

The challenge of forgiveness

1 Introduction

This morning Bev was speaking about the importance of discipline in the church - and that sometimes it is necessary to take action against an individual who has “gone off the rails”. It is a process that is done carefully and sensitively but a process that sometimes needs to be followed.

But here we are looking at things from a different perspective - this is not about an individual sinning in a particular way and the pastoral demands that flow from that, but it is about our willingness to forgive offences against ourselves by someone who has sinned against us.

The Gospel of Matthew 7. Peter’s Question about Forgiveness (18:21)

In vv. 15–17 the concern is with the spiritual wellbeing of the offending member; in vv. 21–22 it is with the willingness of the individual not to insist on his or her own right to redress. In each case the “sin” is assumed to be real and culpable, but in the first case what is considered is the effect on the sinner, in the second case the response of the one sinned against.

Incidentally, just as we saw last week, we again have questions about section headings. Many translations - such as the NIV - have a section from Matt 18:21 to the end of the chapter entitled “The parable of the unmerciful servant” (or something similar) but there is an argument - and the NRSV does this - to see Matt 18:21-22 as being separate and just looking at the general question of forgiveness.

And I think this is quite helpful - in the first couple of verses Jesus is responding to a question asked by Peter about how many times he should forgive a brother or sister and then for the rest of the chapter Jesus is speaking about the reasons for forgiveness, how much we have been forgiven, the importance to forgive.

So we’ll look at both of those sections and see what they have to tell us - but before we do so it’s worth pointing out what’s behind them.

In the first section Peter is speaking about a fellow-believer sinning against him, offending him, doing something wrong. In the second section we have two servants of the same king with one owing a debt to another.

And this is the reality that we know and experience. The fact that there is a group of people who have chosen to follow Jesus, have received the mercy that God provides, have decided to commit themselves to each other in worship and service - does not mean that life will be perfect and we won't manage to offend each other, either deliberately or accidentally. Sometimes these slights are minor, sometimes they are significant and deeply hurtful and disturbing. And we can find ourselves thinking all sorts of unpleasant and unhelpful thoughts about our fellow sisters and brothers - and forget the reality that we are all forgiven people in need of giving and receiving forgiveness.

A good friend of mine when I was in Manchester - someone whom I respected greatly - lied to me about something. He was convinced it was for good reasons, but it wounded me deeply and it took many months for me to forgive him - and this was just one time. Many of us could think of similar examples - some significant, some just annoying.

Jesus doesn't deny this reality - he doesn't tell Peter not to worry as he will never have the need to forgive anyone who has chosen to follow Jesus - but he engages with him and his specific question, and then speaks more generally, about how we should respond when it happens. But he does expect us to respond - not to allow it to fester and cause damaged relationships that could affect our lives, our community and our witness.

Both sections seem to flow out of the earlier teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount about the importance of being **forgiving people**.

Matthew 6:14–15 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

So let's have a look at both of these sections and see what they tell us - see how they challenge us which I think they do!

2 Unlimited Forgiveness (Matt 18:21-22)

Why does Peter come to Jesus and ask this question about how many times he should forgive?

- Is he looking for praise for being prepared to forgive even seven times?
- Is he expecting Jesus to say he could get away with fewer?
- Is there some sort of implied time limit where the count is reset after a day / a week / a month / a year?
- Does he want some mandate from Jesus to be able to say to someone that they have gone too far and that he is no longer going to forgive him?

One clue may be from some of the traditions of the rabbis - Jewish interpreters of the law - who spoke about the importance of forgiving up to three times but reckoned that was enough.

The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary Composite on Repentance

R. Yosé b. R. Judah says, "When a person does a transgression once, he is forgiven, a second time, he is forgiven, a third time, he is forgiven. But when he does it a fourth time, he is not forgiven

While these writings are after the time of Jesus they may reflect the ideas that were commonly held at the time.

But in any case Peter clearly has the idea that he is going to come up against someone / some people who will continually do things to offend him, will sin against him and he wants to know how to handle it.

And we may know people who are like that - people who are continually behaving in such a way as to wind us up, doing the same things that they know offend us and harm us, but without any indication that they are going to stop.

And Peter seems to be asking about when he can say "that's enough, no more!"

But the answer Jesus gives makes it clear that there is to be no limit - it's not even that Peter can stop when the counter ticks over 77 (or 70 times 7 as some translations have it). He doesn't give these numbers to help Peter calculate when he can stop but to make it clear to Peter that his responsibility is to continually forgive and to not stop.

And here we are acting as God acts towards us - a God who is able to say regarding his people (as we saw at the **beginning of the service**):

Isaiah 43:25 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

'I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.

and

Hebrews 8:12 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'

And this idea of "not remembering" carries with it "not counting" as we can't count something we don't remember - it is as though it never happened.

Now there is a tension here that we need to recognise. In the Old Testament, even though God forgave his people their sins for many years - eventually he did move in judgement, as they were uprooted from their land and sent into exile. And we know - as David reminded us last Sunday morning and we will be thinking about again in the next few weeks - that there is coming a day when God will judge those who have refused to accept him.

But God is the righteous judge - and that is for him to do and he will do it righteously - we are not called to judge but to forgive and to keep on forgiving.

Another question which this section raises is whether the one who has sinned / offended needs to recognise what they have done and to seek forgiveness before we are to forgive.

In what looks like a related passage in Luke, Jesus does speak about forgiveness being preceded **by an apology**:

Luke 17:4 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying "I repent," you must forgive them.'

