**The grace of letting it go**

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

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**Scriptures:** Psalm 32; Matthew 6:9-25; 18:21-35

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 103, 218, 284, 454, 67

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism LD51

**Theme:** Jesus demonstrates the grace of God’s forgiveness of sin by using a parable to teach the connection between God’s forgiveness of our huge debt to Him and the call for us to forgive others the much smaller debt which they owe to us.

**Proposition:** Grasping God’s grace encourages us to sincerely forgive others from the heart by letting go of the offense, debt and hurt and by treating the offender as not guilty.

**Introduction**

Forgiveness is the subject of our text from Matthew 18:21-35. Forgiveness is a topic that we can all readily relate to. Often because we have found, or still find, it difficult to forgive someone else. This can be especially true if their offense against us was very hurtful, damaging and unjust. Forgiving others from the heart is letting go of the offense, debt and hurt and treating the offender as not guilty.

Old Joe was dying. For years he had been at odds with Bill, formerly one of his best friends. Wanting to straighten things out, he sent word for Bill to come and see him. When Bill arrived, Joe told him that he was afraid to go into eternity with such a bad feeling between them. Then, very reluctantly and with great effort, Joe apologized for things he had said and done against his former friend. He also assured Bill that he forgave him for his offenses. Everything seemed fine until Bill turned to go. As he walked out of the room, Joe called out after him, "*But, remember, if I get better, this doesn't count!*"

**19th century English reformed Baptist preacher C.H. Spurgeon once** said "*forgive and forget. When you bury a mad dog, don’t leave his tail above the ground*." **Across the Atlantic Ocean, American congregationalist Henry Ward Beecher** said, "*Every man and woman should have a fair-sized cemetery in which to bury the faults of his friends*."

We saw last week that the six petitions, or requests, of the Lord’s prayer divide into 2 groups, the first 3 relating to God: His Name, His Kingdom, His Will. The 2nd set of 3 petitions in Lord’s Prayer (4-6) all relate to us, as men, women and children created in God’s image. We saw last week that the 4th petition of the Lord’s Prayer ‘*Give us this day our daily bread*’ points to our need for bodily sustenance to maintain physical life.

The word ‘and’ connects this to the 5th petition ‘*forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors’* whichpoints to our need for forgiveness by God in order to have spiritual life. To have physical life is of limited value if we remain under God’s wrath as objects of his displeasure with our sins unforgiven. We may have an abundance of good things, but if we are still held accountable for our sins, what we have in this life is of no lasting value. Remember that Jesus asked the probing question: “*For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?*” (Mark 8:36) If we have not been forgiven for our sins, we remain under God’s wrath with an obligation to pay our debt to Him…which brings us to our 1st point:

1. **An impossible burden of debt**

If you take out a mortgage to purchase a house, you place yourself under an obligation to pay the interest for the loan and also to repay the whole debt in full over a prescribed period of time. Until you complete the payment back to the moneylender, you are in debt to them. You are bound; you are not financially free.

In response to a question from Peter about how many times he should forgive the sin of a brother who sins against him, Jesus tells a parable about the Kingdom of God. This is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning which focusses on debt. In this story a King is owed 10,000 talents by one of his servants. The exact sum is not the point here. The focus is on the incredibly enormous size of this financial obligation to be repaid. A talent was worth 6,000 denarii. A denarius being a labourer’s day wage. At the rate of six denarii per week, it would take almost three years to earn 1 talent. Even if the servant, perhaps as an official in the kingdom, was able to earn 100 times the wage of a labourer, he would still need to work for 300 years to earn 10,000 talents and not spend any of his earnings on living costs.

The point in this parable is that the debt owed by this servant was far far too large for him ever to be able to pay back. It was an impossible burden of debt. In many ancient cultures people who could not pay their debts were sold, with the proceeds gained at the slave market going towards the repayment. In telling the parable, Jesus does not condone this practice of enslavement, but he does use it to illustrate the power that the creditor, the one to whom a debt is due, has over a debtor.

Our common ancestor Adam was originally ‘debt-free’ in a perfect world which God had made ‘very good’. He had extensive freedom within the rich and beautiful environment which God had created for him and other creatures. God freely gave Adam the privilege of eating from any tree in the garden, apart from one – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Upon this one tree, a condition of obedience was attached: “*in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*” (Gen 1:27).

Adam, a man made in God’s image – body and soul - had life in fullness – physically and spiritually. His body was alive, with a beating heart, inflating lungs absorbing oxygen into his bloodstream and a brain active with electrical signals enabling him to think and be conscious of himself and his surroundings. He was also spiritually alive. He was in a relationship with the Living God. The condition for him to remain in this state of freedom under God’s good and perfect rule was obedience as defined by God’s word of law - not to eat of the forbidden fruit.

