

“The New Year’s Day of the Soul” (Matthew 18:21-35)

A.B. Simpson¹ once said, “Easter is the New Year’s Day of the soul.”² Yet, for most people Easter is a day just like any other day. Even though most Americans recognize Easter is the day that Christians celebrate Christ’s resurrection, it has little bearing on their lives. Quite honestly, for most people inside and outside the church, Easter lacks significance and power. There is a reason for this: We are blocking the power flow of Christ’s resurrection in our lives. But this doesn’t have to be the case. Although March is nearly over, today, on Easter Sunday, you can experience the New Year’s Day of the soul.

Look with me at Matthew 18:21-35. This passage is sandwiched between Jesus’ teaching on church discipline (18:15-20) and divorce and remarriage (19:1-12). Both are controversial issues that involve forgiveness. In these 15 verses, we will learn that if we want to stop blocking the power flow of Christ’s resurrection, we must forgive. Why is this so important? Because *you have been forgiven far more than you will ever forgive*. In our passage, we will find three exhortations that will encourage us to forgive and hence model the power of Christ’s resurrection in our lives.

1. Grant unlimited forgiveness (18:21-22). In 18:21, Matthew records a dialogue between Peter and Jesus: “**Then Peter came and said to Him [Jesus], ‘Lord, how often shall my brother³ sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’**” Notice that Peter made the assumption that he *should* forgive. Peter had been around Jesus long enough to know that forgiveness was at the heart of His teaching. For Peter, the issue was how many times he was required to forgive. Among the Jewish rabbis, there was a consensus that a brother might be forgiven for a repeated sin three times, but not four.⁴ No doubt, Peter thought he was showing great love and generosity when he offered to forgive up to seven times.

In 18:22, Jesus’ response is not what Peter is expecting. Jesus says, “**I do not say to you,⁵ up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.**”⁶ Jesus goes above and beyond Peter’s “top-of-the-line offer!” He states that disciples are to forgive again and again. Why did Jesus say, “**seventy times seven**”⁷ or “seventy-seven times?”⁸ He is making a point. Most likely, the best translation is “seventy-seven times.”⁹ Jesus seems to allude to Gen 4:24 where the ungodly Lamech said, “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” Lamech claimed to have taken even more revenge on the man who struck him than God would take on the person that killed Cain (Gen 4:15). Jesus turned Lamech’s bad example around and urged His disciples to practice generous forgiveness when their brothers hurt them.¹⁰

Even though the difference between these two translations is great numerically (77 versus 490), it makes little difference which is correct. Jesus’ point is that forgiveness should not be numerically measured because there is no limit. Jesus was not specifying a maximum number of times His disciples should forgive their brothers. Neither was He wiping out what He had just taught about confronting an erring brother (18:15-20). His point was that disciples who are humble (18:1-6) should not limit the number of times they forgive one another nor the frequency with which they forgive each other.

Our Lord’s reply must have startled Peter. Who could keep count for that many offenses? But that was exactly the point Jesus was making. As Paul said, “[Love] keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor 13:5, NIV). By the time we have forgiven a person that many times, we are in the habit of forgiving. Again, the thrust of Jesus’ response is to forgive an unlimited number of times. Since disciples are the recipients of God’s love and grace, through Jesus Christ, they are, in turn, to love those around them. God’s forgiveness of our sins should motivate us to forgive those who sin against us. As we shall see in just a moment, we must always remember that *we have been forgiven far more than we will ever forgive*.

[We are to grant unlimited forgiveness because Jesus commands us to forgive. The reason for this command is further brought out in 18:23-30 where Jesus urges us to...]

2. Recognize the magnitude of God's forgiveness (18:23-27). In 18:23, Jesus begins to tell one of His most soul-searching parables: **"For this reason¹¹ the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him"**¹² (18:23-24). This is one of the few parables in which the Pharisees are not in the foreground or background. The disciples are here alone with Jesus as He discusses some discipleship obligations. If the disciples apply this parable, they will experience **"the kingdom of heaven"**¹³ and showcase God's glory. The **"king"** in this parable is God the Father;¹⁴ the **"slaves"** are disciples;¹⁵ and the "talent" was the highest denomination of currency in the ancient world. The word translated **"ten thousand"** was the highest named numeral, the word from which we derive our English word "myriad." The sum of 10,000 talents would be sixty million day's wages,¹⁶ an amount that would be impossible to repay.¹⁷ The equivalent dollar amount in today's currency, with inflation and fluctuation and precious metal prices, would be billions of dollars. Apart from kings, only a very few in the ancient world would ever come close to owning 10,000 talents, much less owing it to anyone else. They were truly the Bill Gateses and Warren Buffets of Jesus' world.¹⁸

