

Extreme Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

5 April 2020 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: How are Christians to forgive others?

Big Idea: Extreme forgiveness from God enables us to offer extreme forgiveness to others.

Introduction

One night, Dallas police officer Amber Guyger returns home to her apartment after a fourteen hour shift.

She goes to the wrong floor in her building by mistake.

Instead of entering her apartment, she opens the door of the one belonging to her accountant neighbour living on the floor above.

When she opens the front door, she finds a man she doesn't recognise sitting on the sofa eating ice cream.

Thinking he's an intruder, she draws her weapon and shoots twice.

Her neighbour, Botham Jean, is fatally wounded.

In October last year, Guyger was sentenced to ten years' jail.

Lots of people were outraged by what happened in court that day and it sparked protests in the streets of Dallas.

I understand that there was a whole context surrounding this event to do with guns and race which is why some were upset by the length of her sentence.

The real stir, though, came at the end of the trial when Botham's younger brother said to his brother's killer, "I forgive you."

Then he asked for permission from the court to give the woman a hug.

People were confused, troubled and even outraged by what he did.

How could a black man could so quickly and easily forgive a white police officer who'd done such a thing?

For many people, responding with forgiveness just doesn't make sense.

It was his Christian faith that caused him to show such extreme mercy and grace to his brother's killer.

At the trial, he said:

"I know if you go to God and ask him, he will forgive you. I want the best for you, because I know that's exactly what Botham would want you to do. And the best would be to give your life to Christ."

Not only that, what the judge did also caused outrage.

She walked over and gave Amber Guyger a Bible and they prayed together.

{DP} The judge said,

"You haven't done so much that you can't be forgiven."

The Freedom from Religion Foundation filed a formal complaint against Judge Kemp for doing this.

It was a touching moment that showed the power of Christian forgiveness.

Botham Jean's brother shows us an extreme forgiveness that reflects God's character.

A kind of forgiveness that often just doesn't make sense unless you know the God of the Bible.

The kind of forgiveness that voluntarily cancels debts and restores relationships.

Outline

For the moment, this is the last talk in our series in Matthew's gospel.

Over the last few weeks, we've been listening to Jesus' speech in chapter eighteen and we've heard him explain to his disciples what his kingdom is like.

Yes, he's God's servant king – the Messiah – as Peter correctly identified him in chapter sixteen.

But he's going to be a suffering king who will be handed over to men to be killed.

It's not just the type of king Jesus is, but everything about his kingdom that challenges our expectations.

The greatest people in the kingdom of heaven aren't the impressive people, but anyone who's recognises that they're lowly and unimpressive.

In fact, if you want to even get a foot in the door of his kingdom, you've got to humble yourself.

Putting your own sin to death is a must.

Being in Jesus' kingdom also means caring for others.

Firstly, by not causing anyone else to sin, but also lovingly pursuing anyone who wanders away from Jesus.

We want them to repent, which is why Jesus told us to lovingly approach them with humility.

If they don't want to repent, then we need to express our concern with increasing urgency.

That's not the end of the story though, is it?

If at any point a Christian realises that they've been sinning and that they've caused damage to themselves and others, what do we do then?

If they start reversing back down the onramp to the highway to hell or they've been sailing down the highway at full throttle but then realise that they need to get off, what do we do?

When that happens, the person who's been wronged – perhaps even the whole church – need to respond.

And that means forgiving.

Last week's passage was sobering and I think this one actually isn't much different.

Instead of the person who's done the wrong-doing being in the spotlight, it's the person who's been wronged.

It's not just the person who's done wrong who potentially faces God's judgement.

What Jesus says is sobering because there's a very clear warning that if the Christian who's been wronged doesn't forgive, then they'll face God's judgement too.

Extreme forgiveness from God enables us to offer extreme forgiveness to others.

- The Limit of Forgiveness (vv21-22)
- The Reason for forgiveness (vv23-35)
 - Grace Given (vv23-27)
 - Grace Withheld (vv28-30)
 - Grace Demanded (vv31-35)

The limit of Forgiveness (vv21-22)

Having heard what Jesus has to say, Peter – bless him – Peter pipes up in verse 21 to ask a question about forgiveness.

