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Genesis chapter 50

15When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him."

16So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: **17**'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. **18**His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." **19**But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? **20**As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. **21**So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Chapter Context

After settling in Egypt, under his son's protection (Genesis 47–49), Jacob dies (Genesis 49:33). He is embalmed and all of Egypt mourns. Joseph buries his father in the family tomb in Canaan, then returns to Egypt. He asks that his body be taken back to Canaan someday. This sets up the events of the book of Exodus. Over centuries, Israel will grow into a prosperous people, only to be enslaved by a jealous Egyptian monarchy. This provides a context for God to rescue Israel and demonstrate His power.

Context Summary

Genesis 50:15–21 reveals that Joseph's brothers are consumed with guilt and fear after their father's death. They worry Joseph has been waiting for Jacob to die before taking revenge. This would not be unexpected, as they cruelly sold Joseph into slavery as a teenager (Genesis 37:26–28). The brothers attempt to appease Joseph with a message, supposedly from Jacob, but he tells them not to be afraid. In one of Scripture's most pivotal remarks, Joseph explains his conviction that, though their intent was evil, God's good purposes were behind everything that had happened. Despite their bad intentions, God used their acts to save many lives. Joseph assures them he will not harm them.

Genesis 50:15

ESV

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him."

What does Genesis 50:15 mean? Jacob, the patriarch God renamed *Israel* (Genesis 35:10–11), has died in Egypt at the age of 147 (Genesis 49:33). His son Joseph (Genesis 41:44), and Joseph's eleven brothers have buried him according to his wishes (Genesis 47:29–31). They have traveled to Canaan, with Pharaoh's blessing and honor, to lay Jacob to rest in the family tomb (Genesis 23:17–20). Now they have returned together to Egypt. The entire nation of Israel is settled there (Genesis 50:8), and despite Joseph's power, he is still technically a slave of Pharaoh (Genesis 50:4–6).

Now that Jacob is dead, Joseph's brothers are afraid. What if Joseph has been holding back his hatred for them only because of Jacob? They worry that all Joseph's kind treatment (Genesis 47:11–12) has been solely out of respect for their father. Now that Jacob is gone, they fear Joseph will finally "pay them back." It's important to recognize that the brothers understand that they would deserve retribution. They had jealously sold Joseph into slavery as a 17-year-old boy (Genesis 37:18–36). They themselves refer to it as "all the evil that we did to him" (Genesis 42:21–22).

Motivated by that fear, the brothers plan to appeal to Joseph's love of their father, to stave off what might be left of his anger (Genesis 50:16–17).

Genesis 50:16**ESV**

So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died:

What does Genesis 50:16 mean? Joseph's brothers are comfortably settled in Egypt, provided with food, despite a severe famine (Genesis 47:11–13). This was arranged by their brother, Joseph, who is the governor of the entire nation (Genesis 41:44). However, now that their father is dead and buried (Genesis 50:1–14), they seem fearful. They're afraid Joseph has only been kind to them for the sake of their father, Jacob. Now that Jacob is gone, they worry Joseph will exact revenge on them for selling him into slavery as a teenager (Genesis 37:26–28). They, themselves, know they are guilty of sin worthy of such punishment (Genesis 42:21–22).

Taking something of their father's lead, the brothers seek to proactively appease Joseph (Genesis 32:9–16; 43:11–14). They send a message to Joseph, appealing to his fondness for their departed father. Their claim is that Jacob gave them a message, for Joseph, asking him to forgive his brothers for their sins against him (Genesis 50:17). Interpreters debate whether that statement really came from Jacob, or if it was invented by the brothers for this purpose.

Genesis 50:17**ESV**

‘Say to Joseph, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.” And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

What does Genesis 50:17 mean? After the death of their father and the trip to Canaan to bury him (Genesis 50:1–14), Joseph's brothers become overwhelmed with guilt and fear. They know they brutally sinned against Joseph by ripping him away from Jacob and selling him into slavery as a teenager (Genesis 37:26–28). Now, this same brother is the governor of all Egypt (Genesis 41:44), second in power only to the Pharaoh himself. They wonder if Joseph's kindness to them (Genesis 47:11–12) has only been for the sake of Jacob. Now that Jacob is dead, they fear what Joseph will do to them (Genesis 50:15–16).

Following in their father's footsteps, they respond to fear with a combination of manipulation and preparation (Genesis 32:9–16; 43:11–14). They send a message to Joseph claiming that Jacob, before he died, had given them a statement to be passed along to Joseph. That statement appeals to Joseph to forgive his brothers for their previous sins. It does not minimize their guilt (Genesis 42:21–22), but it does make a point of describing them as servants of God.

Some commentators believe this is an outright lie. Scripture does not record Jacob making such a request. Also, Jacob was very deliberate in making his last wishes known (Genesis 47:29; 48:3–5; 49:28–29). A message so crucial seems like one Jacob would have passed along in person prior to his death. At the same time, Scripture does not indicate this is deception. A lack of direct references does not make it impossible. In the end, all we know is *what* the brothers are saying, and what they are thinking.

When Joseph hears the message, he once again responds with tears (Genesis 42:23–24; 43:30; 45:1–3). His response could be due to one or more factors. Hearing a message from his departed father would be an emotional experience. If the message was an obvious lie, Joseph might have been reacting to the idea that his brothers so feared him that they would stoop to such a thing. Or, it might have simply been that Joseph's forgiveness was, indeed, so complete that he was grieved to know his family still held on to fear.

Regardless of his exact thoughts, Joseph's response when his brothers arrive in person is astounding. This is among Scripture's clearest and most pivotal statements about God and His sovereign ability to use "bad things" for a "good purpose" (Genesis 50:20).

Genesis 50:18

ESV

His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.”

NIV

What does Genesis 50:18 mean? Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery when he was a teenager (Genesis 37:26–28; 42:21–22). He unexpectedly became the second most powerful man in Egypt (Genesis 41:44). They reunited during a severe famine, as Joseph had the family resettled in comfort under his own

protection (Genesis 47:11–13). Now that their father has died (Genesis 50:1–14), Joseph's brothers fear this has only been because of Jacob (Genesis 50:15). Using the same fawning approach their father often employed (Genesis 32:9–16; 43:11–14), they sent messengers with a message—supposedly from Jacob—asking for Joseph's forgiveness (Genesis 50:16–17).

With that preparation, the brothers arrive in person, throwing themselves down in submission. The same men who once sneered at Joseph for his prophetic dreams (Genesis 37:5–11) now declare exactly what his dreams predicted. They declare themselves his servants and hope he will be merciful. They've taken this posture with Joseph before, but only when they believed he was "only" a powerful Egyptian (Genesis 44:14–16). Now, they do so in fear of well-deserved vengeance.

It's worth noting that Genesis never describes these brothers asking for Joseph's forgiveness. He has offered it (Genesis 45:5–11), but if they ever said something like "we are sorry," the Bible makes no mention of it. If there had never been a moment of overt repentance, it might explain their combination of fear and unresolved guilt. The healing act of confessing wrongdoing and asking forgiveness is an essential step in healing any relationship broken by sin.

Joseph's response to this appeal for mercy is a powerful statement. It not only speaks to his incredible perspective, but it also clearly states that God can even use human wrongdoing to achieve His good purposes (Genesis 50:20).

