

A Debt that Cannot Be Paid
Sermon for the Day of Prayer and Repentance
Sermon Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came up and said to Him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² *Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also My heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

There are debts that we cannot repay. In every human generation, debts pile up and are passed on to the children. There is now a mountain of debt that could not be repaid, even if we wanted to. Who could make up for the injustice caused by the slave trade? Who could make up for what was done to the many Jews in Germany? All the wars in the world are the consequences of debt that has not been paid over many centuries. And we aren't even talking about how much debt people pass on to their children in normal family life and cause unspeakable suffering for future generations. There are words that hurt others and create a vicious cycle. People are separated. Friendships are broken. Sometimes even just by looking away, I commit sins that have consequences and will affect and harm my children and my children's children. The parable Jesus tells us today is about debt that cannot be paid. The figure of ten thousand talents of silver was a lot of money in the world at that time, today the amount would be converted into millions. Moreover, the person in debt can't even dream of paying off this debt in prison. His situation is truly hopeless. The king, before whom these people kneel and beg for mercy, is not just anyone. At the end of the parable, Jesus explains that this king represents the heavenly Father, and this heavenly Father does precisely what you wouldn't expect of a king. He recognizes the hopeless situation of His servant. He knows very well that he can't repay his debt and responds to the servant's pleading. The great amount of debt isn't worth it to the heavenly Father but rather the hopeless situation of his servant. The Father's heart opens so that He simply sweeps all the debts off the table. The servant doesn't have to pay for his mistakes, nor does he have to do anything to make up for his mistakes. He is simply cleared of any guilt.

Jesus explains this parable to His disciples as an answer to Peter's question, how often should one forgive his neighbor. Peter's question is no coincidence. It didn't go unnoticed by Peter that Jesus was incredibly open to sinners in His preaching and actions. And Jesus always does the unthinkable, he forgives the worst sins. But since Peter was a Jew by birth, the question he asks must have distressed him because according to Jewish law, a sin must always be paid in full. According to Jewish law, there is also an upper limit. You are allowed to forgive this much and then no more. That's why it was extremely important to Peter to find

out what the upper limit was for Jesus. The answer that Jesus gives him, not 7 times, but 70 x 7 times, is Jesus' way of saying that there is no upper limit at all. And the parable that He then seamlessly goes into, about how the king forgives his servant a debt that can't be repaid, tells us that God reserves no upper limit. Jesus wants to open Peter's and our hearts so that we see that we are the kind of people who simply receive such forgiveness freely from God. There isn't a person in the world who doesn't have to reckon with and live with serious debt that can't be repaid! Jesus shows us by example that we are all dependent on grace and forgiveness. Just as there is no way to pay off the debt, there is also no way for us to insist on justice for ourselves.

And that's the kicker, which only comes to light in the second half of the story. Jesus deliberately exaggerates the story. No sooner has the servant left the court of his king and he forgets everything. A moment ago, he and his whole family were facing a very, very long prison sentence. He is given mercy for no reason – only because the king gives it to him. But when he meets his fellow servant, he doesn't want to pass on what has been given to him. Instead, he wants to demand justice from his fellow servant and does the exact opposite of his master. He is not looking for mercy, but for justice, not for forgiveness, but for retribution – and for a much smaller sum than what he himself would have paid. The fellow servant owed him a meager 100 denarii. It immediately becomes clear that the first servant doesn't want to pass on the grace he himself has received at all. He selfishly claims the goodness of his master and doesn't want to apply it to others. He not only attacks his fellow servant physically, but he also throws him in prison until he pays off his entire debt. However, from prison, he would have no chance of paying off the debt. What this servant doesn't realize is that he is pulling the rug out from under his own feet. Because he abandons the opportunity for grace and calls for justice, now God wants to demand justice... the servant should now pay off every last penny. Jesus ends the parable with this: *"So also My heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

I said it at the beginning: the debt we owe God cannot be paid off. Every week, we accumulate new debts too. That's why we pray again and again in the Lord's Prayer: Forgive us our trespasses! Jesus teaches us to pray this way because the forgiveness of sins is part of being a Christian. We can't insist on justice, but only hope for forgiveness. We live from this. And that is also our strength! Then we continue the prayer with: **as we forgive those who trespass against us**. This is a powerful thing. God alone forgives and He forgives an infinite number of sins, far more than we can count, many more sins than we even know about. And now He also invites us to collaborate with Him. We can and should learn from Him how to forgive and pass that forgiveness on. Through God's power, the vicious circle in which we humans find ourselves can be broken! Where relationships between people have become ice cold and merciless, the light of God's grace should shine in. I can breathe a sigh of relief because God forgives me and, with that same breath, I can pass on the forgiveness I receive. Others should also be free from the fear of guilt. The fear of retaliation can be broken. And that is truly a revolution! The normal state of our world is that we are constantly piling up more guilt, blood, and revenge. Through Jesus Christ, God gives us a completely different path and a different course of action: to show our world what it really needs – forgiveness and ultimately the freedom to come before God. *Dear Father in heaven, show us where we are guilty! Teach us what it means to receive forgiveness. And then let us finally breathe a sigh of relief and let the bright light of Your love shine into our world through Jesus Christ and what He has done for us. Amen.*