

Sermon 15th Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 19], Yr. A @ St Johns – 13/9/20
“Forgive as we have been forgiven” (Matthew 18:21-35)
- Pastor André Meyer

Pray: Father, bless our time in your Word today by your Spirit and in Jesus’ name, Amen.

A certain married couple had a run of disagreements in recent months, yet somehow the wife always seemed to stay calm and collected. One day her husband commented on her restraint. *“When I get mad at you,”* he said, *“you never fight back. How do you control your anger?”*

She replied: *“Well dear, it’s simple. I work it off by cleaning the toilet.”*

“But, how does that help?” he asked.

“Well dear,” she replied, *“I use your toothbrush...”* 😊 *[Oh, that passive aggression...]*

Our Gospel reading today follows on from last week’s about forgiveness, and Jesus expands on what this means for His followers. Peter has obviously learned from Jesus’ teaching that it is important to forgive someone for doing wrong against you, but just as we struggle with it at times, he wonders what it practically means in the real world of life’s hurts. He struggles with forgiveness, just as we do, because the hurts that we experience can sometimes be very difficult to overcome. Peter struggles with what forgiveness means for him. *“So, how many times is reasonable to forgive someone when they hurt me?”* he wondered.

Guided by the Jewish Talmud, rabbis taught that the first, second and third time someone sins against you they should be forgiven, but, the fourth time they sin against you, you need *not* forgive them for their offence. Peter has obviously learned from Jesus that forgiveness and mercy are to be highly prized in God’s kingdom, but still he is unsure. So, he asks Jesus, *“Lord, how many times should I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?”* (Matt. 18:21).

Peter doubles the usual amount that was *acceptable* then adds another time just to be sure that he’s on the right track with what Jesus is driving at. Peter *is generous* to offer to forgive someone *seven* times if they hurt you, and seven, is the Hebrew number of perfection and completeness. *“Is that generous enough Lord? Is that a reasonable amount of forgiveness to give?”* If we forgave someone that many times for hurting us, we perhaps might feel a little proud of our ‘loving restraint.’ Although, there’s a flaw in Peter’s reasoning. What happens the *eighth* time someone sins against us? When is our patience allowed to run out? *“Enough is enough! Now I can take revenge for what they’ve done to me; God surely understands.”*

Jesus responded, *“I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times (or, seventy times seven)”* (v.22). What did Jesus mean? Most of us would do the maths – 490 times! That’s much larger than 77. But that’s not simply what Jesus was saying.

We need to look deeper into the Scriptures. The only other place “*seventy-seven times*” is mentioned is in Genesis 4 in regards to a man named Lamech, a descendant of Cain. Cain, a son of Adam and Eve, was cursed for killing his brother Abel. Now Lamech it seems, inherited his forefather’s murderous instincts, and in a shocking lust for revenge, boasted of outdoing Cain: “*I have killed a man for wounding me... If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times*” (Gen. 4:23-24). It seems that anybody who did wrong to Lamech was paid back significantly, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times! Lamech hungered for vengeance in a way that went way beyond completeness!

Jesus builds on this reference and makes a great contrast. His followers should be as eager *to forgive*, as Lamech was to take revenge. Just as Lamech vowed to give a punishment far exceeding the crime so that no one would forget, we should let our forgiveness far exceed the wrong that was done to us. We are to do exactly the opposite of what Lamech did. In other words, we are to forgive as *extravagantly* and as completely as far as it is humanly possible for us to do so.

Jesus is saying that putting a limit on forgiveness would be like putting a condition on grace. Once a limit is put on forgiveness, it is no longer forgiveness, and once a condition is put on grace, it is no longer grace. Forgiveness is to be *unlimited*. “*So Jesus, when someone does something to hurt me or do me wrong, again and again, I am, in effect, to owe them forgiveness? That’s not easy at all! That’s really difficult. ...I don’t think I can do it Lord. I can’t forgive like that.*”

Jesus uses another parable: “*The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold (talents) was brought to him*” (v.23-24). Now, one talent was a measure of weight (of silver/gold), and was generally accepted to equate to around 17-20 years’ worth of average labour. 10,000 talents, would roughly equate then to 60 million days, or 164,000 years’ worth of paid labour to repay the debt. It was an impossibly absurd amount of debt the servant owed his king. Perhaps he’d made some very bad financial decisions or been a gambler, we’re not told.

