



September 12,13-14, 2026

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: Who's in Your Dungeon? -- A Sermon on Forgiveness

1. Recognize sin's prison 2. Release sin's prisoners

Sermon Text: Matthew 18: 21-35

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

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?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."^[a] ²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold^[b] was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.^[c] He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' ³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Dear servants of the most high – King Jesus,

True story. In Revolutionary War days, a pastor named Peter Miller learned a British collaborator, one who mocked him, abused him, and hated him, was to be hanged for his war crimes. Immediately, the pastor set out on foot for Valley Forge, miles away to visit General George Washington to intercede for the man's life. The General, when he heard the request, said he was sorry, but couldn't pardon the pastor's friend. But, Miller said: "The man isn't my friend. He's my worst enemy." On hearing this, Washington heart was changed and replied: "That put things in a whole new light." Seeing the preacher's

forgiveness for his enemy, General Washington signed the pardon. But, the pastor didn't stop there. You could say, he went the extra mile. Actually, he walked another 20 miles to the execution site to deliver the hand-written pardon. He arrived just in time as the condemned man was walking toward the gallows. Miller's enemy was set free that day – by the pastor he hated most.

Now, I know you are probably asking yourself million dollar questions like: "How is THAT possible? How could he forgive his enemy?" Could you do that?" Good questions, right? But, by forgiving the enemy, the pastor proved he was the real free man. The pastor could only forgive much because he had been forgiven much. In the great forgiveness chapter of the Bible, Matthew chapter 18, we meet a man quite the opposite of Pastor Miller. Rather, than setting his enemy free, he threw him into prison. I have a question for you, my Christian friends: do we ever do that? Are there ever times we are unwilling to forgive? This is probably one of those sermons that you are wishing someone else would hear. It's always someone else, isn't it? Someone else has the problem. Someone else is bitter. Not us. I mean, we can hold grudges, right? Now I admit I don't know all the mean and nasty things others have done to you. I am sincerely sorry you've been hurt. And if I did know, I'd probably agree with you – it's hard to forgive. I don't know what happened to you. But, Jesus does. And He's asking each of us tonight/today: **Who's In Your Dungeon?** Every person we've ever refused to forgive is down there right now. Of course, we can't forgive anyone on our own. We need Jesus' help – the one who knows all, sees all. Jesus changes everything. And through His Word today, let's first of all recognize sin's prison and then let's follow Christ's command to release sin's prisoners. Let's make it simple. He says: forgive as we have been forgiven.

It's been said: "to err is human, to forgive is divine." So let's turn to God's Word for divine inspiration and motivation to forgive. Let's take a deeper look at our sermon text, what's been labeled as: "The parable of the unmerciful servant." Our reading begins: **²¹Then 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?" ²²Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."^[6]** Of course, at the heart of being a Christian, is the ability to forgive. There's no question in Peter's mind and that's why he comes to Jesus. Peter asks the one question that's probably been on your mind: "how many times do I need to forgive?" Peter really thought he was going the extra mile to forgive 7 times: 7 times when he was backstabbed, trashed and even used by others. You can almost imagine the look on his face when Christ responded by saying: forgive others seventy-seven times – in other words, and brace yourself for this Bible truth: forgiveness is unlimited. Jesus goes on to tell this parable: **²³"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began**

the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.

²⁵*Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.* The servant in this parable owed money, a LOT of money – 10,000 bags of gold. Conservatively, each bag of gold was worth: about five million dollars. Now think about having 10,000 of those sacks in your living room. That's the big debt. In today's dollars, that would be worth more than 50 billion dollars. And you thought you had a lot of credit card debt or school loans. It would take the average person a million years to repay that debt. Of course, it was impossible – hopeless. Since there was no way the servant could pay, the king decided to do what the law allowed: to sell that servant along with his wife, kids, and all that he had. Just think of what that would mean: each family member taken to different location, owned by different masters. They'd never see each other again. Unthinkable. The servant was trapped in a dungeon with no way out.

Are you already applying this parable to your own life? I hope so. In order to forgive we need to realize how much we've been forgiven. In Jesus' parable, God is the King and we are in the same dungeon as this servant. We might have a zero balance on our credit cards, the mortgage might be paid in full and we may own our car free and clear, but from the moment we're born, we're imprisoned by sin and we've racked up a big debt of sin before God. That's why the apostle Paul said in Romans 7:14: ***We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.*** God's Law, remind us that we are unspiritual, that we owe God for every one of our sins, that lust-ful thought, that unkind word that slipped through our teeth, or even our unwillingness to forgive. So let me get more personal. How many times have you sinned this weekend? Once, twice, 100 times? I mean, who can keep track? We'd like to think: I'm not that bad. Really? Maybe this will show you what I mean. Imagine if they could put a DVR in our heads and record just 1 random hour of the day: every thought, word, and deed. Imagine if God would fill the MLC Bowl with all of us here and stand at midfield with his holy arm around us and push play on the DVR so everyone else could see how bad we are in high definition on one of these big screens they have at US Bank Stadium. How long would it be before you'd finally confess: "God, turn it off. I get I'm a sinner" Just thinking about my sins, I'd never want God to get to push play. Friends, if the Bible is right, and we believe it is, our debt of sin we owe God is even higher than the servant's 50 billion dollar debt to the king. There's no way we can repay God for even one sin. For ***the wages of sin is death.*** In truth, each of us is condemned to be in a dungeon of sin, chained for a meaningless life here on earth, and an eternity in hell just waiting for us when we die. No doubt, the Bible helps us recognize sin's prison with no way out.