How should you respond when someone sins against you?

Notice that this is specifically about another Christian – a brother or sister in Christ.

Verse 21:

Matthew 18:21 (NIV11) ²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

People don't usually just sin once, deal with it and go on to never sin again.

Imagine a wandering brother or sister who's lovingly pursued to the point that the whole church gets involved before they finally repent.

They seem to be genuinely repentant and are restored to fellowship.

But then, six months later, they're found to be doing exactly the same thing again.

What do you do? And what if it happened again?

You might wonder whether it's even healthy and helpful to keep on forgiving them?

Are we actually doing people a disservice by letting them off the hook too easily?

Should there be a limit?

Or what if someone sins against you once and you forgive them.

But the old proverb goes, "Fool me once, shame on me, fool me twice, shame on you."

After a while, you start to get a bit fed up with forgiving when you keep getting hurt time after time after time.

If we keep on forgiving, are we just encouraging others to take our forgiveness for granted?

Like the daily transaction limit on your bank account, Peter wants to know how many times you need to forgive someone before you max out.¹

In his mind, seven seems to be the magic number, which was actually quite generous compared with some of the rabbis in his day.

There's this repeated phrase in the book of Amos, where God says: "For three sins of [insert place name here], even for four, I will not relent."²

Based on that, many rabbis taught that forgiveness should be extended three times and no more.

Peter asks the kind of question that we usually hear the Pharisees ask: "What's the limit?"

Even though Peter's looking for the limit, he's still going double plus one.

Well, just like Jesus does time after time in the Sermon on the Mount, he takes the question that's looking for the minimum requirement and answers with the maximum application.

You think seven is being generous?

Verse 22:

Matthew 18:22 (NIV11) ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Or it could be seventy times seven.

Either way, you're not meant to keep a record so that on the 78th or the 491st time you don't have to forgive any more.

After all, as Paul says, love "keeps no record of wrongs"³

Jesus' point is that you should forgive more times than your wildest expectations.

For many of us, our natural instinct when we get hurt is that we want to retaliate.

We think about how we can hurt them in return even more than they've hurt us.

If you hurt my cat, I'm going to burn down your house.

It sound ridiculous to anyone who's watching on, but that's how feuds that have lasted decades, centuries even, began.

In Genesis 4, Cain kills his brother Abel because God looked favourably on his brother's offering.

God curses Cain and so Cain is worried about what other people will do to him.

God says that he will avenge Cain seven times over if anyone hurts him.

Later in the same chapter, Cain's great, great, great grandson Lamech boasts to his wives about what he sees as his right to get totally disproportionate revenge.

If God would avenge Cain seven times, Lamech thinks he can avenge Lamech seventy-seven times.

Genesis 4:23–24 (NIV11) I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me.²⁴ If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.”

If you know your Old Testament well (like the disciples did), you can see the comparison between Lamech and Jesus.

Instead of extreme revenge, Jesus is talking about extreme forgiveness.

The kind of forgiveness that's radically disproportionate.

Citizens of his kingdom will have the kind of soft heart that forgives again and again and again and again.

Sometimes, we have this false expectation that we will never be wronged by another Christian and so we're taken by surprise when we are.

If we have a biblical doctrine of sin and if we're meaningfully involved in other people's lives, then we should expect to be wronged by our brothers and sisters all the time.

Often it'll be quite unintentional and sometimes it'll even be quite deliberately.

I'm not trying to excuse my sin or anyone else's, but it's a reality this side of heaven.

If we're going to hurt others frequently, then we need to be good at repenting and apologising.

And if we're going to be hurt frequently, then we'd better be good forgivers because we're going to need to be doing that a lot too.

Forgiveness is one of the key ingredients to unity in the church.

I don't want you to think that I'm under any illusions that this is easy and I very much doubt if Jesus was either.

Forgiveness is emotional and it's demanding.

When you're feeling hurt – especially time after time – it's the last thing you feel like doing.

Nor am I trying to minimise the hurt that you experience because it's very, very real.

Forgiveness means being very patient with other people because we're not judge, jury and executioner.

That's God's job.

Jesus wants us to forgive and he's saying that forgiveness doesn't have a limit.