In 18:25, Jesus says, **"But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made."** Since clearly the debt could never be paid, neither would these people ever have their lives back. The slave was going to lose his wife, his children, and all his possessions. In a situation like this, the only thing left to do is to beg! **"So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything'"** (18:26). Two observations are worth noting: First, 18:25 suggests that the king is a generous man because he has the slave and his family sold into slavery. A harsher king could easily have ordered the slave and/or his family to be sent to the debtor's prison or even to their execution.¹⁹ Instead, the king exhibited grace. Second, it is interesting to note that the slave promised to repay the king everything! He did not admit his inability to repay. Given the enormity of his debt, the slave's promise to repay everything is absurd. This is significant because it shows that he didn't really appreciate the magnitude of his debt and his need of forgiveness.

Astonishingly, in 18:27, Jesus declares, **"And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt."**²⁰ The king does not merely postpone or reduce the debt—he cancels it.²¹ This slave was forgiven an Enron-sized debt.²² He was able to walk away free and clear from the debt. Jesus was showing us that God is rich in mercy. He is so merciful that He is even prepared to forgive a debt of incalculable proportions. This means that you have never committed a sin that is too extreme for God to forgive. It also demonstrates that your sins are not so innumerable that God's grace cannot wipe the slate clean! This verse stresses the compassion of God! The biblical authors often emphasize key words by placing them first in the sentence. It is their way of putting words in bold. In 18:27, it should come as no surprise that the first word in this sentence is the word **"compassion."**²³ Jesus wants us to know that God freely and lavishly offers us His love because He loves to forgive sinners of all their sins. Of course, this work of forgivingness is only possible through the person and work of Jesus Christ, who "came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

In the movie *The Last Emperor*, the young child anointed as the last emperor of China lives a life of luxury with 1,000 servants at his command. "What happens when you do wrong?" his brother asks. "When I do wrong, someone else is punished," the boy emperor replies. To demonstrate, he breaks a jar and one of the servants is beaten. In Christianity, Jesus reversed that ancient pattern: When the servants erred, the king was punished. The reason that the Lord can demonstrate compassion and release us from the penalty of our sins is because Jesus took the penalty for us. Always remember, grace is free only because the giver Himself has borne the cost.²⁴

[We are to grant unlimited forgiveness because we recognize the magnitude of God's forgiveness. This is further emphasized in 18:28-35 where Jesus urges us to...]

3. Return the favor of God's forgiveness (18:28-35). In 18:28-30, Jesus continues His parable: **“But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison²⁵ until he should pay back what was owed.”** This is astounding, isn't it? The very slave that was just forgiven a vast sum refuses to forgive his fellow slave a puny amount. How puny? In our day, the dollar amount would be \$5,880. This figure is based on 100 days of minimum wage.²⁶ This slave's refusal to release the debt illustrates one who has not appreciated his own forgiveness. He should have gratefully forgiven his debtors as his lord had forgiven him.²⁷ After all, any debt owed him was “chump change” compared to the great debt his king had forgiven.

It is important to notice something. When the debtor begged for time to pay, the unforgiving slave showed no mercy and threw him into debtor's prison till the debt was paid. The unforgiving slave sent his fellow slave to prison where he could not repay the debt. This is important because no one can ever repay you for harm done. You've heard the phrase, “I don't get mad; I get even.” Well, you can't get even.²⁸ No one wins when one seeks vengeance or withholds forgiveness—everyone loses.

A teacher once told each of her students to bring a clear plastic bag and a sack of potatoes to school. They were instructed to call to mind every person they had a grudge against. For every person they refused to forgive, they chose a potato, wrote on it the name and date, and put it in the plastic bag. They were told to carry this bag with them everywhere, putting it beside their bed at night, on their lap when riding, next to their desk during classes. Some bags became quite heavy. Lugging this around, paying attention to it all the time, and remembering not to leave it in embarrassing places was a hassle. Over time the potatoes became moldy, smelly, and began to sprout “eyes.” Often we think of forgiveness as a gift to the other person, but it clearly is a gift to ourselves.²⁹ When we choose not to forgive, we only end up torturing ourselves. Often some of the most miserable people are those that have refused to forgive. God has just given them over to their own bitterness.

