

Matthew 18:21-35

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[0 : 00] It's been a privilege and an honour to be with you this morning and to share God's word! Lord God, maker of heaven and earth, our help is in you. So may now by the power of your Holy Spirit, will you come and speak to us through your word so that your Son, our Saviour, may be glorified in our lives. And we ask this in his name. Amen.

On the 8th of November 1987, an IRA bomb exploded in the town of Enniskillen in County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland. It was a Sunday afternoon and people had gathered in the city, in the town centre, at the war memorial for a Remembrance Day ceremony. Eleven people were killed, 63 were injured. It became known as the Poppy Day Massacre. The youngest to die that day was a young lady by the name of Marie Wilson. She'd just recently qualified as a nurse. After the bomb went off, Gordon Wilson, Marie Wilson's father, lay under the rubble and shouted to his daughter, are you all right? She found his hand and said, is that your hand, Dad? He said, are you all right? And she said, yes. He asked her for a fifth time, are you all right? And she said, Daddy, I love you very much. And those were the last words that she spoke. Hours later, Gordon Wilson gave an interview with the BBC. I remember as a kid watching it on TV that night. He described with anguish in front of the cameras, the conversation with his daughter and his feelings towards her killers. She held my hand tightly, he said, and gripped it as hard as she could. She said, Daddy, I love you very much. Those were her exact words to me.

And those were the last words I ever heard her say. And then, to the astonishment of his listeners, Wilson said these words, but I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk of revenge is not going to bring her back.

I will pray for these men tonight and every night. Historian Jonathan Barlin recounts new words in more than 25 years of violence in Northern Ireland had such a powerful emotional impact.

[3 : 40] A cup brimful of sweet water. A cup brimful of sweet water when jolted only spills sweet water.

And that day, Gordon Wilson's cup was violently jolted. And the only thing it spilled was the sweet water of forgiveness.

And the question is, what gives birth to that sort of forgiveness? To that sort of quick and unconditional forgiveness?

Perhaps tonight you are here and you are someone who knows the pain of losing a loved one like Gordon Wilson at the hands of the evil acts of another person or group.

And I'm sure you know only too well how deep Gordon Wilson would have to have dug to say those words. And to live them out in the days and weeks and years that followed.

[4 : 55] But for the majority of us here, I imagine that the offenses that we have received are not on that scale. And we should keep that in mind. We should keep that in mind.

But they are nevertheless real. They nevertheless hurt. And forgiveness is never easy. That comment that that person made to you that time.

That thing they did to you. That thing they returned to you in bad condition but never acknowledged that they'd broken it. That snub at church the other week.

That lie that they told you. That, that, that. We all have a that moment, don't we? But whatever it is that that someone or some group has done to us, forgiveness is never easy.

It always costs. But if we are Christians, if we claim to follow the Christ, then forgiveness is not an option.

[6 : 01] It's not something that you can choose whether you want to do it or not as a Christian. Forgiveness is essential to the Christian life.

Martin Luther, the German reformer, said that the continual forgiveness of our neighbor is the primary and foremost duty of Christians, second only to faith and the reception of forgiveness. Second only to receiving forgiveness from Christ. The continual forgiveness of our neighbor. And it's in this passage in Matthew chapter 18 that Jesus helps us with this issue of forgiveness. In fact, it is in this parable that we learn how Gordon Wilson could offer such quick and unconditional forgiveness.

Jesus makes three very simple points in this parable. Number one. Our forgiveness of others must be unlimited.

[7 : 06] Our forgiveness of others must be unlimited. Verses 21 to 22. Then Peter came and said to him, Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him?

As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. Now in order to understand Peter's question, we have to back up a little and understand the context.

Did you notice the word then at the beginning of verse 21? Peter only asks this question because of what Jesus has been saying in verses 15 to 20.

There Jesus was addressing the problem of an unrepentant sinner. If a person sins, you are to go and confront them.

If they are unrepentant, you are to go and confront them with their sin. And if they refuse to repent, then you get two or three witnesses together. You confront them again. And if they refuse to repent, then you go and tell it to the church.

