

Remember!

Text: Matthew 18:21–35

Other Lessons: Genesis 50:15–21; Psalm 103:1–12; Romans 14:1–12

Sermon Theme: Generously forgive as you have been generously forgiven.

Goal: That listeners become convinced of God’s endless mercy and strive to show that mercy to others.

Sermon Outline

3. If our view of greatness is like Peter’s, we might see his offer of forgiving seven times as pretty great.
 2. However, in his parable, Jesus teaches us exactly what great forgiveness truly is.
 1. And that makes clear what it means for us that Jesus is truly the greatest in the kingdom.
- Jesus Is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, for His Forgiveness Is Total, Undeserved, and Entirely for You.

Friday was the nineteenth anniversary of the destruction of the World Trade Center and the other tragedies that marked September 11, 2001. The *Prayer of the Day* asks that God would hear the prayers of his Church, “especially in times of persecution.” The *Old Testament Reading* (Gen 50:15–21) tells of the reunion of Joseph and his brothers and reminds us that even that which begins with evil intention can be, and indeed is, used by God for good. Rather than taking revenge on his brothers, Joseph cares for them, comforts them, and speaks kindly to them. The *Epistle* reminds us not to pass judgment on one another and affirms that “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14:8). Finally, the *Gospel* recounts the parable of the unforgiving servant and reminds us that the forgiveness we have received from our God by his grace alone is a forgiveness that is to be shared freely.

Introduction: It’s 102 minutes the world will never forget. That’s how much time passed between the first plane crashing into the World Trade Center and the collapse of the second tower, on September 11, 2001, nineteen years ago. Most of us remember where we were when we heard or saw the events of that day. We still feel the shock and pain as we think back to that horrific morning—from people’s initial bewilderment that a plane could slam into these iconic skyscrapers on such a clear, sunny day, to the sudden, awful recognition that America was under attack. Many have said that society must never forget what happened on that September 11 as 2,603 lives were lost and countless other lives were changed in 102 minutes.

Yet today, we do not simply remember the evil at work in this world. More than that, we remember our God,

Our God Works Righteousness and Justice for All Who Are Oppressed.

Even as we cannot forget the significance of this day to the world around us, so also we “forget not” the benefits of a God who has always been in the business of freeing his people from the terror of sin and a sinful world!

This week’s Gospel carries over from last week (Mt 18:1–20), so the immediate context of the chapter as a whole is important. The theme of forgiveness connects the two parts of Matthew 18 in terms of upholding the least, receiving the weak, and canceling debt. It begins with the disciples asking, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (18:1). It’s answered with the parable of the unforgiving servant: “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants” (18:23). The greatest in the kingdom, then, is the child (18:2, 5), the shepherd finding the lost sheep (18:12–13), the one pleading with his brother (18:15), the one forgiving seventy times seven (18:22), and the master, who has pity (18:27). Each is a picture of Jesus, and such is how we are to be as those baptized into Christ.

Who’s the greatest? Muhammad Ali made his case in the ring. Bill Gates did it with a computer. Some might see Luther in such a way with a hammer and the church door. Greatness is often measured in strength, making it on your own, changing the world.

We dream about greatness: Wouldn't it be great if I won the lottery or caught the game-winning touchdown pass or aced this exam or got that job? Wouldn't *I* be great if I could just master this struggle with my demons or get out of this funk or turn my life around? We want to be great, and Jesus' disciples were no different. Matthew 18 begins with the disciples asking Jesus: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (18:1).

3.

We know that Mother Zebedee wanted her sons to be the greatest (20:20–21). And Peter was never shy to take the role for himself. It seems that's what he's after by asking Jesus how often he needs to forgive his brother. He wants to be the greatest, which means getting it all right. And to show his greatness, he goes beyond what Jesus just said about seeking out an erring brother—bringing forgiveness first to him alone, then with one or two others, and finally, pleading with him to receive forgiveness from the Church as a whole. No, Peter wants to show his greatness not with three, but with seven, chances for forgiveness.

Really, that's pretty impressive! Just imagine forgiving your spouse for cheating on you seven times. Or imagine forgiving your father seven times for abusing you seven times. And even the little things: you swallow hard just forgiving your child for spilling their milk seven times! It's not easy! We lose our temper quickly. It's easy to yell and fight, or to stop talking and cut ties. So Peter seems pretty great, being willing to forgive even up to seven times!

But it's as if our Lord hears Peter's prideful outburst—sees his desire for greatness—and says: No, Peter, not "seven times, but seventy-seven times" (or, as some translations have it, "seventy times seven"; v 22).

