

**The Red Letter Challenge: Forgiving | Matthew 18:21-35**  
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**Introduction**

“I, a poor, miserable sinner” You don’t like it do you? Some of you have told me so. “I, a poor, miserable sinner”. We don’t like to hear it. We don’t like to say it. We don’t like to confess our sins using those jarring words, do we? But I wonder...why? Why don’t we like to speak those words out loud in worship?

Is it because they sound unduly harsh? Do we really have to get into name calling here? Sometimes, that’s how it feels, doesn’t it?

Do we not like to speak these words because they offend our sensibilities about who you are? Self-esteem seems to be important and we don’t like these words because they make us feel bad about ourselves?

Maybe it's just as simple as they don’t sound nice and we believe that church is supposed to make us feel good so calling ourselves poor, miserable, sinners doesn’t really fit the mood.

Perhaps you have your own reason but whatever the reason, we hear these words...we see them printed on the page and we want to check out. We immediately want to fight and argue.

But to be honest with you, I don’t think it’s because it’s too harsh or too offensive or because it makes us feel a little too bad for a sunny, Sunday morning.

I think we don’t like it because it’s true. I think we don’t like it because it’s true and we don’t want to admit it...I mean really admit it. Maybe we read it, some of us might even say it out loud...but we don’t like to because we don’t want to face even the possibility that we are poor...miserable...sinners.

We don’t want to face the possibility that our sin is real, that it’s all encompassing, and - WORSE! - that there is *nothing* we can do about it. And if there’s anything we poor miserable sinners hate is the feeling of helplessness and powerlessness.

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Now, I know what you’re going to say. I know you’re going to say that it’s not *really* true. That we can and do do good things. I mean, if I were a poor, miserable sinner would I have adopted this puppy from the humane society? If I were a poor, miserable sinner would I have made cookies and taken them over to our new neighbor’s house? Would I have offered up my precious time to help someone move? Would a poor, miserable sinner not just give a little extra change to the homeless person in front of Starbucks, but actually buy him an expensive coffee *and* a grilled cheese sandwich?

We trot out our good deeds and say, "Look! I'm not so bad after all!" We look at those deeds and we want to say, "See! I'm a good person after all". And while I agree with you that we are capable of doing good things and we can and should do them, we do need to make a distinction...and it's a very important distinction.

Take your bulletins and turn to page (##) with me and there you'll see a big section for notes under the sermon. Far be it from me to take all that space you were planning on using to play hangman, but I'd like to ask you to draw a picture with me. Grab that pencil in front of you and draw a cross but with all sides the same length. It's like a graph with an x and y axis.

On the horizontal axis you can draw arrows on the end and on the left hand side write "ME" and on the right hand side write "OTHERS". When we talk about our good deeds and good works, this is the realm which we're talking about. We can feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison and that's all really good and important stuff. A lot of this stuff is actually putting into practice what Jesus tells us we should do! So that's good.

So this is the realm in which we interact with other people. And in this realm, what is required to be considered, "good"? Perfection? No, we can be kind of a mixed bag, can't we? We can mess up...we can have a bad day....but on average we can be pretty good. Pleasant to be around, etc.

OK.

Now on the vertical line in your drawing, write 'GOD' at the top and 'ME' at the bottom.

This is the realm we're really interested in today. We will get back to the other one in a little bit. But to talk about this realm of relationship, between us and God, I think a parable would be helpful. It's the parable from our Gospel text this morning: Matthew 18:21-35:

Jesus says that God's rule and reign is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him 10,000 talents. In modern terms that's around a bajillion dollars. If you can believe it, 200,000 years wages (60,000,000 days wages). Obviously the servant couldn't pay so the king was going to throw the book at this guy. The servant and his entire family would be sold into slavery until they could pay.

But the servant fell on his knees and cried out, "Have patience with me and I will pay you everything!"

The servant finds himself in a massive, massive hole. To say he's over his head is an incredible understatement, right? There is no way that this man can ever repay what he owes the master. Now look back to that vertical line. This is the nature of our relationship with God. We are in massive debt. We are sinful human beings, born into

this thing called original sin and we simply can't dig ourselves out of it. We can't repair what's broken. Our relationship with God, with others, with creation, with ourselves, even, have been broken. No matter how much good stuff we do, there is always sin and brokenness standing in the way.

