

# Inmate Tortured By Jailer! (I'll Be the Jailer)

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## Matthew 18:21-35

I'm follower of Jesus, so I have to be nice, right?

Oh, brother.

Come on, let's be honest.

Some stuff is offensive to us.

Some stuff hurts us.

In fact, in my professional work this week, one of my clients did something that made me feel a little — shall we say, miffed.

Last week, my wife made a remark that made me feel a little — shall we say, miffed.

One evening this week I got a phone call, this person made me feel a little — shall we say, miffed.

Now aren't you dying to know all the details about these conversations?  
Too bad.

Stuff hurts us. It offends us. It makes us feel small.

This is not some out-of-the-ordinary event.

It's an everyday event.

We could make the case from the Scriptures that when I'm offended, it's a signal that I have a certain weakness, a certain pridefulness — it's not a sign of my spiritual superiority, it's a sign of my inferiority — and yet, even if that's true, it's still also true that I'm hurt.

And sometimes — come on, give me a break — even though I may have a pride problem to deal with — the person who hurt me was truly wrong.

They sinned against me.

I mean, I can't be the only person who's ever wrong on the planet!

The other guy *can* be the bad guy.

Right?

So we can cut Peter some slack, can't we?, in Matthew 18:21, when he hears Jesus talking about how to deal with people who sin against you — and Peter comes back with this question:

### **Matthew 18:21-35**

**21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”**

So yeah, Peter makes a mistake, asking this question. He assumes that he’s the holy one, and his brother is the wicked one. This is the wrong assumption to make when I’m in a conflict situation. The healthy assumption to make is:  
I have misunderstood this situation.  
I have not accounted for some error that I accidentally made.  
My tendency will always be to give myself credit for being good, and give the other guy automatic demerits.

But this is our tendency, so it’s as if Peter asks this question on our behalf. And how does Jesus respond?

**22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.**

Some translations make it 70, *seven times*. In other words, 490 times.

But how could you keep track?  
If somebody actually sinned against me 490 times—  
if somebody offended me 490 times—  
Who could hurt me that much? Who could offend me that often?

Which is exactly Jesus’s point.  
It’s not realistic. I can’t go that far. I can’t forgive people as much as I need to forgive people.  
Here’s the key concept today — I’ll just give it to you now, and you can go to sleep or scroll TikTok on your phone or whatever:  
***My need to forgive people is way greater than their ability to hurt me. They may be able to hurt me a lot — but my great challenge, for the sake of my own maximum spiritual health, is to forgive them even more.***

To illustrate the idea, Jesus tells a story — one of the parables that he became famous for:

**23 ...The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.**

The subjects of the king in those days owed an annual tax to the king.

**24 As he began the settlement, [in other words, it was a tax audit] a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.**

[What was his actual debt, in today's dollars? This was what the IRS might call a "big fish." He owed more than \$15 million.]

**25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.**

They had debtor's prisons in those days; you've heard about them.

You or members of your family could be thrown into prison until the debt was paid,

which was doubly hopeless, because how could you pay the debt when you were in prison?

You had to hope that somebody on the outside would pay the debt for you.

**26 "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'**

Which was insane — because in the economy of Jesus's day, you would work 20 years for a single talent, and this guy owed 10,000 talents—so you can see how off-the-charts the situation is, the way Jesus constructed this story.

It's a fantasy.

**27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.**

In other words, the guy's case was totally hopeless, except for one thing: the master was a man of compassion.

*He assumed the loss.*

I think there's a place on your tax form even today for "bad debt."

As a self-employed freelance writer over the past 40 years or so, I've had a few of those.

You finally assume, despite all your efforts, that you will never get paid.

You ultimately just take on the debt yourself.

You receive the loss as your own.

And I can tell you, based on my own personal experience: That's a sad, sad day.

But Jesus's story is not over:

**28 “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii.**

Back in those days, you made about a denarius a day. So this guy owed him about three and a half month's pay.

How much do you owe on credit cards right now? A lot of us owe more than that.

Anyway, compared to \$15 million, it was a drop in the bucket.

But look how Jesus's story unfolds:

**...He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.**

**29 “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’**

**30 “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.**

Now let's be real here. This guy had the legal right to throw his fellow servant in the debtor's prison.

If you stiff me, I've got a legal right to require punishment.

If you sin against me, if you look at how I do my work and you think I'm a loser and you tell somebody else in the company what you think, I have every right to badmouth you and take action against you, maybe even official action, maybe even legal action.

It would serve you right.

By the letter of the law, I'm justified. You sinned; you get punished.