Holding an offense against someone is like being a jailer while the offending party is in the jail. You alone have the key to let them out, but you won't because of what that person did to you. The problem is, since you're the jailer, you're stuck there too. Oh, the offender might be behind the bars, but you can't go anywhere either. The only way to set yourself free is by letting the other person go too. But you may say, “I can't let that person off the hook.” I need to tell you, when you say that you have put yourself in God's place. Furthermore, if you withhold forgiveness, in the end, you are the one that is hurt the most (Heb 12:15). Will you let someone go free today? Will you turn the key? Will you forgive? Easter is the New Year's Day of the soul and *you have been forgiven far more than you will ever forgive.*

As you well know, when a slave does something wrong word eventually gets back to the boss. Look at 18:31: **“So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved [“outraged”] and came and reported³⁰ to their lord all that had happened.”** After reading this account, Jesus intends for us to react to His story with distress and anger. This is an example of appropriate tattling and we are supposed to sympathize with the slave that has been thrown in jail.³¹ We are intended to “boo” and “hiss” the unforgiving slave. He is the villain of this story and deserves to be disciplined by his master. In 18:32-34, this is exactly what happens: **“Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt³² because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers [jailers, prison guards³³] until he should repay all that was owed him.”** The king thoroughly rebukes the unforgiving slave and then hands him over for discipline. This slave experiences a radical role reversal. He went from being forgiven much to experiencing the consequences of refusing to forgive his debtor.

Like it or not, the bottom line of this parable is found in 18:35. Jesus concludes with these sobering words: **“My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”** Jesus sees no incongruity in the actions of a heavenly Father who forgives so bountifully and disciplines so ruthlessly, and neither should we.³⁴ However, it is important to recognize that this passage is not discussing eternal issues; temporal relationships are in view. The discipline takes place in this life, not after death, and amounts to divine discipline.³⁵ The purpose of this discipline is to help the believer appreciate God’s forgiveness. Like any good parent, God disciplines all of His children (Heb 12:5-11). Indeed, it is precisely because He is a God of such compassion and mercy that He cannot tolerate His own children being devoid of compassion and mercy. Yet, God’s chastening is compassionate and never cruel. He wants to teach disciples the importance of forgiveness; *for we have been forgiven far more than we will ever forgive.*

There’s a story about a traveler making his way with a guide through the jungles of Burma. They came to a shallow but wide river and waded through it to the other side. When the traveler came out of the river, numerous leeches had attached to his torso and legs. His first instinct was to grab them and pull them off. The guide stopped him, warning that pulling the leeches off would only leave tiny pieces of them under the skin. Eventually, infection would set in. The best way to rid the body of the leeches, the guide advised, was to bathe in a warm balsam bath for several minutes. This would soak the leeches, and soon they would release their hold on the man’s body. When another person has significantly injured me, I cannot simply yank the injury from myself and expect that all bitterness, malice, and emotion will be gone. Resentment still hides under the surface. The only way for me to become truly free of the offense and to forgive others is to bathe in the soothing bath of God’s forgiveness of me. When I finally fathom the extent of God’s love in Jesus Christ, forgiveness of others is a natural outflow.³⁶ *For I have been forgiven far more than I will ever forgive.*

One issue that needs to be touched upon is this: What if the brother that sins against me is unrepentant? Should I just continue to forgive him without ever exercising “tough love?” If so, won’t this enable his or her sinful behavior? Keep in mind, this parable (see esp. 18:29-30) and the overall context (18:15-20) assumes repentance. This is confirmed by a partially parallel text in Luke 17:3-4 where Jesus says, “Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” The point is: No offense or number of offenses should be considered too great to forgive one who earnestly seeks it. However, this does not eliminate the functions of confrontation, discipline, and repentance. Our responsibility is to “release” (18:27) the sin and our desire for revenge and give it to the Lord. We then seek to offer the offender the opportunity to restore the relationship.³⁷

As an exercise this afternoon, before God, take a piece of paper and write down the names of those who have hurt you over the years, through disloyalty and betrayal. Offer this list to God along with all the pain it rekindles and make a choice through faith in Christ to forgive each person on the list. Then crumple the paper and burn it before the Lord, who forgave you from the cross.³⁸ As you forgive from your heart, you will experience great reward (Luke 6:12). James 2:13 teaches that those who have been merciful to others will receive special mercy at the judgment seat of Christ. Thus, I believe that the greater the hurt you have to forgive, the greater your power will be on earth and the greater reward you will receive in heaven (Luke 6:35). Perhaps you have to forgive infidelity or something someone did to your children. Perhaps you have to forgive a parent for an unthinkable thing they did to you. Maybe you’ve been walked over, lied about, lost your job, or didn’t get what you were promised. Those things hurt. When you are in the middle of it, you cannot appreciate that forgiveness is a blessing in disguise. But you cannot outdo the Lord when you forgive. He notices. He knows the things we have to do, and He will bless us in ways we can’t imagine when we forgive unconditionally.³⁹ *For we have been forgiven far more than we will ever forgive.*