[8 : 10] And then you treat them as an unbeliever. And Peter says, Okay, Lord, I get you. I get what to do if the person is unrepentant. But what do I do if the person does say sorry and I forgive them?

And then the next week, they do it again. And I forgive them. And then the next week, they do it again. And I forgive them. What do I do then?

And that is the situation that Peter puts to Jesus. And Peter says, What about seven times? Is that enough? Now, seven is actually a generous number.

The rabbis taught that you forgive someone three times, a repeated offender. You forgive them three times. And after that, no more. Because if you had to keep forgiving them more than three times, they clearly weren't repentant the first time.

So, Peter's calculation is generous. It's double the standard plus one. So, he's looking all self-righteous. And look at what Jesus says.

[9 : 14] Verse 22. I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. Some of your translations may say seventy times seven, or four hundred and ninety.

But seventy times seven is just another, it's an idiom in Greek for saying seventy-seven. Now, the number seventy-seven is not just plucked out of Jesus' head. It's not just doubling what Peter has said, seven seventy-seven.

Does anybody in here know where in the Bible the number seventy-seven crops up? Genesis chapter 4, verse 24.

If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times. Cain felt slighted by Abel getting favor with God, and so he avenged him sevenfold by killing him, and Lamech, one of Cain's great-great-grandsons, says, that is nothing to the revenge that I will execute on the person who wrongs me.

If Cain sought revenge sevenfold, I will seek it seventy-sevenfold. It is disproportionate retaliation. And it's how the world works, isn't it?

[10 : 30] A cutting word, and what's the retaliation? A raised fist. A raised fist, and what's the retaliation? Lethal weapon. A lethal weapon, and what's the retaliation?

Overwhelming force. Obliterate them. And Jesus takes this approach, and he turns it inside out, upside down, and back to front. He says, in my kingdom, the attitude of forgiveness is as far in the opposite direction of Lamech's as anything you've ever seen.

It is utterly disproportionate forgiveness. Peter, stop counting. Numbers and records and lists are for people who are self-righteous.

Jesus says, Peter, when my people come to forgiveness, they are mathematically inept. If you are counting, then you are not forgiving.

And then Jesus gives Peter a reason why our forgiveness is to be unlimited. And so he tells in verse 23 and following, a parable.

[11:43] And through this parable, Jesus makes a very simple point, and it's our second point. Our forgiveness of others is to be unlimited. That's the first point. Because God's forgiveness of us is unequalled.

Our forgiveness of others is to be unlimited. Because, second, our God's forgiveness of us is unequalled. Verses 23 to 34.

Now this parable, we could break it down into three scenes. The first scene is in the king's audience chamber. Verses 24 to 27.

And it involves a conversation between a king and one of his servants. And then in scene two, it's in the servant's hall. Verses 28 to 31.

And it involves a conversation between the first servant, who met with the king in the audience chamber, and a second servant. And then the third scene returns to the king's audience chamber.

[12:45] Verses 31 to 34. As the king readdresses the first servant. So it's a bit like an episode of Downton Abbey.

Right? You've got Lord Grantham. He addresses Thomas in the main living room. And then Thomas addresses Mr. Bates in the servant's quarters downstairs. And then the other servants get wind of what's happened.

And the whispers filter back up into the main house. And Lord Grantham finally calls Thomas back into the living room. And they have a conversation. So it's an ancient episode of Downton Abbey.

Well, let's take a look at scene one. Verses 23 to 24. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

When he began to settle, one servant was brought to him who owed him 10,000 talents. Now in the first century, kings often lent money and resources to provincial governors and civil servants.

[13:55] They would come, receive the money, and they would go away and invest the money and then eventually pay back the king, the loan that he had given them. So the scenario Jesus paints here was really not that surprising to the audience.

What was surprising, what was mega surprising, was the amount the servant owed. 10,000 talents. The annual taxation of Judea, Edomia, and Samaria together was 600 talents of silver.

It was more, 10,000 talents was more than the entire coinage in circulation in Egypt at the time.

