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## Live Lightly

Matthew 18:21-35

Pastor Josh Luse, Connections Pastor

I was just thinking this week how grateful I am for this church, which means how grateful I am for you. What a community God has brought together. I know it's summertime, a lot of us are traveling, vacations and things like that, so I just want to consider this question: When you're packing and preparing for a trip how many of you would consider yourself to be a light packer? Let's see a raise of hands of light packers. There's a few. So that means the rest of you would consider yourself to be...prepared. I did hear over-packing too, a little bit of both maybe. I tend to be one of the light packers and a bit more unprepared. I remember one trip where I tried to pack everything into my pillow case so that I could just take my pillow. Great idea, right? No, I regretted so many things that I did not take along that week. Which is so good that I married my wife because she is prepared. She's very prepared, and that's what I need. Because when we travel she saves my bacon so much just by what she brings along. I remember right after we got married we went on our honeymoon and then a week later we packed up to go to two weeks of summer camp with a bunch of teenagers. She knew what she was getting into coming into this marriage, so she prepared. So, we packed up, got ready to head to the camp, and I was putting my bag into the car and then I was putting her bags into the car and we get there and I'm unloading it into the room. I put my bag in and go to get her bags and start to unload one particular bag. I'm starting to lift it up and pull it to get it out, and we're newly married and so she has to know she married a strong man so I'm pulling on this bag, and I drop it, and I was feeling a little awkward so I said, "What do you got in here, weights?" And then she was quiet and a little awkwardly silent, just smiled and kind of nervously laughed so I went on with it. I pulled it into the room and then I had to go to a meeting and when I came back, she had transformed this entire room to look like home away from home, it was incredible! She had everything set, and we were ready for a couple weeks of camp. I start looking around the room and seeing all of the things she had brought and had prepared for, and in one corner of the room I see that she has brought along weights for your morning workout. And so I realize I wasn't too crazy, there *were* weights in that bag. What I also realized that for that woman I would carry anything including an over-packed bag with weights. But why would anybody ever choose to carry burdens and undue weight in their heart and their soul throughout this life? Which brings us to Matthew 18. If you've got a Bible, you can follow along as we go there this morning. I'm going to start in verse 21. If you're using a phone I'm going to be reading from the ESV translation this morning. Matthew 18, verse 21:

**Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?"** (\*ESV, Matthew 18:21)

Now since we're jumping right in the middle of this chapter, let's get a little context about what's going on here. So, this is in the middle of what we could call Jesus' road trip. He started up in Galilee, and He's traveling down ultimately over to Jerusalem and He's going there to give His life. But He's not traveling alone, He's brought his disciples with him and all along the way He continues to teach them and show them what his kingdom looks like. And actually in chapter 18 there's been a lot of teachable moments. Because right at the very beginning we find the disciples are arguing with each other about who is the greatest. As I think about that I think of the comparisons that are being made and maybe the words that are being spoken, it's really easy to hurt somebody's feelings in those types of conversations. Not only that, the chapter goes on to talk about how to deal with

someone who has sinned against you. And so Peter is wrestling with this thought and it's a good thought to consider as he comes into this. I'm not sure what all of his motivation was going into it, but he puts a good question out there for all of us. So, after he asks this, he also throws out an answer: **"As many as seven times?"** Which doesn't seem much to us but if you think of the context and the world they were living in, it was commonly taught by the Rabbis that 3 times was enough. They were starting to put limitations on forgiveness. So Peter seems like he's asking a question with some generosity in mind, but what we are really going to see later on is that he is actually putting limitations on this. But for him he's thinking, "As many as seven times? That's more than doubling what the Rabbis were currently teaching." So let's see what Jesus says:

**Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."** (vs 22)

Or as your translation might say 70 times 7, which got me thinking, is it 77 times or 490 because I need to know the number so I can keep following Jesus, which puts me right back in Peter's boat. But, let's get into this and find out what Jesus was doing. Because there's one other spot in scripture where we find this exact same terminology being used. It's back in Genesis 4 and there's two brother's there that are coming into this story - one is Cain and one is Able. One gets jealous and angry and ends up killing his brother. And Cain gets sent away and an entire city starts to form around him and it's not a place that you would want to be. Because hurt people often go onto to hurt people. And this becomes a very difficult spot. And God warned Cain and said, "Be careful, sin is crouching at the door, and it will destroy." So the story goes on and we meet another character named Lamech, who comes down through the family line. In Genesis 4:19 it says:

**And Lamech took two wives.**

This is the guy that introduces polygamy into the story. Then it goes on to say in verse 23:

**Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say..."** Sounds like a super nice guy. And if you're reading this you notice that the form and the text changes, so it goes into this song or this poem that he's writing. Now listen to what he's writing about:

**I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.**" (Genesis 4:23-24)

Did you catch it? If Cain gets revenge 7 times, then Lamech is going to get revenge 77 times. It's actually using some terminology from that day that it's this limitless number. It has some symbolism in it. We could say he's basically saying, "Yeah, if I got revenge I'm going to do it infinity times infinity." But yet Jesus comes back and uses this same terminology to say, "How often should we forgive? Infinity. Infinity times infinity." Which seems like a ridiculous number. That's kind of hard to grasp. But what Jesus shows us is that forgiveness is ongoing. I can't put limits on my forgiveness. So often people say that forgiveness is forgetting, then. But forgiveness is not forgetting, it's choosing not to remember, and there's a big difference between the two. I can't force myself to forget something. But when it comes back into my mind, I can choose to not remember it. This is what I mean. This is what God says in Hebrews 8:12:

**For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."**  
(Hebrews 4:12)

It's not that they didn't do it. But something's been paid so that there is not a lingering debt. 1 Corinthians 3 goes on to tell us **love keeps no record of wrongs**. So what it means is when I'm choosing to forgive I'm telling them I'm choosing not to remember. That means I'm not going to bring it up to you again. That means I'm not going to bring it up to others, again. That means every time it comes up to myself, I'm not going to bring it up to myself again. And when it comes to mind, I'm going to continue to remind myself that I've forgiven. That's it. I choose not to remember. I choose not to dwell on it. To continue to keep thinking that I'm owed something through it. So just to give us a picture and to take us deeper into what he's talking about He goes into a story, and Jesus is a masterful storyteller. Let's check out what He says in verse 23:

**“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. (vs 23)**

Now for us, we kind of picture this and try to think of ourselves in a kingdom with a king and talents and it's kind of hard to understand. So maybe put it in this context. There is a massive company, and the CEO starts to do an audit of that company and finds that one of his employees has been embezzling money from the company. Now this isn't a small amount, this is a gargantuan amount. So he brings him back in to pay the debt that he's incurred. Now when we see 10,000 talents, we try to figure out what that is. The NIV says, 10,000 bags of gold. It's important to know that a talent is not a form of money, it's a measurement. It's an accumulation of money. So, it would have taken 20 years for an average citizen to accumulate one talent. Twenty years! The entire tax levy on all of Palestine at this time was 800 talents for all of that. So those of you that are good at math, others have done this too, have tried to figure out what's the difference? They would say back in this time, this is like 10 to 12 million dollars, not talking about inflation as well. This is a gargantuan amount! Verse 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. (vs 25)**

This seems a little bit cruel when we hear this, but how many of us have went and purchased an education and then got out of that and we were a bit indebted to that education and working for them until we got that debt paid off so we could be free of that debt? I think we could understand a little bit of that with the college experience. This was common practice in that day that they would go and work off that debt. But this was a huge debt so in verse 26:

**So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ (vs 26)**

Did he just say *everything*? Does he remember how much he owes? I am starting to see a picture of this guy's heart, realizing he doesn't get it. There is arrogance inside him thinking that somehow he can still take care of this problem. There is some kind of heart in here that's not grasping the realness of the situation, the depth of what's happening here. We go on to verse 27:

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

I think rather than pity a better word would be compassion. The master saw him and had compassion. Remember what Jesus was telling us that forgiveness needs to be ongoing. And often times that's not just for new offenses that people continue to do to us, but often at times it's that same thing that keeps coming back into my mind but I am choosing not to remember it. C.S. Lewis wrote beautifully about this when he said:

*We find that the work of forgiveness has to be done over and over again. We forgive, we mortify our resentment and a week later some chain of events carries us back to that original offense and we discover the old resentment blazing away as if nothing had been done about it at all.<sup>1</sup>*

We need to forgive our brother seventy times seven not only 490 offenses, but also for one offense. The forgiveness is ongoing. This is a huge debt. Jesus asks a lot, but it's in this verse in verse 27 that we start to define what forgiveness is. Because forgiveness comes from a Greek word, *aphiemi*, that is pronounced 'a fee a me'. I like it because it reminds me of 'a freer me.' And it literally means an action that causes separation. It's a detachment; it's to separate myself from something; it's to cancel a debt. I think of going out and fishing and I've caught a fish and I have a decision to make, I can put it on the chopping block and filet it, or I can put it back in the water and let it separate. Let it go. This is to put space in between me and someone else, it was actually to send away - a legal term. But not in the sense of a hardness of heart, it was in the debt capacity.

