

Matthew 18: 23-35

Just prior to Jesus telling this parable, Peter had been asking him about forgiveness. The teaching in Judaism at the time (Amos 2:3, 2:6, Job 33:29, 30) was that three times was enough to show a forgiving spirit. Peter's question (Matthew 18: 21), seems to be in line with this teaching. He was wondering how many times he should forgive a person who repeatedly sins against him.

Peter offers to forgive a person seven times seven wondering where the line should be drawn on forgiveness. Jesus astonishing response would have stopped everyone in their tracks. "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18: 22). It appears that Jesus is saying the number doesn't matter but that the disciples are to continue to forgive without keeping count.

Then Jesus tells our parable to reinforce forgiveness. Jesus describes what forgiveness is like for those who have entered his Kingdom. That Kingdom is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. The first servant is in huge debt to a King. Scholars tell us that it is difficult to say exactly the amount but it could have been in today's equivalent, hundreds of millions of dollars. Certainly, it could never be paid off in the servant's life time.

Since this servant owes this astronomical amount, he and his family are to be sold into slavery to repay the debt. This was a common practice in the ancient world. This was more about punishment as the debt could never be repaid. The servant begs for the King's mercy and the King responds by cancelling his debt and letting him go (Matthew 18: 27).

Here we see the King's lavish grace in forgiving debts. The King's behaviour leads to the central focus of this first part of the parable. The King displays his enormous grace towards the servant. Clearly this behaviour depicts God's grace in forgiving our sins, even if they are enormous in God's eyes. There is no way in the world that we can ever repay God for what he has done for us. We must rely on his grace alone.

In the next scene we see the servant who has been forgiven approached by a fellow servant who owes him money. Scholars tell us that this was around four thousand dollars, today's equivalent. This is a mere pittance in terms of the millions of dollars that the first servant owed. However, instead of acting with the same compassion and grace the forgiven servant grabbed him and began choking him (Matthew 18: 28). He throws him into debtors' prison which was far worse than the King threatened and made repayment of the debt impossible. The ungrateful servant cannot get away with this treachery because other servants of the King are grieved when they see the unfair treatment and they tell the King (Matthew 18:31).

This part of the parable deals with the absurdity of spurning grace. The treatment of the second servant forms the heart of the entire scene. Almost as unimaginable as the King's forgiveness is the first servant's response, completely devoid of grace and compassion.

The true nature of the servant is revealed and he is called wicked. The King asks the wicked servant, "*Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?*" (Matthew 18:33).

The mercy and compassion shown to the first servant should have impacted his life and values. Instead, his wicked behaviour has come to light. Now he will receive the punishment that he deserved in the first place.

I remember as a young pastor going to a small group to lead a Bible study on forgiveness. Afterwards over a cup of tea I sat next to a woman who I will call Michelle. This is of course is not her real name. She turned and looked at me and before she spoke, I could tell from her body language and the look in her eyes that this was not going to be a sweet conversation. “You don’t know my father”, she said full of aggression. “He was horrible to me, he wouldn’t let me see any friends, he was the most controlling person I know and he turned to physical violence to rein me in” as he put it. “I will never forgive him, never, ever forgive him”.

I left the group quite distressed. Over the next day, I felt a spiritual heaviness from this interaction with Michelle. It was an awful feeling. I asked God to take this away. He told me that it was Michelle’s unforgiveness permeating my spirit. Over the next twenty-four hours it slowly lifted. I remember thinking, how could anyone keep carrying this unforgiveness. I had felt the weight of Michelle’s unforgiveness. This weight will darken your heart and crush your spirit.

The third part of the parable deals with the frightful fate awaiting the unforgiving. Now, we see the other side of the King as well. He can lavish his love upon us but he can also unleash righteous anger and punishment. The logic is clear. How can the servant who was forgiven a huge debt then turn around and refuse to show the same kind of mercy towards another. In telling this story Jesus intend to enrage his audience.

He is handed over to the “torturers”, that is, the debtor’s prison who not only guarded the prisoners but tortured them as well. Since it would be impossible for the servant to repay the vast amounts owed, the scene concludes with the grim reality that he will experience punishment forever.

D.A Carson in his commentary on Matthew captures this well, “Jesus sees no incongruity in the actions of a heavenly father who forgives so bountifully and punished so ruthlessly and neither should we. Indeed, it is precisely because he is a God of such mercy that he cannot possibly accept as his those devoid of compassion and mercy”.ⁱ

The parables principle is to be found in verse thirty -five, *“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”* This reinforces a central principle of the kind of Kingdom life that Jesus has inaugurated. A person who has truly experienced the mercy and forgiveness of God will have a transformed heart that produces a changed life that gives the very same mercy and forgiveness that they have themselves received from God.

Such a transformation will be evident in the words and actions of a Christian. A person who has not truly experienced God’s grace and mercy will not experience forgiveness. They will act like the first servant, take all the benefits possible but will lead a very superficial life. Such a person will experience eternal condemnation. Jesus’ disciples must be forgiving to others. As it is through God’s grace and mercy, they have experienced his forgiveness.

Jesus has already said something quite similar in the Gospel of Matthew which his disciples may have remembered. After giving the Lord’s prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares, ¹⁴*For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive others their sins, your father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6: 14-15).*

One chapter later in this great sermon, Jesus goes onto explain, ²¹*“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²²Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and, in your name, perform many miracles?’ ²³Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ (Matthew 7: 21-23).* It’s important to note that Jesus does not say, “I no longer know you”, or “you lost your salvation” but rather, “I never knew you”. You were never truly one of my followers.

First John seems to reinforce this perspective. As John analyses what went wrong when certain false teachers left his churches in and around Ephesus at the end of the first century, he writes, ¹⁹*They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us (1 John 2:19).*

It’s important to distinguish between those who are struggling with forgiveness but keep on trying and those who have given up and have hardened their hearts. Some know that they need to forgive. They may even want to, but find it very difficult to forgive. Here, they may need the help of Christian friends and even professional counsellors to truly forgive people who have deeply wounded them. What I am talking about here is an attitude that doesn’t even care, that absolutely refuses to forgive as was the case with my story about Michelle.

This parable had a profound impact on the disciples and Peter would go on to write: ⁹*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10).*

Forgiveness begins the journey to reconciliation. However, as Perkins and Tarrant note: *“God expects us to value our brothers and sisters the way the he does.... I see it not as an option but as an integral part of the Gospel. I also see reconciliation as something that takes time. The divisions in our country are deep ones. We have deep wounds that have not yet begun to heal. We have hurts and resentments that have never been dealt with. It will require time, patience and perseverance to overcome these obstacles”.*ⁱⁱ

These authors were writing about America in nineteen ninety-four. I cannot help but wonder if their sentiment could speak to us in New Zealand today about reconciliation.

ⁱ D. A. Carson, “Matthew”, in *Expositors Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); 407.

ⁱⁱ John Perkins and Thomas, A Tarrants III, with David Wimbush, *He’s My Brother: Former Racial Foes Offer Strategy for Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, 1994).