

Matthew 18:21-35

Freedom and Forgiveness

Forgive us our debts

The passage from Matthew Chapter 18, which has really to do with forgiveness, ties in well with the Scottish Presbyterian version of the Lord's Prayer – forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors – as opposed to the trespasses widely used elsewhere. We have a story about a high official being forgiven an enormous debt of 10,000 silver talents – let's say £1 million pounds though it could have been more. He was under very real risk of being thrown into jail, the key being thrown away and his wife and children being sold into slavery. No hope of coming back from nowhere to repay such a sum. Jesus is using hyperbole, what many of you know I call “over the top” language to make a valid point because that wasn't the end of the story. Unlikely, as it might have seemed that anyone would have exercised generosity to such an extent, the king wrote off his official's million pound debt and saved him from dire consequences but did the official learn anything from it? No, he didn't. It appears that he himself was due a small sum of money which he had lent to one of the king's servants. A hundred denarii, (in old money, pounds, shillings and pence, L S D, the d came from denarii) – in practice, we'll call it a few pounds. A trifle compared with the enormous sum the official had owed the king. So, what does he do? He insists on payment and when that wasn't forthcoming he had him thrown into prison until he could pay. Ignoring the servant's plea for time to pay and having no regard to the mercy he had been shown he insisted on his rights and almost cutting off his nose to spite his face, had his debtor imprisoned for a trifling sum, certainly compared to the enormous amount the king had written off for him.

Injustices are not ignored

Is it any wonder that such a massive injustice raises people's hackles? Seeing the huge gulf between the king's generous forgiveness of a debt that could never have been repaid and the official's denial of a not unreasonable request for a bit more time to pay a small sum that was eminently manageable, the other servants were up in arms. It was manifestly unjust. And so, they reported the matter to the king, who was angry. Not only was it unfair on the servant who had been thrown into jail, it was an affront to the king – his mercy had been thrown back in his face, as though it counted for nothing. IN the story, the king reinstates the debt and orders the official's imprisonment.

We need to take great care here in interpreting and applying a parable, a story. It would be all too easy to twist the gospel and make it sound as though Jesus' forgiveness is conditional upon our behaving ourselves and living out perfect lives. Or suggesting that our acceptance by God is provisional and can be withdrawn. That isn't the gospel message at all. We are forgiven and accepted by God in Jesus – not for what we have done or will or won't do in the future. Were that to be the case, salvation would be by works, down to us. But it is of grace, it is all God's doing – Jesus secured our salvation by his death on the cross – “nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling”. But that doesn't mean that there aren't consequences of our forgiveness. Our access to forgiveness is through our bond with Jesus. His Spirit working in our hearts prompts us to accept his love, love him in return, indeed love our neighbour for his sake, in his strength.

He's not gunning for us. He's not on the alert to catch us out at the first sign of trouble. As we were thinking about a couple of weeks ago, with Simon Peter's faux pas in trying to get Jesus to avoid Jerusalem, we ALL slip up. Yet, Jesus is ready to

forgive, accept and use us in his service. But if that is true, then there will be some evidence of love in our hearts, some indicators that God's Spirit is at work. And how does that become apparent? In the way that we treat others! We are expected to treat others well – to love them, to act kindly, peaceably and with justice towards them – not so as to earn God's acceptance, but as a demonstration and outworking of the love Jesus has shown to us, indeed as confirmation that the Spirit is transforming our lives. If that isn't happening, if all that people can see is persistent injustice, unkindness, selfishness and animosity – then it is highly likely they will call it out – You call yourself a Christian and THIS is what you do! Ok, some of that can be unfair, and as I say none of us is perfect and we shouldn't be claiming to be perfect, we all slip up, yet Jesus is willing to forgive – BUT it is reasonable to expect some evidence of changed and changing attitudes in us, as signs that Jesus is working in us. If the evidence is overwhelmingly to the contrary we shouldn't expect it to be ignored. It will be obvious even to outsiders. That in itself is a daunting thought that ought to make us more aware of our need to live lives in keeping with the gospel of love – but that comes through grace, by allowing Jesus to shape our lives by his love – not by grit and determination on our part – which surely fails. We are not forgiven because we live just lives – we are to live just lives because we are forgiven!

How forgiving should we be?

Actually, the passage begins with the disciples asking Jesus how many times they should forgive someone who has wronged them? The law laid down rules as to how often someone should forgive – there were some differences but FOUR seemed to be the top number. The disciples had obviously been discussing the matter and were well aware that Jesus had a more forgiving attitude than the law, so they proposed a more generous figure SEVEN. No, no , no you don't understand – 70 times 7 he said – and

he didn't mean that you had to keep a tab and when someone offended for the 491st time you DIDN'T forgive them! Don't keep count AT ALL! My daughter had a big birthday last weekend and it was good to celebrate that with her but I remember when she was a wee tot being asked by her grandpa, I think, how many sweets she had – the packet had been opened and she was just learning to count and it happened something like this – ONE, TWO, THREE – [LONG PAUSE] – A LOT! And that my friends is the key to forgiveness – hard as it might be for us who are so good at keeping score, dare I say holding OTHERS to account – Jesus' teaching says go on forgiving and don't keep count. Be prepared to forgive A LOT – why? Because the glory of the gospel is that God doesn't keep score on us – at least, he looks at us through Jesus and decides that we're covered – Jesus has dealt with all our faults and failings.

But, if we have clocked that – if we have even begun to take in the import of that (which is at the heart of the gospel) then it will make a difference – a difference in outlook in our lives both toward God and towards other people. It is inconceivable that we will remain the same, unmoved in love towards our neighbour if we have taken in even a little of Jesus' love and grace. Yes, we can have our off moments, we may even have “blinkers” that prevent us from applying the gospel to particular areas of our lives (and we need the ongoing love and grace of Jesus to deal with them) but fundamentally, if we have been touched by Jesus, if his Spirit is in us, then we won't remain the same, our attitudes – indeed our actions will begin to demonstrate the values of the kingdom towards others – and that includes our readiness to forgive. Does that mean we “let people away with it” all the time – no, and the state has the authority arguably under God to maintain justice that people may lead peaceable lives – but as individuals we should not be holding grudges, casting things up, looking for

revenge – that simply doesn't square with the gospel, the Lord's Prayer or with the Spirit of Jesus being at work in our hearts and minds.

Bottom line – we have the FREEDOM to forgive because Jesus has set us free from the power of sin. We still mess up but he forgives us, and he wants to work in us so that we can forgive one another and go on to build real relationships of love, one with another. How many times? 1,2, 3, A LOT – no limit really, because there is no limit to the depths of God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

May the Lord bless you. Amen.