Now, Jesus wasn't simply pushing back the cutoff line. It's not that Peter just got the wrong number—not seven, but seventy-seven, or 490. No, what Jesus says is that forgiveness has no end; it's inexhaustible.

Interestingly, St. Augustine noted that the genealogy from Jesus back to Adam that Luke gives in ch 3 of his Gospel has exactly seventy-seven generations. That is, forgiveness in Christ extends to *every* generation. Others see a connection with Cain and Lamech back in Genesis. As Cain was punished, the Lord sealed him with a sign so that if anyone killed him, vengeance would be taken "sevenfold" (Gen 4:15). Lamech then sang to his wives: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold" (Gen 4:23–24). The wording is exactly the same! The forgiveness Jesus offers covers all—even Lamech's murderous revenge. (

Jesus undoes the curse of Lamech. The Lord said that anyone who kills Cain will have vengeance taken on him seven times (Gen 4:13–15).

If Cain and Lamech embody the totality of sin, then our Lord's call to Peter that he forgive not seven, but seventy-seven times (Mt 18:22) embodies the totality of forgiveness.

And considering what this seventy-seven might mean, St. Augustine marveled at Luke's recording of seventy-seven generations from Christ to Adam. He says,

So then if no generation was omitted, there is no exemption of any trespass that ought not to be forgiven. For therefore did he reckon up his seventy-seven generations, which number the Lord mentioned as to the forgiveness of sins; since he begins to reckon from the baptism, where all sins are remitted. (Sermon 83.5, *NPNF* 1 6:364)

Finally, we might link this seventy-seven to the jubilee year: "You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years" (Lev 25:8).

2.

In any case, in the parable he now tells, Jesus teaches us exactly what this forgiveness means. There's a master who decides to settle accounts. He calls in one servant who owes him ten thousand talents. Now a talent is about twenty years worth of wages. So on my salary and benefits, it'd be like owing \$16 billion; I'd have to work over 2,500 lifetimes to pay that off!

The point is this: the servant is caught in an unrepayable debt. In a last-ditch effort, "the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything'" (v 26).

Like Jesus with Peter, or a father with his child, you get the sense that the master smiled at this. It's almost cute to see the desire to fix or pay back or get it right when it's so obviously impossible. So "out of pity," Jesus says, "the master . . . released him and forgave him the debt" (v 27), no strings attached!

It's unbelievable. You can't run a business on your gut, feeling sorry for your servants. Where's the greatness when you run around canceling debt, looking soft? The servant was sure it was too good to be true. There's no such thing as a free lunch; he'll call in a favor later on. And even if the debt is canceled, pride won't let that be done just by a word. "I've got to do something; otherwise I don't deserve it."

So straightaway he gets his things together, figuring he's bought some time, delayed the punishment just a bit. But he's scared. He has no joy in his forgiveness because he doesn't believe it. So "he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii [about one hundred days of work—you do the math: with weekends off, about a third of your annual income], and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe'" (v 28).

Notice the violence, the anger, the urgency. When greatness is strength, it's always at the expense of others. There's no pity, no compassion, even when the guy pleads with the very same words the first servant had used only moments before! Only this debt isn't impossible—not like *his* debt was. But how could this first servant consider himself great if he doesn't set things right, or at least have something to show for it?

As the parable closes—and the master hears how the first servant dealt with his fellow servant—we move from pity to wrath. The servant finally gets the master he imagined he had all along: the one who gives what's deserved, who measures *greatness* by strength.

1.

As Peter hears this parable, no doubt he's cut to the heart—as are we. We easily think of all those we've failed to forgive. How often we've lost our temper. (*Here insert concrete application examples of sins and failures to forgive that are relevant to your hearers.*)

And yet, how great is the forgiveness we have in Christ! How great is his compassion, his pity, his love! How great is his sacrifice—setting aside his power, his eternal glory, to suffer death on the cross in humiliation and weakness? How great! He forgives us not seven times, but seventy times seven! (*Here announce forgiveness for each of the examples of sin you declared above.*) How can we possibly hold back forgiveness for things done to us so small in comparison?

Recognizing this forgiveness does something to us—it changes us. The more we hear the magnitude of our debt and the complete forgiveness, simply by Jesus' word, the more we're set free to forgive others. Our forgiveness depends on Christ's forgiveness, earned for us on the cross. And our greatness is only found in him—that is, in his weakness, in his compassion that covers sin, and in the joy his freedom brings.

Who is the greatest in the kingdom?

Jesus Is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, for His Forgiveness Is Total, Undeserved, and Entirely for You.

Today, you're given to share in his greatness—and, in doing so, forgiving one another. Amen.