

Matthew 18:21-35

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.
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 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. 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.'

Forgive.

Matthew 18:21-35

When I was about 7 or 8 my father used to read bible stories to me at bedtime, and the parable of the unmerciful servant was my absolute favourite. This was primarily because at the appropriate moment I would climb onto on the bedhead frame and leap on my Dad, shouting "pay me what you owe me"! And then pretend to strangle him. I'm not sure the message got through to me at all, but I always hoped it would be that story! What is the message though? Well it's another one of those parables which you've heard all your life, where you think you know it, but looking again, it has something more to say than you thought. Just to give the context, it follows on from the bit where Jesus is dealing with sin, where he says that issues of fault need to be dealt with face to face between any protagonists, or failing this, others must get involved as witnesses to the discussion. This lack of direct communication is something which too often happens in churches. So the theme of forgiveness is clearly a natural follow on from this. Firstly this is a parable of the kingdom. This means that at the end it doesn't say 'go and do likewise', like for instance the Good Samaritan, because this is a kingdom parable about the nature of God. So keep that in mind.

I skimmed it and at first I didn't notice that it says we must forgive 77 times and not 70 times 7, that phrase imprinted in my brain from my childhood!

There is disagreement about the translation in *Bible Stories for Bedtime* or whatever it was called. Because 77 is a significant number, whereas 490 isn't. In Genesis 4 a guy called Lamech said this to his wives, *listen to me... I've killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech [is avenged] seventy-seven times.'*

And so Jesus, who would clearly have known this text well, is putting God's nature completely at odds with the likes of Lamech, who just because he is quoted in Genesis does not therefore qualify as a man of God. Forgiveness is the opposite of revenge. God will always forgive. On one condition. That you mean it. And forgiveness is an ongoing process. Saying it once and meaning it does not mean that that's the end of it.

In the story there's a pretty extreme penalty of *torture* until the servant has paid back his own debt! But Jesus is saying we must forgive or we will pay a heavy price. So what sort of price?

Well, the story describes a king and a servant. 'Servant' was the word used for anyone who worked for a king so this would likely have meant the overseer of a province, like maybe a council leader. And the sum which he's embezzled is *10,000 bags of gold*. The numbers here are crucial to understand because they're ridiculous.

This would be the equivalent (quoting one commentary) of a day's wage for 100 million labourers! (From another commentary, just to make sure this nonsense amount is accurate) 1,000 times the annual revenue of Galilee, Judea, Samaria and Idumea put together. For which his whole family is to be sold into slavery. So a preposterous amount which could *never* be paid! But he pleads and the king says, astonishingly, oh alright I'll let you off.

This servant himself is owed 100 silver coins. A *minute* amount by comparison, but *his* victim is thrown in prison.

This is the scale of the massive hypocrisy. This is the scale of what we, all of us, have been forgiven, but we barely realise the truth of it. The contrast in the amounts of debt is the point.

The servant thinks he can get away with it. We think we can.

So what price do we put on forgiveness? How important is it? Well, if we're not prepared to forgive why should we be forgiven? This is built into the Lord's Prayer and it really is something that Jesus does not budge on.

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

What happens if we don't though? The story of the king and the servant teaches us not to be complacent but to have *humility* and to see that we have *no right* to consider ourselves somehow superior to others.

We can't expect any different treatment to any other person because each of us has had to be forgiven in just the same way that others have.

And actually not forgiving others damages *us* infinitely more than it hurts the other person. It's the source of most of the bitterness we see around us.

This is a parable and of course it's not Jesus suggesting we be tortured for *not* showing forgiveness, it's exaggeration to make the point. But I think the use of the word 'torture' in the story very accurately describes the effect on us of our own bitterness. The point being that every time you accuse someone else, you accuse yourself. It rebounds on you.

I like Bp Tom Wright's take on this: *From God's point of view, the distance between being ordinarily sinful (what we all are) and extremely sinful (what the people we don't like seem to be) is like the distance between London and Paris seen from the point of view of the sun.* There is no difference, no splitting of hairs on this. None of us sinners have a leg to stand on!

And so what's Jesus's answer to Peter's question, how many times should we forgive? Well it's not 77 times, of course. If someone is prepared to say sorry and mean it, God's forgiveness is *always* possible. That's not to say that we don't make it hard for each other, because of course we do. The heart attitude is what matters, and it's not just a one off, but a continual attitude of submitting yourself to the possibility of healing and reconciliation. Actually the *necessity* for all of us of healing and reconciliation. Small disputes, maybe between neighbours, or church members, over trivialities, are often incredibly deep seated.

They start as trivialities, but over time they become massively impossible to even start to solve because of people's pride. There are many examples of people who have had terrible things inflicted on them being able to forgive the perpetrators. And finding a remarkable peace of mind as a result. Even secular psychologists now widely admit the effects on our health of unforgiveness.

So it's down to whether our hearts are open to the possibilities, or not.

We're all one in Christ, whatever church we belong to.

We're expected to be known by our love for one another and not for our disagreements.

We're all different in our levels of faith, and also in our needs, but none of us are on different levels before God.

We're *all* forgiven sinners.

It's the great leveller isn't it?

Unforgiveness just cannot survive in the kingdom of God. There simply isn't the air for it to breathe; it ultimately spiritually destroys those who give in to it.

But it's possible for it to be overcome, through the power of the Holy Spirit, if we're prepared to be open to the truth that God's *very nature* is of forgiveness and of healing. It's who He is. If we come to a point where we can open the doors that we have closed to forgiveness, God's passion, his heart desire, is to do miracles of reconciliation where we've failed. Amen.