

The key importance of forgiveness

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[0:00] Jesus is all part of the same argument, perhaps not all said by Jesus at the same time, but Matthew certainly has put it together to make one coherent argument of it and we shouldn't divorce this last passage from what has gone before which is why I thought we needed to read at least from verse 10.

But there is a shift of focus here. We heard first of all about the lost sheep and we read and we were hearing last week about what to do if somebody sins against us.

But now there is a change of focus. One might ask the question, well what about the other 99 sheep? Don't the other 99 sheep have a legitimate beef? Don't they have a genuine grievance? After all, while the shepherd was off looking for the miscreant, they weren't getting fed, were they? They weren't getting looked after.

And there's a change here. Here Matthew turns attention not to the perpetrator of the misdeed, but to the victim of it, the person who has sinned against.

[1:28] And I want to particularly draw your attention to the fact that this passage of scripture is about relationships between those within the kingdom community.

Peter says so in verse 21, doesn't he? He says, if my brother sins against me. And you'll notice that that's what Jesus picks up in verse 35.

The father will not forgive you if you do not forgive your brother. So this passage here is closely related to what's gone before. And it is about forgiveness in relationships within the community of the kingdom.

Now, of course, there is an issue of forgiving those outside the kingdom who hurt us. And after all, as we were just sung kind of in that hymn, Jesus himself prayed for those who crucified him and said, they do not know what they do.

Father, forgive them for they do not know what they're doing. So there is an issue, of course, of forgiving those outside the kingdom who do some harm to us or some hurt to us.

[2:39] But that is not what we're talking about here. What we're talking about here are specifically relationships within the kingdom community.

And as I say, that's the question Peter asks, verse 21. And that's the question Jesus answers in verse 35. Peter's question is quite specific.

So let's think hypothetically that perhaps some brother or sister in the church has been spreading malicious gossip about you.

Said something unkind or untrue. And you go through that procedure that Jesus has set out in the previous passage. You go and speak to this person and say, you know, that really wasn't the right thing to say.

That really wasn't kind. And the person says, yes, you're right. I'm sorry. I won't do it again. And you've gained your brother, as Jesus puts it.

[3:58] What is your response to me to that? Well, Peter at least understood that much. You were supposed to forgive and forget. But of course, we're all weak.

And the sins we commit and repent of on one week, we've quite often forgotten about a week later. And suppose that we find that one week later that that same person is doing exactly the same thing. Has fallen into that trap again and again said something unkind and malicious or untrue. So what do we do? Do we go through it all again and forgive them again?

And can we keep on doing that? The Bible scholars tell us that the rabbis recommended that you should forgive your fellow Jew three times.

So Peter, in suggesting seven times, obviously thought he was on to a winner. After all, seven is the divine number, the number of divine completeness, isn't it?

[5:08] So he said, surely seven times is going to be enough here. But Jesus disagrees, doesn't he? In fact, the point that Jesus is making is you can't reduce forgiveness to arithmetic.

It just doesn't work like that. Translators argue whether he advocates 77 times or 70 times 7, which is, of course, 490 times.

But of course, that's not the point anyway. It doesn't matter. The point is that it's too many to count. And in fact, you shouldn't be keeping that account at all.

It's the point that Jesus is really making here. In fact, if you have, if you are keeping track, have you really forgiven that person at all?

Presumably not, really. Not from your heart. And then Jesus goes on to say, well, if you must reduce forgiveness to a matter of accounting and arithmetic, then you better get the calculation right.

[6:20] Because you better compare how much the Lord, how much God has forgiven you against that minor infringement that your brother or sister has made against you.

Your calculation needs to be weighted by the size of the debt. Otherwise, it won't make sense at all. And so Jesus tells this famous parable.

And it's not really a difficult parable to understand, is it? I mean, actually, the story is completely over the top. The main point is set out with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

Anyone can see the foolishness of that unmerciful servant. Yet, actually, there are some subtleties here in this story that deserve close attention to get the full force of it.

So I would like to look at this parable in a little bit more detail and to see the things that we can learn from it. I'm not going to spend a long time. It should be quite brief this evening, in fact. But it is worth looking into this parable in a little bit more detail.

[7:29] So I want to look at these three headings. First of all, the imbalance of the debt. And secondly, something that you may not immediately have spotted, the way that the punishment is escalated through the story.

And then, thirdly, heart forgiveness. What is it and how do we get it? So first of all, the imbalance of the debt.

That's the first and the most obvious point. And yet, this is where the Pharisees were going wrong, weren't they? They were so confident of their own rightness that they were very comfortable in making unforgiving judgments about others.