Okay? So this is surprising. Let me try and give you some indication of how much money this was.

A talent was the highest denomination of currency in those days. It's a bit like our 50 pound note.

And it was a piece of silver that weighed about 30 kilograms. That's about four stone.

That's heavy. Okay? You've got to carry a talent around. A worker in these days earned a denarius for a day's work. One talent was worth 6,000 denarii.

[15:17] So one talent was 6,000 days of work. That's about half a lifetime of work. One talent. And this guy, how much does he owe?

He owes 10,000 talents. That's 60 million denarii. That's 300 tons of silver. That's 60 million days of work.

That's what he owes this guy. One commentator says the equivalent of in our days not millions, not billions, not even trillions. What he owes him is zillions.

So, here's hyperbole if you were here this morning. And Jesus is working it to good effect. This guy owes an unimaginable incalculable debt.

So of course the servant can't pay it back. Verse 25 And since he could not pay his master, since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold with his wife and children and all that he had and payment to be made.

[16:23] Now this was common enough in the Gentile world. If you had a debt and you couldn't pay it then you were sold into service or slavery of the person you owed the money to or you were sold to someone else and the money was given to pay off the debt.

Now the price of an average slave could reach up to one talent. It was actually more about a tenth of a talent. About 500 denarii.

500 days wages. Now unless this guy is the most fertile man in the world never mind the Middle East with about 500 kids running around he ain't ever going to pay this back.

So even the king's request that this servant and his family be sold into his service or someone else's service and the money from that paid back to him is itself an act of mercy.

This guy would probably have raised about seven talents from selling him and his kids. But he owes 10,000 talents.

[17 : 30] So even in these early stages there is God's divine mercy. And the servant's response is to fall on his knees and make a plea to the king verse 26.

So the servant fell on his knees imploring the king have patience with me and I will pay you everything. Now think about how unrealistic that is.

If you just be patient and give me 600 million days I'll get you the money. Never in his lifetime would he pay this back and the king knows it and so he responds in verse 27 and out of pity for him the master of that servant released him and forgive him the debt.

Now the word pity is a bit weak. Even if you have an NIV or an ESV it's a weak translation. The equivalent in English is really that the king's heart wrenched that he was gutted as he looked on the poverty of this man.

The word is used of Jesus a number of times it's translated compassion in the gospels elsewhere. It is a deep gutted feeling of compassion for someone who is completely helpless.

[18 : 48] And that is what this king feels towards this servant and he releases him from the debt. Now this parable helps us to understand what forgiveness is.

I think in the evangelical church today there are a lot of superficial understandings of forgiveness. People think forgiveness is just brushing something under the carpet or just brushing it off. or if you do go to raise an issue with someone and they say well if you're a Christian you're supposed to forgive me so why are you raising this issue with me? But what this parable teaches us is this to forgive someone is to put the offense with its debt on the table.

Do you notice that? Jesus puts a number on the debt. He says there's a debt and it's on the table and only then and only then when the debt is put on the table is the offender to be released from paying that debt.

That is what forgiveness is. It does not involve brushing the debt under the carpet. It involves putting the debt on the table. Naming it blaming it condemning the offense and then releasing the person from having to pay it.

[20 : 04] And what we have here is an unimaginable debt and an unmanageable debt. It is unpayable and yet it is completely wiped out. Completely wiped out.

And Jesus wants us to be amazed at the forgiveness of this king. It is full. It is free. It is complete. No strings attached. And that is a picture of forgiveness.

Now we come to scene two. Thomas and Mr. Bees down in the servants quarters. The camera leaves the king's audience chamber and it moves downstairs.

The conversation of the second scene follows a similar pattern to the first scene but there are some surprising differences. Verse 28 But when the same servant went out who had been forgiven he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii and seizing him he began to choke him saying pay what you owe.

Now do you see the difference? Ten thousand talents one hundred denarii. Now that was a hundred denarii was not an insignificant amount of money. In those days it was a hundred days wages it was three or four months work.

