

Matthew 18:21-35
Full-works forgiveness

Commit to forgiving

It's amazing what we have been able to do in these recent months of Lockdown using this **Zoom** technology. And it's amazing just how far and how quickly technology has been developing over recent decades.

I got my first computer back in the 1980's. It was the then-famous **ZX Sinclair Spectrum**. The 16K (16 kilobytes) version, which I took the back off and upgraded to 48K myself. Just to put that in perspective, the 16K was the total size of the computer memory of that box of tricks. Just the *picture* I have shown you nowadays takes up 137K of computer memory. That is *nine times the total computing power* of the original real thing, just to store the picture in digital data form.

When it came to getting the first *real* (I still think of it as *real*) computer, the shop told us that we had come along at just the right time. Instead of 700 Megabytes, this new **desktop** spec had recently been upgraded to 1 *Gigabyte* of total memory. How does that compare? Well, those prefixes go up by the thousand.

K - 1,000 somethings
M - 1,000,000 somethings
G - 1,000,000,000 somethings

Back in my days as a scientist, we had to get used to all these different sized units. And the list of prefixes goes on up and up. 1 with 12 zeros after it is *Tera* (spell). 1 with 15 zeros is *Peta* (peta). They've even had to introduce some more since I left uni. 1 with 24 zeros, for example, I only learned recently is **yotta-**

Basically, as science has progressed, the need for bigger and bigger (and smaller and smaller) unit names has become necessary. Back in the days when the Bible was written, they didn't need quite such exotic units of measurement. But in this parable Jesus manages with just two measurement words to conjure up a very clever and precise picture of total unreality. And yet he uses it to deliver a hard-hitting message that would have had Peter and the other disciples rocked back on their heels with its apparently ridiculous demands.

They had their system of weights, of course. Some of us grew up with the complexities of **imperial measures**, ounces and pounds and stones and quarters and hundredweights and tons. Much easier now with metric weights. But the biggest measure of weight in Jesus' day was the *talent*. The value of a talent of gold would be different from the value of a talent of silver, of course, but either of them would be way, way out of the reach of your average person of those days.

Rough figure: the total earnings of a standard working man in a long lifetime for those days might come to something like two talents.

And then we have the measure of number that Jesus uses, too. I've shown you "scientific notation", with all the zeros, but back then the biggest number that could be described in a single word was 10,000. It was such a huge number for them that it could be

used with its precise meaning, or just to imply a ridiculously huge number. It's the word from which we get our rather unusual English word nowadays, "myriads".

And Jesus, for very good measure indeed, multiples these two ridiculously large numbers together. Just either one separately is enough to cause a **headache**. Multiply them together and you have an even more ridiculously inconceivable, mother-of-all-headaches number.

And then Jesus presents us with a man who *owes* that much *money*.

"... one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents."

(Matthew 18:24)

People would possibly have sniggered or guffawed. This is barmy. **You cannot be serious!** But Jesus uses this absurd scenario to make a very serious point indeed: **the full extent of the grace of God is almost beyond human comprehension - and yet Jesus calls us to show forgiveness at that kind of level.**

But before we work our way through the parable itself, this morning - and some of you will have heard (and might even remember) me doing before ... and the parable really tells itself so well, I'm not sure that you really greatly need me explaining it to you ... I'd like to start with just a few points about typical human nature that have struck me as I have read through it this week. I've found these quite worthwhile to consider - and quite challenging - too.

I know that they're a bit off the main thrust of the parable itself, but Jesus has woven these observations so subtly into the telling of this story - and I think it's worth checking out some of these extra little facets as we go through for the first time.

- **We think we do so well! (21)**

So here is the setting for the telling of this parable. I think we need to see the theme of Jesus' teaching about humility running all the way through this chapter. It starts with the disciples asking a rather out-of-order question that betrayed some serious weaknesses in their characters:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

(Matthew 18:1)

And Jesus avoids giving a closed answer to that question. An open one, an answer that is both challenging and invitational, will serve much better. It's a *whoever*:

"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

(Matthew 18:4)

And in the relationships between his disciples, humility will be vital. When people fall out, there is to be no proud sitting on our high horse until *they*, the ones that we of course consider are in the wrong, come to *us*. Nope. *You* go to *them*. We're not to see them as

sinner who needs to be taught a lesson, but wandering sheep in peril, who need to be rescued. And you, the offended party, are the one commissioned to be that rescuer.

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”

(Matthew 18:15)

So no, don't stand there on your dignity, as you call it. Demean yourself, like the father in another parable *running* when his long-lost son comes into sight again. Get out there and *win, gain* that brother.