Well, that was 2,000 years ago. But far too often, this way of thinking creeps into the church as well, doesn't it? It affects all shades of Christianity.

And in fact, as that Charles Wesley hymn suggests, often the divisions within the church actually encourage this holier-than-thou attitude. We think, well, we're the ones who are doctrinally orthodox and morally upright.

[8:41] We stand for moral rectitude and firmly on the basis of truth. And of course, those are right things to do. But when we start making these things an excuse to raise ourselves up and put others down, then we've fallen into the same trap as Peter, haven't we?

And why does this happen? Well, it's because it's a natural way for humans to think.

And I'm sure when we read this parable, if you're familiar with the Gospels, our minds turn to that other parable that Jesus taught. It's actually in Luke 18.

I'm not going to look it up, but I'll just remind you briefly of the story. The story there is of a Pharisee who went into the temple and prayed, God, I thank you, I'm not like other men.

And then he went on and listed all the great things he did, all the good things he did, all his good deeds. But then Jesus says a tax collector, a despised Roman collaborator, went into the temple also and prayed, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

[9:55] And the point Jesus makes, of course, whose prayer was it that God accepted? It was that of the tax collector. He was the one who went home justified before God.

Of course, there's the old story, isn't there, of the Sunday school teacher who had been teaching that parable to her class. And then she advised her children, and now let's thank God that we're not like that Pharisee.

We so easily do it, don't we? You can all see yourself doing that. It's so easy to blame other people. So easily we slip into thinking that way. But instead, we should be thanking God that we are like that tax collector, shouldn't we? The chief of sinners, saved not by a list of good deeds that we can recite, but by grace alone and through the death of Christ.

So in Matthew 18.24, going back to our passage, we get this ridiculously large debt, don't we? This is debt on a national scale. Some commentators suggested that's actually what it was, that this was perhaps a governor of some region who had not collected the taxes properly and owed the king large amounts of money.

[11:19] But whatever the details of the story are meant to be, this is an absurd debt. I mean, the man says that, if you give me time, I'll pay it.

But actually, of course, that was totally unrealistic. There was absolutely no way he was ever going to be able to pay it back. No way could this amount ever be repaid.

And even if the king had carried out his threat and sold the man and his family into slavery, the amount they'd get for that was never going to cover the debt. It was just ridiculous.

And we get, by contrast, don't we, the amount the foolish servant that was owed in verse 28? A fiver, a tenner, a ridiculously small amount.

It probably would get repaid. And even if it wasn't, it hardly mattered. And I say the point really is obvious, isn't it?

[12:27] I hesitate to belabor it because it's so obvious. If you've come to God with the words of the tax collector, God have mercy on me, a sinner, then you will understand that anything a brother or sister might have against you is negligible by comparison to what God has forgiven you.

But there's also something interesting and not quite as obvious about this parable, which we might actually miss.

What is it that God thinks is really reprehensible? Well, we could perhaps measure that by the escalation of the punishment that we get here. We've already noted the king's original judgment was hardly adequate.

Of course, we're slightly skewed by our modern perception of slavery as being a terrible thing, which of course it is. But actually, being sold into slavery in Roman times was not such a horrendous thing.

You at least weren't in jail. You still had a certain amount of freedom. You had some legal protections, if not many. And certainly, there was often the hope that you might be released again at some point.

[13:40] You might gain your freedom. That was often the case, that a master whose slave had served them well would actually free them. So actually, that original punishment, although it was a terrible thing, was not perhaps quite as terrible as some of the other things that we read of later.

The family, as I said, would be fed and housed as opposed to going, having no food and nowhere to live. And there was a real prospect of regaining their freedom.

But the amount raised was never going to cover the amount owed. The sum simply doesn't balance. And yet, even this relatively light penalty, we find, is not enforced in verse 27.

But the real problem, of course, is in the servant's plea. He is not asked to be forgiven because he can't pay, but rather he made the rather unrealistic claim that he would and could pay if he was given time.

In spite of what the king says at the end, actually, the servant had not said, I just can't do this. You'll have to let me off. He actually said, give me time and I would pay.

[15:02] Totally unrealistic. There was no way that he was ever going to be able to pay back this enormous debt. In fact, that servant himself has not appreciated the size of his problem.

And if he had, perhaps he would have acted differently later. So let's compare now with the response of this servant to his fellow who, say, owns him a tenor or so.

What does he do? Verse 28, he resorts to physical violence. Grabs him by the neck and starts choking him. And then, as you realise that if the guy is dead, he's never going to get his money back.

He instead throws him into prison. Verse 30. And so the true state of heart and mind of that unmerciful servant is made clear to everyone.