[21 : 23] This fellow servant owed the first servant a hundred days work. For us that would probably be equivalent of five to ten thousand pounds. That's not insignificant.

If someone owes you five to ten thousand pounds you'd expect them to pay it back wouldn't you? But in comparison to the first debt how significant is it?

Completely insignificant. It is one six hundredth of the first debt. Hundred denarii ten thousand talents. It's not even comparable.

But what is also not comparable is the first servant's response to his debtor. The king responded calmly reasonably that him and his family should be sold but now that the shoe is on the other foot do you see the response?

Pay what you owe. And he starts choking him. What is interesting is that the servant in debt offers virtually the exact same plea for patience and more time as the first servant.

[22 : 29] Did you see that? In verse 26 the first servant says have patience with me and I will pay you back. Unlikely. Six hundred million days of work. This guy says have patience with me and I will pay you back.

Very reasonable. A hundred days work. let me work for a hundred days and I'll pay you back. But this servant responds with ruthless unforgiveness.

The king forgave a debt that was unmanageable unimaginable and this servant will not forgive a debt that is minor. And we are supposed to feel indignant indignant at this injustice.

Well the rumours of what has happened in the corridors of the servants' quarters then filters back up into the king's audience chamber which brings us to scene 3 verse 31 to 33.

When his fellow servant saw what had taken place sorry the first servant had him thrown into prison until he could pay it back. And then scene 3 when his fellow servant saw what had taken place they were greatly distressed and they went and reported it to their master all that had taken place.

[23 : 49] Then his master summoned him the first servant and said to him you wicked servant I forgave you all that debt of 10,000 talents because you pleaded with me and should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant who owed you a hundred denarii as I had had mercy on you.

So the point of the parable is simple our forgiveness of others must be unlimited because God's forgiveness of us is unequalled.

Our forgiveness of others must be unlimited because God's forgiveness of us is unequalled. And this is why Gordon Wilson was able to express love and forgiveness forgiveness to his daughter's killers only hours after losing her so tragically because he was a Christian.

He was a Christian who understood that what he owed to God was a zillion times more than what these murderers owed to him.

no one could ever grieve him or offend him more than he had grieved or offended God. And I think the reason why as Christians and as human beings in general why we struggle to forgive is because we have lost the proportionality of our offense to God and the disproportionality of his response to us.

[25 : 30] We have lost the proportionality of our offense to God and the disproportionality of his response to us.

Our offense to God is directly proportional to his dignity, to his being. It's not the length of our sin that determines the debt we owe God.

It is the height of our sin. It is the gravity of what we have done. Let's say a young boy is playing with his sister in the living room and there is a bit of an argument and she steals a toy from him and he slaps her in the face.

Do you think the boy should be punished? Well, yeah. He's just slapped. Let's say it's a brother, sorry. He slaps his brother in the face.

Let's say the next day he's playing with his sister and the same thing happens and he slaps his sister in the face. Should he receive the same punishment for slapping his sister in the face as he did for slapping his brother in the face?

[26 : 40] I would say no. It should be a more severe punishment. What if the mother comes into the room and there's an even bigger fight and he turns around and he slaps his mother in the face?

Should the punishment he receives for slapping his mother in the face be more than what he received for slapping his sister in the face or for slapping his brother in the face? Let's say he passes his Duke of Edinburgh award and for some reason the Duke of Edinburgh doesn't turn up and the Queen turns up to give him the award.

And for some reason as she goes to shake his hand he decides to slap the Queen in the face. Now do you think he should get the same discipline for slapping the Queen in the face as he did for slapping his younger brother in the face?

Well of course not. The punishment is calculated on the dignity of the person that you have offended. The height of our sin is determined by the dignity of the person we have offended and God does not differ from the Queen in degree but in kind.

He does not differ from the Queen in degree. He's not just one notch up from the Queen. He is in a different category altogether. And if that is who we have offended, the most beautiful and lovely and excellent and glorious and majestic and winsome and delightful being in the universe, if that is who we have offended then we owe him infinitely.

