

## Endless forgiveness?

### **Matthew 18:21-35 *Parable of the unforgiving servant***

Peter came up to the Lord and asked, "How many times should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me? Is seven times enough?"

Jesus answered: Not just seven times, but seventy-seven times! This story will show you what the kingdom of heaven is like:

One day a king decided to call in his officials and ask them to give an account of what they owed him. As he was doing this, one official was brought in who owed him fifty million silver coins. But he didn't have any money to pay what he owed. The king ordered him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all he owned, in order to pay the debt.

The official got down on his knees and began begging, "Have pity on me, and I'll pay you every cent I owe!" The king felt sorry for him and let him go free. He even told the official that he did not have to pay back the money.

As the official was leaving, he happened to meet another official, who owed him a hundred silver coins. So he grabbed the man by the throat. He started choking him and said, "Pay me what you owe!"

The man got down on his knees and began begging, "Have pity on me, and I'll pay you back." But the first official refused to have pity. Instead, he went and had the other official put in jail until he could pay what he owed.

When some other officials found out what had happened, they felt sorry for the man who'd been put in jail. Then they told the king what had happened. The king called the first official back in and said, "You're an evil man! When you begged for mercy, I said you didn't have to pay back a cent. Don't you think you should show pity to someone else, as I did to you?" The king was so angry he ordered the official to be tortured until he could pay back everything he owed. That's how my Father in heaven will treat you, if you don't forgive each of my followers with all your heart.

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Last week we thought Jesus was being realistic as he prepared us for how to respond when we're sinned against by our brothers and sisters. We noticed there was no mention of forgiveness even though it was implied. Peter confirms this by immediately offering an opening bid on how many times we should forgive a fellow Christian.

Peter's generous with his offer of seven because scribal law clearly read: "If a man sins once, twice, or three times, forgive him. If a man sins four times, do not forgive him."

But is Jesus still being realistic when he takes Peter's generous offer of forgiving seven times and upsizes it to seventy times seven? We might ask, could anyone sin against us so many times? Is this a joke? Does Jesus seriously want us to keep on forgiving compulsive sinners? Shouldn't there be a point where enough is enough?

Jesus tells a parable about a bookkeeping / account settling master who calls in a servant who owes him a fortune, in today's terms about 12 billion dollars. He begs for time to pay it back and the master forgives the debt. The same servant then demands a debt of about \$20,000 be paid. This debtor also begs for time but it's refused and he's thrown into gaol. Other servants observe what happened and tell the master who calls his servant back and has him thrown into gaol.

What do we make of this parable?

Maybe we should say first up, forgiveness is difficult and so is understanding this parable! Remember it's a parable not an analogy. We shouldn't too quickly say the master is God, the first servant is us and so on but we still want to know what the parable is teaching us about God and us.

One of the aspects of this story which really hits us in the face is, how could the servant who was forgiven so much, be so unforgiving and mean? Why wasn't he changed by grace? Why didn't he forgive as he'd been forgiven? Which leads us to question ourselves. Does the never-ending forgiveness we receive from God because of his incredible love and grace make any difference to us?

We'll say, of course it does. Without forgiveness we're lost in our sins, with it we have the assurance of eternal life. But does it make any difference to how we treat others? If it does, what does it look like?

Think back to the forgiven servant. Does he accept forgiveness but then refuse to forgive, making him the meanest of mean people? Or does he refuse to accept he's been forgiven?

Does he demand the money from his fellow servant so he can throw a party, or go on a cruise, to celebrate his new freedom?

Highly unlikely! Almost certainly not! Most likely, he wants the money to begin to do what he promised, to pay back every cent he owes. He wants to earn his own way, he wants to maintain his respect, to hold his head high, and therefore he refuses to accept he's forgiven.

The best answer to the reason for his meanness is he still insists on paying his master back! He didn't accept the forgiveness because he refuses to be a loser who can't pay his own way. He refuses to die to his old way of doing business. He refused to be classed as a loser. He'll pay his own way with God's help and he'll make others pay theirs also?

Are we like the forgiven servant? Do we need to die to the old business of trying to pay our own way? You might remember me saying a couple of weeks ago - insisting we can and will save ourselves makes us unsavable. Unless we die to the idea we can save ourselves, Jesus can't save us.

The king says to the unforgiving servant, "I said you didn't have to pay back a cent." I died for you! But you were so busy making plans to pay me back, you never even noticed.

Sometimes we hear people say we're justified by faith. What faith? Faith in our own track record and ability to live as a good child of God? Most of us would rather be justified by something we do, or promise to do - just like the servant in the story. We want a bookkeeper God. A God who settles accounts. Because we think we're in the black, we think we're in credit, and it also satisfies something in us to consign to hell all those in the red.

Robert Farrar Capon said, "Grace doesn't sell; you can hardly even give it away, because it works only for losers and no one wants to stand in their line." Are we willing to take a chance we're winners, who've done enough to satisfy a bookkeeping God? Or will we rather accept the forgiveness of a gracious God? Are we willing to stand before our God as a loser and beg for grace?

The truth is we're justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Forgiveness is difficult. Is it difficult for us but not for God? No, it's just difficult. Jesus died so we'd be forgiven and that was difficult.

God's forgiveness is never-ending, endless. All your sins are forgiven because of God's gracious love. Know the joy of grace *in* you and let grace have its way *through* you. Amen.