

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 16  
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl

***We forgive by remembering we are forgiven***

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came up and asked Jesus, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as seven times?”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you as many as seventy-seven times. <sup>23</sup> For this reason the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle them, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> Because the man was not able to pay the debt, his master ordered that he be sold, along with his wife, children, and all that he owned to repay the debt.

<sup>26</sup> “Then the servant fell down on his knees in front of him, saying, ‘Master, be patient with me, and I will pay you everything!’ <sup>27</sup> The master of that servant had pity on him, released him, and forgave him the debt.

<sup>28</sup> “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began choking him, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’

<sup>29</sup> “So his fellow servant fell down and begged him, saying, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’ <sup>30</sup> But he refused. Instead he went off and threw the man into prison until he could pay back what he owed.

<sup>31</sup> “When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were very distressed. They went and reported to their master everything that had taken place.

<sup>32</sup> “Then his master called him in and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt when you begged me to. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> His master was angry and handed him over to the jailers until he could pay back everything he owed.

<sup>35</sup> “This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart.”

—Matthew 18:21-35

Think about your relationships with other people. What are some words you find are difficult to say? I have found that three words that are hard to say are “I have sinned.” When you say those words, you take responsibility for rebelling against God or hurting someone else. Right? Three other words that might be hard to say are “I am sorry.” You recognize that you have hurt someone else and you feel bad about that. But I think it can be just as difficult if not even more difficult to say, “I forgive you.” Have you noticed that? Sometimes I think we have a tendency to say, “Don’t worry about it.” Or we say, “No problem” or “It’s fine.” Why is it so hard to say, “I forgive you?” The reason is because when you forgive someone, you essentially absorb someone’s debt into yourself.

Do you know what I mean? When someone sins against you, they have become indebted to you. You could hold something over their heads. But when you say, “I forgive you,” that sin is gone. You absorb that debt into yourself, never to bring up or speak of it again. That’s what forgiveness is.

And that is not easy, especially when someone continuously sins against you, right? Peter knew how difficult that was. He comes to Jesus and asks, “**Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as seven times?**”

This is not what Peter learned in school. What Peter learned in the church school that he attended was that forgiving someone was so hard. It was so difficult. And so, carefully documented in the instruction manuals that Peter would have memorized from little on, one rabbi from little on carefully documented how to forgive three times. It’s the “three strikes and you’re out” rule. And if you have ever tried to forgive someone who sins against you, you realize how big number three is, right? First offense, shame on you. Second offense, shame on me. Oh, we have to learn our lesson. We have to stand up for ourselves and *not* let it happen again. So three times? That’s a lot.

But Peter had it figured out that Jesus would expect a righteousness that far surpasses the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Peter thought Jesus would want people to do way more than that. **“As many as seven times?”** Seven is an enormous number when you are really forgiving sins. It’s huge!

But Jesus answered and said, **“Not seven times, but I tell you as many as seventy-seven times.”** And if any of you remember from the King James Version it says, **“Seventy times seven.”** Actually, if you read these words in the Greek language, it doesn’t say, “Seventy-seven times” nor does it say, “Seventy times seven.” The words are written in such a way and Jesus said them, so that people would scratch their heads and say, “How is he counting?” He’s saying the numbers, but this is not the way you count them. Why would he do that? It’s because he does not want us to sit there with our calculators waiting until we hit 77 plus one or 490 plus one and then we no longer forgive.

Jesus essentially told Peter, and he tells us, “Don’t count. Just forgive. Every time. Quickly. Without counting.” And we know how hard that actually is. All you have to do is live in a relationship with a person who seems to do the same sins over and over and over again, and you know. You know how difficult this is.

So, Jesus tells us a story to help us always remember how important this is. And so much of how we approach this with other people is based on a perspective. Our perspective can so often be obscured. I’ve talked with families who are split and so angry with each other. They aren’t talking to each other. They don’t go to family reunions anymore. And you sit down and ask them, “So what is the real issue?” And often they can’t even remember what caused the rift. But they think it must be big and so they never forgive.

