

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 55”

Matthew 18:21-35

Last week, you may recall, we looked at the section of this chapter which comes before the passage we’ve just read and talked about the guidelines Jesus gave for dealing with difficulties in relationships within the church. I gave a purely hypothetical example of the kind of exchange that might take place between two people who had a bit of a grudge – and I said it was fictitious. But people still assumed, somehow, that it had actually taken place at the Manse and Sally and I were both very disappointed by the response. In fact, she hasn’t spoken to me all week because I mentioned it. But thank you for your prayers anyway! We’ll forgive you.

And that’s what this passage is all about: forgiveness. Jesus has talked about sorting out any differences and difficulties that there might be between people within the Kingdom community and the need for openness and honesty in confronting the issues. Clearly, once the matter has been discussed and the appropriate action taken, there is a need for forgiveness. As we heard last week, that doesn’t mean that whatever was done wrong didn’t matter or didn’t hurt, but if we are to move on then there needs to be that attempt at reconciliation, and forgiveness is a crucial element in that.

So after Jesus has spoken, Peter speaks up, as usual, and says, “OK. We’re supposed to forgive. But how many times do we let that go on? As many as seven?” Maybe he had an issue with someone who kept causing him bother. Now the rabbis, in their usual prescriptive way, had set down some guidelines for this and they said that you could forgive someone up to three times but after that there was to be no forgiveness. So Peter obviously thinks he being very magnanimous here. But Jesus replies, “No. Seventy-seven times.” There’s a bit of dispute among scholars as to whether it was seventy-seven times or seventy times seven – which is 490 – but, as Dick France writes, “*to be concerned as to whether the figure is 77 or 490 is to return to the pedantic calculation which Jesus rejects!*”

What Jesus means is that you should forgive times without number. The French use 36 as a kind of indeterminate number and we have that wonderful “umpteenth” that we often use. There is no limit to the times you should offer forgiveness to those who have wronged you. And the number 77 is almost certainly the correct one, because this probably has a reference back to *Genesis 4:24* where there is talk of unlimited revenge that Lamech swears to exact on someone who has wounded him. Tom Wright translates this as “*Don’t even think about counting: just do it.*” And it is, indeed, a challenge for us, isn’t it? We find it very difficult to deal with those who have hurt us or harmed us in any way. Jesus knew that. He was human and he’d been around other humans for long enough to know the kind of things that get to us. So to help us understand the imperative to forgive he tells a story.

A king is sorting out his accounts and he calls his servants to him to go through what is owed. These servants are probably bureaucrats and civil servants, given the sums of money involved. One of them has run up a debt of 10,000 talents. Now, don't forget, this is a story and there is a fair bit of hyperbole involved, as always. Ten thousand was the largest number ever used in accounting and a talent was the largest unit of currency at the time. A talent represented about 15 years salary for a worker in those days, so (assuming one or two things about average wages and so on), I reckon in today's money we're talking about a debt of around £3 billion. According to Josephus, who was not writing about this parable, that kind of money was more than the annual budget of five or six Roman provinces put together at that time. This was a huge debt. He'd have had to have taken out a large payday loan or a big loan from Wonga to rack up that kind of debt. It's more like an IMF loan. It may well have been embezzlement. Whatever the explanation – and as this is a story relying on exaggeration, we don't really need to look for one – this is a huge amount of money that he owes.

The king threatens to get some of his money back (he could never have recouped the whole amount) by selling the man and his entire family into slavery – a kind of bonded labour that is still practised in some parts of the world today. But the servant pleads with his master and his plea touches the king's heart. He “*takes pity*” on him – it's the same word we've come across before referring to Jesus: a “gut-wrenching compassion” (9:46; 14:14; 15:32) – and doesn't just give him time to pay (again, an impossible solution) but writes off the debt completely. The relieved and elated servant goes off to get on with his work.

As he does so he meets a colleague who owes him some money – maybe lent to him out of the huge amount he has had off the king. This colleague owes him 100 denarii. A denarius was a day's wage for a worker then, so, again doing some rough calculations, the debt is around £7,700. It is not insignificant, but it is trivial in comparison with the debt that the first servant has just been forgiven. [William Barclay quotes someone called Kennedy who says that if they were paid in sixpences, the 100 denarii debt could be carried in one pocket. The 10,000 talent debt would take 8,600 people, each carrying a sack of sixpences weighing 27 kilos, a queue of around 5 miles.] And the servant wants his money. Now remember, the king has not made this man rich. Writing off the debt has simply given him a clean slate. But this man has obviously grown used to having a large amount of money and living it up on this borrowed credit. He needs to maintain his lifestyle, so he has to ensure he gets all the money he can. So he really goes to town on his colleague, despite his pleading, and insists that he pays up, even getting a court order to have him jailed.

But you can't keep behaviour like that quiet and more of the servant's colleagues get to hear about what he's done. They are understandably outraged – and that outrage may well have been fuelled partly by jealousy at the way the servant had been forgiven his debt – but they have a keen sense of injustice. So

they go to the king and tell him what has happened. Naturally, the king is incensed and calls the servant back and berates him for his lack of mercy considering the mercy that has been shown to him. This time there is no such compassion shown and the servant is handed over the torturers “*until he should pay back all he owed.*” That initially seems a bit of a daft idea. If he’s being tortured, how on earth is he going to get the money together to pay up? But it was apparently common practice as torture might lead to a disclosure of where money was hidden or, more likely, might cause his friends and family to cough up some of the money that was owed.

