

**17th Sunday after Pentecost – Year A – October 2nd, 2011 – Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY
Based on Matthew 18:21-35 – written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**You are Debt Free
I. Freely forgiven...
II. ...to forgive freely**

Maybe you've heard of Dave Ramsey. Mr. Ramsey is a financial guru who has been advising people for about 20 years. Dave's plan assists people to become totally free of their financial debts. When folks accomplish their goals, they call in to his radio show to share the good news. Then, Dave has the callers countdown and scream, "We're debt free!" If you've ever accomplished being debt free except for the house payment, it feels pretty good, especially when you pay it off earlier than scheduled. To celebrate people often take their leftover payment books and burn them in a fire.

This morning as we study God's Word, we will take a look at debt, not financial debt, but the debt of sin.

Today's Scripture reading from Matthew's gospel, chapter 18, builds on last week's gospel reading, Jesus said, **"When your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you, if he listens, you have won your brother over."** Then Jesus said, **"Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,"** in other words, "If a brother in Christ sins against you, and you confront them about it, and they repent, forgive them. What you are announcing to him is already true in heaven."

Forgiveness must be learned, and Peter thought he had figured it out. From the elders of the Jews Peter had heard: "If a man transgresses one time, forgive him. If a man transgresses two times, forgive him. If a man transgresses three times, forgive him. If a man transgresses four times, do not forgive him." Three times, the elders said, was the limit of forgiveness for a good Jew. Peter, however, was willing to go much further; not three times, but seven times, Peter thought with a smile. Until Jesus said, **"I tell you, not seven times, but seven, seventy times.** And just in case you're thinking about keeping a tally on your writing tablet, let me help you understand..."

A king called upon his accountants to straighten up the financial records. They discovered that one of the king's servants owed the king a significant amount of money – ten thousand talents. It was probably about 150 years' of wages. The man was called in to the king's throneroom to pay up. But he couldn't pay that day. So the king said, "Then you and your wife and your children will be sold as slaves and we'll sell off your home and all your household goods." This was a common practice in those days. It wouldn't pay back the money he owed, but everything that the man did have would be taken as payment.

I'm sure that if you or I were in this position we would have done as the man did – he fell on face before the king and begged, "Be patient with me and I will pay it back." Amazingly, the king's heart went out to the man and he canceled the debt and let him go! That would be like your mortgage company, car loan company, credit card company, the IRS, the city, county and state all calling you up tomorrow and saying, "We've decided to cancel everything you owe us. You're debt free!" It would be unheard of! But that's what the king did.

We can imagine this servant skipping out of the palace, grinning from ear to ear. High-fiving everyone he met on the street... and his first order of business – he found one of his coworkers who owed him some money – only a hundred denarii, about 3 month's wages, which wasn't even close to what he had owed the king – and he

grabs him by the neck and begins to choke him, “Pay me back!” This servant echoes what that man had cried just minutes before, “Be patient with me. I will pay it back!” But the servant didn’t listen. “No! Pay up!” And had him thrown in jail.

Some of the king’s servants happen to observe this exchange and, very much disturbed, returned immediately to the palace and reported this to the king. Enraged, the king summoned that servant back to this throneroom and said, “You wicked servant! I canceled all that debt because you begged me to. I had mercy on you, then you turn around and do this?” He ordered the man to be thrown in jail to be tortured until he could pay back what he owed.

Every parable has one simple meaning. Jesus clearly sums this one up by saying, **“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart.”**

Do you have forgiveness figured out yet? It’s quite simple, really. God has freely forgiven you. Freely forgive others who sin against you. Then why is this such a hard thing to do? Is it because we put limits on how many times we’re willing to forgive, “Maybe seven times, but not seven seventy times?” Why are we so unwilling to forgive people more than once or twice? Is it not our sinful pride... and a sense of entitlement, “I was the one offended. They can come and talk to me first.” Why are we so unwilling to forgive people? It also has something to do with the nature of the offense against us, doesn’t it? And I think that offenses that Paul listed from our Second Lesson in Ephesians especially raise our level of unwillingness to forgive, **“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”** How does that make you feel, when you find out that others have been talking about you behind your back? Do you feel, as Paul says, full of “bitterness, rage and anger?” Do we have a right to feel that way? No. And then too often aren’t we the ones who turn around and commit the same offenses? We talk about them, maybe it’s true, but our whispers neither build them up nor benefit their reputation.

