

Matthew 18:21-35 - Forgiving From The Heart

Sometimes we are hurt by others and sometimes we hurt others. These hurts may be fairly trivial or else they may be quite serious. They may be unintentional but hurtful all the same.

What do we do with 'hurts' and insults? We can hang on to them and bear grudges and become bitter and knotted up inside or we can forgive the hurt. Some unresolved hurts can destroy relationships, temporarily or even permanently. Unforgiveness also affects our relationship with God!

In Chapter 18 of his Gospel, Matthew records some important aspects of living as members of the Kingdom of Heaven, as Christians living in a community of believers. In our passage to-day, Matthew records an incident in which Peter came to Jesus and asked: *Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?* We don't know what lay behind Peter's question. It is likely that he is referring to a 'Christian' brother or sister, another member of the fellowship of believers.

We note that at least Peter has recognised that forgiveness is important. He's learned from Jesus that retaliation and grudge holding is not the answer. But how many times should he forgive the same brother or sister? Surely there must be a limit. Within the Jewish religion, it was held that forgiving 3 times was enough. Peter more than doubles that standard and opts for seven. Surely that would suffice!

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For Jesus, forgiveness is wholehearted and constant. It is not Jesus' way to calculate numbers of hurts or offences. So Jesus replies: *I tell you, not seven times but seventy times seven.* Jesus didn't mean that you kept a score and that the 78th offence could go un-forgiven! He was saying that for Jesus' followers, forgiveness is to be unlimited. Forgiveness was to be a way of life. Bearing in mind that God has forgiven them, they ought not to withhold forgiveness from others.

Jesus then launched into a parable found only in Matthew's Gospel. Different to some of Jesus' other parables, this one has no mystery to it. It is straightforward and uncomplicated.

Again, he begins with the familiar preamble *the Kingdom of Heaven is like.* This time it is like a King, later described as a Master (or Lord) who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

There are three scenes in the parable.

Scene 1 opens with the news that one by one his servants came before him to settle their accounts.

One particular servant owed the King a huge amount of money, in our day equivalent perhaps to many Millions of dollars. He was brought before the King to whom he explained that he was unable to pay the debt. In response, the King ordered that the servant, his wife and children all be sold as slaves, in order to recover at least some of the huge debt. The servant owed a huge debt and now he must be punished by having to pay a huge penalty.

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On hearing of this shocking punishment, the servant fell to his knees and begged: *be patient with me and I will pay back everything*. Although it was unlikely that he could ever repay the debt, he was ready to promise anything!

In just a few words, the reaction of the King, now described as *the servant's master* or Lord, is recorded: *he took pity on him, cancelled his debt and let him go*. The Master was a compassionate man and not only released him but forgave his debt! He was free to go! It was an act of pure grace.

In **Scene 2** we find the recently forgiven and released servant grabbing and choking one of his fellow servants who happened to owe him a very small amount, perhaps in our day \$50. In a threatening manner he said to him *pay back what you owe me!*

As he himself had done very recently, the other servant fell to his knees and begged *be patient with me and I will pay you back*. Unlike the compassionate Master, the servant who had been forgiven much had his fellow servant thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

However, there were witnesses to this incident and the other servants, greatly distressed by what they saw, went and told the master everything that had happened.

Scene 3 opens with the Master calling the unforgiving servant in and berating him for his lack of mercy, referring to him as *a wicked servant*. In the light of him being forgiven by the Master for a huge debt, he should have forgiven his fellow servant for this much lesser debt.

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Then the master angrily had the wicked servant handed over *to be tortured* until he could repay the original debt, all that he owed. It seemed that he would die in prison.

Jesus then followed the parable with a brief and pointed statement, as though he was continuing the original conversation with Peter. *This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.*

The lesson is clear: the followers of Jesus must each, without exception, forgive wholeheartedly, not grudgingly and not only seven times or even 77 times. This echoes the statement Jesus made after he had taught the Disciples the Lord's Prayer which includes the phrase *forgive us our debt as we also have forgiven our debtors*. At that time, Jesus said to them: *for if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.* (Matthew 6:14)

Have you been forgiven by God for your sins?

Is there unforgiveness towards a sister or brother in your heart to-day?

We need to take the words of the Lord Jesus seriously.