Forgiveness was in the air Saturday, December 18th, 2004, in Boise, Idaho. That's where a cross-denominational group of pastors gathered outside of city hall and sat at tables for three hours with checkbook in hand. The members of the Treasure Valley Pastors Association proceeded to write checks to the city on behalf of those with unpaid parking tickets.

The much-publicized event called Grace Gift/Paid in Full Project was not all that complicated. To take advantage of the free offer, those with outstanding violations simply had to acknowledge their guilt by showing up and asking for the payment. Up to \$10,000 was earmarked for the unprecedented demonstration of forgiveness. The money was raised from local businesses and was made available on a first-come-first-served basis. One pastor explained the purpose of this event: "We wanted to help people understand, in a practical way, that even though we've all made mistakes, God's grace and forgiveness is received, just by asking."⁴⁰

Have you received the free gift of God's grace and forgiveness? Today, are you trusting in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection to deliver you from the debt of your sin? If so, wonderful; if not, please trust in Him today.

Are you now granting others the same grace and forgiveness that you've received? Have you made a conscious commitment that you will release to God your bitterness and desire for revenge? This epitomizes the Christian life. It also ensures that this Easter will be full of significance and power because you will not block the power flow of Christ's resurrection in your life.

Addendum:

God grants four kinds of forgiveness. To forgive means to release someone from something. In all of the kinds of forgiveness that God grants, God releases man. That is, in all four, the release is downward in direction.

Initial Judicial Forgiveness: In response to saving faith, God releases each trusting sinner from the penalty of all sins he has committed up to the moment of his saving faith and justification (a one-time occurrence for each believer).

Initial Fellowship Forgiveness: In response to saving faith, God also releases each trusting sinner from alienation of fellowship caused by sins he has committed up to the moment of his saving faith and justification.

Repetitive Judicial Forgiveness: God unconditionally releases (dependent only on His faithfulness) each believer from the penalty of each sin he commits after the moment of his saving faith and justification (upon the occasion of each sin).

Repetitive Fellowship Forgiveness: God releases each believer from the alienation of fellowship caused by sins he commits after his saving faith and justification, in response to his obedience in both confession of his personal sins and in using vertical forgiveness (unconditionally releasing to God the penalty of each offense of another against himself).⁴¹

Copyright © 2005 Keith R. Krell. All rights reserved. All Scripture quotations, unless indicated, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1977, and 1995 by The Lockman Foundation, and are used by permission.

Permissions: Feel free to reproduce and distribute any articles written by Keith Krell, in part or in whole, in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way or charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. It is our desire to spread this information, not protect or restrict it. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Keith Krell, Timeless Word Ministries, 2508 State Ave NE Olympia, WA 98506, 360-352-9044, www.timelessword.com

Notes

¹ A.B. Simpson (1843-1919) founded the Christian & Missionary Alliance denomination, published over 70 books, edited a weekly magazine for nearly 40 years, and wrote many gospel songs and poems.

² Warren Wiersbe once said, “Easter is the truth that turns a church from a museum into a ministry.”

³ The term “brother” (*adelphos*) means “fellow believer” or “fellow Christian,” whether male or female. See BDAG, Electronic Ed.

⁴ The traditional limit was three times, possibly because of the refrain in Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6. Glasscock writes, “It is also possible that Peter was thinking about Proverbs 24:16: “For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again, but the wicked stumble in time of calamity.” Or perhaps seven just seemed a generous round number.” Ed Glasscock, *Moody Gospel Commentary: Matthew* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 375.

⁵ Jesus’ answer is directed to Peter and the rest of the disciples who believe in Christ; therefore this parable is directed to the saved. The parable that follows illustrates an improper attitude of one who is destined for the kingdom of God.

⁶ That is how many years Israel stayed in the land without obeying the Sabbath year. God forgave Israel 490 times before He finally sent them to Babylon. Cf. Daniel’s prophecy in Daniel 9:25-27. God is going to forgive Israel for 490 more years (70 weeks of years). God does not ask us to do anything that He isn’t willing to do.

⁷ See also ESV, NKJV, KJV, and NLT.

⁸ See NET, NIV, and NRSV.