Which is why he goes on to explain the what and why of being good forgivers.

The Reason for Forgiveness (vv23-35)

Jesus tells a short parable to describe what his kingdom is like.

A parable is a short story that helps to illustrate a point that can't be seen.

When you read a parable, don't sweat all the details too much, but it does make a clear point.

It's a very sobering parable because it's an example of what NOT to do.

Grace Given (vv23-27)

The first thing we see is unbelievable grace given by the king.

Jesus tells the story of a king who wants to call in the money he's owed by his servants.

One of them owed twenty thousand talents.

If you don't know how much a talent is, then you probably think, "Yeah, whatever."

A talent was about 20 years' worth of wages, which means that this's an obscenely large amount of money.

It's like someone on the minimum wage clocking up a \$14 TRILLION dollar debt.

It's hard to even imagine what he could've spent it on to clock up that amount of debt.

Even if you went and bought a swanky house, an expensive car, went on pretty nice holidays AND did it for a couple of THOUSAND friends, you'd only just be getting close.

There's just no way anyone – no matter how generous they are – would let you rack up that kind of debt.

It could be that this servant was responsible for collecting taxes on behalf of the king, but given that we know how much taxes were in the first century, the numbers are far-fetched, even for that.

You're probably not actually meant to do the maths.

A talent was the largest currency and ten thousand was the largest Greek number.

You're probably just meant to think that this man owed a lot.

Not surprisingly, when the bloke's called in by the king, he doesn't have that kind of money sitting around in his loose change jar.

He's got to pay up, but there's just no way that he can, verse 25.

So the master commands that all his stuff be sold off to settle the debt, including his wife and kids.

Knowing that he's going to be bankrupt and out of sheer desperation, he does the only thing that he can do.

He humbles himself to beg his master, verse 26:

Matthew 18:26 (NIV11) ²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'

I've got no doubt about his conviction in that moment and he probably means it when he says that he's going to pay everything back, but there's just no way that's ever going to happen.

He isn't the first or last person to say, "Please give me a little bit more time," but more time isn't going to help.

Any amount he pays back will be little more than a drop in the ocean.

Even the richest man in the world – Jeff Bezos, who's a mere billionaire – couldn't afford to pay that debt.

The king probably knows this and that's why this's one of the truly amazing parts of the parable – he takes pity on the man.

He cancels the debt. The whole lot.

Can you imagine what it'd be like to have a debt of that magnitude cancelled?

That's ridiculous. Crazy.

Think about what it means: in an instant, he was free, his family was free and he had no more debt hanging over his head.

This describes the kingdom of heaven.

God is the king and we're the servants.

We often think that our sin doesn't matter all that much.

A little white lie here, a little bit of raiding the office stationary cabinet there.

But our sin creates a massive chasm between us and God which we can't cross.

Our sin clocks up a debt to God that must be repaid.

We owe God compensation for our wrongdoing.

The cost of our rebellion against God is our very lives.

But our sin causes relational damage too.

Think of pain and the hurt that he experiences when we sin against him.

Our sin is an offense to God that we can never repay.

And yet our holy and righteous God will wipe our slate clean if we repent and come to him.

Our debt from sin which is incalculable – too big for us to comprehend – can be forgiven so that we can be set free.

We are bankrupt sinners, who can only go free because of his grace.

We are freed at no expense to ourselves.

God's forgiveness is gracious, but it's not free.

God is the one who has forgiven our debt.

He didn't do it by writing it off at tax time.

He did it by paying for it out of his own pocket.

Jesus went to the cross so that we could be forgiven – his life in the place of ours.

As he hung on the cross,

Luke 23:34 (NIV11) ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

This is called grace and it's completely undeserved.

That's the wonderfully good news that Jesus came to share.
God's grace was given on the cross and we can share in it.
Our massive debt can be forgiven if we repent and come to him.

The first thing we see about the kingdom of heaven is that in his grace, God forgives.

Grace Withheld (vv28-30)

That would be an absolutely amazing place for Jesus to finish his story, but he goes on.
How will this servant respond? With unbelievable hypocrisy.
The man probably left feeling very thankful, but clearly not grateful.

