

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us

Matthew 18 – 21 to 35

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."^[a]

23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold^[h] was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

26 "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27 The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.^[i] He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants

saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The story Jesus told involves a King and Kings set the tone for what happens in their kingdom.

Clearly this King is a King with compassion. The servant asks for time to pay off his enormous debt...but the King goes much further and cancels it and lets him off.

WOW.

We belong to the kingdom of God, and our King has set the values of the kingdom. The entry point and the character of the kingdom is forgiveness. We are only part of the kingdom because we are forgiven. Which leads to the expectation that because we are forgiven and forgiveness is a characteristic of God's Kingdom, we will also forgive one another.

In the parable, the unmerciful servant completely fails to grasp this and ultimately it goes very badly for him.

The Rabbi's used to teach that it would be right to forgive someone 7 times, Jesus exaggerates to 77 times meaning, that

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there is no limit. There is no limit to how often we should forgive, because there is no limit to how often God forgives us.

But the requirement to forgive each other is more than just a suggestion or indeed expectation. We are told that if we don't forgive, then God cannot forgive us. This can lead to thinking that we need to earn God's forgiveness and the payment is forgiving others however vile the sin against us...but that would be to misunderstand.

God cannot forgive us when we deliberately hold onto our anger, bitterness, frustration and hatred of the person who has sinned against us. When we ask God to forgive us, we do so repenting of our sin and letting it go. If you intend to go on sinning, you haven't repented.

Holding onto anger and hatred and refusing to forgive, means God cannot forgive what we will not let go.

There is a difference between our forgiveness and God's. We need to understand what we are doing when we forgive someone, and the forgiveness of sins.

King David wrote Psalm 51 as a Psalm of repentance. He was guilty of an affair with Bathsheba and arranging her husband's death in a battle. In the Psalm he writes...

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,

Our sin (and I mean the wrong we have done in every which way it might be described) damages other people, but ultimately sin is against God. Romans 3:23 – For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

We may come to regret the harm we have done to others, we may do all we can to put that right, we might show true penitence in our actions and behaviour...but ultimately we answer to God for our sin, even though our neighbour may have forgiven us.

When we forgive someone, we are not forgiving them their sin, because only Jesus can forgive sins. Through his death and resurrection, he paid the price and he has the authority to forgive.

We are not ignoring or minimising anything they have done, allowing them to get off and ignore the consequences, because they will still have to answer to God for their sin.

OUR forgiveness is forgiveness of the sinner. We are to have the same attitude of forgiveness towards them, as God has towards us. But they will still have to face God's judgement for sin as we will.

We have to find the compassion to recognise that this other person is flawed and damaged as we are and that out of their incompleteness, they sin.

And at this point it gets tricky.

Because although we want to be forgiven and members of God's kingdom...we don't want them let off the hook quite so lightly. We want justice, we want recompense, we want the sinner punished and we feel righteously angry at what has been done.

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It's only in that God given moment of seeing another person clearly, that we can even want to forgive.

Over the last 12 years my favourite TV show has been the sitcom the Big Bang Theory.

It follows the lives of four brilliant, nerdy scientists who are completely and utterly hopeless in relationships and much else besides.

One story line follows the relationship of Leonard with his Mother. She too is a brilliant scientist and psychologist and although she has written award winning books about parenting, she is a terrible parent.



As they wrapped up the whole series, all the loose ends were dealt with and in the penultimate episode, Leonard's mother visits and he comes to realise that his Mother has treated his whole life as one long experiment. He is extremely angry about it but in a moment of terrific insight realises that he wants her to accept him as he is and that she can only be what she is and he forgives her.

He lets out a breath that seems to represent a lifetime of disappointment and anger and although his Mother responds by saying that it does feel good to be forgiven the real benefit is for Leonard himself.

It's just a sitcom. Just a story. That's what parables are.

Every scene is carefully written. Life's not like that

But the writers have got it right. Our forgiveness does not forgive sin but releases us from the anger and hurt – and when that occurs the grace of God is present to heal and restore. Whatever sin there has been against us will always be a part of our story, but it doesn't need to be the only story and it doesn't need to go on damaging us. When we forgive others, we are the ones who benefit the most.

At my interview for my job here I had to write a homily, (5 minutes), on forgiveness. I talked about how difficult it can be to forgive and that we might need to begin with wanting, to want, to forgive.

We are not alone when it comes to finding the strength and grace and courage to even begin thinking about forgiveness.

Today is the celebration of Pentecost and usually the focus is on the events in the upper room as the tongues of flame and rushing wind accompanied the experience of the disciples being filled with God's Spirit and speaking in tongues. Often our focus has been the gifts of the Spirit, or the charismatic experiences.

One gift of the Spirit though is the continual work in us to secure the freedom for which Christ set us free. When we lack

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forgiveness, we hold so much pain and anger to ourselves and the
Spirit would seek to set us free.

It is the power of the Spirit, the gentle, loving, deep work of the
Spirit that allows us to find the desire, to want, to want, to forgive
and the moment we even begin to turn in that direction our
weakness is made strong by God's strength.

Let us as a church never judge one another for not being able to
forgive, or overlook the requirement that we should, but exhibit
the love and grace of a Christlike church that knows it is possible
for anyone to forgive, however grievous the harm they have
experienced, when through God's Spirit they can finally let it go.

Let us pray.

(NB – for those reading this, there are versions of the scene where
Leonard forgives his Mother on you-tube. The link below sets up
the situation and then the resolution.

Back story – Leonard spent the day in his Lab with his Mum and
had really enjoyed it, however....)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BebC9XYaCeA&t=133>

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