

By the Numbers
Matthew 18:21-35

When we helped Stephen and Anne move into a new apartment a few weekends ago we also stopped in on Hannah and Joe. She had just started working on large and very detailed paint by number picture. It was still mostly white with lots of numbers in small shapes not much bigger than an eraser on a pencil. I stared at it for quite a while trying to figure out what it would depict when she was finished. ... I had no idea. I had to ask. She told me, but even then it would take hours of painting number by number before my brain could make sense of it and see it as an underwater seascape.

Jesus paints a picture for us in our Gospel reading: *Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.*

"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. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 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. 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.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 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."

The picture Jesus paints is different from the one Hannah was working on in two major ways: 1) The picture becomes clear almost immediately, and 2) It is not by the numbers.

There are some numbers. Peter throws out a figure: *"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"* Jesus throws another number back at him: *"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. There are some numbers in the parable.* The servant owed the master ten thousand talents, which is about equivalent to our national debt. It is a ridiculously high amount. His fellow servant owed him just shy of \$10,000. That's no small amount, but paltry

compared to what the first servant owed. So there are numbers in the picture, but it is not by the numbers.

Jesus tells Peter to forgive his brother seventy times seven. So do you think Peter is supposed to keep a count? 488, 489 490! One more and I don't have to forgive you! No. The picture is clear. Forgiveness is not by the numbers.

The first servant doesn't see it. Our first hint is in plea to the king: *"Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."* How ludicrous! Here come some more numbers. If that man had a good paying job, it would take him 60 million days of work to pay back what he owed. The king will have to be very patient.

But patience is not the attribute the king displays. Rather it is mercy. He has pity on the man forgives the debt. That's great news! But the man gets stuck doing things by the numbers. He finds one of his fellow servants who owes him money, begins to choke him, and demands payment. This servant makes the same plea as the man choking him, *"Have patience with me, and I will pay you."* You would think he would remember the mercy he had just been shown, that he would have mercy on his fellow servant, that he would forgive as he had been forgiven.

Sadly it is not the case, and by not forgiving he forfeits the forgiveness he had been given: *"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.

Even more sadly, for the person who does not forgive it is not just a lifetime under the wrath of God – it is eternity. The one who forfeits God's mercy won't be paying for his mistake for only 60 million days. It will be forever.

Do you have someone to forgive?

You have been forgiven. As Jesus shared this message He was already thinking about the price He would pay for the forgiveness of your sin. Jesus paid the price for all of your sin by giving His all. He did the work of never sinning in anything He did. He never left any good thing undone. Including going to the cross to shed His blood and die for you. The great debt you could never repay has been paid in full by Jesus. What does He want in return? For you to be so filled with joy and thanksgiving that you do not do it by the numbers, but freely forgive as you have been forgiven. Amen.