Genesis 50:19

ESV

But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?”

What does Genesis 50:19 mean? When Joseph was a teenager, his brothers were enraged at his dreams, depicting them as his servants (Genesis 37:5–11). Out of jealousy, they sold him as a slave (Genesis 37:26–28). Years later, after Joseph had become governor of all Egypt (Genesis 41:44), they were unexpectedly reunited by a famine, and Joseph took them in under his care and protection (Genesis 47:11–13). Now that Jacob, their father, is dead (Genesis 50:1–14), they fear vengeance and seek to appease Joseph (Genesis 50:15–17). In doing so, they fall at his feet (Genesis 50:18), further fulfilling those dreams from many years prior.

Joseph's astounding response shows they didn't need to deliver—or, possibly to invent—a deathbed message from Jacob to secure forgiveness. He had

already forgiven them. Despite all his power, Joseph clearly understands that ultimate judgment is not his to deliver. He is not "in the place of God." After seeing all that has happened—including his own rise to power, the famine, and Israel's rescue—he clearly understands there has been a divine hand at work. And so, Joseph has left it to God to judge those who have done evil to him. He has surrendered his right to take revenge.

Paul's command in Romans 12:19 will reinforce this idea: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"

The following statement (Genesis 50:20) is a powerful, direct summary of Joseph's perspective. This clarifies that God—not man—is ultimately in control, and that even those things men do for evil reasons can be used to achieve His godly ends (Romans 3:28).

Genesis 50:20

ESV

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

What does Genesis 50:20 mean? The statement made here brilliantly summarizes the difference between God allowing something, God deliberately causing something, and God "doing nothing" in response to human needs. Even when human beings try to do evil—and even when they succeed—God is still able to use those efforts to accomplish a greater good. This landmark verse makes no excuse for human sin, while emphasizing that events we cannot understand are still part of God's greater plan (Romans 8:28).

In the previous verse, Joseph tried to calm his brothers' fear that he would revenge on them (Genesis 50:15–18). He had already forgiven, already submitted vengeance to God, and already accepted that he was not in any position to question God's choices (Genesis 50:19).

Joseph does not downplay what they did to him. Selling him into slavery as a teenage boy was evil (Genesis 37:26–28), and they meant it for evil—there was no good intention behind their act. They know full well they are guilty of that (Genesis 42:21–22). As he has done before (Genesis 45:5–7), Joseph insists that God's power and God's plan for His people is more powerful than the ability of mere human beings to do evil to each other. He is convinced that not only was God ultimately responsible for allowing the evil act to happen, but He also

mysteriously built it into a larger plan to save His people—and many others—from the ravages of a deadly drought.

Without his thirteen years of suffering (Genesis 37:2; 41:46), Joseph would not have been gifted with eighty years of immense power and prestige (Genesis 41:46; 50:26). Joseph even named his two eldest sons in recognition of this (Genesis 41:50–52). Both during and after his hard times, Joseph always maintained faith that God was in control.

To the modern world, this is a startling and unusual perspective. And yet, it's how God asks Christians to view our lives, as well. Romans 8:28 insists that "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." As Joseph's example clearly shows, this is not a promise that evil will never happen to God's people. Rather, it is assurance that He still cares for us (Romans 8:31) and that nothing will separate us from His love for us in Christ (Romans 8:34–38).

Genesis 50:21

ESV

So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

What does Genesis 50:21 mean? In great fear, Joseph's brothers have thrown themselves to the ground before him, seeking his mercy (Genesis 50:15–18). Years after selling him as a slave (Genesis 37:26–28), they fear their father's death will inspire Joseph to finally seek revenge.

Joseph's response made it clear they don't need to be afraid. He directly and confidently leaves ultimate justice in the hands of God, and accepts that his years of suffering were—in the end—an incredible blessing. Not only did that experience cause Joseph to live the last eighty years of his life in power and comfort (Genesis 41:46; 50:26), it provided the means to save the entire nation of Israel from death (Genesis 50:19–20).

Here, Joseph effectively repeats the words he said 17 years earlier, when he first revealed he was their estranged brother (Genesis 45:5–7). Joseph arrived at the conclusion that their evil action was part of God's great plan to save many, many people from death. He has no plan to harm them or take revenge. Rather, he intends to continue to provide for them in the land of Egypt. Poignantly, Joseph mentions providing for their little ones, as well, indicating that he doesn't

see this as a temporary arrangement. They have a long-term home in Egypt, so far as he is concerned.

This moment certainly turns typical human instincts upside down. The one who was wronged ends in comforting those who wronged him; the guilty ones are being cared for by the innocent person they harmed. This verse emphasizes that Joseph pointedly speaks with kindness: reassuring them in both his words and his tone that he will not harm them in the future.

Psalm chapter 103 English Standard Version

1Of David. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! **2**Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, **3**who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, **4**who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, **5**who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. **6**The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. **7**He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. **8**The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. **9**He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. **10**He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. **11**For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; **12**as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

Context Summary

Psalm 103:1–5 records David commanding his entire inner being to praise the Lord and to remember all the Lord's benefits. He credits the Lord with forgiveness of sin and healing of diseases. He says the Lord redeems the believer's life from the realm of the dead and bestows on him steadfast love, mercy, satisfaction, and renewal.

Psalm 103:1

ESV

Of David. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!

What does Psalm 103:1 mean? David calls upon his soul and all that is in him to bless the Lord. The Lord blesses us, but how can we "bless" Him? In this

context, the term "bless" means "to praise with strong affection." By calling upon his soul and all that is within him to praise the Lord, David summons his soul, mind, strength, and heart to praise Him (Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 22:36–40).

David also gives a reason to praise the Lord: He is holy. He is completely separate from sin. When the Lord appeared to Moses in a burning bush and commissioned him to demand that Pharaoh release the Hebrews from captivity, He told Moses to remove his sandals because he was standing on holy ground (Exodus 3:5). The ground was holy only because God was present there. Isaiah received a revelation of the Lord's holiness in the temple. He heard the seraphim pronounce, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:3). Praising the Lord for His gracious gifts to us is appropriate, but it is also appropriate to praise Him because He is holy.

Psalm 103:2

ESV

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits,

What does Psalm 103:2 mean? In this verse David calls upon his soul to praise the Lord wholeheartedly because of the benefits He bestows. David is cautious not to be thankless or casual about everything God has done for him. He cautions his soul to "forget not all [God's] benefits." The word "benefits" suggests gracious dealings. David did not want to forget how graciously the Lord had treated him. Perhaps he had in mind the time the Lord used him to defeat Goliath (1 Samuel 17). He might have recalled the many times the Lord delivered him from hateful Saul in the wilderness (1 Samuel 19; 1 Samuel 23). He may have remembered how the Lord established him as Israel's king (2 Samuel 5:1–5).

Moses rebuked the people of Israel for forgetting the Rock that carried them in their wilderness journey and the God who brought the nation of Israel into existence (Deuteronomy 1:31–33). The generation of Israelites that had entered Canaan eventually forgot the Lord. They "abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the people who were around them and bowed down to them" (Judges 2:12). Their failure to remember the Lord and His benefits incurred the Lord's judgment. He gave them into the hands of plunderers and enemies (Judges 2:14). Remembering to praise the Lord for His gracious dealings with us keeps us free from undue discipline and distress.