This is sometimes called the ‘covenant of works’ – not that the actual word covenant appears in the book of Genesis. However we do read in Hosea 6:7 that Israel and Judah “*like Adam… transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me*”. There was certainly a promise which God put in place for Adam. We could put it into these words: If you continue in obedience you will continue to live (physically and spiritually). If you disobey, you will cease to live – you will die. For Adam spiritual death came first – he was removed from God’s presence, his relationship with His Maker being severed. At age 960 he died physically (Gen 5:3) as we are all destined to do.

There was an ‘obligation’ for Adam to pay for his disobedience with his own life. He had a debt to pay to his Creator. Our debt with God arises because of our non-payment of what He has lawfully required of us – full obedience. This obedience which God justly requires of each one of us was summarized by the Lord Jesus Christ in these words: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself*” (Matt 22:37-39). What God commands us is to render to Him an obedience which has been described as ‘perfect, personal and perpetual’. We have all failed to pay this – hence we are all in debt apart from Christ.

A clear way to see the truth that our sin puts us in debt to God is to compare the two slightly different ways Jesus expresses the Lord’s prayer on two separate occasions, as recorded in Matthew and Luke’s gospels: In Matthew, the 4th petition (6:12) reads: ‘*forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors’.* Whereas in Luke, the 4th petition (11:4) reads: ‘*forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us*’.

**Just as** sin against God incurs a debt of non-payment with our lives according to God’s law “*the soul who sins shall die*” (Eze 18:4c), **so, likewise** sin against others, incurs a debt. The debt that we have with God we contracted from conception “*from before birth you were called a rebel*” (Isaiah 48:8) , “*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me*” (Psalm 51:5). The sad truth is that we are not born free, but we are conceived in debt to God and that debt increases as we continue to live. An impossible burden of debt!

Just as many in our western societies do not like to dwell on how much they owe to moneylenders like banks, so many do not wish to hear of their far greater indebtedness to God. An obligation to pay which will cost them their lives eternally. Having not rendered obedience, like fallen Adam, we must give up our lives. As God’s Word says, “*For the wages of sin is death*” (Rom 6:23). Just as the servant in the parable was bound under a heavy load of debt that he could not possibly repay, so we are naturally bound under a terrible load of guilt, a fearful weight of just judgement. In times of great financial crisis, debtors have been known to take their own lives out of utter despair. They experience the weight of their debt expressed by the psalmist this way: “*For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me*” (Psalm 38:4)..which leads to 2nd point:

1. **The generous grace of the King**

In the parable, the heavily indebted servant makes a pathetic plea: “*Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything*”. As we have seen, there was no realistic possibility of paying back such an incredibly large debt. 10,000 talents was far too much. The servant has no way to honour the pledge of his words to ‘pay you everything’. Yet, the response of the King was one of ‘pity’. The Greek word here means to be ‘moved with compassion’. (The same word is used of the response of Jesus to a leper to whom He reached out his hand and said ‘I will [you to be healed], be clean’).

The King is under absolutely no obligation to forgive any or all of what is owed to Him. Effectively He freely gives as a gift with ‘no strings attached’ the sum of 10,000 talents to the indebted servant who has done nothing to deserve such merciful treatment. The King demonstrates great mercy in cancelling such an enormous debt. Notice then what happens to the debt in the parable. The King releases the servant from his obligation to pay the money back. The man is free, the burden of unpayable debt has been removed. In the words of Christ, The King ‘*forgave him the debt*’. He literally ‘let go the obligation pay what was owed’. He cancelled the debt. He let it go. It was gone.

So who, you may ask, paid the 10,000 talents? What was the effect on the King of his cancelling the debt? This sovereign suffered a great loss. To be precise, the loss of 10,000 talents. The money to cancel the debt had to come from somewhere. It came from the King’s own treasury. He was 10,000 talents worse off after forgiving the debt! It was the King Himself who paid the 10,000 talents to set the forgiven servant free.

**Forgiveness, letting an obligation to repay go, always comes at a cost to the one who forgives.** Mercy comes with a price-tag – someone always has to pay. For example, sometimes the New Zealand government will write-off a person’s student loan, or their overdue taxes, it is then our country as a whole which effectively pays. We, as taxpayers, subsidise the forgiving of financial debts by our government.

You may ask, how can a God of absolute justice and righteousness who rules the supreme court of the universe, just let the consequence of sin go? How can he simple waive a sinful person’s debt and allow them to go free? The answer is only by accepting the payment by another person. That other person is His Son Jesus Christ. God is pleased to accept the payment made by Christ on behalf of indebted sinners like you and me. When God forgives the sin of people like you and me, it is because the cost has been paid by another, by Christ. He died at Calvary. Paying the debts of others like you and me. Because He is infinite God as well as man, He was able to pay for the sins of all those for whom he died.