You'd kind of expect that after an experience like that, this bloke will go on to live long and prosper.

He's been freed and released from his debt and so we're waiting to see what he'll do, expecting a Jean Valjean kind of story.

Surely he'll be like all the people who meet Jesus who can't contain their excitement even when he tells them to.

Except that's not what he does.

He's barely walked out the door before he's off to find another one of his co-workers who served the same master.

This second servant owed the first one the equivalent of about 100 days' wages.

Although it's nothing like the amount that the first man owed his master, this was still a fairly significant amount of money.

This isn't peanuts. It's not \$5 in change, but well over \$10,000 in today's money.

Just like our offence towards God creates a debt to him, so does our offense between brothers.

There was a real sin committed and a real debt exists.

And that needs to be dealt with.

It is significant, substantial, but it's still nothing compared to the debt that he's been forgiven.

We get an insight into what's about to happen quite quickly.

The first servant really isn't a very nice bloke.

He grabs the second servant and starts chocking him.

That's quite an extreme thing to do... and not in a good way!

The way the second servant responds sounds like history repeating itself.

Verse 29 is almost exactly the same as verse 26.

How are you expecting the first servant to respond?

You expect that he'd give the same response as his boss gave to him, wouldn't you?

Only he did the exact opposite.

He has the bloke thrown in prison until he could pay the debt.

In some circumstances, debtors' prisons allow their inmates to do hard labour to earn money to pay off their debts.

Or maybe the first servant was hoping that someone rich would come along and have him bailed out – perhaps even their master.

He's not gracious, forgiving, patient or merciful.

The double standard sticks out like a sore thumb.

We've seen how the king treated the slave.

Is this really how a slave will then go and treat another slave?

Is that how a Christian will treat a fellow believer?

Absolutely not.

Looking on, we might be tempted to think that the servant was just being ridiculous.

And he was, that's the point of this parable Jesus tells.

His behaviour was atrocious, so don't be like that man.

The thing is, that we so often are just like him.

Put yourself in his shoes and I can think of a few reasons why we might respond like he does.

When people sin against us, it hurts.

It can really, really hurt.

The pain is very real.

And like him, we can be impatient in wanting justice.

One of the reasons we struggle to forgive is because we desperately want justice, now and on our terms.

Mercy seems like a cheap sell-out.

If you think about it, justice is a really tricky thing.

We want it for others, but not for ourselves because we know that if we get what we deserve, we've got no hope.

We can be quite proud when it comes to justice.

Convincing ourselves that we deserve to be let off but others shouldn't because what they've done is so bad.

That's arrogant and proud – thinking that we're better than others and despising another for whom Christ died.

Given the context and the theme of humility that runs through this chapter, I think that's probably a big part of this.

Pro tip: When you feel wronged, ask yourself how your pride might be stopping you from forgiving.

Ask whether the reason you can't forgive others is because you think you're better than them.

When we minimise our sin and maximise the wrong against us, that's when we find it difficult to forgive.

And by the way, if you're going to play the comparison game, I challenge you to play it with God.

It's no coincidence that this passage comes straight after the previous one.

One of the things that makes it more difficult to repent of our sin is that we're not sure how we're going to be treated.

Even if we're going to be treated badly, that shouldn't stop us from turning from our sin.

Still, I wonder how people might respond differently if they knew they were going to receive forgiveness and not condemnation?

How different would a church look when it lovingly pursues sin if people know that they're going to receive forgiveness when they truly repent?

I hope that characterises our church and people know that this is a place where they'll find grace and not judgment.

I'm not better than you.

We are all sinners who need forgiveness.

Ephesians 4:32 (NIV11) ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Forgiveness lays the foundation for reconciliation.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that there's no consequences, but it's an important step. Just like church discipline seeks restoration and reconciliation, so does forgiveness.

What is forgiveness? It's hard to find a definition.

Forgiveness means graciously pardoning someone who's hurt you – wiping their debt away. And the goal is reconciliation.

{DP} I like this definition from Chris Brauns in his book *Unpacking Forgiveness*.

Forgiveness: A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated.⁴

Ken Sande helpfully puts some legs on this.⁵

He says that forgiveness means:

- I will not dwell on this incident
- I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship

Forgiveness means letting go of the debt others owe us, not calling it in.