Psalm 103:3**ESV**

who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

What does Psalm 103:3 mean? In this verse David begins to list some of the Lord's benefits for which He is worthy of praise. The first is forgiveness of all iniquity. The Hebrew word translated "iniquity" identifies something twisted and distorted. Lust, including lust for power or wealth, tries to convince us that sin is desirable, with a corrupted, warped perspective (James 1:14–15).

Iniquity brings conviction and judgment. Paul described a self-indulgent person as "dead even while she lives" (1 Timothy 5:6). David saw the sinful act of adultery as something desirable at first, but later his iniquity gnawed at him until he confessed it to the Lord and received forgiveness (Psalm 51:1, 8–12). In Psalm 103:3 David also praises the Lord for healing. Some illness comes by nature, not by sin, and God sometimes heals those (John 9:1–7). Often, however, it is sinning which brings sickness upon the sinner. Sometimes, but not always, when the Lord forgives sin He heals the sickness. Psalm 51:6 and Psalm 32:3–4 depict physical suffering that David's sin had brought upon him, but the Lord restored him spiritually and physically (Psalm 32:5–7).

Psalm 103:4**ESV**

who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

What does Psalm 103:4 mean? Redemption and divine love are two more benefits David sees in God. By "redemption" David means deliverance, and the "pit" refers to death. The Lord often delivered David from death. The giant Goliath presumed he could easily slay David, but the Lord enabled David to kill Goliath (1 Samuel 17:41–49). The Lord also delivered David from Saul's attempts to kill him (1 Samuel 19–21).

Believers today anticipate their ultimate deliverance from death. Because Jesus is the resurrection and the life, believers will never truly die (John 11:25–26). Jesus died and rose again and will return in the air to resurrect the bodies of departed believers and to transform the bodies of living believers, so that we will be with Him forever (1 Thessalonians 4:13–17; 1 Corinthians 15:50–55; Philippians 3:20–21).

This verse also mentions God's blessings of unfailing love and compassion. David views these benefits as a crown given to him by the Lord. We can never praise the Lord enough for His love and compassion.

Psalm 103:5

ESV

who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

What does Psalm 103:5 mean? In this verse David credits the Lord with satisfying the believer with good things. Psalm 84:11 promises that the Lord will not withhold any good thing from those who walk uprightly. It's important to remember that "good" is something defined according to God's perfect wisdom (Isaiah 55:8), not ours. Everything God has created has a good purpose (1 Timothy 4:4), even if we cannot fully understand all things.

Many unbelievers associate the possession of wealth and material objects with the so-called "good life," but only the Lord and His blessings constitute something truly good. Psalm 16:11 states that in the Lord's presence "there is fullness of joy" and "pleasures forevermore." The book of Ecclesiastes traces Solomon's search for satisfaction in a number of pursuits, including the pursuit of pleasure. Rich and powerful, Solomon found only emptiness until he recognized that the Lord is the only source of satisfaction. He counsels in Ecclesiastes 12:1: "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth."

This verse also credits the Lord with renewing the believer's life with the energy and strength of the eagle. The eagle molts: it casts off its old feathers and grows new ones, thereby gaining a new lease on life. Regardless of the believer's age, he finds the strength and vitality he needs to do the Lord's will.

Context Summary

Psalm 103:6–19 reflects on the Lord's benefits to Israel. Deuteronomy 6:1–15 contains the Lord's promise to bless the people of Israel if they would obey him. Psalm 105 and 106 are companion psalms that stress the Lord's goodness to Israel.

Psalm 103:6

ESV

The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed.

What does Psalm 103:6 mean? Prior verses contained David's personal reasons for honoring God. Here, David moves from personal to general statements about God's governance. His direction of the world is another reason for Israel to praise Him.

David states that God performs righteous deeds and justice. Israel had many opportunities to observe God's righteous deeds. From His call of Abraham to the time of David, God performed righteous acts on behalf of the nation. He delivered the nation from slavery in Egypt (Judges 6:9) and provided miraculously for the Israelites in the wilderness by supplying water from a rock (Exodus 17:1–6), manna from heaven (Exodus 16:15–16), and abundant quail for meat (Exodus 16:13).

God also judged Israel's wicked enemies and punished those who violated His covenant. He displayed His justice for His oppressed people by rescuing them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 20:2) and later, in the era of the Judges, by repeatedly delivering them from their oppressive enemy nations. He had also commanded His people to show kindness and generosity to the poor (Deuteronomy 15:7–11).

Psalm 103:7

ESV

He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

What does Psalm 103:7 mean? The Lord revealed His ways to Moses, so that Moses could understand not only what the Lord was doing but also why He was doing it. Moses understood that God required His people to be holy because He, the Lord, is holy (Leviticus 19:2). He instructed Moses to convey this message to Israel. At Mount Sinai Moses prayed, "If I have found favor in your sight, please show me your ways" (Exodus 33:13). The Lord responded by showing Moses His glory and promising to be gracious and merciful (Exodus 33:19).

The Lord showed Israel His acts: His mighty deeds. We read in Psalm 78:12–29 about His miraculous efforts on Israel's behalf. God performed wonders in Egypt (Deuteronomy 6:22). He parted the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21–22). He led the Israelites by a cloud and a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21–22). He gave them water

from a rock (Exodus 17:1–6; Numbers 20:7–8). He fed them with manna and quail (Exodus 16:13–16). All these benefits from the Lord were reasons to praise Him.

Psalm 103:8

ESV

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

What does Psalm 103:8 mean? The thought of what God had done for Israel led David to celebrate His grace, patience, mercy, and consistent love. But David also knew these facts about the Lord through personal experience. God had shown David mercy and unmerited favor by withholding death from him after David's affair with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:7–13). David had confessed his sin, and the Lord forgave him and demonstrated His love toward him (Psalm 51:1–3).

The nation of Israel, as well, had experienced the Lord's mercy and grace. Despite frequent rebellion against the Lord, the people of Israel had found forgiveness and assurance that the Lord had set His love upon them. They had learned the truth God proclaimed to Moses on Mount Sinai: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). Time after time the nation's people provoked the Lord, but He did not destroy them. The fact that Israel exists today bears testimony to the Lord's mercy, grace, and love.

Psalm 103:9

ESV

He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever.

What does Psalm 103:9 mean? Following his description of the Lord as merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, David writes that God does not always "chide." The Hebrew word here is *yā'rib*, which implies a legal argument, accusation, or debate. God does not perpetually bring a court case against us. He certainly has enough evidence to condemn us, but He refuses to do so. He has a right to be angry with us, but He forgoes that right.

How do we, living so long after Israel, know that God is loving and merciful, even to sinners? The answer is Jesus, who took the punishment for our sins. On the cross he was made sin for us "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). The prophet Isaiah predicted the sufferings of Jesus on our behalf. He wrote in Isaiah 53:6, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Psalm 103:10

ESV

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

What does Psalm 103:10 mean? This verse contains a strong admission of Israel's sin and guilt as well as a tribute to God's forgiveness. If God punished every sinner as that sinner deserves to be punished, no sinner would be allowed to enter heaven. Even worse, the Bible says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Humanity getting what we deserve would mean every single one of us being separated from God, forever.

