



International Bible Lessons Commentary

Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series

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Matthew 18:21-35 New Revised Standard Version July 1, 2018

The [International Bible Lesson](#) (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, July 1, 2018**, is from **Matthew 18:21-35**.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the [International Bible Lessons Commentary](#) website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#).

(Matthew 18:21) Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

Jesus told the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (below) after Peter asked his question. His question may have been prompted by Jesus' previous teaching on what to do when you see a fellow Christian commit a sin; most probably, a sin against you (Matthew 18:15-17). Peter's question implies that the one who has sinned against him has repented and asked him to forgive him. In such a case, Peter wants to know how many times he should forgive someone who repeatedly sins against him, repents, and asks him to forgive him. The rabbis of the day said a person needed to forgive three times; so, Peter may have thought that seven (the perfect number or the number meaning completeness) should be the goal of Jesus' followers. As we learn from Jesus' parable, Jesus has a larger number of times in mind.

(Matthew 18:22) Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

The KJV and the NASB translate the Greek numbers to mean “seventy times seven” and the ESV, the NIV, and the NRSV translate the Greek numbers to mean “seventy-seven times.” In either case, Jesus means that His followers should not keep count of the number of times they forgive someone; instead, they should forgive every time someone repents and asks them to forgive them. Jesus’ answer probably surprised His disciples. Jesus’ answer may remind us of Lamech, whose ways were the opposite of the compassion and mercy that Jesus expects of His followers. In Genesis 4:23, 24, we read, “Lamech said to his wives, ‘Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.’”

(Matthew 18:23) “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

To illustrate His meaning and show how serious it can be for one who will not forgive, Jesus told another kingdom parable. Jesus and His Father reign in the kingdom of heaven, a kingdom that visibly came to earth when Jesus came and began to preach and work miracles as the Messiah and Son of God. The “king” in the parable should remind us of the king in the kingdom of heaven: “Jesus the King” or “God the king,” as Jesus will indicate as the lesson from the parable. To “settle accounts” means to pay your employees what you owe them for their labors and to collect what your employees might have borrowed from you; then, everyone is even, and a new beginning can be made. The king generously loaned money to help his servants when they asked. Some of his servants obviously took advantage of the king’s generosity and borrowed well beyond their ability to ever repay their loan.

(Matthew 18:24) When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;

A “talent of gold” weighed about 75 pounds or 33 kilograms. Therefore, a man owed the king ten thousand talents or ten thousand very large bags of gold. As of this writing, a pound of gold is worth \$1,413,355.19: an incredible amount of money to be loaned by a generous and incredibly wealthy king. We learn something of the character of the man when we think about how much he borrowed from his king, and we also might wonder why he would ever borrow so much. What were his real needs?

(Matthew 18:25) and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

Probably having squandered this immense wealth, the servant could not repay his master 750,000 pounds of gold (according to my calculations today, more than 1 trillion dollars). Therefore, in compliance with both Old Testament law and Roman law, the master resolved to sell as slaves the man and his family and his property to repay the debt. It is unlikely that the master would ever recover his immense losses from the sale.

(Matthew 18:26) So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’

The servant begged his master for patience; and owing so much this may not have been the first time the servant had asked the master for a little more time to repay him and for a little more money. The servant made a foolish promise when he said he would pay back everything. They both knew that the servant could never repay him so much money.

(Matthew 18:27) And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

But the master, the king (representing our gracious Lord and Savior), was a merciful king, so he showed compassion to the servant and his family by doing far more than the servant requested. He cancelled the debt, which was the same as telling the servant, “Your debt is paid in full. I have paid your debt to me out of my own treasury. What you could not do, I can do,

and I will do. I will pay the 750,000 pounds of gold that you owe me out of my own treasury.” Then, the king let him go his way.

(Matthew 18:28) But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’

The servant did not learn compassion and mercy from the king’s example. Instead, his angry, violent, greedy, selfish, and unforgiving spirit moved him to grab and choke a fellow servant who owed him very little by comparison to what he had owed his master and what his master had cancelled when he forgave him the debt he owed him. He refused to grant his fellow servant the same mercy their master had shown him. He did not sow the same compassion and forgiveness that he had reaped from his king.