So then Peter seems to be trying to take this on board. *So we have to do this in order to win our brother, Lord, OK. But ... just how often are we talking about here, Lord? The Pharisees say three. But shouldn't the Kingdom of Heaven be rather more generous than that? Wouldn't that be a good idea? How about we, oh, at least double that? Can't you just see him sort of beaming at Jesus, thinking how well he was doing to be so much more gracious than the Pharisees?*

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

(Matthew 18:21)

I'm not saying that what Peter suggested wasn't good. I'm not suggesting that what *you* do in living out your faith isn't good. But can't we be just a bit too ready to congratulate ourselves on being only a bit better than *some other people*? On giving a bit more than they do in *some other churches*, because we believe in tithing and not just tipping God? On being really quite holy, just because we have never tuned into Playboy TV?

We can think we do so well. But Jesus may not actually be totally impressed.

And we can still, related to this

- **We think of ourselves as the hero (21)**

Or perhaps that should be heroic *victim*. Notice what Peter says, and the implied directional arrow. Is there perhaps a presumption that it couldn't be the other way around?

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

(Matthew 18:21)

I wonder if Peter would have thought seven was such a generous number if it was *him* in need of forgiveness. But ... that would require Peter to think of himself as a sinner, wouldn't it? A repeatedly-sinning sinner. Oh, that surely can't be right ... can it?

Actually, if you feel that is *exactly* your problem, I will come back to that as I finish, with what I really do hope will be a word of profound encouragement for you. Promise!

- **We live by rules and limits (21)**

I think this is probably more a human limitation than an actual sin, but I don't think we're always good with undefined quantities. We much prefer answers to the questions of "how much" and "how far" and "how many". Or, in this case, ...

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

(Matthew 18:21)

We want limits, rules, numbers, rather than principles. We can't easily work out what "give generously" will look like in our situation, so we settle for the simple "give 10% of your income". And then we fuss over whether that should be 10% before or 10% after tax ... and we risk almost totally losing that original principle of giving generously and giving cheerfully.

But you see another danger of rules and limits, though, I hope? What if you reach that limit - which you've quite possibly set conveniently, reachably low? You have forgiven your brother seven times ... well, well done me! Self-congratulation. Pride - which Jesus said earlier was totally contrary to the way that the Kingdom of Heaven works.

And, in this case, too, you will now most likely feel that you can now, with divine justification, wash your hands of that inconvenient and troublesome brother in future. He has offended you enough, so it's now their problem, not yours. That straying sheep can just carry on wandering, and fall off a cliff ... and your conscience is conveniently clear. You're righteous ... or would that just maybe be *self*-righteous?

- **We think we can do so much (26)**

I think I've given poor old Peter enough of a kicking for what was probably just one more ill-thought-out comment. One day they really should invent a vaccine for the human version of **foot and mouth disease**. So we move on into the body of the story, this man owing an enormous debt. And even though we've not yet gone through the story in great detail, I've given you the background information you need, just in case you couldn't derive it from the context. This debt is absolutely, stupidly, impossibly large. And yet do you see the answer that the king gets?

"So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'"

(Matthew 18:26)

It's even more emphatic the way that Matthew wrote it, with *everything* up front in that last clause. *Nobody* could pay that back ... and especially not if you were thrown into prison and had no way to earn anything. It is a stupid thing to say - although, in such extreme circumstances, people *do* say pretty stupid things.

And yet some people who don't even believe themselves in really extreme circumstances say some even more dangerously stupid things.

How many people, if you ask them about anything to do with even some vague notion of heaven, come out with the absolutely useless suggestion that God will weigh their good deeds and their bad deeds - put them in some celestial **scales or balances** - and, they usually say with an attempt at a humble smile, they just "hope" that their good deeds will outweigh their bad.

Folks, I would suspect that not a single person who gives such an answer has ever given thought to what *Jesus* says is the most weighty commandment of all, the one that will contribute most, by its presence or by its absence, in those scales ... if they actually existed. Matthew will record it later:

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment."

(Matthew 22:37-38)

We think we can do so much *for ourselves*. But will you measure yourself against the standard of those words of Jesus ... don't the states of our own lives start to look rather like the ten thousand talents of debt that that foolish man said, without the slightest chance of fulfilling his word, that he would pay off *in full*?

- **We are blind to the obvious (28)**

There is not just simply the single jaw-dropping turn-around in Jesus' story. The king forgiving such a ridiculous debt was the first. But the second follows right on its heels.

"But when that same servant went out, 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.'"

(Matthew 18:28)

This is almost as ridiculous as the previous line. How could someone be so blind? And yet, *aren't* we? Human beings generally, for one. There is truth about God to be seen in the world around us, but people by and large choose to ignore or even suppress that truth:

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

(Romans 1:20-21)

Or the punchy summary to Paul's argument there:

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ...

(Romans 1:22)

And yet, in other ways, we show that we are hypocrites, for just about everyone ...