Everybody can see it. Verse 31 and 32. Everybody who sees what's happened immediately concludes, this is wrong. This is just completely wrong.

[16:15] So after all, a man can get into debt through not much fault of his own. Perhaps just being a little unwise or uncareful or being scammed by somebody. Perhaps getting into debt is not such a terrible thing in one sense.

But there's no excuse at all for this man's attitude, is there? That is sheer wickedness. And you'll notice, as I say, the punishment gets escalated.

The judgment of the king, because of that, is so much more severe. The judgment for this man's unforgiving heart is much more severe than the original judgment for the dead.

And the translation is accurate. That's what the Greek says. The man is handed over to the jailers to be tortured, to be put to suffer. He gets what he would have paid his fellow servant.

Our minds go again to that, back to the Lord's Prayer, don't they? And that one, there's only one clause of the Lord's Prayer that has a condition attached. And that's the one that says, forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.

[17:30] Matthew 6, verse 12, and a couple of verses later, Jesus, that's the line of it that Jesus comments in. You thought he might have commented on some of the others, your kingdom come, your will be done.

But the actual line of it that Jesus particularly comments on is in verse 14 to 15, is that one.

Because Jesus says, if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. That's the one thing that Jesus says you've really got to appreciate from the Lord's Prayer.

This is a vitally important thing. That condition matters. Forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors. forgiveness. And so this unmerciful servant has to make full repayment and is put into suffering for his terrible wickedness.

So let's think now a little bit about heart forgiveness. I'm not going to be long this evening, but it's worth thinking about what heart forgiveness is.

[18:50] And I want to say at this point, it's important here that we do not divorce this parable from what has gone before. If we just had just read verses 25 to 35 and forgotten what had gone before, we might think that Jesus is talking about ignoring sin or ignoring trespasses.

But it's worth making the point that forgiveness is not the same thing as tolerance. They can be, they're often confused aren't they?

Certainly by the world. But forgiveness is not the same thing as tolerance. And as Ben so ably was, no, sorry, it was Aaron last week and I said Ben, was it Aaron last week?

Yes, it was Ben last week, sorry, yes. Ben so ably was telling us last week that we're not supposed to tolerate sin in the church.

That's what the previous passage is about. What is it? What is it? What is it? What is it? What is it? What is it? What is it? Why? Why? Why? Because sin spreads like a cancer, doesn't it?

[19:57] If we tolerate sin, then other people will say, well, this is fine. He does that, so why can't I behave the same way? So forgiveness is not a matter of tolerance, it's not a matter of ignoring things that people have done against us.

sometimes it may, one may say, well, this is such a trivial thing that one is probably better just ignored, and one may be able to forgive without that, but it's not, forgiveness does not necessarily mean that you simply sweep the offence under the carpet, because it might be a serious problem, something that needs dealing with.

And indeed, we see that even in this parable, in this parable, don't we? What about those other servants that we read about in verse 31? They weren't tolerant at all, were they?

They didn't say, oh, well, he shouldn't really have done that, but, you know, let's just ignore it, let's just forgive him for treating his fellow servants so badly. No, those fellow servants say, this is wrong, this is something that needs dealing with.

And it can't just be left to, you know, just be swept under the carpet. Forgiveness is not tolerance. [21:27] But in that case, what is forgiveness? Well, I would suggest to you that forgiveness is primarily relational. I know it's a trendy word at the moment, relational.

but it is the right word. Forgiveness is about relationships between people and in particular, as I say, we're looking here, relationships within the kingdom community.

It's about restoring that relationship of love which has been damaged by the trespass, by the sin, by the fault. and in particular, it requires that relationship to be renewed unconditionally.

We can't keep accounts as if Peter was trying to do. We can't. We need to forgive as if the trespass had never happened.

I'll say a little bit more about that in a minute, because there is a caveat to that. But, as far as the actual relationship is concerned, it should be as though it's never happened.

[22:41] And so Peter's question completely misses the point. Forgiveness, in fact, refuses to keep a record of things done against us. And that reminds us, doesn't it, of those words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.

Let me read those lines to you. Love is not rude. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs.

Love is forgiving, in other words. It doesn't delight in evil. It doesn't say, oh, well, you know, it doesn't matter.

But it rejoices with the truth. It rejoices when things are put right. But it requires patience.

And so Paul goes on to say, it always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

[23:46] It doesn't give up. You may forgive 70 times, seven times, but it's worth going for the 491.

love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. So forgiveness can never be a matter of accounting, because if you're keeping an account, you're not truly forgiven.

forgiven. But this isn't an easy thing, is it?

How do we get this forgiveness? That, of course, is really what this parable is trying to tell us. How can we be intolerant about sin, as we're supposed to be, in verse 15?

