

Matthew 18:21-25

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Date: 29 January 2023

Preacher: Paul Bolton

[0 : 00] Well, thank you very much for your welcome, Paul. It's good to be with you again. We actually came in October, sort of incognito, as a family with my wife and other two children.! Lovely to be with you again tonight.

We're in Matthew 18, page 823 and 824 of the Bibles in your hands. As we come to God's Word, let's come to Him in prayer.

Our Heavenly Father, we praise and thank you for your Son, the Lord Jesus. We ask now that you would help us to listen to Him, that we might walk in Him as the way, that we might trust Him as the truth, that we might receive Him as the life.

We ask this in His precious name. Amen. Amen. It was in a church in Munich that I saw Him, a balding, heavysset man in a grey overcoat, a brown felt cap clutched between His hands.

People were filing out of the basement room where I'd just spoken. It was 1947, and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

[1 : 24] And that's when I saw Him, working His way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown cap. The next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

It came back with a rush, the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the centre of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man.

I could see my sister's frail form in front of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsy, how thin you looked.

Betsy and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland. This man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent. You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk, he was saying. I was a guard in there. No, he did not remember me. But since that time, he went on, I have become a Christian.

[2 : 29] I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there. But I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, his hand came out.

Will you forgive me? And I stood there. I who sins had every day to be forgiven. And I could not. Betsy had died in that place. Could he erase her slow, terrible death simply by asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out.

But to me, it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I have ever had to do. For I had to do it. I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition.

That we forgive those who have injured us. If you do not forgive men their trespasses, Jesus says, Neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses. And still I stood there.

[3 : 35] The coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion. I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will. And the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

Jesus, help me. I prayed silently. I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling. And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands.

And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. I forgive you, brother, I cried. With all my heart.

For a long moment, we grasped each other's hands. The former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.

[4 : 42] But if you don't recognize it, that is an extract from Corrie Ten Boom's autobiography, The Hiding Place. I don't know how you react when you hear that story.

My instinct is to be full of admiration, but to think there is no way that I would ever be able to do what she did. Forgive a man implicated in my sister's death.

And yet, as Corrie makes clear, forgiveness isn't an act only for super saints. No, for Jesus, it's basic Christianity.

And nowhere is that clearer than in tonight's passage from Matthew 18. It's a chapter all about relationships in God's kingdom, how we get on together in church.

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus highlighted three qualities that should mark our relationships with one another. Humility, that we view ourselves simply as children.

[5 : 44] Love, seeing each other as children too, and therefore protecting and caring for one another. And then accountability. Again, the family language of brothers and sisters challenging one another in unrepented sin.

And here, in tonight's verses, Jesus adds a fourth quality to his sketch of healthy church culture. Maybe forgiveness. Peter is the one who raises the issue, presumably off the back of what Jesus has just been saying about church discipline.

Verse 21, he says, Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times. Actually being very generous.

The rabbis of the day taught that it was necessary to forgive just three times. But for Jesus, even seven times isn't enough. Verse 22, I do not say to you seven times, but 77 times.

Or it could be 70 times seven. By which he really means stop counting and just get on with forgiving.

[6 : 59] Now, it may be that some of us feel that's actually quite an easy command. We don't think of ourselves as the sort of people who hold grudges. What's the big deal? Which is probably a sign that we're not really doing the first half of this chapter and properly getting involved in one another's lives.

You see, if we are seeking to do church life together as family, sharing our lives and our homes and our hearts, then because we remain sinners, there will be times when we clash, when we rub each other up the wrong way.

When we sin. And when we're sinned against. And presumably that's why Jesus concludes his teaching on kingdom relationships with this need for forgiveness.

But equally, there'll be others of us, perhaps the more honest, for whom this feels like a very hard teaching. We've been sinned against deeply and repeatedly by others.

And the thought of forgiving them is just too painful to contemplate. Well, Jesus understands that, and he's not in the business of laying burdens on us and then leaving it to us to carry those burdens.

[8 : 17] And in the story that follows, he not only underlines how essential forgiveness is in his kingdom, he also points to the one place that can move and empower such forgiveness.

It's a story of two halves. Each teaches a simple truth. First half, forgiveness is the heart of all true Christianity.

Let's remind ourselves how Jesus begins his story. Verse 22, sorry, 23. 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 was brought to him who owed him 10,000 talents. And 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.

So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, have patience with me and I will pay you everything. And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

[9 : 25] 10,000 talents. 10,000 is the largest numeral in ancient Greece. There isn't a bigger number than that. And a talent you'll see from the footnote was the equivalent of 20 years living wage.

So we can do the maths and say it's the equivalent of around 3.5 billion pounds today. But Jesus is really just saying, this guy is a gazillion pounds in debt.

Which is what makes the man's request in verse 26 so ludicrous, isn't it? Have patience with me and I will pay you everything. Everything. I mean, even before the Bank of England put up interest rates, there's no way that he could keep up with the interest, let alone start to pay off the capital.

