

Sunday, September 13, 2026

Proper 19A | 16th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 18:21-35

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

*** THE PROBLEM OF KEEPING RECORDS**

My friends,

How good are you at keeping score?

When I was a kid,
I was forced to play softball.
It was a fun league,
and we didn't keep score.
Except that we did.
We knew when we were winning.
We knew when we were losing.
People keep score,
even when
they're not supposed to.

Dear St. Peter was keeping score.

And he thought he was doing well.

*"Then Peter came up to Jesus
and asked,*

'Lord,

how many times

shall I forgive my brother

when he sins against me?

Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21)

Seven is a good number.

Seven is the number

of completion

and perfection.

Much higher

than the average.

But Jesus has more

in mind.

*“Jesus answered,
 ‘I tell you,
 not seven times,
 but seventy-seven times.’”* (Matthew 18:22),
 or perhaps
“seventy times seven times.”
 The Greek can go either way.

Now, just in case
 you want to reject Jesus’ hyperbole
 and keep a record
 counting up to seventy-seven
 or four hundred and ninety,
 here’s something to consider.
 First off,
 the ambiguity
 in the large number
 Jesus gives should be a clue.
 Second,
 His Scriptures state
 in First Corinthians chapter 13:
*“...[love] does not insist
 on its own way;
 it is not irritable
 nor
 does it count up wrongdoing.”* (1 Corinthians 13:5)

Love keeps no record
 of wrongs.
 Forgiveness is abundant.
 Forgiveness fills up
 the perfect number completely,
 again and again and again.
 Forgiveness doesn’t have limits.
 Forgiveness doesn’t keep score.

We want to keep records
of wrongs.
We want to keep score
on forgiveness.
But
Christ calls us
to lose our scorecards
for Him.
Christianity is forgiveness.
And so Christ reveals
to us the treasure
of God's abundant forgiveness.
It is forgiveness
that creates
and sustains
forgiving hearts.
We will continually forgive each other
from our hearts—
from the heart
of Christ.

I. HOW MANY TIMES HAS GOD FORGIVEN YOU?

So, my friends,
Let us turn
from our little records
of wrongs
to God's enormous record
of mercy.

Christ expects His people
to engage
in extravagant forgiveness.
So He drives His point home
with a parable.
He shows us
how ludicrous it is
for the forgiven
to be unforgiving.

*“Therefore the kingdom of heaven
 may be compared
 to a king
 who wished
 to settle accounts
 with his servants.
 When he began to settle,
 one was brought
 to him
 who owed him
 ten thousand talents.”* (Matthew 18:23–24)
 Ten thousand talents is a horrendous sum.
 It would take a first-century day labourer
 approximately **200,000 years**
 of continuous work
 to earn 10,000 talents.
 This is an unpayable debt.

*“So the servant fell on his knees,
 imploring him,
 ‘Have patience with me,
 and I will pay you everything.’
 And out of pity for him,
 the master
 of that servant
 released him
 and forgave him the debt.”* (Matthew 18:26–27)
 The king doesn’t just give him time.
 He forgives the debt.
 Complete cancellation
 of the debt.
 The king lets go
 of ten thousand talents.
 The king loses 200,000 years of revenue.
 The servant is set free.

This is what God has done
for each of you.
You have sinned
against the infinite,
eternal God.
You have incurred a debt
you cannot pay.
Psalm 49 says,
*“Truly no man can...give
to God
the price of his life,
for the ransom
of their life
is costly
and can never suffice,
that he should live on forever
and never see the pit.”* (Psalm 49:7–9)

But what did God do?
God pitied you.
*“God shows His love
for us
in that
while we were still sinners,
Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8)
*“While we were enemies
we were reconciled
to God
by the death of His Son... ”* (Romans 5:10)
So that we:
*“should not perish
but have everlasting life.”* (John 3:16)
God the Father gave
His eternal Son
for you.