[28 : 33] We deserve infinite punishment if we have not honoured such a being. That is what creates the incalculable debt. We slap in the face the creator of the universe.

And we don't just slap in the face as our maker. Actually when he came among us, what did we do to him? We slapped him in the face physically. We stuck him on a cross.

The most meek and humble of all men who ever walked the face of the earth. And if you and me had been there, we would have slapped him in the face.

ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers. It was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished.

Our offence to God is directly proportional to his being and dignity. And what was God's response to our sin, to slapping him in the face as our creator?

[29 : 43] He sent his one and only son to be the savior of the world. What was Jesus' response when we slapped him in the face?

Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do. And what was God's response? Did he punish us instead of Christ when we slapped him in the face?

How great the pain of searing loss. The father turns his face away as wounds which mar the chosen one bring many sons to glory.

God the father punished his own incarnate son to save us from himself and he did so in the very moment of the most violent expression of our hatred of his son.

In the most violent expression of our hatred of his son God the father did not come down and rescue his son but he let it play out so that he might forgive us.

[30 : 53] Well might the sun in darkness hide and shut his glories in when Christ the mighty maker died for man the creature's sin. Thus might I hide my blushing face while his dear cross appears, dissolve my heart in thankfulness and melt my eyes to tears.

But drops of grief can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe. Here Lord I give myself away, tis all that I can do.

The debt of love I owe. This is the well from which Gordon Wilson drank in the bitter moments of losing his daughter.

Our offense to God is directly proportional to his dignity and his response to us is completely disproportional to what we did to him.

We slapped him in the face as our creator, we slapped him in the face as our saviour, we spat at him, we crucified him and he said I forgive you.

[32 : 03] I forgive you. And that is Jesus' point. Our forgiveness of others must be unlimited.

Why? Because God's forgiveness of us is unequal. But Jesus does not leave it there.

He has a final point to make in verses 34 to 35. Unforgiveness of others is unforgivable.

Unforgiveness of others is unforgivable.

He ends the parable with a warning and in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, the first servant, until he should pay all his debt. And so also my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

Jesus is saying, Peter, forgiveness is not optional for you. Forgiveness is not an added extra of the Christian life. It's not like when you go to buy a car, they say would you like tinted windows or not?

[33 : 14] Do you want air conditioning or not? Do you want a stereo system or not? It's not like when you become a Christian God says, do you want to add on that you need to forgive people or should we just leave that off?

Jesus comes to us and says, you cannot expect unequalled forgiveness from God and then limit your forgiveness to others.

You can't expect God to stop counting your sins and then you keep counting your offenders sins.

Now this is not a threat.

If you don't forgive then God will take away your salvation as if your salvation is earned on the basis of you forgiving others. This is not purgatory. You're saved and if you don't forgive then you go to hell and you pay for it for a bit.

You pay for your unforgiveness and then you get released after that. Now Jesus is not saying that your forgiveness of others guarantees or maintains your forgiven state before God.

[34 : 18] Jesus is making a very simple point and it's this. Forgiven people forgive. Unforgiven people don't forgive.

Forgiven people forgive. Unforgiven people don't forgive. If you forgive others it simply demonstrates that you have understood God's forgiveness of you.

To not forgive others is to receive God's punishment. Can I put it as starkly as Jesus does here hell is for those who will not forgive.

C.S. Lewis put it starkly we must forgive all our enemies or be damned. To not forgive from the heart is to show that we've never really grasped forgiveness. And that's the point about the first servant. He had not ever really grasped what the king had let him off with. And that is why he wouldn't offer forgiveness to a fellow servant. [35 : 28] the reason Gordon Wilson could stand before the world's media that day only hours after losing his daughter and speak words of love and forgiveness was because he had grasped the gospel.

Or rather it had grasped him. But God demonstrates his love for us in this. While we were still sinners.

Not while we had repented. Not after we had repented. While we were still sinners. Christ died for us. You see on your service sheet we have the Lord's Prayer.

And it's appropriate I think to pray this together now keeping in mind in particular the fourth line forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

We'll have a moment of quiet reflection and then we'll say this prayer together.