The Old Testament prophet Ezra understood that God does not punish us to the extent we deserve. He said, "And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved" (Ezra 9:13). Contrary to punishing us as we deserve, God loved us and gave His Son for us (John 3:16–17).

Jesus took the full punishment for our sins by dying in our place on the cross. Romans 5:6 announces: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Romans 5:8 says "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Those who accept this are saved (John 3:16–18), but those who reject it are not (John 3:36).

Psalm 103:11

ESV

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

What does Psalm 103:11 mean? David describes the Lord's unfailing love for those who reverence Him. This is an example of how Scripture uses the concept of "fear" somewhat differently from the modern world. This is not an abject terror, or a panic-inducing dread. Rather, this is the healthy and humble respect that comes with recognizing that God is God, and we are not.

Scripture says the Lord's love is as high as the heavens are above the earth. It was common for David to gaze up at the heavens and marvel at the Lord's creative power (Psalm 8:3–4; 19:1). He spent much of his life in the open outdoors, both as a shepherd caring for his father's sheep and as a fugitive from hateful Saul. David probably didn't understand the mind-boggling distance from earth to the stars, as we do today. Yet he recognized them as extremely distant from the earth, and knew God's love for His people stretched even further.

The death of Christ on the cross for us is the best measure of God's love for us. John 3:16 tells us God's love was potent enough that He gave His only Son. Furthermore, no power on earth can destroy His love for us. Tribulation, distress, persecution, nakedness, danger, and sword cannot divide us from God's infinite love (Romans 8:35–39). Those who accept Christ are saved (Acts 4:12), and those who reject Him are lost (John 3:18; 3:36).

Psalm 103:12

ESV

as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

What does Psalm 103:12 mean? In love and mercy, the Lord has removed His people's sins from them. He doesn't simply move our sins onto our doorstep or a mile away; God moves them as far from us as the east is from the west.

This is an especially profound analogy. North meets south at the South Pole, and south meets north at the North Pole. East and west never meet—there is neither an east pole nor a west pole. A person who follows a straight path north will eventually begin moving south. But no matter how far one travels east, they will always be moving east. *North* and *south* are definable points, but *east* and *west* are indefinitely far from each other. To say that God separates our sins "as far as the east is from the west" speaks of the absolute, irrevocable measure by which God forgives us.

On Israel's annual Day of Atonement the high priest killed a bull as a sin offering for himself and his household. He also sacrificed a goat for the people of Israel. A second goat became the *scapegoat*. The high priest laid his hands on this animals' head and confessed all Israel's iniquities, transgressions, and sins. Then he sent the *scapegoat* into the wilderness, where it symbolically carried the nation's sins over the horizon, never to return. Thus, the people's sins were removed far from them (Leviticus 16).

If we were to search for the sins the Lord has removed from us, we would never find them, because Jesus, the Lamb of God, has taken them far away (John 1:29) from those who come to Him in faith (John 3:16–18). When we turn away from that gift, we resign ourselves to bear punishment for sins ourselves (Acts 4:12; John 14:6).

Romans chapter 14

English Standard Version

1As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. **2**One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. **3**Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. **4**Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

5One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. **6**The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. **7**For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. **8**For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. **9**For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

10Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; **11**for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."

12So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Context Summary

Romans 14:1–12 describes how Christians with opposing views on matters of freedom and sin should treat each other. First, strong-faith Christians who understand that all things are clean for those in Christ should welcome and not try to change weaker-faith Christians who believe some things, like eating certain meats, to be sinful. Each should act on their convictions and honor the Lord in doing so. Neither should judge the other, for the real day of judgment is coming when we will all stand before Christ and give an account of our lives.

Romans 14:1

ESV

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

What does Romans 14:1 mean? In Romans 14, Paul draws attention to the tension created between Christians because of conflicting ideas. Not every issue in our lives is given an explicit boundary in the Bible. This leads to differences of opinion about how we should use our freedom in Christ.

Here's the scenario: Paul has made it clear that Christians have died to the law of Moses and have been released from our obligation to it (Romans 7:4–6). That doesn't mean it's acceptable for Christians to participate in sin. In the last verses of Romans 13, Paul was very clear that we must cast off works of darkness like drunkenness, immorality, and jealousy (Romans 13:13). When the Bible is clear—and on the truly important issues, Scripture is very clear—then there is no reasonable room for doubt or disagreement.

However, what about things that are not clearly sin? Is it okay for Christians to eat meat? What about meat that has been offered to idols? What about observing Jewish holidays and Sabbaths? Is that right or wrong for Christians? In the modern context, this applies to issues which are also not clearly spelled out in Scripture, such as consuming alcohol (Romans 14:21) or watching movies, or listening to certain types of music.

Paul's answer to these questions is surprising. First, he refers to those who think of certain foods or items as inherently sinful as being weak in faith. He does not mean that these people are not Christians. They have faith in Christ. Nor does he mean they are spiritually immature, in general. The "weakness" referred to is specifically in this one particular area, or for that question alone. Paul means these believers do not yet fully trust that God has set them free from observing

the law or religious rule following. They struggle to accept that everything God created is good (1 Timothy 4:4), and can be used for a good purpose.

Instead of condemning these people, though, Paul speaks abruptly to those of stronger faith in the grace of God. He commands them to welcome those with weaker faith into the full life and community of the church. More, he tells them not to welcome them with an ulterior motive of convincing them they are wrong.

Romans 14:2

ESV

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.

NIV

What does Romans 14:2 mean? It may not have been clear to Paul's readers what he was talking about in the previous verse. Now he begins to explain it. Strong differences of opinion existed in the early church, as they have in every era of history. Paul makes a distinction between matters of opinion and outright works of darkness like sexual immorality (Romans 13:13). In this passage, Paul will clearly command that Christians ought not dismiss or judge those who differ in these matters of opinion—though they still ought to hold fast on issues which Scripture makes clear.

Still, Paul labels those who hold certain opinions as being "weak in faith" (Romans 14:1). Now he gives an example. Christians who eat only vegetables for religious reasons are said to be weak in faith. Those who feel free to eat anything at all are, by comparison, strong in faith. This corresponds to Paul's other comments where he indicated that God has a good purpose for everything He created (1 Timothy 4:4), so there is no spiritual requirement to avoid any particular food. The strength/weakness here is not a comment on these believers' general maturity, but only their stance on this specific issue.

Why eat only vegetables? It's possible these Christians had not been able to let go of Jewish dietary restrictions about eating only kosher foods. Perhaps daily life in Rome made it impossible to ensure meat sold in the market was kosher. Concerned believers might have decided it was better not to eat any meat at all.

It's also possible the issue has to do with eating meat offered in sacrifice to idols. Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 and 1 Corinthians 10:23–

30. Some Christians did not want to support idol worship by eating meat that may have been offered to an idol and then sold in the marketplace. Others, perhaps, may have been concerned about associating with any demonic activity attached to that meat.

Whatever the issue, Paul's statement about weakness seems to indicate his view is that these believers do not yet have the strength of faith to be convinced that God's grace has freed them from any of the requirements of the law. They cannot, in good conscience, bring themselves to eat meat.

Paul will not correct them in this passage, however. In essence, he will instead tell both sides of these issues to mind their own business.

