

“Giving Up Our Right” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Pentecost 16

September 13, 2026

- I. **Matthew 18:21-35** – previously read
- II. **I’m a fan of Clint Eastwood.**
 - a. His movies were a big part of my youth, and amazingly, he has worked on films up to 2024, or into his mid-nineties.
 - i. The characters that he played captivated me as a kid... Josey Wales, Dirty Harry, Jed Cooper in Hang ‘Em High, and many others.
 - ii. Yet, as I look back on these storylines, most of them were about good guy / bad guy situations.
 - 1. The good guy might be flawed sometimes, but the bad guys were terrible and deserved what was coming to them.
 - 2. It was vengeance written into the story that kept my attention... because I wanted the guy in the white hat (so to speak) to get the guy in the black hat... to make him pay for what he did.
 - b. The storylines for these types of movies and TV shows are always a huge draw for people, as we go to see The Avengers, John Wick, The Equalizer, Gladiator, and countless other series as the characters dole out some kind of justice.
 - i. We like it when the bad guy or the offender is put in his place... or pays for whatever he did.
 - ii. Sometimes these movies play on our own desire for justice for the wrongs that others have done to us... and we are conflicted... because we know God says to forgive... but we want the offender to pay for what he or she did to us.
 - iii. Yes, there is something inherent in all of us sinful people to harbor resentments, seek revenge, or withhold forgiveness until perhaps the offender has received a comeuppance.
 - c. In the Bible, we can read about the terrible deeds of humanity, and the different ways that believers responded.
 - i. For example, in 1 Samuel 25, David sends some men to ask for help from Nabal... and not only does Nabal refuse, he belittles, shames, and insults their master David and sends the men away.
 - 1. What was David’s response? Okay, listen up everyone, put your swords on because we are going to destroy Nabal and his men!
 - 2. Yet, David was met on the way by Nabal’s wife Abigail, who persuaded David to allow the Lord to take care of it... and David listened, saying, “You [Abigail] have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from working salvation with my own hand!” (1 Samuel 25:33)
 - 3. Ten days later, the Lord struck Nabal and he died...

- ii. In today's Old Testament reading, Joseph has every right, even the authority to punish his lying, wicked brothers for selling him into slavery and deceiving his father Jacob that he was killed.
 - 1. Joseph, in a story for the ages, becomes second in command in all of Egypt by the work of God... and when his brothers come to get help during a famine... he doesn't have them tortured and executed in the name of justice, he forgives them, restores them, and invites them to live without worry or care for the rest of their lives.
- d. Yes, the Bible is full of people who could have taken revenge or even handed down justice by their authority... but they chose to forgive.
 - i. Forgiveness means releasing the debt... giving up our personal claim to get even, make the person pay, or hold that sin over him or her.
 - ii. Instead, we forgive... simply give it up to the Lord... "Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" (Romans 12:19)
 - iii. When it comes to us, our pride and sinful nature make us feel righteous, but we are nothing without God.

III. **The Gospel lesson is based on limits, but God has other ideas.**

- a. How many times or how much shall we forgive someone... there must be a limit right?
- b. Yet, Jesus claims that the forgiveness we give is unlimited – not seven, which is symbolic for the perfect amount – but seventy times seven, because it means always.
- c. Then our human brains start working... what if the person does this? What if the person does that? What if?
 - i. Perhaps we even go to the pain and troubles of someone who hurt us in the past... maybe long ago... maybe recently.
 - ii. Some of you cannot let it go and have resentments that eat at you.
 - 1. The word resent literally has the idea of "feeling again" ... to repeatedly feel the wrong done to you like a broken record.
 - 2. Sometimes those feelings go hand in hand with thoughts of revenge... thoughts of what people casually call 'karma'... that somehow the universe will make sure a person gets what's coming to them... but in the end, it's not our business to let those real or perceived harms against us eat us alive.
- d. We call upon the Lord to forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
 - i. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is the classic case of a man whose unpayable debt was paid for by the master... it didn't just magically go away, it was a loss the king had to cover.
 - ii. Then, the servant blows up at a man who owes him a tiny debt... and his self-righteous anger and lack of mercy are exposed.

- iii. Seemingly, he forgets or chooses not to recognize the gift of freedom he was given... and blows up at the first person who can't repay him.
- iv. Our debt can be compared to the unforgiving servant... more than we could ever pay back... and therefore we have no right to assume the position of the Master... the King... and demand a punishment or repayment because "we are owed".

IV. **The greatest example of forgiveness comes at the expense of our King Jesus.**

- a. You see, the debt we owe comes from untold numbers of offenses... born with sin in our very nature... we break God's commandments to love Him and love our neighbor every... single... day.
 - i. We scoff at the unforgiving servant because he is absurd... and then we turn around and do the same things when it comes to not forgiving those who have harmed us.
 - ii. Yet, the Lord forgives us seventy times seven through Jesus.
- b. Stop for a moment and think about how God forgives and provides us His grace... as it all started with the perfect life... ending in sacrifice.
 - i. Jesus was nailed to the cross as Paul writes, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them." (2 Corinthians 5:19)
 - 1. The debt was enormous... and the cost was enormous.
 - 2. But God loves us so much that He took what was our obligation to pay for... and paid it through His Son's death...
 - 3. The debt didn't just go away... it was paid in full... for you.
 - 4. We are free because of a grace-filled God who chooses not to exact punishment on us... but placed it on Jesus instead.
 - ii. From that one act of saving grace on the cross pours forth all the grace and forgiveness we need throughout our whole lives – through His Word... His Baptism... and His Supper.
 - 1. The Word constantly reminds us of the forgiveness we have, but more than that, the proclamation you hear... "I forgive you all your sins."
 - 2. Baptism is the cleansing power of God, and we return to that Baptism every day in repentance, drowning the Old Adam and rising again in Christ.
 - 3. The Lord's Supper is the forgiveness tied directly to the cross as we take in the very body and blood that was broken and shed for us.
 - 4. These gifts of grace and forgiveness are given seventy times seven.... all through our lives, and we have nothing but gratitude and love to show because the debt was far too large to ever pay for through our own good works.

- c. We may be tempted to withhold forgiveness toward someone who wrongs us... but when we are the Lord's... we give up our right to punish... we see them through the cross and blood of Christ.
 - i. It might be a good movie plot – but the truth is, when it comes to those who have harmed us, we give up our claim to make them pay, because Jesus has already taught us where judgment belongs... we place the matter into the Lord's hands.
- d. That is pure freedom for us – no weight of unforgiveness, no resentments – just experiencing and showing the gift of seventy times seven. Amen.