

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Matthew 18:21-35

Verses 21,22

Then Peter approached and said to him, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus replied to him, “I do not say up to seven times but seventy times seven.

Chapter 18 deals with relationship and attitudes between members in the church. The disciples ask about the greatest disciples (1-5), Jesus warns about causing lowly Christians to stumble in their faith (6-9), he explains how the fallen Christian should be sought like a lost sheep (9-14) and how to appeal to a Christian who is involved in some serious sin (15-20).

Now Peter raises a question about a limit to forgiveness. The verbs **sin and forgive** are in the future tense but the present tense is a better translation for sin. Peter suggests **up to seven times**, which is a perfect and complete number according to Jewish thinking. He may not have been thinking of serious sins but irritating and foolish behaviour that is damaging to a person or failure to carry out responsibilities. The NIV “someone” is inadequate when Peter is referring to **a brother** (15) and not merely a brother, but **my brother**. Peter is thinking of a fellow disciple in close contact with him.

Jesus’ reply is astonishing. **Seventy times seven** could be translated as 77 but either way, he is suggesting that there be no limit on forgiveness. Lamech wanted to take revenge to the extreme but saying he would do so up to 77 times over but Christ reverses this and says that he considers forgiveness should be taken to the extreme (Gen 4:23,24). Clearly, he is saying something about himself, that he is willing to forgive in this way and that there are no limits on his grace.

Verses 23-27

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven can be likened this way, to a man ruling as king. He wished to settle accounts with his senior noblemen. When he began to settle accounts, one owed him 10,000 talents was brought to him. But not having the means to repay [the money] the nobleman ordered him to be sold, as well as his wife and children and everything he possessed and payment be made. Falling to his knees, the nobleman begged him, “Be patient with me and I will repay you everything.” The lord had compassion on that manager and released him and forgave him the debt.

It is odd that Jesus speaks of **a man ruling as king** ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ, though the same expression is found in 22:2 and there it becomes clear the reference is to a king (22:6). **The servants** can be understood to be noblemen, ruling territories on behalf of the king, which fits the extremely large debt accrued. 10,000 talents is a debt beyond the ability of anyone to repay. It is the equivalent of millions and millions of dollars. There were four denarii to a shekel, and 3,000 shekels to a talent of silver. A denarius was a day’s wage. Let’s assume a denarius is worth \$200, a shekel, \$800. This arrives at a figure of \$2.4m in our terms for one talent. But there were 10,000 talents, thus an equivalent in our terms of \$240b! Jesus was suggesting an impossible figure.

Selling people was clearly a common practice and in this case would be considered a punishment rather than a way of recovering the debt. The nobleman’s response of **falling to his knees** evoked a reaction of **compassion** σπλαγνισθεῖς, a feeling deep within the king’s being. His words, **be patient with me and I will repay you everything** were implausible and simply a desperate attempt to change the king’s mind. It was not this that turned the king away from a just punishment but the king’s sympathy and his desire to be generous-hearted.

He released him and forgave him the debt is at the heart of the parable. The king released the servant from arrest and imprisonment. He was now a free man. Moreover, the debt was wiped and the accounts were now balanced to zero. No debt remained. The word for this is not cancel but

forgive ἀφῆκεν, the same word Peter used in asking his question. Jesus was making clear the direction the parable was heading in, that of the king's huge capacity to forgive and the expectation of his servants to offer forgiveness on a smaller and supposedly, easier scale.

Check fifth petition of Lord's Prayer.

Verses 28-31

That nobleman went left and finding one of his fellow noblemen who owed him 100 denarii, seized him and began to choke him demanding, "Pay back what you owe." So, his fellow nobleman falling to the ground, pleaded with him, "Be patient with me and I will give [it] back to you. But he didn't want [that]. Taking him away, he threw him into prison until he would pay back what was owing. When his fellow officials saw what had happened, they were deeply incensed. When they came [before the king], they explained to their Lord everything that had taken place.

The nobleman found one of his fellow noblemen assumes that they were in the king's courtyard or in the vicinity of the king where their business took place. **Finding** his colleague indicates that he was searching for him. His desire all along was for money and was no doubt the reason so much of the king's money was missing. His actions were not measured and certainly not the like the king's just and considered investigations. Rather, he **seized him and began to choke him**. He was violent, was committing assault and was no doubt a narcissist and bully. What his friend owed was not a large amount (**100 denarii**) in comparison to his debt with the king, probably about \$20,000 in today's terms and very small in comparison to the revenues he could extract from cities, ports, and taxes.

Similar words and actions to those of the hatefully bully accompanied the fellow nobleman's remonstrations, **be patient with me and I will give [it] back to you**, but though a reminder of what he had just said himself a moment before, they were of no avail. This time, it was perfectly feasible for the debtor to clear the amount owing yet the nobleman would have none of it. **He did not want to wait** and had his staff took the poor fellow-nobleman and very roughly **threw him into prison until he would pay back what was owing**. Every last cent counted to this evil fellow.

However, what had happened did not go unnoticed by the fellow officials. The distress they felt was like **being incensed** ἐλυπήθησαν because they immediately saw the hypocrisy, the violence, the obsession over money and the offense against the king who had been so kind to the nobleman. As a group **they reported everything they saw to the king**.

The rest of the church sees and is distressed by an unwillingness to forgive.

Verses 32-35