

Good morning! This week we have been studying forgiveness together. Forgiveness is central to Christianity because Christians are forgiven people who must also forgive others. Over the years I have known many Christians who struggled with forgiveness; they couldn't receive forgiveness from God and they couldn't or wouldn't forgive other people. Both conditions are damaging and both keep us from experiencing the freshness and blessing that come with forgiveness. When we receive forgiveness it is new life for us. When we forgive others, it frees us from the power that bitterness, envy, and hurt hold over us. Someone has said that withholding forgiveness is like drinking poison and then waiting for the other person to die! Jesus had much to say about this; let's read a familiar parable together this morning:

"The Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.

Matt. 18:23-35

Ouch! Jesus was being pretty clear with this one, wasn't He? In today's passage, Jesus tells the story of a servant who owed a king a very large debt---millions of dollars. When he couldn't pay it, the king commanded that he and his family be sold off into slavery to pay the debt. The servant begged him for more time so he could pay but the king did something completely unexpected. He didn't just give the servant more time; he completely forgave the debt! Shortly afterward, this same servant, upon seeing another servant who owed him a far smaller debt, demanded immediate payment. When that servant begged for more time, the first servant wouldn't do it, despite the fact that he himself had been completely forgiven his debt of millions of dollars.

When the king found out about it, he was livid and asked, "Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?" and then he ordered that "evil servant" to be tortured and put into prison. Jesus makes this chilling comment: "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart." Uh oh. Jesus commands us in this passage to forgive and He very clearly promises that there will be terrible consequences for withholding forgiveness, even though the debt is very real. Let's face it: you and I have been forgiven much. In fact, we have been forgiven everything and could never repay our debt to our Heavenly Father. This morning, will you be like Jesus and forgive ...or will you be an "evil servant"?