How is that possible? Well, it's grounded in what God has done for us.

I've emphasised – because I think our passage does – that this is forgiveness between Christians.

If you don't know Jesus as your saviour, I'm not saying that forgiveness is impossible for you.

Many Christian counsellors say how important forgiveness is.

But usually what they mean is the benefit of forgiveness to yourself – so that you don't burn up inside with uncontrolled emotion.

Christian forgiveness is so much more than that because it's grounded in what God himself has done.

Our natural inclination is to withhold grace, but Christian forgiveness extends grace so that reconciliation can happen.

Grace Demanded (vv31-35)

Finally, we see that grace is demanded from the king.

I think that one of the parts of this story that's under-emphasised is that there are other servants who see this.

I can't help but think that in this context, that's important.

Even though you were a brother who was unjustly hurt, if you don't forgive others then you're in danger of being one of the sheep who are wandering off.

They're outraged and indignant about what they've seen happen and so they tell the master.

The master is outraged when he hears what the first servant has done.

Failing to forgive is wickedness.

The one who receives mercy should also show it to others.

It's actually sin not to forgive the sinner.

Occasionally, you come across someone who seems to live by the mantra, "Never forgive anyone for anything ever."

You get one chance with them and if you blow it, that's it.

Forgiveness isn't an option.

That's just not an option if you're a Christian.

More commonly, I hear Christians say, "I just can't bring myself to forgive that person."

We all find forgiveness hard. It's no walk in the park.

Can't forgive when we lose sight of the cross.

But when we look to what Jesus has done, how could we not?

If we're struggling to forgive, it's a sign that we're struggling to keep sight of God's grace.

We should be grieved when other Christians aren't forgiving.

And we need to take that seriously, even when we're not the ones who need the forgiveness.

It's actually a sign that they've lost sight of the cross and perhaps they're wandering from the Lord.

Jesus ends on a note of judgement, so listen carefully because this's a warning for us.

In his parable, the master hands the first servant over to the gaoler.

He gives him the same treatment that the first servant gave to the second servant.

Matthew 18:35 (NIV11) ³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

If you have experienced God's grace, then grace towards others is demanded.

Conclusion

In Luke's gospel, this whole discussion is summarised in just two verses:

Luke 17:3–4 (NIV11) ³ So watch yourselves. "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. ⁴ Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."

Forgiveness isn't an optional extra in the Christian life.

If we've been forgiven by God, then we must forgive others.

Extreme forgiveness from God enables us to offer extreme forgiveness to others.

We started by thinking about Amber Guyger and Botham Jean.

On that tragic night, Amber did something that I'm sure she very much regrets.

In an interview with CNN, Botham Jean's father quoted Jesus:

"I felt the same way as Brandt," Jean said. "That's what Christ would want us to do... If you will not forgive, neither will your Father forgive you. I don't want to see her rot in hell. I don't want to see her rot in prison...So, I wish her well and I will pray for her family and pray for her as well."

"If you will not forgive, neither will your father forgive you."

Amber Guyger and Botham Jean were neighbours.

She received forgiveness from her neighbour's family and also from the judge.

How much more should there be forgiveness amongst brothers and sisters in Christ when we've received it from our heavenly judge?

May we be people who forgive our neighbours, just as God has forgiven us.

¹ In Luke 17:4, Peter seems to ask how many times you should forgive in a single day.

² Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6.

³ 1 Corinthians 13:5

⁴ Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2008), 55.

⁵ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2004), 209.

Extreme Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

5 April 2020 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: How are Christians to forgive others?

Big Idea: Extreme forgiveness from God enables us to offer extreme forgiveness to others.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think people typically think that forgiveness is hard or easy?
2. Why does Jesus say that you have to forgive 77 times?
3. Why is the king's reaction so surprising and what does it teach us about the kingdom of heaven?
4. Is grace truly free?
5. How does the first servant meet or fall short of your expectations?
6. What are some reasons that we act like the first servant?
7. How does this section on forgiveness connect with what Jesus said earlier?
8. What does it mean to forgive someone?
9. What do you think would be helpful to say to a Christian who says, "I just can't forgive that person"?