Romans 14:3

ESV

Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

What does Romans 14:3 mean? Paul has defined two different groups of Christians in the early church. In the context of actions not clearly labeled as sinful or righteous by Scripture, Paul considers those of "weak faith" in contrast to those who are more secure in their faith. Those in both groups were true believers in Jesus. The difference was found in their opinions about what Christians should be free to participate in versus what they should stay away from. In the previous verse, Paul identified an example: those who refuse to eat meat for religious reasons, being weak in faith. Those of stronger faith felt free to eat anything at all, because they were convinced that Christ has freed them from all the requirements of the law and they were fully accepted by God's grace through faith in Christ.

Paul, though, does not condemn the religious vegetarians for their opinion. Instead, he forbids both groups from despising or passing judgment on each other. God has welcomed all who are in Christ, whether they live in the full freedom of God's grace or not. As such, both groups should welcome each other.

This statement is a crucial part of the context of chapter 14. It coordinates with Paul's other remarks on Christian liberty (1 Corinthians 10:23–33; 1 Timothy 4:4). Those who feel free to partake in certain things should not look down on those who are not comfortable with that same activity. At the same time, those who

feel a personal conviction about something ought not judge those who do not share their conviction.

In short, both sides need to respect and tolerate each other (Colossians 2:16–23).

Romans 14:4

ESV

Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

What does Romans 14:5 mean? In Romans 14, Paul deals with the issue of "disputable matters" between Christians. These are issues where the Bible does not give distinct, obvious guidance. Sexual immorality and idolatry, for instance, are clearly condemned. In contrast, however, are issues such as the example given by Paul: the freedom to eat meat, versus abstaining from it for religious reasons. Now he introduces another example, the observance of special days, as a point of disagreement between Christians.

Previously, Paul commanded people on both sides of these opinions not to judge each other. It's important to note that Paul described those who felt bound by stricter-than-Scripture religious requirements as having a "weaker" faith. They were not yet convinced that God's grace in Christ had completely freed them from following the law. Still, both groups were to fully welcome the other.

Now Paul applies that same teaching to the observance of religious holidays. Some Bible teachers suggest that Roman Christians were still following cultural religious ideas, which included a belief that some days were lucky, while others were not. It is more likely, however, that Paul is thinking about Jewish feast days and Sabbath days.

Elsewhere, Paul condemned the Christians in Galatians for continuing to observe "days and months and seasons and years" (Galatians 4:10). In that case, Paul seemed to feel the Galatians were trusting their religious rule-keeping to save them instead of trusting God's grace through faith in Christ.

With the Roman Christians, however, Paul simply tells them to be fully convinced in their own minds about whether to observe special days or not. Apparently, they were not trusting in the observance of these days to save them.

As the following verse will show, some Roman believers may have been keeping these days to voluntarily honor God.

Romans 14:6

ESV

The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

What does Romans 14:6 mean? Should Christians who have been saved by God's grace through faith in Christ and have been freed from the requirements of the law continue to observe special days as commanded in the law? Paul has been clear in his other letters that nobody should continue to observe these days if they are doing so in the hopes of earning their salvation (Galatians 4:10). That would mean that they were not fully relying on Christ's righteousness and death for their sin to save them.

He also wrote to the Christians in Colossae that they shouldn't allow anyone to shame them into following special requirements about food and drink or about observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbath days (Colossians 2:16). To do so is to give more authority to a religious leader than to Christ Himself.

Having said that, Paul allows in this verse that Christians might continue to observe these days with right motives. They may do so in honor of the Lord, not out of fear of dishonoring Him and losing His approval. In the same way, any Christian may eat or abstain from eating to honor the Lord and give thanks to God. The same is true of other personal choices to abstain from things the Bible does not explicitly condemn. Restraint for the sake of honoring God is not the same as the "weak in faith" belief that such things are, themselves, actually sinful.

Paul's point seems to be that Christians must not follow any practices of the law, or any religious tradition, *for the purpose* of earning acceptance with God. That would be a rejection of God's free gift of grace and acceptance through faith in Christ. However, someone who is fully trusting in Christ may *choose* to engage in that same religious practice, simply because they believe it to be honoring to God.

In other words, those truly trusting Christ alone are free to participate or not participate in these disputed activities as long as they do so with thanksgiving and to honor the Lord.

Romans 14:7

ESV

For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

What does Romans 14:7 mean? This verse must be read and understood in the context of the verse that follows. Paul has insisted that whatever side someone is on in one of the disputed matters in the early church, each person should be fully convinced of his or her position and participate (or not) to honor the Lord. Strictly speaking, those who associate sin with things God has not explicitly condemned are considered those "weak in faith" (Romans 14:1). However, those who embrace their Christian freedom in that are not to look down on those who are more convicted. And, those with more restrictive opinions should not judge those who don't share their view (Romans 14:3). Christians ultimately answer to God, not to each other (Romans 14:4; Colossians 2:16–23).

Now Paul writes that no one lives or dies to themselves. Christians are not meant to exist in a vacuum. In fact, we cannot wall ourselves off from the Lord or other believers. Whatever we do, we belong the Lord. That's what Paul will declare in the following verse.

In other words, we should not think that our decision about whether to participate in disputed issues is only about us. The Lord is *always* involved because we are His. That means that only God has the right to judge those issues, but it also means nobody has the right to make decisions on those topics without considering the will of God.

Romans 14:8

ESV

For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

What does Romans 14:8 mean? The previous verse declared that nobody who is in Christ lives and dies to him or herself. Born-again, saved Christians no longer exist to serve our own agenda. We cannot claim the right to follow our own path to our own goals. Rather, Christ redeemed us, meaning that He paid for us. We have been bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Or, as Paul

puts it here, we live to the Lord and, eventually, we die to the Lord. Whether living or dead, the Lord owns us.

The fact that we live to the Lord means that our choices must be made for His honor and in service of His agenda. In the context of Romans 14, that includes our choices about whether to eat meat or observe special days. More than that, it should include all the choices we make in this life.

We also die to the Lord. This likely means not only that we die in God's perfect timing, but also that we will continue to belong to the Lord after we die and enter eternity. We will ever and always belong to the Lord. Understanding that should impact how we view every choice we make.

Paul's teaching in this chapter strongly commands those who have tighter convictions on certain issues not to judge those who disagree (Romans 14:3). However, he is just as clear that the concept of "Christian liberty" is not a license to do whatever we want, however we want. Our choices and freedom should still be guided by submission to God.

Romans 14:9

ESV

For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

What does Romans 14:9 mean? This verse concludes the thought begun in the previous two verses. Paul has written that as Christians, we do not live or die to ourselves. Instead, we live and die to the Lord. We are His both in this life and in the life to come. This supports Paul's instructions about those of "weak faith" versus those who have a stronger faith. Those "weak in faith" who feel conviction over unclear issues, such as eating meat, are not to judge those who disagree. Those who recognize that God has given all things for a good purpose (1 Timothy 4:4) should not look down on those with a more restricted conscience. Neither is master of the other: Christ is the Lord of all.

Now Paul uses poetic language to show this is why Christ died for our sins and was resurrected. In doing so, He became Lord of the living and those who have died and will exist forever. He has experienced both life and death and now holds ultimate authority over those who live and those who have died and entered eternity.