⁹ Jesus quoted the Greek OT of Genesis 4:24 and it has “seventy-seven times.” The Hebrew text clearly indicates that the meaning is “seventy-seven times.”

¹⁰ This has been modified from the comments of Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Matthew* (<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/matthew.pdf>, 2005), 248.

¹¹ Glasscock writes, “For this reason” (*dia touto*) introduced a comparison between the kingdom of heaven’s attitude toward an unforgiving saint and the attitude of an undeserving servant shown mercy by an earthly king, who then failed to exercise the same mercy toward others.” Glasscock, *Moody Gospel Commentary: Matthew*, 376.

¹² Stanley A. Ellisen, *Parables in the Eye of the Storm* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 136.

¹³ Constable writes, “The whole parable taught a certain interpersonal relationship based on forgiveness. This parable illustrates kingdom conditions, conditions that will prevail when Jesus establishes His kingdom. Jesus was not saying the kingdom was in existence then any more than He was saying that the conditions He described were already in existence. He argued that kingdom conditions should be those that the King’s disciples should seek to follow in their lives now since they already live under the King’s authority (cf. chs. 5-7).” Constable, *Notes on Matthew*, 248.

¹⁴ This is the first of the parables in which God appears as a king.

¹⁵ As we will discover later in Jesus’ parable, the disciples are put in the position of “slaves” of a great king who is God. This is one of the relationships that disciples have to God that we must never forget. We are His servants as well as His sons.

¹⁶ A denarius was a day’s wage for a day’s labor (Matt 20:2). A talent was worth about 6,000 denarii.

¹⁷ Carson suggests that Jesus is using hyperbole (a deliberate exaggeration). Carson, *Matthew*, Electronic Ed.

¹⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 71.

¹⁹ Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, 72.

²⁰ The Greek word rendered “debt” (*daneion*) really means “loan.” It is used only here in the NT. Evidently the king decided to write off the indebtedness as a bad loan rather than view it as an embezzlement, another indication of his grace. D.A. Carson, *Matthew: EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed

²¹ Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), Electronic Ed.

²² Bob Wilkin, “An Enormous Debt Forgiven: Part 1,” *Grace in Focus*
<http://www.faithalone.org/news/y2002/debt1.html>.

²³ Gk. *splagchnizomai*: lit. “to be moved in the inward parts.”

²⁴ Preaching Today Citation: Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Zondervan, 1997).

²⁵ The imprisonment of debtors served both as a punishment for dishonesty and as a warning to others. Sometimes debtors performed forced labor to repay their creditors (2 Kgs 4:1). Other times, they were thrown into prison and their property confiscated. The threat of imprisonment was also used to compel debtors to acknowledge openly any hidden property they possessed so this could be used to pay off their debts.

²⁶ Washington State raised the minimum wage to \$7.35 in 1/2005. This figure is based upon a 40-hour week.

²⁷ See Luke 7:47-48 where Jesus illustrates this truth.

²⁸ Hampton Keathley IV, *The Parable Of The Unforgiving Servant* (www.bible.org).

²⁹ Preaching Today Citation: www.TimTimmons.com; submitted by Kevin A. Miller, vice president, Christianity Today International, Carol Stream, Illinois.

³⁰ The verb “reported” (*diesaphesan*) is a strong verb meaning “explained in detail.” It occurs in the NT only here and Matt 13:36.

³¹ Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, 73.

³² It is interesting that the word the king used for “debt” (*opheilen*) in 18:32 is the usual word for debt, not “loan” as in 18:27. He took a different view of the servant’s debt now.

³³ Gk. *basanistais*: Noun meaning torturer used only here in the NT. Originally it referred to a person who derived information by torture, perhaps softened in meaning here to simply jailer.

³⁴ Carson, *Matthew*, Electronic ed.

³⁵ Dillow writes, “If we fail to forgive people from the heart, God will bring severe divine discipline on us in time and withhold temporal forgiveness for fellowship in the family.” Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 384.

³⁶ Preaching Today Citation: Gary Preston, *Character Forged from Conflict* (Bethany, 1999).

³⁷ For a wonderful resource on this subject, see Dr. Dan B. Allender, *Bold Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992).

³⁸ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 51.

³⁹ Kendall, *The Complete Guide to the Parables*, 158.

⁴⁰ Preaching Today Citation: Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, Illinois; source: KBCI TV 2 News (12-15-04) and Parkingticketgrace.com.

⁴¹ See Wendell E. Miller, *Forgiveness: The Power and the Puzzles* (Warsaw, IN: ClearBrook, 1994).