Jesus came
“to serve,
and
to give His life as ransom
for many.” (Matthew 20:28)
And by His shed “blood
[He] ransomed people
for God
from every tribe
and language
and people
and nation.” (Revelation 5:9)

Jesus has paid the price
for your life.
He has cancelled your debt.
On the cross,
it is finished.
He has rescued you
from the everlasting hellfire.

You are forgiven.
That is now who you are.
It's your identity.
The Cross is on your forehead
and on your heart.
You are forgiven
by God.
You are His baptized
and redeemed child.
You are a recipient
of His mercy.
The Christian life flows
from that mercy.

II. THE ABSURDITY OF THE UNFORGIVING FORGIVEN

My friends,

The king

in the parable

forgave a mind-boggling debt.

But

the shocking thing

is not merely the size

of the debt.

The shocking thing is

what the forgiven servant does

with the forgiveness

he received.

“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.’” (Matthew 18:28.)

The first servant’s debt was astronomical.

His fellow servant’s debt?

Substantial.

Real.

About four months’ wages.

Four months of lost income would hurt.

But what is four months compared

with two hundred thousand years?

The king forgave an impossible,

multi-billion-dollar debt.

The servant refused

to forgive a modest,

realistic debt.

The king showed enormous mercy.

The servant refused modest mercy.

It’s absurd, isn’t it?

The forgiven ought

to be forgiving, too.

But

isn't this what we are tempted to do?
We who have been forgiven everything
by God—
do we likewise forgive others?
Or
do we keep that record
of wrongs?

And we have our excuses.

“They don't deserve it.
They haven't earned it.”
But if they earned it,
it wouldn't be forgiveness.
“I can't pretend it didn't happen.”
“I can't say what they did was okay.”
Of course not.
Forgiveness does **not** mean denying evil,
eliminating appropriate consequences,
automatically restoring trust,
removing boundaries,
or permitting ongoing abuse.
Forgiveness means releasing the debt.
Not acting
on our anger.
Abandoning our claim
for personal revenge—
and leaving that for God.
Forgiveness is refusing
to keep the account.

My friends,

when we refuse
to forgive,
we deny the cross.
Everyone you meet
is someone Jesus died for.

Christ is the Lamb of God
who takes away
the sins of the world.
Christ paid all debts.
There is no debt remaining
for Christians
to collect
as personal vengeance.

How can we confess
that Jesus paid it all
while still demanding
that others must pay?
Our refusal
to forgive
contradicts
the mercy we ourselves
confess and receive.
It is absurd
for the forgiven
to refuse
to forgive.

And Jesus gives us a terrifying warning:

*“Then his master summoned him
and said to him,
‘You wicked servant!
I forgave you
all that debt
because you pleaded
with me.
And should not
you have had mercy
on your fellow servant,
as I had mercy
on you?’*

*And in anger
his master delivered him
to the jailers,
until he should pay
all his debt.
So also my heavenly Father
will do to every one of you,
if you do not forgive your brother
from your heart.” (Matthew 18:32–35)*

What do we do,
then,
if our old heart
doesn't want to forgive?
Where does a forgiving heart come from?

III. OUR FORGIVING FLOWS FROM GOD'S HEART

My friends,
We need a new heart.
The problem is our old heart.
When we struggle
with the sin of unforgiveness,
we want to keep pointing
at our debtor.
It's their fault
that we cannot forgive.
What THEY did is too much.
And so we want to cut them out.

But sin doesn't come
from outside
of us.
Jesus says:
*“For from within,
out of the heart of man,
come evil thoughts,
sexual immorality,
theft,*

murder,
adultery,
coveting,
wickedness,
deceit,
sensuality,
envy,
slander,
pride,
foolishness.
All these evil things come
from within,
and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:21–23)
 Anger
 and hatred
 come from the heart.
 Unforgiveness is the fruit
 of the sinful heart.

So what are we to do?
 Hear the Lord’s solution:
“I will give you
a new heart,
and
a new spirit
I will put within you.
And I will remove
the heart of stone
from your flesh
and give you
a heart of flesh.
And I will put my Spirit
within you,
and cause you
to walk
in my statutes
and be careful
to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:26–27)

Christian forgiveness is a fruit
 of the Spirit.
 It is not
 a self-generated virtue.
 Forgiveness is the fruit
 of God's Word—
 God's Word flowing
 from the lectern, the pulpit, the Sacraments & Absolution.

