

A Heart of Forgiveness – Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction

The question of just how much forgiveness we should offer people is a more important question than we might realise. Sometimes, when the cost of forgiveness is not too big then we just kind of forget about it and get on with our lives without really dealing with the issue of forgiveness. But then, when forgiveness is really costly, we can find it very difficult to forgive properly. It may be that we never really learnt how to forgive in the first place, because if we do not learn how to forgive the small things, then how will we be able to forgive the big things.

Then there is the question of people taking advantage of our forgiveness. If we are constantly offering people forgiveness, over and over again, without any consequences, will those people ever learn to be responsible for their actions. Sometimes people even use our forgiveness of them against us, almost as if it is a weapon. They manipulate us and try to keep us in our place by insisting on our forgiveness. But that is just another way of them getting away with what they have done and keeping their power over us. So, how much forgiveness should we offer people and what might that look like?

Context

Our passage today starts off with Peter asking Jesus a question...

Matthew 18:21 *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?"*

When you first read this, it sounds like a random question, but if you check the context of the passage, you find that it is not. Earlier in chapter 18, Jesus had been talking about the importance of dealing with sin in a person's life. He spoke about taking drastic action to cut those things that cause us to sin out of our lives. So, from our perspective, looking at our sin, we should be doing everything we can to make our repentance real. We should be turning away from sin as we turn back to God. But we must always remember that salvation is not what we do in turning away from sin, it is what Jesus has done in saving us. That is why Jesus told the story of the shepherd who left the 99 sheep so that he could find the one that wandered away. God saves us from our sinfulness, like a shepherd saves, and cares, for his sheep. But what if someone sins against us? How are we to deal with the problem of someone else's sin in our lives? Last week, we heard Jesus' teaching on this. He spoke about going to the other person to try and restore the relationship. He spoke about the possibility of getting others involved to try and help make this happen. And he said that God would be with them as they did this kind of thing. We pointed out that this was not meant to be a series of shame and punishment, or even church discipline, which is the way that some people see this passage. Rather it was all about restoring the relationship, and you would assume that forgiveness was part of that process. Peter seems to back this idea up with the first verse of today's passage. It is the natural follow up of verse 15.

Matthew 18:15 *"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over."*

Okay, if my brother or sister sins against me, I have to deal with it. But how often do I have to deal with it? I wonder if Peter had somebody in mind. Maybe somebody had wronged Peter several times and he wondered

how often he would have to go through the process of reconciliation. Peter suggested that forgiving someone seven times would be the maximum amount of forgiveness you might need to offer.

Matthew 18:22 *Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."*

Now, to be sure, Jesus does not expect us to keep a ledger of people's sins against us. He does not expect us to count from 1 to 77 so that we can finally treat that person the way we want to treat them when they get to 78. No, he is saying that we need to have a generous heart of forgiveness. A heart that is prepared to offer continual forgiveness. But what does that look like? What does it mean to have that kind of heart of forgiveness? What does it look like to be constantly forgiving people of their sins against you? Well, Jesus does something that can be a bit frustrating even though it does help. He does not answer the question of what forgiving a person 77 times will look like, rather he tells us what not forgiving a person will look like.

A Debt Owed

He starts off by telling us about a king. This king has servants, some of whom would have been important people who served in important positions. Today we might call them civil servants. We are told that the king wanted to settle his accounts. It was like he was doing an audit of the books. And so, he called in his civil servants so that they could give an account of the king's moneys. We are told that one of those servants owed the king ten thousand bags of gold. Now, I do not believe we are talking about a personal loan here, I believe we are talking about the civil servant's business dealings on behalf of the king. The servant was supposed to be doing business on behalf of the king but instead of making money, he was losing money, and lots of it! The NIV says it was "ten thousand bags of gold" but the original language talks about ten thousand talents. A talent was not actually money, it represented a certain weight of metal. It would be like saying that he owed a tonne of gold. Now, exactly how heavy a talent is, is not known. But the commentaries say that a denarii (or what the NIV calls "a silver coin") was worth one day's wages for a low level labourer. It is thought that a talent (or a bag of gold) was worth about six thousand denarii. So, ten thousand bags of gold (or talents) would take a lowly labourer sixty million days wages to pay back. So, when Jesus said that this man owed ten thousand bags of gold, he is really saying that he owed a zillion dollars. It is like a made-up number, so big that it is hardly worth counting. There was no way that this man could pay the debt and so the king ordered that he, his wife and children, and all that he owed be sold to pay off the debt.

Now, this is talking about being sold into slavery, and I want to point out that Jesus was not saying that he agreed with slavery by putting it in this story. He was simply saying that this is what would happen to this man because it was the kind of thing that happened in those days. The man was obviously not a good businessman and had lost the king a massive load of money. There was no way he could pay the king back. So, the king would get rid of him by selling him off, but also take everything of value from that man. Of course, even that would never really pay back the ten thousand bags of gold. The king would still suffer a great loss because of this man. But the man fell on his knees and begged for mercy. It is interesting to see that he did not ask for forgiveness, he said that he would pay the king back everything he owed. So, what we see is the king's generous heart. He did not simply say, "Okay, get back to work!" He said, "I will cancel your debt" or as other translations say, "I will

forgive you your debt.” The king cancelled, or forgave, the man a debt he could never repay. In financial terms, it was as if the man had never gone into debt. His slate was wiped clean, and he was free from all that he owed.