- **We have quite an acute sense of justice (31)**

People saw and instinctively realised that this first servant's behaviour was just *wrong*.

When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.

(Matthew 18:31)

This is wrong. And justice is needed. Most people are most acute in their perceptions, I would say, when it is *they* who have been mistreated. Most people will far more easily smell **day-old sweat** on someone else than week-thick sweat on themselves. But *this* is so bizarre that even when it happens to someone else, there is a cry for *justice*.

And that is why, in this world of sin, in this world in which we sin, there is a cross and a Saviour. It is *God* doing justice.

It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

(Romans 3:26)

And one final snippet, before we return and quickly run through the story in full.

- **We are subject to “should”s (33)**

This world is moral. This world is God’s. And *he* sets the rules. There are “shoulds”.

“And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”

(Matthew 18:33)

Sometimes we use that word too liberally, it also has to be said. We can be Pharisees to ourselves at times, and ...

“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, ...”

(Matthew 23:4)

Knowing our need to be right before God, we sometimes falsely task ourselves with rules and regulations that we think are necessary if we are to please him, to satisfy him, to keep him on our side because we are keeping up our side, too. Folks, that **treadmill** will only ever get more and more laborious - and eventually impossible - to keep up with.

But that doesn’t mean that there are *no* shoulds. If the **universe** is all that there is, if there’s just time and space and random events, then nothing has any meaning, and nothing is good or bad, it just *is*. There’s nothing that can describe or measure value or rightness in any meaningful way. You only get that from their being a God who simply defines goodness by being perfectly good.

From that you get a real meaning for the word *should*. And every human being knows it, deep down. Even the most thoroughgoing atheist will argue that you *should* agree with their take on things - so they’re borrowing a word that needs *God* to have any meaning, in order to push their own agenda.

But if there are *shoulds*, there is also accountability to the one who defines those shoulds. And just before telling us about grace, Paul in his letter to the Romans uses this very argument about our failing to do what we *should*:

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

(Romans 3:19)

So there's my quick run through that list of spin-off thoughts, and I would have loved to follow each of them through in more detail. Perhaps we'll come back to some of them this evening. But let's go back to the start and take the whole story at a trot now, just to remind ourselves of the big overall picture, that **the full extent of the grace of God is almost beyond human comprehension - and yet Jesus calls us to show forgiveness at that kind of level.**

So, if Jesus has been talking about sin disrupting the relationships between believers

"If your brother sins against you, ...

(Matthew 18:15)

Peter's question here makes sense, and it shows that he is starting to see this stuff about forgiveness:

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

(Matthew 18:21)

He knows he needs to push himself a bit. Maybe he has remembered Jesus saying

"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

(Matthew 5:20)

But Peter's answer is to substitute a different number, instead of removing the concept of number here completely. That's the legalistic approach: give me a number, give me a nicely-defined specific task that I can do and know that I've done my bit by doing. So that I can feel good about myself again, thinking that I've matched up to God's mark. I've been to enough Sunday services this year. I've phoned everyone on the church members' list this year. I have read my Bible before breakfast every day this year. I've even gone one better than the Pharisees on a couple of occasions.

No, just totally the wrong approach. Instead of bigger and better laws - or bigger and worse, that might actually be, if you're talking about having to keep them - think grace. Which does not place limits. Which is a totally different attitude.

Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."

(Matthew 18:22)

Whether that should read 77 or $70 * 7$, the implication is the same. With a number like that, you will lose count - just like Jenny and I are not sure how many times our infamous **balloon flight** has been cancelled. 16, 17, possibly even 18? But with extending forgiveness, we are *meant* to lose count. That's the whole point of what Jesus is saying.

And he backs this up with a parable, to put things into some kind of God context for us. Here's setting the scene:

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants."

(Matthew 18:23)

And you get maybe a hint of something about to happen when you read, before hearing the extent of the problem, someone being "brought" ... perhaps with some reluctance? You could understand why, when the accounts are opened!

"When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents."

(Matthew 18:24)

Really totally loopy amount of money, remember. Actually, don't think average labourer here. This is more likely white-collar failure than blue. This is far more likely a "servant" who has been involved in the financial sector. Possibly he has over-extended himself in bidding for the taxation rights for a part of the king's dominions, and something went wrong. Maybe a famine struck, and people just couldn't pay their taxes - or the extras that were usually extorted as well - so he can't pay to the king what he contracted to.

Or maybe there was actual mismanagement. Or maybe there was some dodgy dealing which didn't work out. Really doesn't matter *how* the debt came to be. The problem is the *size* of it. With just those two words, it becomes an astronomical sum. Totally beyond any human being's ability to pay - or to earn in order to pay off. The king is definitely not going to be **amused**.