But here there is no such provision - even when there is no apology, no evidence of recognition of doing wrong, we are not to allow that to poison our relationship but to continually seek to love our fellow brother and sister. We may act to try and reduce the impact of what they are doing but we are not to allow it to cause us to despise them or to say that we are no longer in relationship with them.

Hard, challenging call from Jesus - but one that we are meant to follow.

3 **Responsive Forgiveness (Matt 18:23-35)**

And then, expanding on the theme, Jesus goes on to consider another dimension of what forgiveness in the kingdom of heaven is like.

The numbers in the story are intended to demonstrate the scale of the problem:

1. 10,000 talents - better than “bags of gold” - is a ridiculous amount of money. At the normal daily wage for a labourer - although this servant may have earned more - it would have taken about 164 thousand years to pay off the debt.
 - a. So it’s not to be seen as a realistic number just an indication that it was totally out of the reach of the servant
 - b. And selling him and his family wouldn’t help much either - there is just nothing he can do, any way out of this must come from the king
2. The hundred silver coins is effectively a hundred days wages so it would probably have taken the second servant three or so months to save enough to pay off his debt assuming he didn’t spend any money during that time. So, in principle, something he could pay off but it would take a long time and the first servant would need to be patient. It is a large debt but around one six-hundred-thousandth of the first debt!

On the face of it the story is quite simple:

- A king realises one of his servants owes a great debt, the servant can’t pay it so the servant is to be sold to pay off the debt - and this is within the rights of the king
- The servant pleads for time to pay it off but the king goes beyond that, graciously writes off the debt and lets him go
- This first servant comes across another servant who owes him money and has him thrown into prison until he can pay
- The king hears about this and imprisons the first servant for not showing mercy on his fellow

And it all comes together in the challenge in Matt 18:33 - should you not have shown mercy to your fellow as I showed mercy to you? And the idea is that it was necessary for the first servant to have acted in this way following the example of his king - and the king is questioning why the servant didn't behave in a way that was required. The king didn't lecture the first servant about being forgiving - it was assumed that he would learn from what he had experienced from the king.

When we say it was necessary ...

The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew 3. Forgive Your Brother or Sister from Your Heart (18:21–35)

There are moral necessities that are not legal necessities. It had not been necessary for the master to show clemency (but he had), but after the master's clemency it was necessary for this slave to show clemency to his fellow slave. The language of having mercy calls to mind the places where Matthew reports people asking Jesus to have mercy on them.¹³⁶ People sense their need for mercy, but they are not so ready to see the need to extend mercy. The development to come in the next verse will reinforce in a negative manner the beatitude in 5:7: 'Good fortune ... to the merciful! For they shall receive mercy.'

And the consequences for the first slave are greater than the first time round where he was "simply" going to be sold into slavery to pay off the debt:

The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew 3. Forgive Your Brother or Sister from Your Heart (18:21–35)

But the master does not revert to his first plan, which in retrospect will look positively generous. The master's strategy is to go one better than what this slave has inflicted on his fellow slave:¹³⁷ he has been imprisoned until his debt is paid; this slave is now to be similarly imprisoned with the added note that his gaolers will make use of torture (ostensibly to motivate him and any who care for him to raise the money, but here the goal is primarily punitive)

Matthew 18:35 isn't intended to make us think that this is exactly the way God will behave towards us but is intended to make us think about the importance of forgiving because we have been forgiven. But it does raise a question as to how much we can really receive God's forgiveness if we aren't prepared to forgive others. Tom Wright illustrates this using the analogy of breathing:

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16–28 The Challenge of Forgiveness (Matthew 18:21–35)

Forgiveness is more like the air in your lungs. There's only room for you to inhale the next lungful when you've just breathed out the previous one. If you insist on withholding it, refusing to give someone else the kiss of life they may desperately need, you won't be able to take any more in yourself, and you will suffocate very quickly

We - as followers of Jesus - are forgiven people. We have been forgiven a great debt, a debt due to our sin, a debt which we could not pay. We have seen God acting towards us in great, undeserved, mercy and we are expected to follow his example.

So as part of our response to that we are called to forgive fellow followers of Jesus for the harm that they do to us. In this story there is a recognition of a debt being owed from the second servant to the first and a desire to do something about it - but the first servant isn't willing and acts in an unforgiving manner.

The debt was large - and we need to recognise that sometimes we are capable of really badly hurting each other - but the debt was insignificant compared to the debt the first servant owed to the king and for which he had been forgiven.

The mercy of God towards us, that mercy that we see extended through the person and work of Jesus, is not just supposed to result in our forgiveness - although it wonderfully and gloriously does that - but is intended to make us realise how much we have been forgiven and to extend mercy and forgiveness to others.

4 How are we measuring up?

Are we willing to forgive and keep on forgiving? Or are there limits in terms of how many times we are prepared to forgive, in terms of how much wrong we are prepared to forgive, in terms of who we are prepared to forgive?

Are we willing to forgive the major hurts that others cause us because we recognise how much God has forgiven us? If not, is that because we have lost our understanding of how much we have been forgiven or that we don't see that this should affect how we treat others?

Doug O'Donnell, reflecting on this call of Jesus, says:

Preaching the Word: Matthew—All Authority in Heaven and on Earth Scene Three

There is no such creature as an unforgiving Christian. That being doesn't exist. Christians forgive. We forgive because we have been transformed by the power of the gospel

Is this our experience? Are we prepared for it to be our experience?