But here's the rub. We *think* we can fix it! Just like the servant in the parable, we say "just give me a second! I can fix this! Here...here's \$100 in the offering! Here, I helped a person who is homeless! Here, I helped my spouse do the dishes or the laundry or cook dinner or whatever." I wonder, though, does that make even a dent in the debt that we owe to God? What does God demand? He demands perfection. Not just a mixed bag. "You're only human" isn't really an excuse that flies with the Almighty. You see, before God we are poor, miserable sinners. We are utter and complete beggars who can only say in our foolishness, "have patience with me and I will pay back everything!"

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But, of course, that's not the end of the parable, is it? No...it's not the end of the parable and it's not the end of this thing we call Confession and Absolution either.

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

The master had *pity* on him. The greek word underlying this English word 'pity' is my favorite greek word and it's pronounced "*splongidzomai*" and it refers to the innards...the guts of a person. This is the seat of our feelings. And to *splongidzomai* means to have this deep-seated compassion for someone...to really feel it in your guts.

You've probably experienced something like this before. Maybe you've felt that way for parents mourning the loss of a child...for those facing unimaginable pain or heartache or loss. Your guts were moved for them. You had this physical, emotional reaction to their incredible suffering.

In Mark 6, Jesus looks over at this crowd which had gathered to hear him preach and the gospel writer says, "He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd". Jesus' guts were moved for them because they were a lost and wandering bunch. Same greek word. It's the same emotion as when the master looks at the servant and he's moved with this physical-emotional reaction...this deep-seated compassion in his belly. And because of this, the master forgives the servant his *entire debt*.

What was a massive debt, unimaginable debt, becomes nothing at all. What was once an incredible burden to the servant is instantly transformed into amazing freedom. Some of you may remember when you paid off your car, your house, your student loans? Wasn't that an incredible feeling? I remember paying off my very first car loan...what a sense of accomplishment! But more than that, what a sense of freedom, right? But in the parable, it's not a \$15,000 car loan that's paid off. It's *60,000,000 days worth of work* that is paid off. In exactly the same way, then, God looks at us, seeing our

enormous debt of sin, and out of his great compassion for us...his unimaginable mercy for his people, God pronounces the forgiveness of all that debt.

And in an instant we are transformed from “poor, miserable sinners” to debt free sons and daughters of God.

See, here’s the thing. Whatever that phrase, “poor, miserable sinner” says about you and me...it says even more about Jesus. To be sure, it puts us in our place. We have absolutely nothing that we can bring before God. Let’s just be honest about that for a second. Your money, your prayers, your...anything? Nothing before God.

Nevertheless, Jesus who looks at us in our sin, with such amazing, divine love and compassion that he takes that sin from us. Everything that is burdening us...everything that we are dragging around...he takes this massive heap of debt and places it on his own shoulders.

Imagine how big it is. And not just yours but the person next to you...your friends and your neighbors. Jesus takes all their debt too. And he takes it all the way to Calvary’s cross. Jesus looks at you, at me, at every single person on this planet...our poor, miserable sinner-ness and all, and in his love and compassion brings us total and complete freedom from our sins. Everlasting and eternal life with a perfect and compassionate God.

Whatever you think that phrase says about you...it says far more about Jesus and his love for you. It reminds us that Jesus didn’t go to the cross for some bush league, JV sinners. He went to the cross for professional sinners like you and me. For poor, miserable sinners. Because the truth is, there isn’t any other kind. Just sinners who were once dead in our transgressions but, because of Christ’s great love for us, are now we are debt free before our Father in heaven.

This is why Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that the message of the cross is complete foolishness. It’s foolishness because no one in their right mind would cancel such a debt. No one would have *that much compassion* for another person. No one would do that. Except Jesus. Except Jesus and his foolish, love for poor, miserable sinners like you and me.

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I, a poor miserable sinner. You don’t like it. I get that. But whatever it says about us and our brokenness...it says more about Jesus and his love. It says far more about how Jesus looks upon his people with deep, gut wrenching compassion and forgives us of all our sins. So now, even now as we confess, “i a poor, miserable sinner” we leave with this promise: because of Jesus we leave here today **rich in his mercy**, we are **joyful in his presence**, and **saints in the eyes of God because our debts have been canceled** by his sacrificial death and resurrection from the dead. Amen.