Since the debt was impossible for the servant to pay, “*the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything’*” (v.25-26).

The servant literally *prostrates* himself before the king. He falls on his face in humility and sincere repentance, and throws himself at the mercy of the king. The debt he owes is very costly – in fact it’s impossibly unpayable – even if he were to work for the king for the rest of his life. Interestingly, prostration is the word Matthew uses for those who fall *in worship* before Jesus, acknowledging Him as the Christ. He likely reveals the true king in the parable.

When confronted with his debt, the servant does not seek to put on a show to justify himself or hide it from the king. Instead, he truly feels the weight of his sin and desires to pay it back so he can be free from it. It is no less important for us when we are confronted by our sins in the face of God's Law. We don't have to look too deeply at the 10 Commandments to know we fall short in many ways. Taking responsibility for our actions, honestly recognising the severity of our sins and confessing them sincerely is important, reminds Jesus, not only before God, but also one another, those we've sinned against. There's no playing the 'blame game' before God who sees and knows us to our core.

The servant wants to pay back his great debt, but the king knows he cannot. He cannot even live long enough to pay it back if he tried. This is where the strength of the mercy and compassion of this king shines forth. Out of pity the king cancels the great debt – he literally 'forgives' the unpayable debt (v.27). The king *suffers* and absorbs the loss that is incurred upon himself as the debt gets transferred into his care. Then, he releases the servant to go on his way. It's unbelievable that such an act of generosity would happen – it's shocking to Jesus' hearers and disciples and their way of thinking. This would never happen in real life. Truly the servant didn't deserve such a gift of forgiveness and freedom at all.

Although sadly the servant doesn't truly comprehend the generosity of his king. Perhaps he thinks that he still owes something to the king, or still fears his punishment, or that he still must earn the gift he has just received. We may think the same: *"Surely I don't deserve God's love... there must be a catch to His grace. Surely I still have to do something to be saved."* Whatever motivates him, we hear the servant then goes to settle his own accounts. He found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 denarii (about 100 days' wages); he grabbed him by the neck and began to choke him, demanding, *"Pay back what you owe me!"* (v.28).

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged, *"Be patient with me, and I will pay it back"* (v.29). We have heard this plea before. Even though it was a trifle compared to the great debt the servant was forgiven by the king, the servant does not share the same kindness that was shown to him. Instead, he refused and had his fellow servant thrown into prison until the debt could be paid. But his deed did not go unnoticed and was brought to the attention of the king... and the king was not pleased at all. The king moves from pity to wrath. The servant finally now gets the king he originally thought he had – the one who gives to people what's deserved.

Peter perhaps would have been cut to the heart as he listened to Jesus, just as we are. What happened to the good and gracious king? But Jesus does not explain. The king has the authority, right and power to be merciful or to be a righteous judge. The question remains for us who listen is this: How many times have we failed to forgive as we have been forgiven by God?

If God is able to forgive us unconditionally and eternally, how much more eager are we to be to forgive one another with such a small debt they owe us in comparison. Yes, forgiveness *costs the giver*. We see it most powerfully when Jesus willingly gave up His life to pay for our sin on the cross, though we least deserve it. Our great debt of sin, that we could not possibly even hope to repay to God when He calls us to account, is paid-in-full by Jesus' suffering and death. He, who was without the debt of sin; He, who is the King of Kings, absorbed *into Himself* the cost we have incurred for our sin. He knows the unpayable amount we owe, though we may realise only a little of what we've done, yet, He shows us mercy. And, our King sets us free, and calls us to live our lives by gratefully sharing the same gift with all who have a great debt – to ourselves, or to God.

Why? For God's forgiveness does something to us – it changes us. It is powerful and counter-cultural. Forgiveness is a gift of God we give to others in Jesus' name so that God's kingdom will bear great fruit. Sharing it shows we truly understand the gift *we* ourselves have received, and it honours the giver. No, it's not always easy to forgive. Yet, Jesus calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven, so He will help us find a way. ...Thanks be to God that His forgiveness, just like His love, has no limits, and that in Christ, our debt has been paid-in-full. Amen.