How
 does God make forgiven sinners
 into **forgiving** sinners?
 By forgiving them.
 By pouring His love
 into their hearts.
 It's His forgiveness
 that creates
 and sustains
 forgiving hearts.
 The Holy Spirit creates
 and sustains faith.
 The Holy Spirit produces fruits
 appropriate to faith.
 Forgiveness is part
 of Christian sanctification.
 By the Gospel,
 the Holy Spirit enlightens you
 with His gifts,
 sanctifies
 and keeps you
 in the true faith.

Forgiveness can be an ongoing struggle.
 It is usually a **process**.
 There's a reason Jesus tells us
 to pick up our crosses daily.
 Cause you put it down
 sometime yesterday.
 We can forgive someone today.

And tomorrow,
remember what they did,
and get mad all over again.
We are tempted
to resume the record.

So, what do we do?
We return
to Christ's forgiveness.
We prayerfully forgive them again.
And
for as many more times
as necessary.
We repeatedly release the debt.

And while forgiveness will **eventually** include emotions,
it is far more
than feelings.
And it certainly doesn't need
to start with emotions.

You can even start
by saying,
"God,
I don't feel like forgiving.
I don't even want to.
But I admit
your law is good.
You say to forgive.
And you have forgiven me so abundantly!
So,
in the name of Jesus,
I forgive so and so.
In Jesus' name,
I'm letting go
of what I'm holding
against them.
I don't require repayment
from them.
I only need Jesus.

Help me,
 Jesus,
 to forgive.
 Open my heart to forgiveness.”

If you’re struggling to forgive,
 you can talk to me
 or another Christian
 you trust.
*“Again I say to you,
 if two of you agree
 on earth
 about anything they ask,
 it will be done
 for them
 by my Father in heaven.
 For where two or three
 are gathered
 in my name,
 there am I among them.”* (Matthew 18:19–20)

Forgiveness is a miracle.
 God works forgiveness.
 Forgiveness is His love,
 reaching through us.
 When our hearts forgive—
 it is only
 because our hearts
 are in His.

*“We love
 because He first loved us.”* (1 John 4:19)
 Forgiveness starts
 with God.
 Forgiveness flows
 from God
 to us
 to our brother.
 God’s mercy is the source.

The Cross is the centre.
 Christian forgiveness is dependent
 on the cross.
 Forgiving others
 is living out the mercy
 we have already received.

*** LOSE THE RECORD**

My friends,
 St. Peter asked,
 *“Lord,
 how many times
 shall I forgive my brother
 when he sins against me?”*
 Our sinful nature wants
 to keep counting.
 We want to measure
 and keep score.
 But
 we have received
 unlimited mercy.
 The servant
 in the parable
 was given forgiveness.
 His enormous debt was cancelled.
 But he didn't lay hold
 of that forgiveness
 in faith.
 Instead,
 he laid hold
 of his fellow servant's neck.
 Instead of living
 in freedom,
 he bound himself
 to accounting once again.

Whose sin are you still recording?
 What debts are you still demanding?

Christ's cross has covered it.
Christ's cross has covered you.
You don't need more
than Jesus.

Your great debt has been cancelled.
God's mercy is yours.
God's forgiveness is placed
in your heart.

Are you sinned against?
Release the debt.
Forgive from the heart.
Pursue reconciliation wherever possible.
And leave vengeance
to God.

Don't try harder
to forgive.
Receive Christ's forgiveness again,
and then live
as the forgiven.

Christianity **is** forgiveness.
Christ reveals
to us
the treasure
of God's abundant forgiveness.
That forgiveness creates
and sustains
forgiving hearts.
We will continually forgive each other
from our hearts—
from the heart of Christ.

*And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts in Christ Jesus,
amen.*