We are meant to relate to this man. Our sin puts us into debt with God, a debt that we can never repay. We deserve God’s wrath, we deserve hell, and there is no way we can escape it as we can never repay that debt. All we can do is fall on our knees before God and ask for his forgiveness. Of course, that debt still has to be paid. Someone has to pay it, and Jesus paid that debt when he died on the cross. It is because Jesus paid our debt that we can know that our debt has been paid in full, that it has been forgiven or cancelled. Our slate has been wiped clean and we are free from the penalty of our sins. So, how should we respond to God’s generous heart of forgiveness? Well, this is what Jesus addressed in the second half of the story.

A Hard Heart

This civil servant, who had just had his debt cancelled, went out and found another servant who owed him one hundred silver coins, or one hundred denarii. This is equivalent to one hundred days of a labourer’s wages. A significant amount of money, but not a debt that he could not repay without time and good management. And you have to think, where did the forgiven servant get that one hundred silver coins from? Where did that money come from originally? Surely, it was the king’s money. So, now that the king had cancelled that debt, the forgiven servant could keep the hundred silver coins that the other servant owed him as if they were his own. So, the forgiven servant demanded the money, and when the other servant could not pay it immediately, the forgiven servant got angry. His greed was driving him, and in his selfish rage, he had the man thrown into jail. This was a severe punishment. Surprisingly to us, it was more severe than being sold into slavery. As a slave, a person could live and work and still look after his family. You could even save up to buy yourself out of slavery again. But prison was a death sentence. You could not work, you were not even given food, blankets, or clothing. You relied on the kindness of family or others to help you survive. If they could not, or would not, help then you died of starvation and exposure. The forgiven man punished the other servant severely, even though the other servant had asked for mercy. But when the king’s other servants saw what the forgiven servant had done, they acted as witnesses and spoke to the king about it. The king brought the wicked servant in to see him

Matthew 18:32b-33 *'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled 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?'*

The king then gave that man the same severe punishment he had given to the other servant and had him thrown into jail.

What we see in this story is the opposite of how we should respond to God’s forgiveness. The king demonstrated a generous heart of forgiveness, but the forgiven servant took that advantage of that forgiveness for selfish gain. He abused the mercy he was shown by bullying the other servant. Even though he was legally able to do this, it was morally wrong, considering how he had been treated.

A Forgiving Heart

Whenever we think about forgiveness and how we should forgive others, we must firstly think about how God has forgiven us through Jesus. God has shown us a generous and gracious heart. Through his mercy he offers

us forgiveness and cancels our debt of sin. So, the answer to Peter's question of how many times we should forgive others is not about keeping a number, it is about showing others the same heart of forgiveness that God has shown us. It reminds me of that line in the Lord's Prayer, which we say regularly in church, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." God has forgiven our sins because he has a heart of forgiveness. We ought to have that same heart of forgiveness and forgive others.

Now, that is easy to say, but it is not easy to do. Sometimes, forgiveness can be extremely costly. If the forgiven servant had the same heart of forgiveness that the king had, then it could have cost him one hundred silver coins. But the cost of forgiveness may not always be counted in terms of money. Putting aside the emotional injustice, abuse, and hurt that someone else has done against us can be extremely hard. Our natural reaction is revenge, or at least our own sense of justice, and we start to act in wicked ways, much like the forgiven servant did. Forgiveness is not easy, and sometimes we have to set aside our own desires for "justice" in order to demonstrate the same heart of forgiveness God has shown us.

Now, I want to talk briefly about a way in which this kind of idea has been used to harm people. Yes, we are meant to have the heart of forgiveness, but that does not mean that we should let people get away with things they should not be getting away with. Take the problem of domestic violence. One spouse is being abused by the other. The abuser gets away with it for a while but then when the abused is ready to report the abuse and possibly even leave, the abuser says they are sorry, and they ask for forgiveness. An abused person could read this passage and hear this sermon and say, "Well, I need to forgive my abuser like God has forgiven me." There is a truth to this, we need to have a heart of forgiveness, but I want you to notice that the forgiven servant was held accountable for their actions when they did not respond properly to their forgiveness. When an abuser continues to abuse after they have been forgiven, then they need to be held accountable for their actions. It may even be that the abused person may end up forgiving the abuser, but that forgiveness does not mean that they will not leave the abuser. God cannot be manipulated and walked over. There will be a final Judgement Day when those who pretend to be repentant are seen for what they are. God will punish those who mistreat the mercy and forgiveness he has offered them. In the same way, if a forgiven abuser does not show real repentance, then the abused is not locked into a cycle of manipulation and abuse because they have the heart of forgiveness.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, we deserve to be punished for our sins, but God has shown us mercy and grace by forgiving us our sins. Jesus has paid our debt, our slate has been wiped clean, and all that we owe has been cancelled. We are forgiven people and as forgiven people we ought to show the same kind of mercy and forgiveness that has been shown to us. But that does not mean that we should allow ourselves to be abused and manipulated by those who use our heart of forgiveness against us. There may be times when we need to take action, there may be times when we need to get others involved. People are sinful, life is messy, forgiveness is costly, we need to call on our king for help.