"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."

(Matthew 18:25)

The context is that such "servants", in those days, were the king's property - and their wives and children were *their own* property. Not that selling them off would recoup what was owing to the king. But an example had to be made. And yet ...

"So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'"

(Matthew 18:26)

Which of course is total nonsense, totally impossible. But now, gobsmackingly ...

"And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt."

(Matthew 18:27)

But not a happy ending. Merely the end of act 1. Something even more dramatic follows. If act 1 is just unbelievable, act 2 kicks off with something unbelievably offensive.

“But when that same servant went out, 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.’”

(Matthew 18:28)

This first servant, in case we had some doubt, is not really that pitiable after all. He’s mean and he’s vicious. But he’s actually a bit more understandable than we maybe typically think.

100 denarii is about a third of a year’s wages for your average guy. It’s not a totally trivial amount. It’s a big enough sum that most of us would find it outrageous if someone presumed to deprive us of it. If you send off for something for a fiver on **Ebay** and don’t get it, you will probably put a claim in to be recompensed, but you won’t lose a whole lot of sleep over it. If it was something you bought for £5000 though, then you would definitely be causing a stink when the parcel doesn’t get delivered. And it looks as if this ancient equivalent of a city banker, on a much higher salary, is also inclined to kick up about it.

So that is what this parable is about, I think. Not just forgiveness of trivia - though some of us may well big up some pretty minuscule offences. But forgiveness of *serious* hurts. The kind of thing, perhaps, that we would start to argue that *I just CAN’T forgive THAT*. Things that *anyone* would find a challenge, no matter how placid you are by temperament.

But what makes this snarling “*pay what you owe*” outrageous instead of just obnoxious is what now follows. It is almost word-for-word what the now oppressor had himself said just a moment ago. One exception: the word “all” is omitted ... and that is when it is quite conceivable that this smaller debt *could* be paid back, in full, if a not too unreasonable accommodation as regards time is made. But it *isn’t*.

“So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.”

(Matthew 18:29-30)

And because it’s outrageous, people are outraged. There is an affront here to obvious, natural justice. So appeal is made to one who may be able to administer justice.

“When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.”

(Matthew 18:31)

And Jesus, of course, has crafted this story such that everyone’s natural sensitivities insist that the king’s response should be severe. In prison, and this time **throw away the key!** Someone as ungracious as this doesn’t *deserve* that grace.

“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.”

(Matthew 18:32-34)

The only problem is that at this point, Jesus turns to his hearers, and speaks to *them* as this *you*. “Should not *you* ...”, the king had said.

“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

(Matthew 18:35)

So look, it's not only not just seven times, but an indefinite number of times, that Jesus calls us to forgive.

It's not just trivial issues, but substantial ones that Jesus calls us to forgive

It's not just the already substantial humbling of self that Jesus calls for, with us *saying* the words, *I forgive you*. Jesus calls us to forgive not just in word alone, but from the heart.

And we probably say that this is impossible for us. This kind of forgiveness is a life-long commitment, not just a momentary grin-and-bear-it but then it's over. It is a commitment to never again make that offence an issue. Whenever those feelings of anger rise within you again, you need to **whack them down** ... just like that fairground game.

You must not speak those angry words again to the person you have forgiven.

You must not speak those angry words again to someone else, running them down behind their backs.

You must not speak those angry words again to yourself, letting the devil into your soul to entrench a lasting resentment, dug ever deeper and more secure with every hidden inward snarl you permit yourself.

And you must not speak those angry words again to God, pretending that you have some kind of immunity because you call it prayer, and you're “ust being honest with God”.

Folks, don't we all feel, when we hear Jesus' words

“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

(Matthew 18:35)

... that we don't have that kind of heart? Even when we know that God has forgiven us that 10,000 talent debt of our sin, we can't even properly let go of a relatively trivial 100 denarii?

At least we recognise, I hope, that we *should* indeed have mercy on *our* fellow servants. And so we must cry out, recognising our continuing debt, to the King of kings. But not with the promise that *I will pay you everything*. For we have someone standing alongside us *who has already paid everything*. Someone who has taken our old lives to the scrapheap, and given us new lives.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

(Colossians 3:9-10)

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

(Colossians 3:12-13)

And folks, as we come to break bread, and consider again ... *am I really worthy of this?* Do I belong here right now?

Final point. Remember this. I promised you I'd mention this point I that I find most encouraging before I finish.

If Jesus says in this passage that we are to forgive without limit, is that more than we should expect from God himself? Is he just waiting for the 78th or the 491st time?

If Jesus says in this passage that we are to forgive without limit, should we think that God will be less gracious to us, less forgiving-without-limit, if we come to him pleading not our own pretence of righteousness, but the name of his own beloved Son?

Commit to forgiving