So that's what he does here, he releases him, and forgives him because forgiveness is me letting go of my right to hurt you for hurting me. And that's not easy to do. That's tough. What I'm not saying is you ignore the sin or that the sin has no consequences. I'm not saying you lay down like a doormat and allow people to walk all over you. I'm not saying if you're in an abusive situation that you just take that abuse. What I'm saying is you need to get out of that into a safe place where you can do the hard work of forgiveness because the hard work of forgiveness is heart-work, and that's the most difficult kind.

So he forgives him the debt – everything. He releases him from it. Verse 28: **But**. Now this could have been a beautiful story. This guy could have understood everything and went out to change the whole kingdom because of what he had experienced....

**But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii,** (vs 28)

So this guy was wronged, too. He was carrying a hurt. He was owed something, and not something insignificant. NIV says a 100 silver coins. It would have taken 100 days of wages to accumulate something like that for a common citizen. We would maybe picture this to be like 3 or 4 thousand dollars. So this is not insignificant, but this is insignificant compared to what he has just been forgiven. And what does he do?

**and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'** (vs 29)

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<sup>1</sup> *Reflections on the Psalms, C.S. Lewis, Copyright 1958, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. New York, pg. 254*

Does that sound familiar? Just back in verse 26 we heard him ask the exact same thing, only his was filled with a little bit of arrogance and lack of understanding of the debt, but this guy is intending to do this. Verse 30:

**He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay back the debt.** (vs 30)

Your translation may say he was 'unwilling'. I think this is important to understand. We often think of forgiveness as an emotion, as a feeling, and while dealing with the heart in the scripture it does have feeling and emotion but it's also a will and an intellect, a choice. Forgiveness is a choice, it's part of our will. Corrie Ten Boom understood this and she lived it throughout her life. If you don't know who that is pick up a book and read her story, it's incredible. She said:

*Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.*<sup>2</sup>

Although I may feel something I can still choose to forgive in that moment. It's showing us that the problem he is dealing with here is not a money problem, it's a heart problem.

He goes on – you see his punishment is different, rather than having them work off the debt he is putting them in prison. In essence he's telling him, "I'm putting you in a place where you will never be able to pay off the debt that you owe me. I am forcing you to be in that debt for a lifelong piece." It's not like we would do this, right? We often think of this in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation. We think if they don't come to the table, I can't forgive them. But we have to understand that forgiveness always takes one person. Reconciliation always takes two. When I had a sin debt, Jesus saw my debt, came down, and died for that for me. And He offers freely forgiveness and life with Him. But I have to come to the table and acknowledge the debt I owe and accept that free forgiveness for our relationship to be reconciled. You may have a relationship that you are longing to be restored. Or maybe you have a relationship that you're hurting from, but there is nothing you can do to force the will of that person to come to the table. There's nothing you can do, it's a heart issue. But with forgiveness you can because it's all up to you. It's your decision to make. And it's a hard decision to make.

When I'm thinking of this story, at first I read it and I'm thinking, man, I put myself in the king category, thinking "yeah, I'm the guy that forgives a lot." But as I read through it I realize that God is the king in this story, that I am the servant, I'm the debtor. And I started having to wrestle with that, and I thought, "Do I ever put people in prison?" This summer I was able to go take a trip a few months back. As I was preparing for my trip to Colorado, I wanted to do some studying, wanted to read through some old journals and so I got a little cabin and I was spending some time doing that. And I decided one day, I had done some hiking but this day I wanted to just fill up my bag, go out in the mountain, and just read. So I start packing my bag with stuff and I had brought this Bible that was like the Cadillac of Bibles, huge study notes, maps, everything in it. I had a bunch of journals and other books and I wasn't sure what I was going to feel like reading so I just kept loading this

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<sup>2</sup> *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom & John & Elizabeth Sherrill, Fleming H. Revell Company

bag up, had snacks, lots of water. I put it all in my car and headed out. I found a spot where I decided I was going to find a great place to go and read. So I park my car, I get my backpack out, and I start walking. As I'm walking, I continue to look and try and find a spot I can sit and park and pull all of this stuff out the backpack that I'm carrying. I walk a while and I'm not seeing anything. Then I see a sign for a water fall and think that might be a good place to sit and read. So, an hour later I'm continuing to walk to the waterfall. My back is starting to hurt and I'm getting frustrated because I'm walking so far. I finally get there and it was beautiful, incredible! I'm excited to finally put down my back pack and was ready to celebrate a little from this journey.