(Matthew 18:29) Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’

Just as he had done when he had asked the king for patience, his fellow servant asked him for patience with the exact same words, but the forgiven servant did not have the virtues of patience, compassion, generosity, or forgiveness. The servant could have eventually paid the little that he owed, and unless the forgiven servant had totally squandered his 750,000 pounds of gold, he could have easily canceled the debt of his fellow servant, but he was greedy and wicked. As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6:10, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” The forgiven servant obviously loved money, which led him to take undue advantage of his generous and compassionate king and violently attack a fellow servant who owed him so little and who would have greatly benefitted from his compassion and mercy. As Paul wrote to Timothy, because of his love of money, the forgiven servant would soon be pierced “with many griefs.”

(Matthew 18:30) But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

The forgiven servant did worse than what his king chose not to do to him when he asked for patience. The king had resolved to sell the man and his family into slavery, which would not be as bad as sending him to prison. The king had the right to do either, for he was his king and master. The forgiven man thought he could use his legal prerogatives and throw the man into prison, where the man could not serve his master or work to repay his debt. The burden of repaying the debt would fall on his now even more impoverished family. However, the forgiven servant made a big mistake when he threw a servant of the king into prison; thereby depriving the king of his service. As the man would soon learn, loving money more than loving God always leads to some unreasonable decisions and some painful experiences and some eternal consequences.

(Matthew 18:31) When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

The forgiven servant had either broadcast his good fortune of forgiveness to his master's other servants or they saw or quickly learned about the gracious response of their master when his servant had asked to be forgiven his huge and unrepayable debt. They became outraged when they saw how the forgiven servant had shamefully treated his fellow servant, physically abusing him and throwing him into prison for such a small amount rather than show him the patience that he himself had received from their master, so they told their master all that had happened.

(Matthew 18:32) Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

For the first time we hear of the servant being called wicked. He was wicked to have borrowed so much money without the hope of ever being able to repay his generous master all that he had borrowed, but he was even more wicked for attacking his fellow servant and choking him, and for not showing the same compassion and forgiveness that he himself had just received. He was wicked because he would not forgive his fellow servant his

debt or patiently give him more time to repay his debt (they both had the same gracious master). He was wicked to treat his fellow servant the exact opposite of the way he had been treated. The generous king had done far more for the forgiven servant than he had requested when he cancelled the debt and marked it paid in full. The king rightfully expected his forgiven servant to do for others what he had done for him and forgive others even as he had been forgiven.

(Matthew 18:33) Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’

If we were to total all our sins against God and others as debts, we could never make restitution for all the pain and suffering we have inflicted because of our sins. Our only hope is the merciful forgiveness of God, and when Jesus suffered and died in our place, by grace through faith in Jesus, God has cancelled our debt and has marked it paid in full by Jesus. Therefore, shouldn't we have mercy on our fellow Christians; indeed, forgiveness toward all when they come to us, repent of their sins against us, and ask us to forgive them? We can be examples of compassion and mercy and forgiveness even as the king in Jesus' parable is an example of compassion and mercy and forgiveness.

(Matthew 18:34) And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

The master or king expressed justifiable anger against the wicked, unforgiving servant who had shown his wickedness by the way he had treated his fellow servant. He was sent to prison, not just to sit in a jail cell, but to be tortured until he repaid 750,000 pounds of gold. Because of his wickedness, he now had a debt he could never repay, even as he had put his fellow servant in prison with a debt he could never work to repay in prison. He reaped what he had sown. When Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6:24, he said, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” By all his actions throughout the parable, money was the true master of the wicked

servant: he loved money and was devoted to serving money more than serving his king; so, when he borrowed 750,000 pounds of gold, he did so because he hated and despised his master and never thought about repaying such a generous king. He became an example of the truth of Jesus' preaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Since he loved money supremely, he abused and despised others; otherwise, he would have treated his master differently and would have shown compassion to his fellow servant. After all his master had generously done for him, he did not turn from his love of money to loving his master and his fellow servants.

(Matthew 18:35) So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

In conclusion, Jesus told Peter and all those listening the importance of forgiveness. He explained that this is the way His heavenly Father would treat them if they refused to forgive repentant brothers and sisters who came to them and begged them to forgive them. To refuse to forgive a repentant brother or sister shows an unloving spirit and a lack of compassion and grace, a lack of openness to obeying Jesus as Lord. An unforgiving spirit indicates that a person is not a true child of their heavenly Father, who loves, forgives, and restores those who come to Him with repentant hearts.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. How many times did Peter think was the most someone needed to forgive someone? What was Jesus' answer?
2. How much did the men borrow in Jesus' parable?
3. What did the king do to the man who could not repay the gold he had borrowed?

4. Why did the king throw the man who had been forgiven his debt into prison?
5. How important is it for someone to forgive others instead of being unforgiving?

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