

Matt 18.21-35: FORGIVE YOUR BROTHER – FORGIVE YOUR SISTER!

“Peter came to Jesus and said: “Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?” (v21)

Peter thought he was being more than generous in his willingness to forgive seven times, for Jewish rabbis reckoned that three times was enough.

But Jesus replies: **“Not seven times, but seventy times seven”**(v22).

By this, Jesus does not mean that we should only forgive 490 times, and that on the 491st time we are justified in losing our rag.

No, Jesus is in effect say, *“Go on and on and on forgiving”*.

“How many times do I have to forgive my brother?”

Who was this brother Peter had in mind?

- Was Peter finding his brother Andrew particularly difficult?
- Or was Peter speaking about a fellow disciple

The context in which we find this parable suggests that, for Matthew the **“brother”** Peter had in mind was *a brother in the church*.

For Matt 18 is a collection of teaching that Jesus gave about relationships in the church.

The fact is that *wherever two or three are gathered together in Jesus’ name, things are bound to go wrong* from time to time. There are bound to be failures and breakdowns between Christian brothers and sisters. For every church is made up of sinful men and women. Church life without tears is wishful thinking.

Relationships can go wrong. But Jesus says, ‘forgive’.

Incidentally, *forgiveness does not mean pretending nothing ever happened*.

Forgiveness is not about saying “It doesn’t matter”.

Forgiveness involves acknowledging the wrong, the injustice, the hurt – and then letting go of the anger and resentment.

THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT.

Jesus underlines his point by telling a parable

There was once a servant who had amassed an enormous debt.

He owed the King **“millions of pounds”** (v24) – in Ghanaian terms, “millions of cedis”. Literally, he owed the King **“10,000 talents”**.

Now a talent was a monetary unit equivalent to 6,000 denarii. Since a denarius was a day’s wages for a common labourer [who might be expected to work some 300 days per year], then this means that a talent was worth nearly 20 years wages.

Multiply that by 10,000, and the amount owed by the slave would be equivalent to **200,000 years’ wages for one man**, or a year’s wages for 200,000 people.

It was an enormous sum of money.

How the servant had got himself into such a financial mess, we’re not told.

The point is that he hadn't got the 'readies' when the King came to call in the debt.

“So the king ordered him to be sold as a slave, with his wife and his children and all that he had, in order to pay the debt” (v25). Frankly, that would have made scarcely a dent in the sum owed – but nonetheless it perhaps did for starters.

Not surprisingly, the servant begged for mercy. **“Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything!”** (v26)

That was wishful thinking, to put it mildly.

He would have had to have lived as long as Methuselah (969 years) to have had any hope of paying back even anything like a meaningful fraction of the debt!

But **“the King felt sorry for him, so he forgave him the debt and let him go”** (v27).

Wow, if ever there was an act of generosity, that was it.

[Could you imagine your mortgage lender wiping out your debt?

So far, so good. Jesus' hearers must have thought that this was going to be a parable with a happy end. But then, there comes a twist to the story.

For on the very day that the servant was released from that enormous debt, he happened to bump into a junior colleague who owed him a relative pittance: just **“100 denarii”** (v28). A denarius, remember, was a day's wage for a common labourer – so the debt amounted to a third of a year's salary.

But by comparison with the 10,000 talents, it was nothing.

Indeed, the ratio of the two debts was 600,000 to 1.

On a day when he had been released from having to pay back millions of pounds, we would have expected the servant to have been generous to this junior colleague.

But far from it.

“He grabbed him and started choking him, ‘Pay back what you owe me’” (v28).

The man begged for more time to pay back the debt, but the servant would hear of no delay. **“Instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt”** (v30).

Not surprisingly there was uproar in the servants' quarters. It was so unfair.

So they went to the King **“and told him everything”** (v31)

The King in turn was hopping mad with his servant: **“I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you”** (v32, 33).

With that the servant was sent **“to jail to be punished - literally to be tortured - until he should pay back the whole amount”** (v34). That was a vain hope. The clear implication is that he was sentenced to life-imprisonment, to a life-time of torture.

A tragic ending, if ever there was, and all so unnecessary.

And Jesus concluded, **“That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart”** (v35).

What do we learn?

1. GOD'S GRACE IS BOUNDLESS

Over the years each one of us has been piling up a large mound of sins, which we may liken to debts. To make matters worse, every day, if not every hour, we make the pile larger. These debts are way beyond our repayment – there is no way in which we can make amends for our sins.

But God in his grace says, *“I release you from your debts”, “I forgive your sins”*. It doesn't matter what we have done, God forgives us. His grace is boundless – it is without limit.

It is at this point that the parable begins to break down. For the parable speaks of the King waving away **“millions of pounds”** in an instant. But God has done much more. God has given us his everything – he has given us his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amazingly, God in his love loves us beyond our deserving – he loves us beyond our wildest dreams.

Do you know what it is to be forgiven? Sunday by Sunday you have heard about it, but have you experienced it? If not, then let me encourage you to allow God to wipe clean the slate, to begin life again in Jesus. Gone, gone, gone, gone – yes my sins are gone!

2. GOD'S GRACE IS CONDITIONAL

God's grace is conditional, in the sense that God is only gracious to those who in turn are gracious to others. Have you ever noticed that there is only one petition in the Lord's prayer that has any condition attached to it: it is the petition for forgiveness. **“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us”**.

In the parable the King released the servant from his massive debt. As a consequence he should have therefore have been more than willing to release his junior colleague from his debt. Having been forgiven, we in turn must be willing to **forgive [y]our brother from [y]our heart** – if we do not forgive, then we cannot have really experienced true forgiveness. For compared the ocean of our indebtedness to God, the failure of others is but a drop in the bucket.

3. GOD'S GRACE IS SPURNED AT OUR PERIL

In the parable the unforgiving servant is sent to jail, there to endure for the rest of his life unending punishment. And Jesus goes on: **“That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart”** (v35).

Perhaps your initial reaction is to say, ‘*But it’s only a story – the details of the parable are not to be pressed*’.

But let me point out that the overall thrust of the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels is that God’s grace is indeed spurned at our peril – that those who refuse to forgive face a frightful fate.

The parable contains a very real warning about the danger of not forgiving those who sin against us.

If we do not forgive others, then we will be excluded from the Kingdom of God.

So where does this leave you and me? How forgiving are we?

Before you say, ‘but of course I forgive’, let me ask you: ***do you harbour grudges?***

To harbour a grudge means to fix in the memory every small act of unkindness that we have received from others, real or imagined, and long for the day when they will receive their come-uppance!

The harbouring of grudges like the resenting of past injustices is a sign that we have not truly forgiven the other.

Have you really forgiven your brother or sister?

“How many times do I have to forgive?” “Seventy times seven” says Jesus.