In light of that ultimate truth, Paul will ask again in the following verses why any of us would ever think it is our job to judge other Christians who belong to the Lord (Colossians 2:16–23).

Romans 14:10

ESV

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God;

What does Romans 14:10 mean? Paul has spent the previous three verses showing that every Christian belongs to the Lord, both in this life and in the life to come. In fact, that is why Christ came to die and be resurrected: to become Lord of those currently living and those who have died.

Given that, Paul now asks, why would any Christian ever see it as their place to judge or despise their siblings in Christ? This is in the specific context of issues where the Bible is not clear, such as eating meat or celebrating certain holy days. It's true that there will be a judgment, Paul insists, but we will not be the ones sitting in the judge's chair. Instead, we will be standing before the judge along with every other Christian in history.

This judgment seat is described in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. It comes during the end times. Christ will judge the works of all believers. He will not be deciding whether we go to heaven or hell. That was decided when we came to God through faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8–9). Instead, as 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." That is, Jesus will look at our choices in this life and reward good works (1 Corinthians 4:5), while holding us accountable in some way— through a loss of rewards, perhaps—for our worthless actions (1 Corinthians 3:8).

In Romans 14:10, then, Paul is saying that the day of judgment is real and it is coming. Judging other Christians now is not our job.

Romans 14:11

ESV

for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."

What does Romans 14:11 mean? In the previous verse, Paul asked pointedly why any one of us would think it was our job to judge other Christians when a real judgment is coming. He called it the judgment seat of God. This is not a judgment of the salvation of believers, but an assessment of their works, as described in 2 Corinthians 5:10. Paul's specific context for this is disagreements over issues where Scripture is not clear—where the Bible does not explicitly say "don't do that." The proper response between believers with a difference of opinion on such matters should be tolerance, not judgment.

Now Paul quotes mostly from the second half of Isaiah 45:23 to support the idea of God judging our works during the end times. Isaiah looks forward to a moment when every knee will bow in acknowledgment that Christ is the Lord. Every tongue will confess—meaning to praise or swear allegiance to—the Lord. In other words, everyone gathered at that judgment will willingly recognize and submit to Christ as the Lord of all.

Romans 14:12

ESV

So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

What does Romans 14:12 mean? Paul sums up the message of his previous two verses in one simple sentence. Each one of us will give an account of ourselves to God at some future moment in the end times. Paul included himself here. He, too, will give an account of himself to God. Critically, Paul's point here is that this account is not given to other Christians (Colossians 2:16–23). This passage speaks of the need to tolerate fellow believers when they have a different opinion on a non-essential issue. A heavy motivator for that tolerance is the fact that we, ourselves, are not that other Christian's ultimate master; God is.

Paul is talking about what is known as the judgment seat of Christ, described more fully in 2 Corinthians 5:10. This judgment will not be about salvation. God will not respond to the account we give of ourselves here and then decide if we deserve heaven or hell. If He did, each of us would be sent to hell. Paul wrote in Romans 3:23 that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Rather, the decision about whether we will be allowed into heaven or not has already been made for those of who are in Christ. It was finished the moment we came to Him in faith (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Instead, we will give to Christ an account of our works in this life and they will be shown to be lasting or worthless. Christians will be rewarded for their lasting works and suffer loss of some kind for their worthless ones. Everyone there, though, will stand in Christ and be saved (1 Corinthians 3:12–15).

Matthew chapter 18

21 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?” **22** Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

23 “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. **24** When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. **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. **26** So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ **27** And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. **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.’ **29** So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ **30** He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. **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. **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?’ **34** And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. **35** So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Context Summary

Matthew 18:21–35 answers Peter's question about how many times he should forgive a brother who sins against him. Jesus tells a parable about the servant of a king. The king forgives the man's enormous, unpayable debt. In turn, the servant refuses to forgive the much smaller debt owed him by another and has that man thrown in prison. The king is furious and asks the servant why he did not show the same mercy he had been given. The king has the man jailed until he pays everything. Jesus says that God the Father will do the same to those who do not forgive their brothers.

Matthew 18:21**ESV**

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?”

What does Matthew 18:21 mean? Peter likely thinks he is being generous and noble in this question to Jesus. Jesus has just finished describing a process for what to do when another believer in Jesus sins against you. It's a process that starts with a one-on-one conversation and ends, if there is not repentance on the part of the sinful person, with removing that person from the community of Jesus-followers (Matthew 18:15–20).

Peter seems to be thinking about cases when someone repeatedly sins against you. The Jewish rabbis required those who followed the law to forgive a person who was guilty of the same offense three times. Then they were free to stop forgiving—in that mindset, the offending person had exhausted any reason to be forgiven. Peter seems to know that Jesus' standard will be higher, so he more than doubles that number. He forms his suggestion into a question: As many as seven times? Jesus, as usual, will give Peter a surprising answer.

Matthew 18:22**ESV**

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

What does Matthew 18:22 mean? Peter has asked Jesus a question about forgiving someone who sins against you. Apparently, Judaism required you to forgive the same person three times for the same offense. Peter, perhaps thinking he is being generous, asks Jesus if he should forgive someone who sins against him up to seven times. Jesus says no. Instead, you must be prepared for effectively unlimited forgiveness.

The only scholarly debate over this verse is irrelevant to how these words are meant to be applied. It can be argued that the Greek construction here means "seventy and seven," meaning seventy-seven times. However, it can also be construed to mean something like "70 times 7 times," meaning 490.

It's possible that Jesus, in naming the number 77, is playing off the words of boastful Lamech in Genesis 4:24. Lamech was talking about revenge against

those who might harm him for killing a man. God had promised that Cain would be avenged seven times if anyone killed him. Lamech said to his wives, "If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold."

Fortunately, nuances of Greek grammar don't impact the main point being made. Here, and in the parable to follow, Jesus means that believers in Him should forgive and keep on forgiving without any plan to stop.

Matthew 18:23

ESV

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

What does Matthew 18:23 mean? Peter has asked Jesus if he should forgive someone who sins against him up to seven times. Jesus has said no. Instead, Peter should forgive 77 times—or, possibly, 490 times—meaning Peter should plan to *always* forgive, with no plan to stop forgiving. Holding on to unforgiveness toward others should never be an option (Matthew 18:21–22).

To illustrate why this is true, Jesus begins a parable. As with other parables, Jesus starts by saying that the "kingdom of heaven may be compared to..." In this case, the point of comparison is also a kingdom with a powerful king. The time had come for that king to settle accounts with his servants or slaves.

In a large and prosperous country, the king would have high-ranking slaves who lived very well, better even than the free citizens of the nation. In the case of this story, those servants were able to borrow or hold money owed to the king in some way for a limited time. The time to pay up had arrived.

Matthew 18:24

ESV

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

What does Matthew 18:24 mean? Jesus is telling a parable to illustrate why His followers should plan to forgive each other, always (Matthew 18:21–22). He has begun by saying the kingdom of heaven can be compared to the king of a

large nation. That king was ready to settle accounts with his servants or slaves. This meant that his slaves owed the king money.

One of the servants who was brought before the king owed him the astronomical figure of 10,000 talents. Depending on how one calculates things like inflation, gold prices, and so forth, the modern value of this figure can change quite a bit. Generally speaking, a *talent* was about as much money as a low-level laborer could make in twenty years.

