

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sermon 13 September 2020 11.00am
Richard Shepley

Matthew 18: 21-35

Forgiveness

When Jesus was a teenager, I wonder if Joseph ever felt the need to say to him, "Jesus, I've told you a million times, Stop Exaggerating!"

If he did, it fell on deaf ears. Why do I say that? Well, let's dig down a bit into the reading.

In the parable, let's call him the Wicked Slave owes the King 10,000 talents?

Does anyone here know how much that is?

A denarius was about a day's wage. In today's terms, based on the minimum wage, that's £8.72. x 7.5 hours a day = £65.40.

There are 6,000 denarii in a talent. £65.40 x 6,000 = £392,000. The debt is 10,000 talents = rounding it up a little, that's 4 billion quid.

How many slaves (wicked or not) could run up a debt of £4 billion?

Jesus is exaggerating. And realising that helps us to get our heads around another rather unsettling part of the parable. Did you notice at the end, the King 'handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.'

Now I'm no expert, but torturing someone non-stop doesn't seem a very realistic way of get a debt repaid.

It's not. And again, Jesus is exaggerating to make the point.

So what *is* the point?

Jesus is saying that forgiveness is uncountable. There is no maximum. Not 7 times, not actually 490 times. If you are keeping track, it is not really forgiveness at all: keeping track simply means that you are waiting for your neighbour to cross some line.

We should keep on keeping on forgiving.

But Jesus later attaches a condition to being forgiven.

Jane is a friend of ours. She is a retired Anglican priest and was for many years the Chaplain at New Hall Women's Prison near Wakefield. One day she said to me, 'We never used the Lord's Prayer in the Chapel services.' I asked her, 'Why not?'

She explained that many of the women there found it impossible to forgive the men who were the reason that they were in prison. Men who had regularly beaten them up, raped them, used them as prostitutes or drug mules. Men who had controlled and destroyed their lives.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray, 'Forgive us our sins, **as we forgive those who sin against us**'. For most of us that may not be a stumbling block, but for others it is a mountain to climb. The ability to forgive does not always come easily. It sometimes may be almost impossible.

So where does that leave us?

God's love is unconditional. Perhaps for some of us – like those women - all we can say for now is, 'Lord, I **want** to forgive.' Or even, 'Lord I **want** to be able to **want** to forgive.' And that surely is enough for God?

A sketch was inserted here about the Wicked Slave and the King. They meet in an alleyway where the King explains that he is sweeping the streets because he has to make up the money that he has forgiven the slave. It is absurd as is the whole parable because the debt is £4 billion.

What about the idea of the King sweeping the streets to pay off the debt? The idea isn't mine. David Watson, an amazing Anglican preacher and evangelist told the story many years ago.

And it had a deep effect on me.

Because I always thought that by saying, "I forgive you", to anyone who had wronged me, what I meant was, 'It's OK, it doesn't matter.'

This story made me realise that what I **actually** meant was, 'It's OK. it **does** matter. But I'll pay.'

That is the key message of this parable.

For a King to have to forgive a slave £4 billion is ridiculous. But the parable is there to make us think at a higher level. What if the king in the parable is our Creator God, the King of Kings, and the debt is . . . The debt is what?

Many years ago, I visited the home of the Cansdale family. In Victorian times, they were prominent in Evangelical Anglican circles. I was there for an 'awayday' as a member of All Soul's Langham Place Church Council.

The family allowed us to look round the principal rooms of their house, and I was particularly taken by the dinner service displayed on shelves in the dining room.

The middles of all the plates and bowls had 'improving' bible verses printed on them.

I thought at the time that it must have been rather alarming to be a dinner guest there. You are calmly slurping the Mock Turtle Soup, when, as the level of the liquid goes down to reveal the bottom of the dish, you are confronted with the words, **'The wages of sin is DEATH'**.

You panic. 'What on earth have they fed me?'

After calming down a bit, the Victorian dinner guest may have thought, 'Why isn't it, the wages of sin ARE death?' Good question.

But a better question and more relevant might be, 'Why? Why do the wages of sin have to be death?'

I suppose it depends on what Death means.

Death in this sense, is what? Not physical death. No. Death is separation from God, and from all those qualities that are of God; love, generosity, peace, justice, compassion, joy etc.

Death is anything that is **not** of God, that is not Godly. So, selfishness, greed, injustice, hatred, jealousy.

Those things can be no more of God than a rotting carcase can be a course in a royal banquet.

We ask God to forgive us. In our minds it's easy. 'It's OK, it doesn't matter.'

No, it does matter. It can't be ignored or just brushed under some celestial carpet. It is real.

Here is how God deals with it.

1 Peter 2:24. He *himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*

It's a kind of divine transaction of total love within the Trinity.

John in his gospel puts it like this, "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.*"

That is why 'the wages of sin is death'.

That is why, as the parable says, when the King of Love forgives our debts, he is saying, 'I'll pay.'

That's the meaning of the parable.

And so is that what happened on the cross?

Well, not really. I don't think it is. A parable is a story that helps us to understand something more about our God. But it can only go so far.

I would say the same about the meaning of the cross.

We have so many ideas and teachings from St Paul, to St Augustine to Martin Luther to John Wesley. Their teachings are pictures that may contain or help us to appreciate the truth more.

But they cannot really explain Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

That is a divine secret still to be revealed.

Charles Wesley agreed with me, as can be seen when he asked this question, '*How can it be, That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*'

And then answered it, '*Tis mystery all. The immortal dies. Who can explore his strange design.*'

It's a mystery yet to be revealed. Only when, as Charles Wesley also said, 'boldly I approach the eternal throne' (and there's another picture) will I really understand how (Wesley again) 'my God could die for me'.

Finally, let's think about **our** forgiving others.

It maybe that someone has betrayed a secret about me, or maligned my reputation, or even deliberately physically or psychologically wounded me. It may be hard for me to forgive them.

But here's the rub, forgive or not, I'll pay anyway - one way or another.

Because if I don't forgive, I will continue to carry resentment. And that will eat me up with bitterness and anger, and destroy my peace.

If I **can** forgive, I'll be free of that burden.

Knowing that we are forgiven and being forgiving ourselves is joy, liberty and a blessing.