An interesting story: but what point is Jesus making here? Well, the servant wouldn’t forgive his colleague the debt. It was significant (about four months’ wages), but it was nothing like the debt he himself had been forgiven. Jesus is saying that things happen to us which matter, which are significant, which do hurt us – but just think what God has forgiven you, and at what cost.

The Bible is clear, over and over again, that we are all sinners: no-one is immune from that propensity to do and say wrong things and to harbour attitudes which are quite contrary to what God expects of us. You may be sitting there thinking that doesn’t apply to you: you’re not much of a sinner. But I bet you can think of two or three things you said or did yesterday that you realise now you shouldn’t have done – a hasty word, a secret action, an unkind thought. If you can think of only three, you’re probably on the way to being declared a saint! But even three sins a day becomes 21 sins a week, over a thousand a year, getting on for 80,000 in a lifetime. And some of those will almost certainly be serious.

God has forgiven those sins. The death of Jesus on the cross – which we are remembering here this morning – means that every one of those sins can be forgiven if you want them to be. And there is no sin that cannot be forgiven, nothing so serious that God cannot, in his immense mercy, wipe the slate clean and let you start all over again. We ask God for his forgiveness each Sunday as part of our worship – even if only in a couple of lines from the Lord’s Prayer – and many of us ask daily for his forgiveness. Despite what we have done and the repeated regularity with which we do it, God forgives us as we plead with him.

So, Jesus says, God has forgiven you all that. The slate is wiped clean. The things you have done which have saddened and hurt him – over and over again, maybe 80,000 times – have been dealt with. Your relationship with him is being constantly renewed. Why can’t you “*forgive your brother from your heart*”? That one thing someone has done to you, which may, indeed be significant and has really hurt you, is still a drop in the ocean compared with what you have been forgiven. Even if someone has repeatedly hurt you – seventy-seven times or more – it’s as nothing in the light of what you have done that has offended God. How can you accept the mercy and forgiveness of God and then refuse to offer

forgiveness to those who have wronged you? How can you call yourself a follower of Jesus, who gave his life for you on the cross, and yet bear a grudge against another person?

In fact, says Jesus in conclusion, if you can't or won't forgive others, why on earth should God bother with you (v35)? He's said it before, of course. If you look back to the *Sermon On The Mount*, you'll find these words in *Matthew 6:14,15*: "*For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*" That's actually just after Jesus has given his followers what we now call "The Lord's Prayer", in which we pray, "*Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.*". If you don't recognise the concept of forgiveness when you need to offer it to others, how will you be able to accept it from God?

And the rubber hits the road here this morning, as we take this bread and wine together in our communion. What's this all about? This about Jesus giving himself, offering himself as a sacrifice so that you and I can experience the forgiveness of God. It's a grateful recognition that God has gone to extraordinary lengths to forgive you – to forgive you those tens of thousands of things that you have done which offend him. Are you going to take this bread and this wine, but still refuse to find it in your heart to forgive another person the one thing – even the seventy-seven things – they've done which have upset you?

Again in *The Sermon On The Mount*, Jesus tells his followers that if there is anything between them and another member of the Kingdom community, they need to get it sorted out before they come to worship. As you take this bread and wine this morning, the sign and symbol of the awesome love of God and the forgiveness which flows from that, resolve before God to get sorted anything that is still standing between you and another. If you cannot find it in your heart to forgive that person, your own relationship with God himself will be affected. But if you can – maybe even after a very long time – then not only will your relationship with that person be healed, but also your relationship with God can move forward. And, as Jesus has been teaching in this eighteenth chapter, the community of the Kingdom will take another step towards being healed and complete.

God of our hidden depths,
we come before you as people of our time and place.
We confess our faults and recognize our weaknesses.
We are complex creatures;
deep within us are patterns, experiences,
conflicts we do not understand
and we do not always know
what to do with them.

We are silent before you and pray:
understand us, unburden us.

We are silent before you and pray:
help us to understand and unburden each other.

We are silent before you and pray:
help us not to fear what is deep within us
that is hurting and hurtful, that breaks and is broken.

Spirit of God's deep peace,
show us that we are forgiven so that we may forgive;
touch our wounds with your healing
so that we may be people who heal;
and help us to be at peace with ourselves
so that we may become makers of your peace for others,
through Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**

(Gathering For Worship p271 © The Baptist Union of Great Britain 2005)

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Questions for discussion

1. Do you think there should be any limit on forgiveness? Share any examples you know of people who have demonstrated great forgiveness.
2. Why do we find it difficult to forgive? What do you think needs to happen before forgiveness can happen?
3. Does God really withhold forgiveness from those who will not forgive others? What makes you say that?
4. Jesus says we should forgive *"from the heart"*? What does that really mean?
5. Is there anything you need to do as a result of reading this passage? What are you going to do about it?