

Matthew 18:21-35

Limitless Forgiveness

14.9.14 (HC C&H)

When I looked up today's Gospel reading, I couldn't help thinking, well yes, we all know that we should forgive. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we ask that God will forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us*.

So, I thought, why don't we do it?

It's not always that we're intentionally refusing to forgive someone, I know there are times when I almost subconsciously treat someone in a less pleasant way because of something they have done to me. It seems to happen automatically. Maybe someone has let me down, so I won't bother asking them another time. That might seem a trivial example perhaps, but such thoughts can grow into holding longer term grudges against people which can become very damaging in a community, especially in a church community.

What could inspire or change me so that I do forgive as God has forgiven me?

I read a story about a man in charge of a company who had a reputation for being willing to take on people who had just come out of prison, people who needed a new start. It must have been difficult to trust such people as employees, but this boss was willing to give them a second chance.

When he was asked why he did this, he told the story of his own life. As a young man he had worked as a very junior employee of the same company making deliveries and collecting money. Over a period of time he had stolen money from the company. One day the boss told him ‘Don’t come to work today. I’ll make sure all your jobs are covered. Stay at home and come over to my house this evening with your wife’.

All day, he waited at home, devastated, assuming he had lost his job and, of course his wife kept asking him why he wasn’t at work.

That evening he and his wife went to the boss’s house and were made to feel welcome. After a short while the boss said to him ‘explain to your wife why you were not at work today’. With great difficulty he tearfully confessed what had been going on. The boss, while making it very clear that what he had done was wrong, agreed to give him a second chance. He would continue to employ him, in a different role where he would not be handling money.

The man worked hard over many years as a loyal employee. He gradually worked his way up the company until eventually he became the boss himself. Now he had the opportunity to give others a second chance, in the same way as he had received it, however difficult that might be.

It was his gratitude for the great forgiveness that he had received, that inspired this man to forgive others. Maybe this is the key to

becoming forgiving. If we can really start to appreciate just something of how much we have been forgiven by God, then it will become part of our nature to forgive others.

In the parable Jesus told, the servant owes the king more than he could ever possibly be capable of paying back. (equivalent to millions of days' wages,) What a hopeless predicament. The servant pleads for mercy saying he'll repay everything he owes. In reality he knows there is no hope of him ever paying off a debt like that but I suppose he's pleading for time – maybe something will change (perhaps he'll win the lottery, or the king will die). The king also knows that there is no way the debt can be paid but his response goes far further than the servant could ever imagine, he doesn't just give him some time, he wipes out the debt completely – a miracle!

And this is a picture of the amazing miracle that God does for us! I think of all the times I've ignored God, done my own thing rather than considering what he wants, all the wrong things I think, say and do, either by mistake or deliberately – all of this is like a debt I can never hope to repay, a seemingly hopeless situation.

But God gives us a second chance, a new start as our debt to him is wiped out through Jesus' death on the cross, by his taking the punishment of death which we deserve. And all this so that our relationship with God is restored and we can live the wonderful life he wants us to as his people.

Graham Kendrick puts it very well in one of his songs we sing:
*Amazing love, O what sacrifice,
The Son of God given for me.
My debt he pays and my death he dies
That I might live.*

Forgiveness which goes on and on, not just a second chance but a 3rd, 4th, 5th etc. - limitless forgiveness - surely a big reason to give God our thanks and praise!

When Peter suggests to Jesus 'might it be good to forgive seven times?' he probably thinks he's being quite generous. The traditional limit was 3 times. (based on what he would have read in the OT prophets) Peter senses more was required so doubles it and adds another one for good measure.

But as we heard, Jesus reply is to command infinite forgiveness. Although we read: 77 times (or 490 times in some translations), he's basically saying 'don't count!'

This is a description of what life is like in the Kingdom of God. Jesus starts his story: 'Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like...'
This is a kingdom parable. In kingdom parables, Jesus gives us a glimpse into a very different world: a world that operates according to principles that are often the opposite of those with which we are familiar, a world which functions as our world was intended originally to function, a world where God is king, reigning in the hearts of his people.

Wouldn't it be great if we could see more of that in our community!

The alternative, that is, life in the world as we know it, is described in the next section of the story. The forgiven servant finds a fellow servant who owes him a small amount, (He's not likely to have this to hand but he probably would be able to pay it back if given a bit of time). The forgiven servant however, ignores his pleas for mercy and refuses to forgive even this small debt.

Do we find ourselves in situations where, rather than forgiving, we feel we must make a big deal of someone's small wrongdoing, maybe in an attempt to punish them? What about in our church, when someone forgets it's their turn to be welcoming or making coffee? We might be tempted to tell everyone else about it, but wouldn't it would be far more constructive to sort the immediate problem, forgive, and make a mental note to quietly remind them beforehand next time?

On a wider scale do people's actions sometimes leave us with a feeling of resentment? I think that's the way I feel sometimes at work, when it seems to me as though someone is being really ungrateful even though I feel I'm falling over backwards to do my best for them. How can I forgive and really mean the pleasant smile with which I respond?

We expect mercy from God but sometimes don't offer that to other people.

And so Jesus' story ends with the forgiven servant being punished, put in prison until he can pay back all he owes- something he will never be able to do.

Then follows a very stark warning from Jesus: 'This is how God will treat each one of **you** if you do not forgive your brother from your heart'.

What does 'Forgiving from the heart' mean?

This is not superficial or half-hearted forgiveness but the type of forgiveness which means:

- we won't keep tabs to justify getting even later,
- we won't claim to forgive but still hold it against them
- we won't demand recompense for that which we have forgiven
- we will love the person who has wronged us and enjoy the reconciliation that our forgiveness has made possible

Forgiveness from the heart is only possible when we have a deep understanding of how God has forgiven us and when we ask for God's grace to help us.

Which gets us back to what I mentioned at the beginning:

The command to forgive is very well-known, with very serious consequences if we don't obey. We're probably well aware of this message but we still struggle to do it!

And that is despite Jesus' very clear warning which he also gave people on another occasion too: 'If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins'.

It might seem quite shocking to us to hear such an emphatic warning— we usually tend to hear offers of God's *free* gifts of grace. I believe Jesus made such a harsh statement as this to impress upon us that forgiveness really is at the heart of all relationship – crucial, fundamental, to our relationship with God and with other people.

So how can we heed Jesus' command to forgive?

The more we read the Bible and look at Jesus, the more we realise just how short we fall of God's will for us. This will help us to start to appreciate deeply the utter limitlessness of God's forgiveness, forgiveness of a debt which would be completely impossible for us to repay by our own means. If we can envisage just something of God's amazing grace and glory we will worship him, and turn our affections to him and what is made possible for us through Jesus!

We can truly and gratefully accept God's forgiveness. I think part of our accepting involves repenting, that is, saying sorry *and being willing to change*.

So, as we consider God's limitless forgiveness for us, as well as remembering Jesus' stark warning, let's be willing to allow our hearts to be changed so that our characters come to reflect God's

character, so we **are** motivated and empowered to forgive –
willingly and joyfully - and not just because God has forgiven us!

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