The sum Jesus mentions here is so large that it becomes meaningless to calculate an exact number—this is literally many thousands of lifetimes worth of debt. What's owed is exponentially beyond what the debtor can ever hope to pay. Likewise, how any servant could ever come to owe his king this much money is impossible to imagine. That, also, is not the point of the story. However, it also factors into the king's merciful nature that he allowed the servant to go so far into debt in the first place.

Jesus might even have been using a deliberately exaggerated figure simply to make His teaching clear (Matthew 18:25–27).

Matthew 18:25

ESV

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.

What does Matthew 18:25 mean? Jesus is telling a parable to illustrate why those who follow Him must be ready and willing to forgive everyone for everything. He has described a king who is owed the impossible figure of 10,000 talents by a servant. Jesus has named this number as a kind of hyperbole. It may have made those who were listening chuckle because it was so impossibly, astronomically large. A common laborer would earn about one *talent* over the course of twenty years; the figure Jesus mentioned could be the modern equivalent of million or even billions of dollars (Matthew 18:23–24). Nobody could come close to paying this.

However, since the man could not pay, the king decided to get what he could. He ordered that the servant be sold into slavery, along with his wife and children and all he owned, so some payment could be made. It was a common practice in ancient times to sell into slavery those who owed more than they could pay, although the Jewish people did not practice this.

The king's take for such a sale would have been tiny in comparison to what was owed. The price for a slave was 2,000 days' wages at the most. Even if the king got that price for each member of the servant's family, it would have come nowhere near to a fraction of a percent of the amount owed.

Matthew 18:26

ESV

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

What does Matthew 18:26 mean? This parable illustrates why Christians ought to be willing to forgive when others sin against them. He has described a king who is demanding payment for an impossible debt from one of his servants. The man owes 10,000 talents, the equivalent of literally thousands of lifetimes of earning. Jesus chose a huge, unpayable number in order to make His point about forgiveness. Since the man cannot pay, the king has ordered him and his family to be sold into slavery, along with everything he owns. The amount the king would get for this would not add up to a drop in the bucket of the servant's debt. Still, the king would get something (Matthew 18:23–25).

Now the servant falls on his knees before the king and begins to beg the king for patience. He promises to pay back the money if given enough time. Given the amount owed, however, everyone listening to Jesus tell this story would have understood that to be absurd. The servant's promise was empty and hopeless. The king in the story understands this, as well.

Matthew 18:27

ESV

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

What does Matthew 18:27 mean? After teaching that Christians should plan to offer unlimited forgiveness (Matthew 18:21–22), Jesus is illustrating with a parable. A servant owes his king 10,000 talents—each talent being worth twenty years of labor. This would have been an impossible amount to imagine a servant owing to a king. It's certainly a sign of the king's patience to allow that to happen (Romans 2:4). Since the servant cannot pay, the king has ordered that

he and his family be sold into slavery to make some payment (Matthew 18:23–25).

The servant has begged the king to be patient, promising to pay back all he owes. This, obviously, would have been impossible (Matthew 18:26).

This leads to an unexpected twist: The king takes pity on the man. He doesn't set up a payment plan. He doesn't cut the debt in half. In pity for his servant, the king simply forgives the entire amount. He wipes out the debt. It is gone. If it was impossible to imagine owing a king that amount of money, it would have likely been even more impossible for Jesus' listeners to imagine a king just forgiving it. The king in Jesus' story, though, does exactly that.

The meaning behind Jesus' parable is taking shape, and some of His first listeners may have begun to think they understood it. The debt of sin was apparently often compared to financial debts during this time. Here is a powerful king who not only patiently stands by while a servant accumulates mind-boggling debt, he then forgives the debt. This is meant to be a powerful analogy for salvation through faith in Christ (Romans 5:8; Titus 3:5).

The parable is not done, however. Peter's initial question was about being forgiving towards other people, and so far Jesus has only spoken of forgiveness granted by a king. The tie-in to Peter's question comes in the next part of the story (Matthew 18:28).

Matthew 18:28

ESV

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.'

What does Matthew 18:28 mean? Those engaged in Jesus' parable have likely breathed a sigh of relief. He depicted a servant who owed the king an impossible amount of money. The king was going to exercise his right to sell the man and the man's family into slavery as a payment on that debt. The servant begged for time to pay the debt off, something he clearly could never do since it was such a large amount. Then, finally, the king graciously forgave the man for the entire amount of the debt with no need to ever pay it back (Matthew 18:23–27).

The man was free. It was a story with a happy ending. For those with ears to hear (Mark 4:9), this part of the story gives perspective to humanity's relationship with a forgiving God. Through faith in Christ, God forgives a debt for our sin that we could never hope to repay. That debt is so severe it's remarkable God allowed us to fall so far in the first place. We deserve eternal fire, and God gives us instead an eternal place in His own family through faith in Christ (Romans 5:8; John 1:12; 3:16–18).

This story is not over, though. Jesus continues, following the man out from the presence of the king and into a confrontation with another servant. This fellow servant owes the man 100 denarii. This is not a tiny sum; a denarius was about a days' wages. Still, it was an irrelevant fraction of a fraction of a percent of what the king had just forgiven this man. All the same, the man angrily demands payment, grabbing the other servant and even choking him.

Matthew 18:29

ESV

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

What does Matthew 18:29 mean? Jesus' story has taken a shocking twist. A king has forgiven one of his servants his entire debt of 10,000 talents, equivalent to literally thousands of lifetimes of wages. The king was going to sell the man and his family into slavery but took mercy on the man when he fell to his knees and begged the king for patience. The king wiped the debt out and sent the servant on his way (Matthew 18:23–27). This is a powerful picture of God's patience and mercy with our sin-debt, which can never be atoned by good works (Titus 3:5).

Instead of that happy ending, though, the servant immediately goes out and finds another servant who owes him money. This debt is, 100 denarii, about 100 days' wages. That's not a trivial amount, but it's nothing compared to what was just written off. However, the man demands immediate payment, grabbing and choking the other servant. The servant in his debt falls to his knees and begs the man to be patient with him, promising to pay what he owes.

The man now finds himself in a similar place as the king was just moments ago. His response will not be the same (Matthew 18:30).

Matthew 18:30**ESV**

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

What does Matthew 18:30 mean? Two servants face each other, one on his knees begging for an extension on a loan amount of about 100 days' wages. The other servant has just been forgiven a debt of, roughly, several thousand *lifetimes* of wages by the king after begging for an extension on the loan (Matthew 18:23–29). What will the man do?

Famously, he refuses to forgive his fellow servant's debt or even to extend the loan. Instead, he has the other man put in debtor's prison until he is able to pay back the full amount of the loan. Debtor's prisons don't exist in many places these days. Then it was a strategy to force a person's family or friends to come up with cash to get them out of prison, since they could not earn money themselves to pay their way out from prison.

This shocking twist in Jesus' parable turns those of us in the audience from rooting for the servant stuck in impossible debt to rooting against a man that is so ungrateful he will not spare another from the fate he just escaped himself. The meaning behind Jesus' parable is creeping closer.

Matthew 18:31**ESV**

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.