But Jesus isn't all that interested in the letter of the law, it seems.

Here's the next part of the story he's making up:

**31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.**

They tattled!

**32 “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he**

said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.

**33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'**

**34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.**

**35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."**

Does God really do this? Or, if you prefer the lingo of the day: Is this how the universe operates?

Yes.

I get "turned over."

I'm allowed to go my own way — even though I'm walking straight into prison.

The prison of consequences.

The world is designed, and the people in the world are designed, to function a certain way.

Forgiveness is part of the design.

When I bust the design, I experience the natural consequences.

I chain myself to the hurt, I refuse to let it go, and I suffer the ongoing torture of the hurt I've experienced.

*Time* magazine ran an article entitled "Should All Be Forgiven?"

Researchers found "robust" physiological differences between non-forgiving and forgiving states.

Subjects' cardiovascular systems inevitably labor when they remember the person who hurt them.

But stress is "significantly greater" when they consider revenge rather than forgiveness.

The study found that subjects enjoyed the greatest sense of power, well-being and resolution when they managed to grant forgiveness.

I think when God's copy of *Time* magazine came in the mail and he read this article, he was not a bit surprised.

This is exactly why the Scriptures push us so hard to forgive those who hurt us.

When someone hurts me or offends me, they're handing me a heavy chain. The chain of revenge. Of resentment. Of contempt. Of bitterness.

Until I forgive that person, I continue to be shackled by that heavy chain.  
It's holding me back. It's distracting me. It's consuming my attention and my  
energy.

I'm a prisoner, and I'm being tortured by my jailer.  
But I'm not just the inmate. I am the jailer.  
*I'm my own jailer.*

Yet Jesus comes along, with good news.  
It's an offer of a free gift ... a gift of grace.  
I get a GET OUT OF JAIL FREE card.  
I can walk out.

Someone hurts me. What do I do with the hurt?  
Give it up.  
Lay it down.  
That's what happens when I forgive the person who hurt me.  
Forgiveness sets me free.

\* \* \*

Is this too easy?  
Is it overly simplistic to say, Forgive the person who hurts you?  
If I'm innocent and the other person is guilty, doesn't it make sense that I'm  
hurt and angry?  
Well, maybe so, but in the grand scheme of things, if I look at the whole  
world...  
If I factor in everybody's strengths and everybody's weaknesses, including  
my own strengths and *my own* weaknesses — quite a mixed bag...  
If I factor in everybody's virtues and everybody's faults, including my own  
virtues and *my own* faults — which is quite a mixed bag...  
If I factor in everybody's contributions and everybody's sins, including my  
own contributions and *my own* sins — also quite a mixed bag...  
Now, suddenly, the person who hurt me isn't that much better than me.  
Because I've hurt other people myself.  
In the cosmic scheme of things, I'm not better. The math alone tells me  
this.  
I'm not better; I'm just the one who *got hurt most recently*.

The incredible thing isn't that the other guy is still alive, in spite of how they  
hurt me.

The incredible thing is, the beautiful thing is, grace still applies to *me*.

I'm still loved, in spite of my own faults.  
 I'm still blessed, in spite of my own shortcomings.  
 I have the privilege, the joy, of living another day, in spite of my own failures.

I think this is what Jesus is saying here, in this story.  
 Doug, don't be stuck with the earthly view.  
 Doug, get the God's-eye view.  
 Doug, get a wider perspective on your situation.  
 You've got *tons* more to be thankful for than you have to be angry about.

This parable tells me that *the math alone* is more than enough reason to forgive someone when they hurt me.  
 Not because they deserve to be forgiven.  
 But just because of the realization that I am still here ... blessed ... even though I'm deeply, humanly *short of perfect* myself.

In this parable, I'm the man with the big debt.  
 The person who has offended me is the man with the small debt.  
 Look again at the difference between the two debts in the parable.  
 In the coinage of the day, the small debt, 100 denarii, could be carried in one pocket.  
 If the big debt were paid in the same coinage, it would take an army of 8,600 carriers, each carrying a 60-pound sack.  
 If they walked just a yard apart, the line would stretch for five miles!

The story Jesus told here should soften my heart — so that I don't see myself as the righteous one, and the other guy as the failure...  
 But so I see us as equally in need of help. Of hope. Of grace. Of love. Of care.

If I get a clear and accurate picture of how righteous I am, I see that I'm not righteous at all — except for the gift of grace that I've been given.  
 A gift anyone can receive, but if I've received it, it's just my good fortune, not anyone else's failure.