Perhaps you are wondering why we need to continue to pray that God would forgive us our sins/debts if we have already come to Christ in repentance and faith and have thereby been fully and finally justified before God? Have we not been saved by this great grace of God? Are we not now acceptable in the sight of His perfect holiness? Are we not now his beloved children? Why continue to pray for forgiveness, as Jesus teaches us to do in the Lord’s Prayer? Three points come to mind in response to these questions:

1. It is good that we are reminded of God’s pardon daily. As we pray this petition, we recall his blessed grace towards us.
2. It is true that at the time of our conversion we are judicially forgiven, thereafter there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. He has fully paid for all ours sins with His precious blood! However, as God’s children we do continue to grieve Him as and when we sin. In this petition we are not seeking his judicial pardon again, but what we could call his ‘paternal pardon’ day by day, so that we can enjoy the closeness of an unhindered relationship with our Heavenly Father. Unconfessed sin in the life of a child of God does not mean that salvation is lost, but closeness with our Lord suffers as a result.
3. Also, in the words of HCLD51, we are reminded of the necessity that we forgive our others ‘*as evidence of your grace in us*’. **The forgiven must be forgiving** – which brings us to our 3rd point.
4. **The corresponding grace of His servants**

As we’ve seen in the parable, the King had shown great compassion to the hugely indebted servant. However, this servant later refuses to forgive his fellow servant a tiny debt in comparison to what he owed the king – the debt equivalent to 100 days of labour. Then the King’s gracious compassion rightly turns to anger. He has the wicked servant delivered to the jailers until he should pay all his debt.

So here comes the ‘punch-line’ – the main point of the parable at the end: **“***So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart*" (Matt 18:35). The message is clear and plain. If you, having been forgiven such a huge debt by God in Christ, do not forgive others the far smaller debts they owe to you when they sin against you, then you have no place in God’s Kingdom.You will be shut out forever.

Jesus is teaching this truth: **The forgiven must forgive others.** This is a command. A command which is underscored by the ‘footnote’ which Jesus ‘adds’ to the Lord’s prayer: **“***For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*” (Matt 6:14).

Perhaps you’re thinking, well that sounds like salvation by works. Is God’s forgiveness of me in Christ dependent upon my forgiveness of others? Could I like the servant in the parable be forgiven by God and then have that reversed and be cast out of His Kingdom forever? The answer to both these questions is categorically NO. What Christ is driving home here is that a clear sign of God’s grace in the heart of a saved sinner is the ability, desire and readiness to forgive others. Being fully determined to forgive other is ‘*evidence of God’s grace us*’. A truly forgiving heart is the result of spiritual rebirth (John 3:3).

For some, perhaps, many of us, forgiveness of others has been, is, or may in the future, be a struggle. We may have been deeply hurt and our flesh protests against letting go injustices, perceived or real. We forgive others when we let go of resentment and give up any claim to be compensated for the hurt or loss we have suffered. Here are some steps in forgiving someone else:

1. **Remember what forgiveness involves.**You are not condoning the wrong or acting as if it never happened​—you are simply letting it go.
2. **Recognise the benefits of forgiving. It is evidence that you belong to Christ.**Letting go of anger and resentment can also help you to keep calm, experience improved health, and increase your joy in the Lord ([Proverbs 14:30;](https://www.jw.org/en/library/bible/study-bible/books/proverbs/14/#v20014030)[Matthew 5:9](https://www.jw.org/en/library/bible/study-bible/books/matthew/5/#v40005009)).
3. **Be understanding.**All of us are imperfect. ([James 3:2](https://www.jw.org/en/library/bible/study-bible/books/james/3/#v59003002)) We sin against others. Other people sin against us. Just as we appreciate being forgiven, we should likewise forgive the mistakes of others ([Matthew 7:​12](https://www.jw.org/en/library/bible/study-bible/books/matthew/7/#v40007012)).
4. **Act quickly.**Work to forgive as soon as you can rather than letting your anger or resentment fester ([Ephesians 4:​26, 27](https://www.jw.org/en/library/bible/study-bible/books/ephesians/4/#v49004026-v49004027)).
5. **Do no bring the forgiven offence back up. Bury the ‘whole mad dog’, tail and all, and don’t try to dig him up again!**

In light of this sermon, you and I should ask ourselves, do I have a heart which:

* Is eager to forgive others.
* Does not keep score.
* Does not dwell on past offences.
* Does not repeatedly bring them up to myself, the offender or to others.
* Experiences the joy of forgiving others.

Grasping the immensity of God’s grace can be difficult for us when we tend to think of people getting what they deserve. The more we get a grip on how much debt we have been forgiven in Christ, the more we realise how free we are. Free to forgive the minor debts others have incurred with us. Free to enjoy not only being forgiven, but being ready, willing and eager to forgive others from the heart as evidence of God’s grace in us.

Heavenly Fatherforgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Amen