What does Matthew 18:31 mean? Outrage would be an appropriate emotional response to what the servant in Jesus' story has just done. The man was forgiven by the king for an astounding amount of debt instead of being sold into slavery with his wife and children (Matthew 18:23–27). However, that same servant immediately demanded payment for a relatively tiny debt owed to him from a fellow servant. When that servant could not pay, the recently-forgiven man had his co-worker thrown into debtor's prison.

The other servants of the king are described by Jesus as deeply disturbed by this. They knew both sides of the story. They knew that, incredibly, the accusing man had been forgiven for an impossible sum. They knew that, unbelievably, the man had refused to forgive or even negotiate the much smaller sum. The

ugliness of that action got to them. It could not stand. They went and reported to the king what had happened.

The point of Jesus' parable is becoming clearer. God is like the king in that He remains patient even as we accrue a massive "debt" of sin. In Christ, He forgives our enormous, unpayable debt of sin, the sin that has earned us His wrath and judgment. After Jesus' death and resurrection, this story would resonate even more deeply with the disciples. After all, Jesus is the one who paid the debt for our sin with His life. We are forgiven because He suffered and died (John 3:16–18; Romans 5:8).

Soon, Jesus will tie this parable to Peter's question about forgiveness (Matthew 18:21–22). The point is that it is outrageous for those who have been forgiven such an extraordinary burden of sin debt—at the cost of the life of Jesus—should refuse to forgive a tiny-by-comparison amount of sin inflicted on us by another.

Matthew 18:32

ESV

Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

What does Matthew 18:32 mean? The distress of a man's fellow servants has now become the fury of his king. Those servants have reported to the king that the same man he had forgiven for an unrepayable debt had turned around and thrown another servant in jail for a ridiculously smaller debt. The one who had been forgiven all refused to forgive any (Matthew 18:23–31).

The master, the king, calls the servant back into his presence and then calls him wicked. The king reminds him that he just forgave the enormous debt because the man pleaded with him. One can only imagine the anger the king would have expressed. This will not go well.

Jesus' point is obvious now. God has forgiven those who believe in Jesus of an enormous, unpayable debt of sin instead of sending us away to the fires of hell. Should that change the way we think about forgiving each other? How can someone who is a born-again believer fail to appreciate the debt they've been forgiven? Does such a person even understand their own relationship to God (Matthew 6:14–15)? That, in fact, is the point Christ will make in the next verses (Matthew 18:35).

Matthew 18:33**ESV**

And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'

What does Matthew 18:33 mean? The king has heard that the man he recently forgave of an absurdly huge debt had another servant thrown into prison over a much smaller obligation (Matthew 18:23–32). He now asks a question that should pierce the guilty man's heart. It should also pierce the heart of every believer in Jesus who struggles to forgive others. The king asks, "shouldn't you show the same mercy to others I showed to you?"

This makes Jesus' parable very personal. God is the king who has forgiven our sin. How much does that add up to? Romans 6:23 is clear that the wages of sin is death. In other words, we owe God death, eternal and painful, as the payment for our sin. The debt we accrued for sin is so outrageously large we have no hope of ever paying it back. And yet, God not only is patient with us while we accumulate those sins (2 Peter 3:9; Romans 2:4), He offers complete and total forgiveness (Romans 5:8; John 3:16–18) Those who believe in Jesus, though, are forgiven. Romans 6:23 goes on to say that the gift of God is eternal life, rather than death, for those who are in Jesus Christ.

Jesus, the one telling this story, will soon die on the cross to pay the death we owed to God for our sin (John 12:32–33). God will soon offer eternal life to all who come to Him through faith in Jesus. Eternal life begins with the forgiveness of sin through the death of Jesus. This is a gift of mercy.

It's helpful to realize that both parts of Jesus' parable involve debt—meaning both instances of forgiveness imply something real. Jesus is not saying that when others sin against us, or harm us, or hurt us, that we should act as if it's nothing. The second servant's debt was significant. The point is that even those large, painful "sins" others commit against us don't compare to the level of forgiveness we've been offered through faith in Christ (Colossians 2:13–14).

Those who follow Christ should have mercy on each other, even for the painful wrongs done to us, as God has had mercy on us for our debt of sin against Him.

Matthew 18:34**ESV**

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

NIV

What does Matthew 18:34 mean? This is the last sentence in Jesus' story about the servant who refused to show mercy to his colleague after the king had shown mercy to him. The king had forgiven the first man's debt, which was equivalent to literally thousands of lifetimes of income. That same man then had his fellow servant cast into debtor's prison for a debt of 100 days' wages (Matthew 18:23–33).

In response, the angry king now reverses his earlier decision and delivers the servant to the jailers to be imprisoned, as well, until all his debt is repaid. This is, in effect, a life sentence since the servant owes such an impossible sum of money. In the context of Jesus' parable, it is an eternal sentence.

Jesus' troubling application of the parable in the following verse raises questions for all of us. The point of this story is to demonstrate how much we "owe" God on account of our sin. For that reason, those who claim salvation in Christ ought to reflect that understanding by being forgiving towards others. Those who cannot, or will not, be forgiving, give reasons to doubt their relationship with Christ is legitimate (John 14:15).

Matthew 18:35**ESV**

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

What does Matthew 18:35 mean? Jesus told the story in this passage (Matthew 18:23–34) in response to Peter's noble-sounding question: Should I forgive my brother for sinning against me seven times? Judaism required forgiveness of the same person for the same offense at least three times. Seven was twice that plus one. Peter was suggesting taking it to the extra mile when it comes to forgiving others (Matthew 18:21–22).

This parable was used to show how limited Peter's idea of forgiving each other really is. How much should a man, forgiven by the king for thousands of lifetimes worth of debt, be willing to forgive from others? The man in the story refused to forgive a debt of 100 days' wages, causing every listener to agree with the king that the man was wicked. Perhaps they even cheered when the man was thrown in debtors' prison.

Now, though, Jesus drives the point of the story home. His Father in heaven, God, will also imprison every person who does not forgive his brother from the heart. God expects those whom He forgives to forgive everyone who sins against them up to the amount they themselves have been forgiven. Since every sin we commit is committed against God, those who are forgiven by Him are forgiven for every sin, every wrong and wicked choice, we ever do over the course of our lifetimes. Nobody will ever sin against us anywhere near to the amount we have sinned against God.

How are we forgiven? Only through faith in Jesus and by God's grace (Ephesians 2:8–9). The one who told this story is about to die on the cross to pay the price for the sins of all who believe in Him (John 3:16–18; Colossians 2:14). Now He tells us that God will not forgive those unwilling to forgive as they have been forgiven. This is not because forgiveness is a pre-condition of salvation (Titus 3:5), but because forgiveness is a symptom of those who have been truly saved.

God's grace for us is absolute and our only hope of spending eternity with Him. We cannot earn His forgiveness by forgiving others. Instead, we should understand that the God who saves us begins to change our hearts and make us new in the image of Christ (Romans 12:1–2). The ability to forgive those who hurt us is evidence that the Spirit of God in us through faith in Christ is alive and active and at work in us.

Those who absolutely refuse to forgive may be showing that they are not willing to receive God's forgiveness for their much larger debt of sin. This does not apply to those who *want to* forgive yet are grappling with it. Even if we're not perfect, we can demonstrate willingness to obey. We can live consistently with an understanding that God has forgiven us for far more than we will ever need to forgive in others.