And how can we even be wise about what our brothers and sisters are capable of? And we know that because they're like us, and we're sinners. And yet unconditionally forgiving in our relationships, in verse 22.

[24:59] And this parable gives us the key. And of course, it's in verse 32 33. The master called the servant in. You wicked servant, he said.

I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you? If we really grasp what God has forgiven us, then forgiving others would not be so much of a problem.

At least it shouldn't be. it's because that servant didn't realise what he'd been forgiven, what he'd been let off, that his heart was not changed. He wasn't really penitent.

He wasn't really coming to the king trusting in his grace. So heart forgiveness proceeds from the understanding that we're all in the same leaky boat. We must all struggle together to keep afloat.

It's not a matter of saying my bit of deck is polished a bit better than your bit of deck. It's a matter of saying all hands to the pumps or the ship goes down. We all need to be working on our relationships.

[26:12] We all need to be forgiving one another because if not, we'll all come apart and the ship will go down. The church of Jesus Christ consists of all those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

But let me remind you of this, that every name recorded there is registered as a certified sinner. There's no point in doing a DPS check with that record because I can tell you it will come back guilty.

And yet through the grace of God and the death of Christ what verdict does the judge pronounce? there's nothing remaining to pay.

I've cancelled that debt. There's nothing to pay. I think it's perhaps worth just stopping for a minute and looking at one issue of how that might work in practice.

I mean safeguarding is all the rage at the moment. We all dislike it but we all realise it's something we've got to do. it's right to have a safeguarding policy and more than just as it relates to children. [27:35] After all in a sense what Jesus has just been talking about in the previous passage is a safeguarding policy to prevent the effects of sin being ignored and just to say growing like a cancer.

And churches sometimes in this respect have confused tolerance with restoring relationships haven't they? They've said oh well this child has been abused but we'll tolerate it we don't want to rock the boat we don't want to show that person up as being a sinner so we'll tolerate it.

We're not supposed to do that. In fact the church demands far higher standards than anything our legal system requires. Our legal system says you've just never been checked that you've never been convicted of paedophilia but what the church requires is something much more responsible than that.

A complete giving up of self to care for those who are under our care in whatever way it is. and I think it's worth saying sometimes of course it is unwise to forget the past entirely because that might just point to a weakness and somebody that might cop up again might put them into temptation. I mean if somebody has struggled with relationships with children in the past it's probably not very sensible to put them in charge of the Sunday school because that's just going to lead them into temptation.

[29:28] But what you could do if they truly repented is put them in charge of a group of people who are dealing with similar issues and say you know this is how the Lord has helped me to deal with that.

Perhaps the Lord can help you also. So it's not right to neglect the past entirely because as I say that may be simply unwise it may be putting people back into temptation but the relationship should be restored.

That's the important thing that the relationships within God's people should be restored.

Forgiveness doesn't require a foolhardy trust but rather it is based on a clear sighted appreciation of our shared human weakness.

If something's going to lead us into temptation if somebody's going to stand up here and preach the word of God just to show how clever they are or to do it for money or whatever no better reason than that is leading them into temptation and if we find that's happening then that person should not be invited to preach again.

We all have that shared human weakness. We all struggle with these things. Some of us perhaps struggle with some things more than others but we all as I say if you do a DBS check in the record in heaven it always comes back guilty and yet the verdict of the judge is that there is nothing remaining to pay.

[31:30] Such a clear sighted policy can only be on the basis of there but for the grace of God go I. And to remember that whatever wrong any of us has done to our fellow man the wrong we've done to our heavenly father is far worse.

as Ben was pointing out this morning. So we'll finish and I don't want to go on for a long time. It's a short parable and a very clear one really.

But I'll ask the question does Peter's question still seem relevant to you? Because if it does perhaps you've not understood this parable simple though it is.

it's just asking the wrong question isn't it? Because it means Peter had not understood really what forgiveness was about.

And if we still incline to ask that question then perhaps we haven't understood what forgiveness is about either. So we need to remind ourselves that not seven 77 times not seven times 70 not even 70 times 70 times 70 times there can be no account because there can be no balance.

[33:02] And this is very important. The title that Phil gave me was the key importance of forgiveness. And it is key isn't it? Because I've already pointed out how that's the one thing in the Lord's Prayer that Jesus himself comments on.

And what does he say here in verse 35? He repeats that same thought doesn't he? He says this is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart. So we need to work at forgiveness and the way to do it is the way this parable tells us to just to remind ourselves that we've been forgiven far more than anything anybody owes to us. So let's not think like Peter. Instead let's sing 824. Four.