In fact, the only thing more ludicrous than this man's request is his master's response. Verse 27, And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

To forgive a gazillion pound debt, this man wanted a patient master. What he got was a ludicrously generous master.

[10:47] And that, of course, is Jesus' point. You and I are in debt to God. I mean, if I sin against you, if I steal, I don't know, 10 pounds, well, I can make up for that.

I can pay you back. But to sin against an infinite being is an infinite offense. And you and I have sinned against God, not just once or twice, but all the time.

Every second that I fail to love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, I am adding to that mountain of debt. And I have absolutely no way of paying it off.

Not a year of faithful church attendance, not a decade of sacrificial good works, not a lifetime of nonstop worship could repay my rejection of my loving creator.

Some of us here will know the horrible feeling of being in financial debt. The bills mounting up, the demands arriving.

[11:54] The burden of it dominates every waking moment. But financial debt pales beside the reality of our debt to God.

That debt is far greater and infinitely more serious in its consequences, as verse 25 hints.

And yet here is the wonder. If we belong to Jesus, God has canceled it all, every last penny. And this side of the cross, we know how much that cost God.

As Peter himself put it later, you know that it was not with perishable things that you were redeemed from your empty way of life, but with the precious blood of Christ, chosen before the creation of the world, yet revealed in these last times for your sake.

An infinite debt requires an infinite payment. An infinite life is of infinite value. So when God the Son willingly gives up his life for us, the offering of his life exactly matches our infinite need.

[13:24] See, the gospel is even more wonderful, actually, than this story. For our king doesn't just cancel our debt, he pays it himself by the gift of his Son. That's why, unlike any religion or philosophy, the heart of Christianity is forgiveness.

If you are someone looking into Christian things, trying to work out whether this is for you. Well, the place to start is with this question of forgiveness.

For forgiveness. forgiveness. What do you think God makes of the way that you've lived your life?

Of the way you've treated your loved ones? Of the way you've treated him?

What does your conscience say to you about your moral state? And if you don't come to Jesus for forgiveness, where else are you going to find it?

And for those of us who are Christian believers, well, really, the extent to which we understand what value God has done for us in forgiving our sins is the measure of our progress as disciples.

[14:32] As Jesus puts it elsewhere, if we think we've been forgiven only a little, we'll love only a little. But if we know that we have been forgiven much, then we will love much.

Someone once compared the Christian life to one of those old cutters, those big sailing ships that used to bring the tea round the Cape from India, nice and fresh, as quickly as possible. The reason they could put up so much sail to catch the wind and go so fast was because they had so much heavy ballast down in the bottom of the ship to stop it from being blown over.

And the only way that we will catch the hurricane of God's love for us in Christ is if we have a deep and abiding sense of our own sin and how much we have been forgiven.

It's why, I mean, I don't know if Paul does this every time, but I presume he does. At the start of the service as he was leading us in prayer, he led us in confession of our sins to God. I used to think that was a bit of a gloomy way to start a service with confession.

You know, haven't I already been forgiven? Aren't I already fully justified the moment that I trust in Christ? Well, yes. But though forgiven, I remain a sinner and therefore a debtor.

[15:55] Only no longer a debtor to God's law, obliged to try and do the impossible and earn forgiveness by my obedience. But a debtor to mercy alone.

And weekly, in fact, daily, remembering and meditating on that gospel dynamic of my sin and God's forgiveness is as much the way on with Jesus as it is the way into Jesus.

Which brings us to the second half of Jesus' story and his second point. We've learned what it means is, if you like to pray, forgive us our trespasses. Now Jesus will teach us what it means to pray as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Forgiveness is the heart of all true Christianity. Therefore, forgiveness is the test of all true Christianity. That's the point of his second half of the story.

Forgiveness is the test of all true Christianity. You see, even as we are cheering and applauding the king's generosity in Jesus' story, we're hit with the sucker punch.

[17 : 07] Verse 28, for when that same servant went out, having just had his debt cancelled, 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. So the TV cameras are all lined up outside the debtor's court, the champagne corks are popping, a string of journalists are waiting to ask this chap how it feels, to have had his debt cancelled, but he doesn't even stop to hug his wife, because in the crowd, he spotted a familiar face.

Well, verse 29, his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, have patience with me, and I will pay you back. Ring any bells?

Verse 26, doesn't ring any bells for this guy, though, no. He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

Now, it's worth noting that this second debt is not insubstantial. It's a hundred denarii, which apparently today would be about ten thousand pounds. I'd certainly think twice about writing off a ten thousand pound debt.

[18 : 24] But compared to what he's just been forgiven, and in the light of the fact that this is another servant of the same master, his behavior is as outrageously bad as his master's was kind.

And that's Jesus' point. when I fail to forgive another Christian from the heart, verse 35, whether that's my wife, or my parents, or my sibling, or my previous church, or my minister, or just the person next to me in the pew, then my behavior and attitude is as offensive to God as this unforgiving servant was to his king.

Verse 32, Then his master summoned him and said to him, You wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me, and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?