The servant saw it. And then He did something both desperate and ridiculous. Jesus records it all for us: ²⁶***The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,'***

he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷**The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.** In desperation, He threw himself on the floor. He could hardly get the words out, but in brokenness, asked for the King's mercy, promising to pay back his debt

How ridiculous! Was the King was born yesterday? It would take a million years to pay off the debt. But, when the king stared at the brokenness of the servant, something amazing happened. Instead of doling out justice, he gave him grace. The king was so moved that he released the servant from the 50 billion dollar debt. His grace outweighed the bags of debt. That just a small comparison what God has done for every sinner in Jesus. God's only son Jesus came to earth as a human being to pay our debt of sin. He paid our debt by taking on our sins, dying on the cross and rising from the grave. God's Word directs us to fall on our knees, and confess our sins. And God does something even more ridiculous than the King: God wipes out our debt of sin – squeaky clean. Heaven is a certainty. We're no longer in the dungeon because Christ has set us free.

So what difference does that make? As we stagger out of sin's dungeon, and shield our eyes from the bright sun, does it change us? Now, Christ tells us to release sins' prisoners. One would think that the servant in our sermon text, forgiven so much would do just that. One would think. Listen to how he responded. ²⁸**"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.** ²⁹**"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'** ³⁰**"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.** ³¹**When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.** Same old story. When the first servant was released, he found second servant who owed him a 100 silver coins - an insignificant debt. The second servant threw himself on the floor and begged his forgiveness. Sound familiar? You'd think these words would've jogged the memory of the first servant and reminded him of grace. But, they didn't. So the second servant was thrown into prison. Twisted.

All these events just beg the question: have we ever put anyone in a dungeon? Have we ever failed to forgive? Every person we've failed to forgive is imprisoned there. Can't you just see them? Some have been hanging there a few weeks, others months and years. Every time we recall a painful memory, it's like we're putting them in the dungeon all over again. Who have you failed to forgive? Maybe it's your parents who messed up, siblings who were unfair, co-workers or classmates who should've known better. They're all there in the dungeon. Oh, we remember their mistakes and just can't bring ourselves

to forgive. We should FEEL better after serving them justice, but we don't. In fact, it's almost as if we are imprisoned ourselves. It's because we are. We are imprisoned by our failure to forgive. When we fail to forgive, we don't sleep real well. Food doesn't taste so good. Deep down, we know we must forgive but we just can't.

My friends, isn't it time to forgive? Then, let's understand what forgiveness isn't and what it is. Forgiveness doesn't mean that we're denying the sin didn't hurt or happen. Rather, God's kind of forgiveness means to let go of the anger and hurt. We can only forgive as we have been forgiven by God. Not forgiving is like the little boy was sitting on the park bench in obvious agony. A man walked by and asked him what was wrong. The boy answered: "I'm sitting on a bumblebee." "Then why don't you get up." The boy replied: "Because I figure I'm hurting him, more than he's hurting me." The healing process only begins when we get up off that park bench. God leads us to let go of our hurts only when we stop inflicting pain upon those who hurt us. Besides, if we don't let go, we sending God a message. Remember the words of the LORD's Prayer? We'll say it later in the service ***Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*** What are we saying? When we refuse forgiveness, we're telling God don't forgive me. Is that worth it? Of course not? It's not worth withholding forgiveness any more than it is to sit on a bumblebee. The only way to forgive is to remember how Jesus forgave that first Good Friday when He said: ***Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke).*** Didn't those soldiers know what they were doing? Of course. They crucified countless criminals before. But, this time they didn't know they were killing the Son of God. They were blind. Many who have hurt us are also blind to the injuries they have inflicted. Instead of withholding forgiveness, we need to pray the prayer our Savior did. We can only forgive when we stop replaying the hurt in our minds. When we forgive, we choosing to stop recalling the past, thereby releasing the prisoners. Look at it this way. Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, was reminded of a vicious deed that someone had done to her years before. But she acted as if she had never even heard of the incident. "Don't you remember it?" a friend asked. "No," came Barton's reply, "I distinctly remember forgetting it." Isn't that what God does with us and now we do with others.

So Jesus asks us, **Who's In Your Dungeon?** This week, make that trip to your own dungeon and see the one who hurt you, the one who doesn't deserve to be forgiven. Only this time, don't go alone. Go with Jesus, the one who freely shares God's forgiveness. Forgive as you've been forgiven. Because when we do, we suddenly have a peace that passes all human understanding. And when we do, we suddenly get the feeling it wasn't them we set free at all. God set us free. The devil doesn't make it easy. But, Pastor Miller got it. General George Washington got it. Look at the cross and we'll get it. Forgiven people forgive people. May God help us. Amen.