Jesus wants us to put into perspective this whole attitude of forgiveness. And he tells us a story to help us see. He says, **“For this reason the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle them, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.”** In Jesus’ story there was a king who had a servant who was, evidently, in control of overseeing a very large portion of his estate. And when he came to settle accounts, the king realized that he owed him ten thousand talents. Well, what does that mean? This was the largest number in the Greek world. As I understand it, a talent was the equivalent of 6,000 denarii. A denarius was the equivalent to one day’s work. So, if you make \$16.25 per hour, that’s \$130.00 per day. That’s a denarius. A talent is 6,000 of those. So, a talent is \$780,000. So, what is ten thousand talents worth? Almost \$7,800,000,000. Almost 8 billion dollars. A man owed nearly \$8 billion to a king in Jesus’ story. How in the world is this guy going to ever pay back such an insurmountable debt? Billions of dollars. He couldn’t. It was an impossibility.

Jesus continued, **“Because the man was not able to pay the debt, his master ordered that he be sold, along with his wife, children, and all that he owned to repay the debt.”** My friends, what is your greatest treasure? What is it? Apart from God and his Word, I would guess that your greatest treasure, what you value most, is your family. Your spouse, your children, your grandchildren, those are the ones who are nearest and dearest to you, right? I can’t imagine the pain and the agony that this man went through when he heard the verdict. And there was nothing else he could do. He owed the king whatever the king said. So, when the king said this, he knew this was going to happen. His wife, his children, his family would be taken from him and would be put into slavery, probably breaking up the family entirely. It’s like a big knife was penetrating his heart.

**“Then the servant fell down on his knees in front of him, saying, ‘Master, be patient with me, and I will pay you everything!’”** Yeah right. How is this guy going to pay back billions of dollars? Not possible. And the king knew that it was not possible. **“The master of that servant had pity on him, released him, and forgave him the debt.”** The master has this sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He knew that this man needed mercy. So, the king canceled this man’s debt. Billions of dollars. And let him go.

Now you put yourself in that servant’s shoes. How do you react? “Eh, no big deal. Boy, I sure manipulated him, didn’t I?” No! You’re going to be overjoyed. You are going to crawl on all fours before this king. And you are going to say, “Thank you! Thank you so very much! I will be your faithful servant forever. Thank you!” You will walk out of that palace with your head held high, as a model of a person who understands, who loves, and who cares, right? Yes!

So, Jesus continues. **“But...”** Oops. Something is going to follow that we didn't think of. **“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began choking him, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’”**

Remember that a denarius was the equivalent to one day's work. So, a hundred denarii are the equivalent of approximately \$13,000. Not a small chunk of change. It was still a debt. For me, \$13,000 is still a lot. And it is, right? Sins that people commit against us still hurt. They are still painful. Jesus isn't saying that the sins that people commit against are nothing. No, they hurt. They cause pain. But once again, put it in perspective.

Make the comparison. He just had his billions of dollars of debt canceled, and now he's choking a guy for a few thousand bucks. **“So his fellow servant fell down and begged him, saying, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’ But he refused.”** But he refused. **“Instead he went off and threw the man into prison until he could pay back what he owed.”** No mercy here.

**“When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were very distressed. They went and reported to their master everything that had taken place. Then his master called him in and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt when you begged me to. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?’ His master was angry and handed him over to the jailers until he could pay back everything he owed.”** The king had shown mercy and compassion to this servant, canceling a *huge* debt. And when the servant acted with contempt and ingratitude for the king's gift to him, the king was going to make sure that justice would be served. The servant was bound. He would be beaten, crying out for mercy once again, but no mercy and compassion would be found. In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed.

