Matthew 18:35 This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart.

Sometimes it is so tiring hearing people say again and again that God is unjust and unfair in his dealings with mankind. If you think that, then, in truth, I don’t believe you know or even have a comprehension of the truth of what God’s Word has to say and reveal. In fact, should you do an honest study of Scripture and let God’s Word interpret God’s Word you will find that God has done nothing but work in the world to bring about his salvation and the gift of eternal life. God has done everything to grant every soul the gift and chance of eternal life and salvation!

Our sinful nature is what messes it all up. God has given mankind the job of telling of his love and grace and in many ways we have failed. The Jews of the Old Testament were to spread the news and joy of a Savior to come and the grace that God’s promises bring, but because of sin, they didn’t really do that. Instead of proclaiming God’s grace and mercy as foreshadowed in their ceremonial laws, they twist things around and declare that obeying the law, being holy and perfect or “being the best you can be” is all that counts. And according to the Jews, the law, obeying the law as they saw it was the best you could be. They got it wrong!

Even today in our Christian churches often times the emphasis is on our obedience to God. In the name of Jesus do this or do that, be this or be that…because that is how you show God your love and faith and then he will grant you eternal life. But that teaching is really no different than the falsehood the Jewish people of the Old Testament clung to. That work-righteous teaching is no different than the hundreds or thousands of work-righteous religions that man has invented and promotes. So when even Christian churches, for reasons of sin, keep getting it wrong, then why should anyone think Christianity different or any more “of God” than all the other work-righteous religions? In truth, understanding the Christian faith starts with understanding God’s mercy and then how that mercy impacts. Our theme will be: **GOD’S FORGIVENESS.**

How interesting to see that Jesus is going to use a parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning to get across his point. Now I do think it important to grasp that this conversation, this lesson begins at the start of chapter 18. If you would, recall the entire lesson started with the question: **“Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”** Understand, at this point Jesus could have simply stated: “I am,” but that is not what he does. He understands the heart of the question is about man’s position, man’s ranking in the faith. The disciples understood God was and is God, so clearly their question is about how man is to carry out God’s work. Do you recall how Jesus answered?

That’s right, he had the little child come up and pointing to this child says, **“Amen, I tell you; Unless you are turned and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives a little child like this one in my name receives me.”** The lesson is be humble. Don’t exalt yourself. Even as a Christian leader it is not about power and greatness in this world but about God’s love, humility, serving, forgiveness and total trust in God. Our focus is not this life. And look how he reinforces that lesson by the next lessons. The millstone if you destroy the faith of the those who simply trust in the Lord. Or getting rid of your foot or eye if they are the cause of offense and are destroying your faith. Then comes the lesson of the lost sheep…do your best to save souls. Next is the lesson on how to lovingly deal with the sinful brother, our gospel reading from last week. And now comes the heart of the lesson, precipitated by Peter’s question, **“Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me?”**

With that question Jesus shoots right for the heart of it all and does so in a parable that is absolutely masterful. Honestly, I don’t think Peter was being anything but totally human in his question. How far does this forgiveness thing go?

Please note that Jesus answers with a play on Peter’s question. Peter had asked, **“Up to seven times!”** Jesus answered with a **“as many as seventy-seven times.”** It is an answer emphasizing that forgiving our brother is really an unlimited thing. And to drive that message home Jesus gives us the parable of the unmerciful servant. Because I can see how this could get real long, I am going to refer to parts of the lesson and hopefully drive home the lesson for all.

First, the servant is called to account. That is the King’s right. The servant has utilized the King’s resources, benefited from the rule of the King and, just frankly, owed the King be it taxes or tribute or whatever. It is the King’s right to demand an account. He will ask it of all his servants. In other words, God sets the rules and God will make the judgments as He sees fit. I also want you to consider the message here for those who say that God is love and that He will not demand an accounting. Yes, He will!

Second, the servant owes millions. This is no small sum of money. Why the servant owed this, I don’t know. Failure to pay? Took advantage of the fact that he thought there would be no accounting? Doesn’t matter the reason, the debt is considerable. And the servant is totally unable to make it right. The King simply gives out the order that is in keeping with what the law states. The man, his wife, children, all that he had was to be sold to repay the debt. That was the penalty for this great debt, this total incompetence in the matter or this total willingness to cheat the King of his rightful due. It is what the law says! The only one in the wrong here is the servant and his defaulting ways. If you don’t grasp the reality of the debt of our sins before God and God’s right to act on that fact, then you are a totally blind soul.

Now the servant, with heartfelt distress and emotion, pleads for his life and that of his family. He begs to be given time and promises that he will repay the debt. Mind you, it is already stated that he cannot, he would not be able to pay the debt! The servant, in total humility, begs for his life and again the life of his family. I want you to be aware of the fact that this humility, this humbling before the King and this recognizing of your faults before the King, this throwing yourself at the mercy of the King is exactly what is behind all true repentance. God’s Word calls upon us for repentance, not just before God but even with our fellow human being. To acknowledge our faults, troubles, short-comings and foolishness. To acknowledge them and throw yourself at the mercy of God. Such is the way of faith. This servant must have had, at this moment, the hope and trust that his Master would forgive! Again, I believe it reveals something about the King. That this King was well known for his mercy and kindness. Why else plead?

