

Freedom Way M.B.C.
Bible Study Lesson # 476
Date _____

**Deciding to Forgive:
The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant**

Biblical Passage: Matthew 18:21–35

Memory Verse: 1 John 1:9

Biblical Truth: We forgive others because in Jesus God has first forgiven us.

Context: After Jesus' teaching about who was the greatest, Matthew recorded His teachings about the way to treat others. Matthew alone recorded Jesus' teachings about how often to forgive someone. Jesus' command went far beyond the forgiveness requirements of the Jewish rabbis of His day.

INVESTIGATION

Matthew 18 begins with Jesus' answer to a question His disciples asked Him: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt. 18:1) Jesus then taught on life in the Father's Kingdom, which includes the value of humility (18:3–4), the heinousness of being a stumbling block to other believers (18:5–9), the value of one lost sheep (18:10–14), and church discipline (18:15–20).

Just before the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Matthew recorded Jesus' teaching about confronting a brother's sin (18:15–20). Jesus' counsel was to confront the brother with the hope that he might repent. Those who do not repent were to be treated as if they were not brothers in the faith. At this point, Peter asked how often he should forgive a sinning brother.

This account shows believers the importance of forgiveness. It gives both positive (v. 22) and negative (vv. 23–35) examples. This is not just a story about an evil slave who got what he deserved. It is a personal opportunity to judge one's willingness to forgive.

IMPORTANCE

This passage of Scripture will help learners understand the great importance that the Father places on relationships among His children. As such, this passage teaches the Essential Truth that People are God's Treasure. God has given abundant grace to us—more than we can possibly comprehend. In response, we must show the same grace to each other. If learners do not understand the magnitude of God's forgiveness, they will have difficulty showing forgiveness to each other.

This passage also touches on other key truths: Jesus is God and Savior and Salvation is by Faith Alone.

INTERPRETATION

Matthew 18:21–22 Matthew's account begins with Peter's question about forgiveness. Jewish custom required someone to forgive a repeated sin three times. The fourth time that the sin occurred, forgiveness would no longer be granted. Peter, believing that he had learned from Jesus' earlier teachings, considered himself a forgiving person. He was willing to forgive his brother seven times. This was more than twice what Jewish custom required. But Jesus told Peter that he must forgive "seventy-seven times." Jesus' point was that forgiveness couldn't be limited.

Matthew 18:23–27 After His positive example of providing limitless forgiveness, Jesus provided a negative illustration in the form of a parable. It is almost that in light of how God has so immeasurably forgiven His children they would withhold forgiveness from each other. Sins between humans are trivial in comparison to the sin between God and man. If God can forgive man, believers surely can and must forgive others.

Jesus' parable involved three main characters—a king and two servants—and was divided into three scenes. In the first scene, the king desired to settle his financial accounts with his servants. Wishing to collect his debts, the king began calling those who owed him money to come before him.

The first servant was unable to pay the enormous debt that he owed the king. The amount was "ten

thousand talents" (v. 24). Some have estimated the debt to be worth hundreds of millions of dollars or even more than a billion dollars in today's currency. Jesus used this hyperbole to show the vastness of the debt: The debt was beyond anyone's ability to repay. Because the servant could not repay it, the king commanded that the servant, his family, and all that they owned be sold. Although selling a small number of slaves would not begin to recover the king's large financial loss—the most that could be recovered from the sale of a slave was one talent—this would allow him to regain part of it. The servant begged for more time to repay his debt, an act that would have been impossible to accomplish. In a shocking twist, however, the king canceled the servant's debt and sent him home instead of selling him off.

Matthew 18:28–31 Although the second scene mirrors the first part of the story, the response to a request for mercy was different. The forgiven servant left the king's presence and encountered a fellow servant who owed him "a hundred denarii" (v. 28). A hundred denarii represented three months of wages for the common worker. The disparity between the size of debts of the two men—10,000 talents compared to 100 denarii—was tremendous.

The forgiven servant demanded that he be paid back. His debtor begged for more time (v. 29), which mirrored the forgiven servant's plea to the king (v. 26). The forgiver, however, showed no mercy and had him thrown in debtor's prison. Interestingly, even a slave worth very little could have been sold for 500 denarii. Yet Jewish law forbade selling a servant to repay a debt for any amount greater than the debt itself. The forgiven servant, therefore, demonstrated a level of vengeance in his actions.

His hypocritical action was appalling in light of the forgiveness just shown to him. Fellow servants were disturbed by the double standard and told the king all that they had seen. In Greek, "told" carries the idea of explaining in detail or giving a report. These servants wanted to make sure that the king knew every detail of the first servant's actions.

Matthew 18:32–35 The forgiven servant's unforgiving actions led to the final scene of the story. The king rebuked the first servant and

called him wicked for being unwilling to show the same forgiveness that he had been shown. In disgust, the king commanded that the first servant be tortured until he repaid his entire debt. Unfortunately for the servant, he could never repay his debt to the king.

Jesus then related the story to God's Kingdom. In the parable, the servant, who had received forgiveness beyond understanding, did not show forgiveness to others and thus suffered the consequences of his actions. In God's Kingdom, there is great danger in an unforgiving spirit. Because of Christ's sacrifice, we have a relationship with the Father through which we receive immeasurable forgiveness. We are then called to show the same forgiveness to fellow servants of the Father.

Recall Peter's initial question: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother?" (v. 21) Jesus' parable emphasized the magnitude of the Father's forgiveness. As His children, we are to forgive one another as God has forgiven us.

IMPLICATIONS

The members of your class have all faced times when they have been injured, slighted, betrayed, or cheated by others. These instances may be petty or shockingly severe. But just as Jesus forgave from the cross those who crucified Him, we are to forgive those who hurt us. Jesus' parable involving the forgiven debtor who would not forgive is a reminder that the consequences of failing to forgive as we have been forgiven are severe. Because **People are God's Treasure**, God expects us to extend infinite forgiveness to others, even as we have been forgiven by His grace. People who understand this truth reflect Christ-like attitudes by forgiving others and forgetting their offenses. Adults need to be reminded that there is nothing to be gained—and much to be lost—through holding grudges, seeking vengeance, or allowing bitterness to take root in our hearts.

As many adults have already learned, an attitude of forgiveness releases the Christian from anger, bitterness and the wish for vengeance. Forgiving others is an action of the heart that does not depend upon the confession, repentance, or apology of the ones who have offended us. Adults who choose to express a Christ-like attitude will extend forgiveness toward others as they have themselves been forgiven. Those who do so will experience the blessing of release from the tension of sitting in judgment of others and the frustration from when others fail to apologize.