, we forfeit God’s forgiveness and are put back under the Law’s demand that we make full payment for our sins: eternity in the prison of hell. “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”¹ Yet, it is that last part, to forgive as we have been forgiven, where come the difficulties. Let’s consider a few.

To begin, it is helpful to recall what brought forth this parable in the first place: Peter’s question and Jesus’ answer. “‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’... ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.’”² Rabbis taught you needed to forgive someone three times. Peter takes the number, doubles it, and even adds one more. Clearly, He has been listening to Jesus, that forgiving others is a rather important thing. Yet, the Lord takes Peter’s number and ridiculously enlarges it to seventy-seven times (some translate as seventy times seven). Either way, the number is not to be taken literally. The point is that we are commanded, not to count the number of times we forgive, *but to forgive without counting*. We are not to keep score, even as God does not keep a record of our sins.³

But this becomes one of the difficulties with this parable. As believers in Christ, recipients of God’s forgiveness, we know that we are to forgive others; that’s not in doubt. But there has to be a limit, right? Some sort of a reasonable stopping point. Yet, while seeming reasonable to us when dealing with the sins of others, aren’t we glad that God doesn’t go by such “reasonable limits” when dealing with us and our sins? And honestly, when we have sinned against others,

¹ Matthew 18:35. All quotes are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² Matthew 18:21-22.

³ Cf. Psalm 130:3. Also the opening versicles of Divine Service Setting Four, *Lutheran Service Book* (LSB) p. 203.

don't we hope that they will not decide that we have passed their limits? Are we not thankful when they forgive us, especially if it is a "big sin," especially when it is "again"?

Knowing this, then we too forgive others, *not seven times, but seventy-seven times*. For one who has received mercy is to be changed by that mercy, becoming willing to show mercy to others. For it is the height of selfishness to receive forgiveness, to enjoy it, but then to refuse to give it to others. Such is an abuse of grace. Such a person is truly a "wicked servant"!

But what if I don't feel like forgiving them? What if I don't feel like I have forgiven them? On the other side, what if I don't feel like I've been forgiven? Two things to note here. First, these are common feelings that most of us have likely experienced. Second, these are exactly that, *feelings*. It's not that they are unimportant per se, but we must keep them in their proper realm. Forgiveness is not a feeling, neither on the side of the forgiver nor the one forgiven. For God's grace is not founded on a feeling called "love," but His grace and love is what led Him to act, to decide to send His Son, Christ Jesus, as our substitute. It is Jesus's holy life and sacrificial death that pays the price of sin's debt, yours, mine, and everyone's, not an emotion. So then for us forgiving is an act of the will, a decision made by one renewed in Christ.

We forgive because we have received grace and forgiveness for Jesus' sake. We forgive because God commands it, as it is His will that we who have received His mercy readily share it with others. We forgive because we do unto others as we would have them to do to us. And on the flipside, we do not believe we are forgiven when we feel it; we believe we are forgiven when we are told we are forgiven. In both cases, over time, feelings begin to catch up, if not fully at least in part. And that is a gift. But if we wait to forgive until we feel like it, then we never will forgive. And if we believe we are forgiven only when we feel it, we will never believe it. For the feelings follow the objective act of giving and receiving forgiveness, not the other way around.

"But if I forgive the person, aren't I saying that what they did to me was okay?" However, just rearrange this slightly, "But if God forgives me, isn't He saying that what I did was okay?" The answer becomes obvious, doesn't it? Certainly, our sins are never okay; they are never anything but filth, evil, and wickedness that deserve wrath and punishment. Truly, if they were okay, why would they need to be *forgiven*? Why would Christ have had to *die*? Forgiveness *assumes* something wrong has been done. So then too when we forgive another, we are fully cognizant of what they did being very wrong, harmful, evil. That's why forgiveness, even as it conveys mercy, also conveys the truth of evil committed, and being let go *out of pure grace*.

But what if they're not sorry for what they did? We still forgive them. But why then do we speak of withholding forgiveness from the impenitent until they repent as a part of the Office of the Keys which Christ Himself has given to His Church. This is because there are, if you will, two "forgivenesses" that come into play. One is our personal forgiveness; the other is God's.

God's forgiveness cannot be given to the impenitent, for by not repenting they refuse His forgiveness. This is why an impenitent sinner must not receive the Holy Communion, as their sins cannot be forgiven and they are, in fact, receiving the Lord's body and blood to their judgment. To them we must say, "You are not forgiven by God for your heart rejects Christ's sacrifice as proven by your refusal to repent and change your sinful ways."

But even as we speak that divine truth, we still have forgiveness in our hearts. It is a fruit of faith that we do not keep a *personal* record of wrongs. It is freedom in the Gospel as we do not let the other person's sin have control over our emotions and life. It is a tool to combat our sinful nature, which *wants* to hold a grudge, looks for a reason to not forgive, to get revenge, to stay bitter, and make that person suffer. It serves to call us to repentance if we don't have the desire to forgive, if we fear to forgive "too much" or "too often."

In a sense, we forgive that person as we refuse to cling to bitterness and hatred even as he or she *forces us* to use the binding key by their not repenting. It is turning it over to God. It is also why forgiveness and reconciliation, though related, are not the same. While reconciliation is the goal, it is God's will, it might not happen. The Christian forgives the person who refuses to repent and change their ways, but a lack of repentance both rejects God's forgiveness as well as makes reconciliation impossible. Honestly, that is one more sin added to their debt for which they must give an account to God.

"Do we then earn God's forgiveness by repenting of our sins and forgiving others?" Despite how it might seem at first, *no* to both. God's forgiveness is a gift, *earned by Christ*, given to us by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel Word, Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper. Our repentance, which includes our sorrow over sin, our fruits of repentance, our works of restitution to those whom we have hurt, our forgiving others, and all the other good and holy works of our new life in Christ in general, these can never be good enough, sincere enough, or *whatever* enough to earn grace. As the beloved hymn says, "Not the labors of my hands Can fulfill Thy Law's demands; Could my zeal no respite know, Could my tears forever flow, All for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone."⁴ Only the perfect faithfulness and obedience of our dear Savior as our substitute under the Law, unto death upon the cross, shedding His divine life-blood, only that can appease God's wrath, satisfy divine justice, and justify us that we would be declared righteous in God's eyes.

Yet, faith in Christ cannot exist where repentance, sorrow over sin and stopping sinful ways, is not present. These too are works of the Holy Spirit within us. To resist them is to resist Him and so reject Christ and God's forgiveness that He won. A regenerated person will despise their sins and fight them with ever-increasing diligence. Not to earn forgiveness, but in holy fear that we would lose it by falling back into sin. Not to earn forgiveness, but to live in a way that proves that we have received grace, and so be salt and light unto the world.

Dear fellow redeemed, as Christianity is both misrepresented and purposely distorted, it is important to be reminded that forgiveness does not mean no consequences, no arrests, no trials, and the emptying of jails and prisons. Forgiveness does not mean no damnation. It cannot mean these because it cannot mean "no justice," for God is just and holy. But the just and holy God has paid for our sins in the person of His Son, Jesus, so that all who repent and believe in Him will be saved.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive." Well, God had much to forgive, and forgive us He has! So let us be merciful servants,

⁴ "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me," LSB 761:2.

living even as we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” by “sincerely forgiving and gladly doing good to those who sin against us.”⁵ Amen!

⁵ Luther’s Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, Fifth Petition meaning.