

The theme: - The importance of forgiveness.

Now as a general rule unforgiveness locks us in the past and festers in our hearts, and the only person it hurts is us; whereas forgiveness releases us from the anger of the past and opens up a future of love, joy, and creativity.

At the heart of Christ's teaching is the Lord's prayer and every section of the prayer is of great importance, and the section I'm going to deal with today is, "Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," and the key word in that section is forgive, and forgiveness of others and of ourselves is vital as I hope you have heard and that you will hear.

In Matthew chapter 5 starting at verse 44 we read, "But love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And in chapter 6 verse 14 we read, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." In both examples of forgiveness Jesus is telling us to love everyone, no matter who they are, and if you forgive them God will forgive you. But here in Matthew chapter 18 verses 21 to 34 Jesus is dealing specifically with forgiveness of fellow Christians, however the philosophy of forgiveness applies to everyone.

In verses 15-20 Jesus tells us that when relationships break down between members of the church then as Christians we are to pursue reconciliation, at all costs. The penalty is severe for those who refuse to respond to the reconciliation process, and here Jesus is talking about expulsion from the church. But the process is designed, not to punish, but to open the eyes of the offender to the seriousness of the offense, and to bring them back into the family of the church.

And it is the message in verses 15 to 20, just before our reading, that inspired Peter to ask Jesus in verse 21, the first verse of our reading, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Now seven in ancient Israel spoke of a sense of fullness or completeness, so in answering his own question, St Peter either understands the need and importance of forgiveness or he thought he was being very generous to which Jesus would applaud him, but Jesus says no not seven times but seventy seven times. In other words, and in reality, Jesus sets no limit on forgiveness. Also, by saying seventy seven times Jesus is making record keeping impractical; and indeed, anyone who is keeping records of forgiveness is not forgiving but storing up ammunition for revenge, forgiveness comes from the heart not from the head.

Verse 23 starts "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slave. This is a kingdom parable, which has been the focus of our recent sermons. In kingdom parables, Jesus gives us a glimpse into a quite different world, a world that operates according to principles that are often

the opposite of those with which we are familiar, a world that functions as our world was intended originally to function, a world where God is king. In ancient Israel, before King Saul, God was their king, but the people, and against the advice of Samuel, pressurised God to give them a king from their own people, and be like other nations around them, and God gave them Saul to become their king, but it was never God's original intention. But what follows is principally about forgiveness, which is a facet of the kingdom of heaven, indeed without God's forgiveness through our Lord Jesus Christ we would be lost to Satan.

Verse 24 starts, "When the king began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and in the previous verse we are told that he was a slave. A talent, which was in those days about £240, was the largest unit of currency in ancient Israel, and ten thousand talents would be equivalent to two point four million pounds, and that is an incredible debt. The wealth of a relative wealthy province such as Galilee at that time was estimated at six hundred talents.

Now it didn't matter if it were one talent or ten thousand talents, because a slave wouldn't normally be able to repay either sum, so his Lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So, the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patients with me, and I will repay you everything." The slave's response is a desperate grasping at straws. He knows that he can never repay the debt because of the amount, but he still asks for time. Every day of freedom is one less day of misery, and who knows, the king might change his mind, or the king might die and his debt with him. The situation is hopeless, but who can blame the slave for trying.

And I'm sure, to the absolute amazement of the slave, the king agrees to waive all of the huge debt, and the slave who was looking at absolute misery one moment was now looking forward to a life free of the worry of debt. In the NIV Bible, the equivalent verse to the one I quoted before reads, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Now since the sum of money owed was so huge as to be beyond payment so similarly must we forgive sins against us, no matter how grievous they may be.

But now we come to the next extraordinary event in the story, which was while the king let the slave off from paying what amounted to a fortune, this same slave, as he left the king, saw a fellow slave and grasping him by the throat demanded that he repay his debt of a mere one hundred denarii, which was about four pounds. And then his fellow slave went down on his knees and begged him to be patient and I will repay you. The very same words that the slave who owed ten thousand talents used when pleading with the king.

But the difference here is that the slave who owed ten thousand talents could never have paid it back, while the slave who owed one hundred denarii, could have, had he

been given the chance. But he was refused and in verse 30 we are told that he had him thrown into prison until he should pay his debt.

Now we know from Charles Dicken's story of Little Dorit that we too had debtors prisons in this country, and for the life of me cannot see the point of them. If you are owed money by someone then the best way for a person to get his money back is to send your debtor out to work, not lock him up in a prison where they cannot earn any money.

Carrying on with our parable, when his fellow slaves heard the circumstances of what had happened to the slave who owed 100 denarii they were greatly distressed and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, you wicked slave! I forgave you all your debt, shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?

Verse 34 reads, "And in his anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt." If we wondered earlier if Jesus' code of forgiveness leaves any room for accountability, then this verse assures us that it does. The unforgiving servant will suffer at the hands of his torturers until he repays the king all that he owes, ten thousand talents, an enormous debt that he has no hope of ever repaying.

We enjoy salvation by the grace of God, but this parable warns that God expects us to manifest at least some small portion of that grace in our relationships with our Christian brothers and sisters, or our eternal security is at stake.

Our last verse, verse 35 is not a part of the parable but is a speech directed to his disciples and to us, and he is saying to his disciples and us that we must forgive, not superficially or half-heartedly, but from the heart. Such forgiveness is the kind of forgiveness that is likely to end in an embrace, or that celebrates the end of a rift in a relationship. How can we manage to forgive like that, especially when we have suffered a grievous injury at the hands of the offender? Forgiveness from the heart is only possible when we fully appreciate or understand at a deep level, how God through our Lord Jesus Christ has forgiven us, and continues to forgive us.

We can say quite casually that Jesus died for our sins, but try saying, Jesus died for my sins, that he had me specifically in mind when he sacrificed his life. Jesus' sacrifice is now personal, not something that happened to or for someone else.

Our last verse contains the sting in the tail, I have already mentioned accountability, and now Jesus states it quite clearly that if you do not forgive your brother or sister their sin against you then neither will God through Christ forgive you. We all know, or I hope we do, that God's love for us through our Lord Jesus Christ knows no bounds, but what we conveniently forget is that God's judgement through our Lord Jesus Christ is also a reality that we forget at our peril.

St James wrote in chapter 2 verse 13 these words, “For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement.” Matthew wrote in chapter 5 verse 7 these words, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” St Paul wrote to the Ephesians chapter 4 verse 32, these words, “And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

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