Then Jesus comes to some very straightforward words in this text. **“This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart.”** Wow! Do you get the point that Jesus is making with these words? Jesus is not speaking soft and gentle words here. These are strong words. Jesus is speaking these words with a force. Jesus wants these words to be understood very clearly and very plainly.

Now I'm going to guess that you are already at the application of this story in your mind. You know that you and I are the servant. God is the king. And we had accumulated such a debt that we could never have repaid God. When we were born into this world, we had this insurmountable debt. God demands that we are perfect and holy in his sight. And when we live our lives, it becomes very evident, very fast that we will never, never be able to pay back this debt. We will not be holy by our efforts. And our great treasure, our life itself, was taken away from us as we were on a path that was leading to the imprisonment of hell.

But in his kindness and in his compassion, and in his mercy with a pit in his gut our Savior Jesus came to this earth. It is the main reason why he came. He came to take the punishment away from us. It is the reason why he went to the cross. It is the reason why he cried with clarity so that the whole world would know, **“It is finished.”** Your payment is complete. Your debt has been paid in full. Your account is clear. Jesus has absorbed your debt of sin into himself. He took it away from you. Just soak up that truth, my friends.

You have had billions of dollars of debt to God canceled. You don't owe him anything. He canceled your debt. I highly doubt you are going to think to yourself, “Boy, I sure manipulated God on this one.” No. When we put into perspective what our gracious God has done for us in canceling that huge debt, we are overjoyed. We say to the king, “Oh, thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!” Do you see that?

But Jesus' forgiveness is also meant to be lived. You and I were called upon by God to channel that forgiveness and to reflect that forgiveness with each other. I know you have hurts in your life. I know that there are people who have wronged you. They have hurt you. They have sinned against you. But God is calling you to absorb their debt into yourself. God doesn't want you to hold it over someone. He doesn't want to plan retaliation. He wants you to forgive quickly. And if you are struggling with this forgiving someone in your life, then please look at Jesus' cross. Right now you need to be flooded with the truth that your debt of billions of dollars has been canceled. And it starts there. Put it in perspective.

Maybe you are struggling with some anger, or some resentment, or some bitterness right now. Maybe you are going through some rough times in your relationships, and you are finding it hard to deal with. You are feeling bitterness and anger against those who sinned against you, not just once, twice, three times. Whatever it is, whatever is weighing heavy on your heart, you must know that that anger, that bitterness, and that resentment is hurting you. Whatever it is that you are harboring in your heart against another person, you must know that it is so important to let it go. Let it go.

Not necessarily because the other person deserves it. But let it go because you are the person who has been forgiven a billion-dollar debt that you could never repay. The big debts have been completely forgiven you by your Savior Jesus, and the little ones? As much as those debts hurt you, let them go.

Don't use your time here on this earth to plan retaliation or to harbor anger in your heart. Let it go. And, my friends, God tells us in his Word that this is not optional for our lives. It's not optional. If you have bitterness and anger and resentment right now, you are in danger and at risk of losing your own mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus himself said, **"This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart."** My friends, this is a very important lesson for us to learn. And if you are finding yourself struggling in this area, pray to your Lord Jesus that he would show you the billions of dollars of debt that he canceled for you. Pray that he would open your eyes to see how he has given you life, how he has spared you from the eternal dungeons of hell. He did that for you. Mercifully. Freely. Fully. Forgiven. Forgotten. Forever. And pray that he would open up your heart so that you would cancel the debts of sin of someone else.

In fact, let's pray about this right now. "Lord, I have accumulated a huge debt of sin against you. I could never have paid it off. But in your mercy toward me you have forgiven my debt to you. Jesus came to take my debt of sin and absorb it into himself. The wages of sin is death, and Jesus died for my sin. It is canceled. It is gone. Lord, you know the hurts and pains I am experiencing right now because someone has sinned against me. I don't want to harbor anger or resentment. I want to forgive as you have forgiven me. Please send me your peace and your strength so that I can let it go. Help me forgive by remembering that I am your forgiven child. Amen."