So I sit there for a while but it's kind of noisy and I go up a little ways to get away from the noise of the waterfall. So, I eat some of my snacks, grab my backpack, and start to head back up the mountain. Now as I'm walking, water is starting to flow down this trail because of snow melt. As I continue to walk longer and longer, I stop thinking about the things cluttering my mind, what I have to do next etc, and I get to that heart spot where I'm thinking about what's going on in my heart.

God and I continue to have conversations. It's almost like the water in my heart started getting stirred up and these things that had settled to the bottom started rising up. I started to think about some of the situations I was frustrated by, some of the places where I felt the injustice in the relationship, and you know what that does to you, you start to feel that angst and frustration. And as I'm experiencing that I'm getting more agitated and more frustrated, and now I'm determined to get to the top of this mountain where there is a lake. I envision there's going to be this beautiful grassy area with flowers and water, and I'm going to sit down and finally read. So I get to the top several hours later and the lake is frozen over. I think, "I'm not sitting in a snowbank to read." So, I go find a spot where the lake is melting off and there's this log and I sit down and start talking with God. And it's almost as if he was saying, "You shouldn't be carrying all this weight", which was very real to me at this point. "But not just on your back and your heart. Why are you doing this? You're putting yourself in prison, for what? Do you realize how much I have forgiven you, yet you think you can withhold forgiveness from someone else? You think you can put a limit on what they can do." And it was so brilliant and clear to me that I thought, as a symbol of it I wanted to just leave my backpack there because it would have been much easier to come back down the mountain. But there were great books and I didn't want to lose them. So instead I did business with God, I prayed with Him, and I grabbed this backpack up and walked back down this mountain carrying this weight again. I wonder how many of us would say there are things we carry, maybe for years we've been toting this stuff around; maybe it's fresh this week. But we continue to carry this, when God has a different thing in mind. So what happens in our story – verse 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. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'** (vs 31)

God in his mercy and forgiveness is incredible. Psalm 103:3 says: **Bless the Lord, O my soul, who forgives all your iniquity.** That's a ridiculous number. Ephesians 4:32 goes on to give us the standard for forgiveness: **forgiving each another, just as God in Christ had also forgiven you.**

Because forgiven people forgive people. We could follow the way of Lamech and we could be hurt people who hurt people. But God's kingdom flips it upside down. So then we go on to verse 34:

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

It's almost as if he's had a choice and he's chosen to put himself in prison. And there is no prison worse than the prison of an unforgiving heart. And this blows my mind. He's had the chance where he could have aphiemi, he could have forgiven, he could have cancelled the debt, he could have released it. But instead he's choosing to hang on to it. For us we have the chance to hold on to this thing and let it take hold of us, or we can set them free, and in doing that become free ourselves. The question that we wrestle with is, "Which one would I want to do?" And I think we always have to go back to the understanding of the experience of what God has done for us because then we get to the end of our parable and sometimes in the parable we get to the end and Jesus is very clear. Other times, we're not quite sure and He'd go back to his disciples and He'd explain. Here, He gives it to us very clearly. Verse 35:

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

Man, this is hard. When I read this verse, I wrestled with it. Because after I came down from the mountain I went to this passage and I thought, "I want to grow in this area." And I saw this and thought, "wow this is a huge standard!" Now what this verse is *not* saying is that somehow you pay for your forgiveness – that somehow you earn it. That's clear all throughout all scripture that that gift of forgiveness to you and I it comes through grace by faith alone. There's nothing you can do to earn that, you just freely accept it. But what we do have to realize when we look through this is that salvation comes from repentance; and repentance comes through acknowledgment of my sin; acknowledgment of my sin comes through the reality of receiving God's forgiveness, understanding the depth of that forgiveness; and that brings a changed heart; and a changed heart brings a changed life. So, one of the ways you're going to be able to see those followers of Jesus is they are going to be people able to freely and fully able to forgive. Not because they can do it in their own strength but because of what He's done for them. What He can do through them if they choose to follow. It's a big choice.

December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1974, Chris Carrier was stepping off a bus. He was in Coral Gables, Florida and he'd just finished the last day of school. He's ten years old, and he's walking back to his house and a guy comes up to him and introduces himself as Chuck. He tells him that he's preparing and decorating for a holiday party for his dad and he asks him to come help. Chris assumes this guy knows his dad and it's okay, so he gets in the car with him and he starts to drive away. What he doesn't know is this guy's name is not Chuck, it's David McAllister, and 6 months earlier he's been fired from giving care to his great-uncle because of his alcohol, and he's angry. So he continues to drive north from Miami in his car, pulls off on the side of the road, and he goes to the back trunk of the car, pulls out an ice pick and he begins to viciously attack Chris. Chris had grown up in the church and he said he recalled what Jesus said on the cross and for some reason he said, "God, forgive him, he doesn't know what he's doing." And I don't know why David stopped in that moment, but he did. And he got back in the car and started driving, and he told Chris what his next

plans were. Chris realized there was nothing he could do, he was 10 years old and David had just told him he was going to drive him to the Everglades, drop him off and call his dad to tell him where he was so he could pick him up.