The pleading, the repentance brings a result. The King took pity on the man. The King releases the man. The King, even more than that, completely and absolutely forgives the entire debt. Gone! Zeroed out! No debt remaining for this man. A new start! Again, not just pennies, but millions of debt is gone. All of this because of the Master’s, the King’s kindness and heart. Make no mistake. It is not the good pleading that does the trick but rather the good heart, the forgiving heart, yes, the merciful heart of the King that brings about this complete forgiveness of debt. Make sure you let that sink in.

Let that sink in because in effect that is what God offers and gives every soul in Jesus. That in Jesus, you, me and every person ever is offered the forgiveness of sin and eternal life because of the goodness and grace of God. Grace given completely! Your debt is paid! No strings attached. Go in peace! And just like this parable, all it took was some faith, hope, trust in the goodness of the King’s heart. That is literally what our faith is about. The goodness and grace of the Lord our God’s heart. Note that God saw fit to put his goodness on display. He sent Jesus to the cross so we could know our debt is paid and so we could know that God and Jesus do offer us forgiveness because and through grace. Now I would think, hope and pray that this grace has an impact on you who have been forgiven for your millions in debt.

But what does this servant do? Yep, finds a fellow servant who owed him only pennies and though he had just be forgiven his millions by his master, this servant has not a single shred of pity or mercy for his fellow servant. Everything the king could have done to him, according to the Law, he turns and does to his fellow man. There isn’t a man on this planet who doesn’t recognize the total wickedness, the total ungratefulness, yes, the total evil of this servant! How can you receive the blessing of the King’s forgiveness and then not share that forgiveness with others? You make a mockery of the King! Your actions declare that you think the King a fool, an idiot for being so soft hearted. In truth, you don’t care for, love, or even have a shred of regard for the King and what He is. Your repentance was not born of humbleness but comes from a heart that thinks it knows better than God. You know you can pull a fast one over on the Lord because He is such a dolt in how He acts with all this forgiveness and such. And you think you are now going to show the example of just how the sinners of this world should be treated! There is not a man on this planet who does not see the evil and wrong of this servant.

It was his fellow servants who reported to the master. They were distressed at this horrid evil. They couldn’t believe that one who had received such mercy, such a debt of forgiveness could so quickly and callously beset his fellow servant. That’s our job, to alert the evil doers of this world of the price to come should they not be moved to bring honor and glory to their King in their lives and actions.

The way this parable ends is such a simple lesson. **“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.** Who in this world would condemn the master? Who would declare that this King acted in hatred and ignorance or acted without justice and righteousness? None. Oh, it is true, the King was angry. A righteous, pure and holy anger because His grace, his total forgiveness of this servants debt was spurned and despised by this servant. It was clear this was so by the very actions of this servant.

So the answer to the question of Peter is quite clear. **“This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart.”** How many times shall I forgive my brother, my repentant brother? Answer: How much have you been forgiven? In other words, you want to have God’s grace, mercy and love showered upon you, then you too, should show that same grace, mercy and love to all.

This is not something new. Jesus would teach in his Prayer: “**Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”** In the book of 1 John, what we are studying in our Monday and Wednesday bible classes we heard: **“The one who says he is in the light and yet hates his brother is still in darkness. The one who loves his brother remains in the light and nothing causes him to stumble. The one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”** Same lesson. God’s love will impact your love. God’s forgiveness impacts your forgiveness. Faith in Jesus means that we take to heart, deep to heart the forgiveness and love God has showered upon us and it shows in our lives.

Mind you. Not once did I mention anything about being perfect and holy. We will stumble. We will falter and disobey because of our sinful nature and the temptations of the Devil. But we will always, with humility, with a deep sense of the need we have for Jesus and His wonder, turn to the Lord repentant. We are filled with sorrow because we grasp that every sin, any sin, is an affront to the wonder and grace of God himself. With complete trust in the mercy of God we turn and seek his grace. God’s grace will be found. It is found in Jesus. It is found in lessons of the resurrection and the hope of eternal life those lessons bring. Grace is our hope and confidence. And we, faltering though we may be, seek to live to the glory of that grace.

But should we determine, like this wicked servant, that God’s grace is only a tool to be used and abused for our personal good and gain, it will not be so. In other words, you can’t decide that what God’s grace and mercy is foolishness, that God is not God and that you are better and smarter than God and expect God to get over it.

I pray the simple and yet powerful lesson of this parable stay with us. I pray, that you, like me, grasp your debt of sin and the utter grace of God in completely and totally forgiving us. And then, in humbleness, let that grace of God shine in your life to the glory of Jesus. Amen.