Why is it so hard to approach our brothers and sisters in Christ who sin against us? Is it because we expect more from them? They are baptized children of God and now they’re not behaving that way? And like the unmerciful servant we grow impatient with them. And so we justify our anger. We justify our gossip. We justify our right to ignore those people. We justify our right not to forgive. We justify it by saying, “I can forgive, but I can’t forget.” Is that true forgiveness from the heart?

For our offenses, we stand before the King, as unmerciful servants, and he says, “Pay up!” It’s not 150 years’ worth of wages that we owe, but our very souls for eternity. Unless... unless we could offer something for payment - a life that reflected little hints of forgiveness toward our brothers and sisters in Christ? “No,” the King says, “it’s not enough. It must a perfect life of forgiveness toward all people who have harmed and offended you.” Our hearts sink. We know that we cannot make that payment. The price is too high. We stand before the King with nothing to offer.

This King is just and demands payment or else we must be thrown into the dungeon to be tortured forever. But he is also a merciful and loving King and wants to save his people. But he knows that his poor servants cannot pay him. And the King’s Father says, “Son, go and make the payment.” So he steps down from his throne, sets aside his royal robes and royal crown, and dresses himself in the garments of a slave and says, “I will do that.”

The servant travels from town to town telling people that he has come to save them! But he does not look like a king and so many do not want to hear him or believe him. They abuse him verbally, speak badly of him and spread false rumors about him. But how does the servant-king respond? With legions of his Soldiers from his army to cut them down? No. With gentle words that offer free forgiveness. He is the merciful servant. Even when they plan and push for his death, from his place of execution he calls out on their behalf, “Father, forgive them.” And before he dies, he offers the payment to his Father and cries out, “It is finished!”

The King’s Father examines his Son’s life, and he sees a life of perfect forgiveness toward all people, even those who hated him. The Father sees a merciful servant. He takes into consideration the blood his Son spilt on Calvary, and determines that it is enough to pay for the debt of all people. To prove that he accepted this payment, he raised his Son from his grave, and seated him at his right hand. There the King, Jesus Christ, takes up his royal garments and his crown of glory. And there we stand before him, again with nothing in our hands to offer as payment, he says to you and to me, “It is finished. I made the payment you owed my Father. My Father has taken the payment book and thrown it into the fire. You are debt free. You are free to go.”

I know that I am personally debt free through faith in Jesus, just as you are. Through faith God credits our account with the payment Jesus made. When God summons his accountants and opens his books and finds your name, he sees no sins listed. He reads the list there: Jesus’ life, Jesus’ death and Jesus’ resurrection. We cling to Jesus’ reassurance when he tells us in his Word from the Second Lesson this morning, **“In Christ, God forgave you.”** (Ephesians 4:32) And lest we doubt or wonder... every time you sit down and read God’s Word, every time you listen to a sermon preached or participate in worship, or receive the Lord’s Supper, it is there that God brings you into his throneroom and proclaims to you, “You owe me nothing. My Son has paid it all for you! You are debt free!”

You have just left the palace of the king! Your burden has been lifted! You are skipping down the street. You are grinning from ear-to-ear. You are high-fiving everyone you meet... and there, on the street... you see your brother or sister who still owes you – owes you for their offensive words, their gossip, their anger toward you. What will you do? Will you grab them by the neck, or will you embrace them, as Joseph did his brothers, and say, “You have sinned against me. But I forgive you. And most importantly, your Father in heaven forgives you.” Yes. That is what we will say.

We will live the words of the Apostle Paul: We will not **“let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up, that it may benefit those who listen.”** We will **“get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.”** We will **“be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.”** We will **“be imitators of God as dearly loved children,”** because that is what we are. We will **“live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”** (Ephesians 4:29-5:2)

You are debt free, by the blood of your King. You are freely forgiven. Freely forgive. Amen.