

Matthew 18:21-35 Fact Sheet

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Context: All of Matthew 18 is one conversation Jesus had with His disciples and is the broader context of these six verses. They speak of a humble heart and a sensitivity to sin, both in ourselves and those who have strayed from Christ.

Parallel passages: Matthew 18:1-35; Mark 9:33-50; Luke 9:46-50
(*underlined verses indicate last verse of chapter*)

Time and place: Jesus and His disciples had come to Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, about a month prior to His crucifixion. They were making their last journey to Jerusalem during His public ministry.

I have quoted the ESV text and have divided this passage according to the Greek sentences.

Matthew 18:21a

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?"

Matthew 18:21b

As many as seven times?"

"The traditional Rabbinic teaching was that an offended person needed to forgive a brother only three times."¹

Matthew 18:22

²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.

The Greek "seventy times seven" in this verse exactly duplicates the Greek Septuagint's (LXX) translation of the Hebrew in Genesis 4:24.

^{ESV} **Genesis 4:24** If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold."

This is why the NIV and the NET Bible read "77." It is the more likely translation.

Matthew 18:23

²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

Matthew 18:24

²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

¹ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Victor Books, 1983), 62.

Talent: first a measure of weight (26 to 36 kg.), then a monetary unit whose value differed considerably in various times and places. The figure cited in Mt 18:24 is rhetorical = ‘millions of dollars.’

“ten thousand”

This was the highest number for which the Greek language had a particular word (*mu’-ri-oi*, cf. our “myriad”).

King David gave for the building of the temple out of his own personal treasure 3,000 talents of gold and 7,000 talents of silver (1 Chronicles 29:3-4).

^{ESV} **1 Chronicles 29:3-4** Moreover, in addition to all that I have provided for the holy house, I have a treasure of my own of gold and silver, and because of my devotion to the house of my God I give it to the house of my God: ⁴ 3,000 talents of gold, of the gold of Ophir, and 7,000 talents of refined silver, for overlaying the walls of the house,

Here the debt is 10,000 talents, presumably of silver.

Matthew 18:25

²⁵ **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.**

“Such indebtedness could not possibly be covered by selling the family into slavery (v.25): top price for a slave fetched about one talent, and one-tenth that amount or less was more common.”²

Matthew 18:26

²⁶ **So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'**

Matthew 18:27

²⁷ **And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.**

Matthew 18:28

²⁸ **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.'**

“A denarius was a Roman silver coin, worth about 16 cents: it represented a laborer’s daily wages.”³

The estimates of the value of a talent range from 60 to 10,000 denarii, so the ratio of 100 denarii to 10,000 talents is anywhere from 6,000 to one to 1,000,000 to one.⁴

² *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gabelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 406.

³ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 62.

Matthew 18:29

²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'

Matthew 18:30

³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

“He refused”

The tense of this verb indicates he repeatedly refused, and maintained a sustained unwillingness.

Why debtor's prison and not slavery?

Even an inexpensive slave sold for five hundred denarii, and it was illegal to sell a man for a sum greater than his debt.⁵

Matthew 18:31

³¹ 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.

“reported” (di-a-sa-phe'-o)

This is a strong verb meaning “to report in detail,” not merely “to tell.”

Matthew 18:32-33

³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'

Matthew 18:34

³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.

Matthew 18:35

³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

This last verse doesn't mean that there is a purgatory, or that we can lose our salvation. It does mean that there could be consequences of our unforgiving attitude both here, and possibly even in eternity (cf. Eccl. 12:13-14; Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10).

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 284.

⁵ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 407.