

Sermon for Trinity 22 – Matthew 18:21-35

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

There are times in which the teachings that we Christians hold dear don't seem to line up mathematically. God is three persons, but still one God. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but the Lord our God is 1 God. Or to put it in an equation: $1+1+1=1$. Or again, Jesus is 100% God and 100% man. How can a person be 100% of two contradictory things? Or how about this one: we are 100% sinner while being at the same time 100% saint. Because of our daily sins and sinful nature, we are completely condemned before God. Still, because of our baptism, we are completely perfect before God, with no sin in us. All of these are Biblical teachings we hold by faith, and we won't fully comprehend until Christ returns in the new creation.

And there's two more equations that come to us today. St. Peter asks our Lord in today's Gospel, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as 7 times?" Our Lord's response? "I do not say to seven times, but seventy times seven."

So Precise Peter gets out his abacus and tallies the total. $70 \times 7=490$. So on the 491st time my brother sins against me, I need not forgive him. Only then can the bookkeeper's grudge account begin.

So to correct Peter once again, Jesus gives another mathematical equation and it's one that we too should take to heart: $10,000 > 100$. "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. Christ, the shrewd teacher that He is, begins by setting up the law, not grace, as the first element of a parable. This king is a bookkeeper, pure and simple: for the honest, for the upright, and above all for the solvent, he will have kind words. But for anyone in real trouble, he will have no care at all except to get his money back as best he can. Accordingly, when the flat broke servant who owes him ten thousand talents is brought in (which today would correspond to about \$10 million) the king orders him to be sold, lock, stock, barrel, wife, and children, and restitution to be made. There's no forgiveness in the story and no reason to expect it. Cut your losses and get out.

But then the servant falls on his knees before his master and says, "Have patience with me and I will repay you everything." And sure enough, the king's attitude suddenly changes. He goes from having all the mercy of a loan shark to the warmth of a kindly grandparent. "Taking pity, the lord of that servant released and forgave him the debt." The servant does nothing more than ask for grace to get grace. The king has no reaction to the extravagant promises. For reasons known only to the king, he cancels the debt entirely.

But we know why. Mercy. Grace. The king wasn't swindled by a losing proposition that the servant deviously concocted. The servant, being a closet bookkeeper himself, thought he'd got one by the old fool. He didn't see the mercy or the grace. Which

is obvious from his first actions after forgiveness. He tries to beat 100 bucks out of a guy who's also a servant and has him jailed when he doesn't pay up.

How simple an equation it is: $10,000 > 100$. We know that right? The debt we owe God on account of our sins is enormous, and in Christ Jesus He's forgiven it all. What sins others have done against us is a pittance. But how quick we are to keep an account of them. Every hurtful thing spoken in anger, every lack of gratitude, every show of favoritism, we've got it locked in and ready for display for anyone who will listen or look. We hold that grudge for a long time. They may have some redeeming qualities, but we keep the mistake count going.

But in case you hadn't yet noticed, God doesn't deal in fractions: it's all or nothing. We're completely forgiven and we must also completely forgive. Have we not, too, like the vengeful servant demanded justice when we have received nothing but grace? Have we too forgotten the equation so quickly? $10,000 > 100$?

In Luther's explanation of the Our Father's 5th petition ("and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"), he calls us unworthy. It's true. "We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that he would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment." So while we are not worthy, still, there is One who is worthy. Jesus Christ. No sin in Him. He is worthy. He is deserving. Daily, He did only good things. He surely deserved no punishment.

But in a twist with more whiplash than a 5 car pile-up, He becomes the unworthy one. He takes our grudges, our rocky unforgiving hearts, our sins upon Himself. He dies so that you are worthy. In Him, with Him, Through Him, you don't deserve death. You are given life and that to eternity. You are free forever. The math checks out. Jesus paid it all.

In heaven, there are only forgiven sinners. We who have received Christ's forgiveness because He died so that we might live. But in hell, too, there are only forgiven sinners. Jesus on the cross does not sort out and cut off pardon to some people in His death. He forgives even the worst sinners and never takes back that forgiveness, not even in the bottom of the bottomless pit. The sole difference, therefore, between hell and heaven is that in heaven the forgiveness is received and passed along, while in hell it's rejected and blocked. In heaven, the death of the king is welcomed and becomes the doorway to new life in the resurrection. In hell, the old life of bookkeeping and grudges is insisted on and becomes, forever, the pointless torture it always was. So pass along God's forgiveness today and start enjoying heaven on earth. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. +BJF+