And in anger, his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt. And then comes Jesus' terrifying punchline, So also my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

It's not that our forgiveness of others earns God's forgiveness of us. No, in the gospel, just as in Jesus' parable, God's forgiveness comes first.

[20 : 08] But Jesus is saying that there is no such thing as an unforgiving Christian. Being forgiven by God changes a person.

If we have been reborn through the message of forgiveness, we will bear the fruit of forgiveness in our lives. If we persist in a refusal to forgive, then whatever we profess to believe, we are not God's children.

any bitterness in my heart towards another Christian, or indeed any person made in God's image, here or elsewhere, is an urgent summons to me to examine my heart and whether I have really come to understand and trust what God has done for me in Christ.

Christ. Here's how Irish missionary Amy Carmichael put it in her extended prose poem, If, based on 1 Corinthians 13. If I have not compassion on my fellow servant, even as my Lord had pity on me, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I know little of his pity, if I know little of his hopefulness for the truly humble and penitent, then I know nothing of Calvary love. If I cast up a confessed, repented, and forsaken sin against another, and allow my remembrance of that sin to colour my thinking and feed my suspicions, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

[21 : 47] If I take offence easily, if I'm content to continue in a cool unfriendliness, though friendship be possible, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

If I say, yes, I forgive, but I cannot forget, as though the God, who twice a day washes all the sands on all the shores of all the world, could not wash such memories from my mind, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

So, in the light of Calvary love, what will it mean for me to start forgiving from the heart? For some, as I ask that question, it will be a particular sin and a particular person that springs to mind, something done to us or said about us that has left deep scars of hurt that we have allowed to fester into the gangrene of bitterness.

For others, it will be a particular relationship here at church or with a relative or spouse. We're still civil to each other, but there's a coolness and distance, because it's easier to tiptoe around each

other than deal with that wall of frustration and criticism and self-justification.

Well, forgiveness is not about pretending that sin doesn't have consequences. If a crime has taken place, that needs to be reported and dealt with by the legal authorities. If abuse has happened, I need to get myself out of that situation.

[23 : 26] And where trust has been destroyed, in a spouse, in a church leader, forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that the marriage lasts or the church leader is reinstated.

And all we can do if we have been sinned against is to offer forgiveness. We're not responsible for how that offer is received, whether reconciliation is achieved.

But, from this parable, here are three marks of genuine heart forgiveness. forgiveness. First, it will be costly.

Sometimes it will feel like forgiving a £10,000 debt. Being sinned against gives us power over another person. It gives us a sense of moral superiority.

And sometimes we enjoy that power so much we don't want to give it up. We love the fact that we can use that grievance as leverage against them. or as an excuse not to get close to them.

[24 : 33] But to forgive someone is consciously to choose to cancel that debt. To absorb into ourselves, if you like, the cost of the sin, rather than making the offender pay and taking it out on them.

That's what Jesus did for us on the cross, isn't it? To forgive someone is to promise not to remind them of their sin as a means of control. as a way of manipulating them for our purposes.

Yes, we can talk about the sin as we seek to learn from it and grow in our relationship together. And yes, we might together decide to go and get help from a third party in processing it.

But we won't bring the offense up to others and use it to tear down our brother and sister. And we won't dwell on the offense ourselves. Heart forgiveness will be costly.

Though not as costly as failing to forgive. Second, it will be continual. Not seven times, but 70 times seven.

[25 : 38] The parable Jesus tells is not so much about a one-off action as an ongoing attitude. I go through life, through marriage, through church, with a bias to let go of resentment, rather than to hold on to it.

Every time I see you or think of you, I am careful to put to death bitterness and to welcome you as a fellow debtor, forgiven and welcomed by Christ.

Yes, that will be a battle, particularly where the hurt has been deep or the bitterness long. But it is a battle I must keep on fighting if I have been forgiven, by God.

But wonderfully, it is not a battle I fight on my own. For thirdly, forgiveness will be Christ in me. That is, I do not have in myself the spiritual or emotional resources to forgive like this.

But Jesus does. We see his heart in this parable, and the king who cancelled the gazillion pound debt, we see it at the cross as he prays, Father, forgive them, and then gives everything that that prayer might be answered.

[26 : 55] And when he forgives us, he also pours out his spirit into our hearts to give us his desire and strength to forgive. forgive. It's a power we can't imagine, actually, before we forgive, when all that fills our mind is the other person's sin.

But it's a power we need to trust, just like Corrie Ten Boom did when she lifted her hand and prayed, Lord, you supply the feeling. And as we trust God's promise and obey his commands, his compassion will soften the scab of bitterness.

It'll soothe the scar of pain. It'll overwhelm the towering barrier of hatred. No, it won't turn the clock back as if the sin had never happened.

In God's grace, it will do something better. It will turn the clock forward. It will deepen our appreciation of God's forgiveness of us and of his spirit's healing power.

And where that forgiveness is accepted, it won't just restore the relationship. It will enrich and deepen it. So who do you need to forgive tonight?

[28 : 16] Or who do you need to go on forgiving? Let's pray.