So they do just that, they drive to the Everglades, park the car, and go out about 20 or 30 feet by some bushes. As Chris walks over with him, David turns around to walk back and Chris sees he's got a gun, and he shoots Chris. And then he drives away. Chris lays unconscious for 6 days. The bullet went through his temple and exited out his right temple, causing him to be blind in his left eye for the rest of his life. But somehow, remarkably, he wakes up 6 days later. He thinks he is still waiting for his dad, so he goes to the side of the road and sits there until somebody drives along in a truck. Now you can imagine his parents have been terrified this whole time. They are frantically looking for him, they've put a 10,000 dollar reward out trying to find him. This guy in this truck sees this 10 year-old boy with black eyes and a bloody shirt and takes him to the hospital where they are astounded he's still alive after this attack.

Well Chris goes on to share with the detectives a description of the guy that had done this to him, not knowing who he was before. Other family members see it and say it is Dave McAllister. And so they bring David in and with a lineup and ask Chris to identify him and for whatever reason Chris cannot identify him. So without any other evidence, David walks out free of charges. For the next three years Chris was just scared. He said he would wake up terrified and go lay at the foot of his parents' bed. As time went on, he was in Bible studies and started to learn that God was Sovereign, in control, and that he could trust Him. He started realizing that his story could be one that he could share and tell about God and his forgiveness, so he did just that. He continued to do that for years and years until one day he gets a call. David is 77 years old, laying in a nursing home bed, dying, he is blind from glaucoma and had no friends and family around him. And when the detectives had heard that and were tipped off, and since they were never able to close the case they went back and tried one more time. And David had acknowledged that he dropped Chris off in the Everglades and that's all that they needed to close the case.

But for Chris there was not going to be any other justice done beyond that. So they asked Chris if he would like to go talk to him, and Chris said yes. So he and his pastor and a reporter went to this nursing home. Now just imagine walking into the room, 22 years later, and seeing the man that had tried to kill you. Rightfully so he said it was awkward in those first initial conversations. And at first, he denied it again. But then the pastor gently asked him more questions and he continued to share more and more. Chris said they talked for a while and after, when he was leaving, Chris told David to sleep well, and David replied he finally would. But the story doesn't end there. It's incredible what Chris goes on to do and this is only a story that could come through the incredible forgiveness that God offers. In his own words he said:

*I visited often, introducing him to my wife and two girls offering him hope and some semblance of family in the days before his death less than a month later. I shared the gospel with him and he trusted in Christ. He was always glad when I came by. I believe that our friendship eased his loneliness and was a great relief for him after 22 years of regrets. He told reporters from CNN I was the best friend he had ever had. And while many people can't understand why I could forgive David McAllister, from my point of view I couldn't not forgive him. If I had chosen to hate him all these*

*years or spend my life looking for revenge then I wouldn't be the man I am today, the man my wife and children love, the man that God has helped me to be.*<sup>3</sup>

So I wonder, if you examine your heart are you carrying a weight of debt? What's your limit? Chris decided that he wasn't going to be like Lamech. And if there's anyone who has an excuse not to offer forgiveness, I think it's the guy to the person who tried to kill him. But yet he flips it around and understands the ridiculous forgiveness God has given him and instead he grants that and it turns into a world changing experience, seen broadly.

As we close out this time together I would ask that you wrestle in your heart that if there are any burdens that you are continuing to carry that you need to aphiemi, that you need to release, you need to let go? Absolutely you'll need Jesus' strength to do this but it's going to be your choice. Now some of us might need to leave this room and go ask others for forgiveness. But to forgive we can do that right here where we sit. We can simply tell God that we have chosen to forgive.

*Jesus would you continue to help us to understand the depth of your full forgiveness in our life. God will we able to fathom and understand and comprehend the way that you have freed us from a debt that we could not pay so that we could go on to forgive others. God as we sit in this moment right now and wrestle through this would you give us the strength and courage to choose to follow You, to choose to forgive. Realizing this is not just a one-time thing, this will be ongoing. This will be something we will continue to need to wrestle with. God allow us to start here, to start to experience what it means to live freely and lightly following you. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512  
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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.crosswalk.com/11622274/>