

Matthew 18:21-35

The Joy of Forgiveness

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every now and then on the news, you see a story where someone affected by a crime declares that they forgive the perpetrator. Often there is a reporter or social commentator who cannot comprehend this. Surely someone who has been victimised in some way should hate or despise the person who did it. But what we see is that when someone forgives, they also free themselves. And this is the point Jesus is making in today's gospel reading.

By this time in Matthew's gospel account, Peter seems to be catching on a bit about Jesus. He's clearly learnt a few things, and he knows that Jesus is the Messiah and doesn't think or act like other people. And so, Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" Now the common rabbinical teaching at the time was that one forgives three times, and any more than that is foolish and asking for trouble. But Peter clearly wanted to impress Jesus, so he asks should he forgive seven times. Now seven is a common biblical number of completeness and was a pretty good suggestion from Peter. Jesus was rabbi, a teacher, but not like all the other rabbis at the time. And this is demonstrated in Jesus' reply. Not even seven is enough, but seventy-seven times.

Now because the number system in Aramaic wasn't as functional as ours, the translation into Greek and then English sometimes comes across as seventy times seven, or 490 times. Seventy-seven is probably more accurate than seventy times seven, but either way, the point Jesus makes would have been equally dramatic. Peter had probably thought he was being very generous with seven. We could imagine Peter thinking, "Jesus will like this answer." Surely this shows a strength of leadership, a godly wisdom, and a generous spirit. Surely this is an impressive demonstration of all that Peter has learned from the great teacher Jesus.

But Jesus takes Peter's suggested number and multiplies it considerably. And the first point to learn from this response is keeping track of the number of times we grant forgiveness to someone is missing the whole point of forgiveness. Jesus offers an impossible number, meaning that a disciple is to forgive their brothers and sisters beyond their ability to keep track. Indeed, if you're still counting how many times you've forgiven someone, you're not really forgiving them at all, but simply delaying your revenge.

To reinforce the lesson Jesus tells a parable of the kingdom. Now it's important to remember that parables are a teaching device. Jesus tells a relatable earthly story to teach a spiritual reality. But that doesn't mean we just insert ourselves and God directly into the parable. And when we look at the sizes of the debt in the parable, it becomes obvious that this is an exaggeration to make a point.

So, we have a servant that owes ten thousand talents to the king. This is an enormous sum. A talent was worth six thousand denarii, which was the standard wage for a day of work. So, the debt is the equivalent of sixty million working days. Considering we work somewhere around twelve thousand days in our lifetime, we're talking about 5000 lifetimes for your average labourer to pay off this debt. If you just got lost with all those numbers and maths, that's kind of the point. There's no way the servant could have accrued that much debt to the king. There's no way he could possibly pay it back.

But contrast the first servant with the second. Both owed a debt, but the second's was 600,000 times smaller. The second owed the equivalent of one hundred days' wages. This is not insignificant. It would take some time to pay off, assuming you still needed to spend money on necessary things like food and housing. But the first servant, having been forgiven of his ridiculous debt to the king, refused to forgive this debt owed by the second servant. Rather than imitating the mercy of his king, the first servant mistreated the second and demanded repayment of the debt. What he discovers is that his own debt comes back with a vengeance. By refusing to forgive his fellow servant he suffered the consequences.

This is really the second point Jesus makes in this passage. Our refusing to forgive someone who has wronged us only serves to hurt ourselves. On the other side of the equation, it is true that being corrected is painful. Being called to account brings to mind our failure and sin, especially how we have let down those we love, and asking for forgiveness requires much humility. But perhaps as challenging as asking for forgiveness is the granting of forgiveness. After all, forgiveness heals relationships by requiring us to let go, to turn the page, to refuse the right to hold on to bitterness and anger. This can take some hard work on our part. But ultimately it frees us from the self-destruction that is the inevitable result of unchecked bitterness and anger.

This is why, when the disciples asked Jesus how they should pray, he included the line, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." This fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer is echoed in the lesson of this parable about the kingdom, reflecting it back in reverse. We ought to forgive as our King has forgiven us, Jesus says.

Forgiveness lies at the heart of our faith in God and our love of one another. Forgiveness, which we receive from God our King in the person of Jesus is what our King expects from his people in their dealings with each other. And all along we are reminded of the great price that Jesus paid to clear the debt of our sin. The first servant in the parable owed a debt more than one man could ever have accrued, but Jesus deals not just with the debt of one person, but all the world. This is what our God and King has done for us. He has satisfied the debt of every person who has ever lived. The price was his own life, which he willingly gave on our behalf.

As we live in the joy of this forgiveness, we also learn to forgive others. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. To forgive without counting how many times. To forgive without trying to measure the cost. To forgive, knowing that it is bringing us freedom as we live in the forgiveness we have received from God. The size of the forgiveness we have received and the amount of forgiveness we should give are both so astronomical that there's no point trying to measure it or count it. God simply invites us to rejoice in it, to gladly receive his gift of forgiveness to us, and willingly share that gift of forgiveness with those who sin against us. So may the Holy Spirit enable you to forgive and forgive again. May you find true joy in the forgiveness you have received from God. May you find true joy as you also forgive others. And may you lose count of it all, and rest securely in the eternal grace of God.

Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.