

Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness

Introduction

A

Today, I want us to do three things:-

1. Look closely at the parable Jesus tells in its context, and see what arises out of that investigation.
2. Apply the passage and address the challenges that arise, AND I think that it might be helpful for me to flag one issue as I see it.

At one end of the spectrum, some of us may seek a deeper understanding of forgiveness because we just don't get it. It isn't because we have had great wrong done to us and have suffered deep hurts. It just isn't our style.

Maybe these quotes resonate:-

“Don't get mad, get even.” [*Kennedy, Robert F.*](#)

Revenge is a Dish Best Served Cold.

First said by Pierre Ambroise Francois Choderios de LaClos (1741-1803). He originally said it in French in his 1782 book Les Liasons Dangereuses:

At the other end of the spectrum, some of us have suffered great harm – even suffered at the hands of adults that we have trusted and therefore are finding it next to impossible to forgive, however much we want to.

It seems to me that any proper application of this passage must address both ends of this spectrum and also the positions in between.

3. I want to formulate some principles which I believe to be in accordance with these scriptures and that apply across this spectrum and in that way open up

a dialogue, an ongoing discussion that we can all participate in. I welcome your thoughts and trust that you will discuss them with others.

1.1

Look closely at the passage to see what arises.

First thing I think to note is that Peter is involved. As Bruce mentioned last week, Peter the great doer, the one who always responded to Jesus, in a bit of a flap. Peter asks Jesus a question:-

V 21. “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?

From this statement, we can tell much:-

- a) Peter has been giving this forgiveness thing a go and hasn't found it much to his liking.
- b) Please have a look at v15. Jesus has just told Peter and the other disciples that if their brother had sinned against them, then they were to take it up with their brother privately and show them their fault. Peter has a problem with this. **He comes to Jesus and says – but when is enough, enough? When does forgiveness end? Surely if I forgive him seven times, then I can write the relationship off??**
- c) Peter is feeling hurt, injured and upset because of his brother's behaviour. This isn't a polite, philosophical question and answer session – that's what I love about Peter, he wants to engage with Jesus and if something gets in the way, he tells Jesus about it. **It's too painful to keep on forgiving, time after time. It hurts. I want to know when forgiveness stops. I don't want to go and have it out with my brother; I want you to tell me that it's O.K to stop forgiving him, because I've had it up to here with his behaviour.**

At this point, I think it important to note that Jesus takes Peter seriously. There is so much in what Jesus does not say!!

He doesn't say,

“Peter, build a bridge and get over it.”

He doesn't say,

“I've just told you to go and work it out with your brother, so go and do that.”

He engages Peter where he is at – he is engaging with what Peter is thinking (there must be some end to forgiveness) and what he is feeling (forgiveness is painful).

Firstly, he addresses Peter's thinking with a parable. It is a fairly straight forward parable.

V23. A king decides to settle his accounts. Loans that are long overdue for payment. A man who owes 10,000 talents cannot pay. (10,000 talents is millions of dollars). He cannot pay and so his whole family is to be sold to repay the debt. The man only asks for time to pay... **BUT the king in his great mercy cancels the debt.**

Then this same man goes and grabs his servant who owes him 100 denarii (just a few dollars) and not only will he not forgive the debt, he won't even extend his servant time to pay.

Needless to say, the King on hearing about his behaviour throws him into jail to be tortured until the whole of the debt is repaid.

Now, in the context of Matthew's gospel as a whole, we catch here a glimpse of the cross, don't we? We are asked to see ourselves as the servant who owes a debt that is so large, it cannot be repaid. Our sin comes between us and God, and unless God cancels the debt of our sin, we cannot come into right relationship with God. Even worse, we must bear the debt of our sin and endure the wrath of God on that day when he does call us to account. **BUT** God in his mercy has cancelled our debt **AND** not only that, he has borne the cost of that debt **HIMSELF**. Christ endured a painful physical death on the cross in order to cancel that debt. That's at the heart of this parable that is where it points us.

Colossians 1: 21 – 22 sums it up in this way:-

“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now, he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body

through death, to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.”

Peter wanted to know when forgiveness ends. Jesus tells him that it never ends. AND that is good news. All of my sins, all of your sins, past, present and future, dealt with forever. That is how Jesus addresses Peter’s thinking.

Peter has been hurt by his brother’s repeated failures. Jesus tells Peter that the only way to heal that hurt is through **forgiveness from the heart**. AND that too, is a blessing. Forgiveness always benefits the forgiver; it may not always benefit the forgiven. It is God’s way of releasing us from hurt, bitterness and resentment.

2.1 Segue

And here we come to the really difficult part. As I mentioned at the beginning, some of us may be struggling to understand the point of forgiveness at all. And others may have suffered terrible wrongs and know, we just know that, however much we would like to forgive from the heart, we are not there yet. I would like to address this problem in two ways. Firstly with an illustration and then with a set of principles that may help us on our journey toward forgiveness.

So to address this issues I have an analogy. I might suffer a cut or a scratch. I need to look after that and see that it doesn't get infected - I attend to it and look after it and in a couple of days, maybe a week, it heals. On the other hand, I may be in a serious car accident. My injuries are extensive and I need the help of others, including qualified professionals to recover from my injuries. It will take months and maybe even years to recover, before in any real sense that I can say I am healed. The same can be said about recovering from the wounds that others cause us. You see, some injuries are relatively minor, some are very serious and some are in between. In all cases, a journey is involved that takes us from being wounded to being whole. Forgiveness is that journey. It needs a proportionate amount of time, depending on the nature and extent of the injury. Forgiveness is not a door that we open, step through and close. **It’s a journey, leaving one place and setting out for another.**

3.1

Journeys require maps. Here are five “landmarks” – principles that you might find helpful on your journey.

1. It's not right - (if there is no wrong, there is nothing to forgive). (Matt 18:15)

Culturally, one coping method is to deny that we have been wronged or that a wrong has affected us. i.e. to intellectually and emotionally decline to begin the process of forgiveness.

Sometimes the wrong done to us is so severe it leaves people with the feeling that they must have done something really bad to "deserve" to be treated like that. Coming to an understanding that what happened was wrong can therefore be a really tough step and take a long time.

We do need to commence the journey.

2. It will never be right. (Matt 18:17)

Time does not heal wounds that are unattended. In fact, they get worse - they become infected and will continue to get worse unless treated. Forgiveness is the only plan. There is no plan B. A friend of mine broke off a large section of her tooth. She would not see the dentist. She hates the dentist. At the moment that a large section of her tooth broke off, she was always going to see the dentist. It was only a question of when and how bad it had to get before she would go. There is no plan B.

3. Understanding. (Matthew 18: 23-35 – understanding what the kingdom of God is like).

- a) Contemplating the forgiveness that God has extended to us through Christ can help.
- b) In some cases, we will be able to recall when we have acted in the same way - which can be quite humbling and help us to forgive.
- c) Perhaps we can see that we have contributed to a situation and need to seek forgiveness as well as to extend it.
- d) Can we have compassion for the offender? Is there something in their life that might explain (not excuse) their behaviour?
- e) Perhaps we need to come to an understanding that we did nothing and we are blameless. Those of us who suffered as children at the hands of a trusted

adult may be struggling through this

4. Justice.

God seeks repentance and the Matthew passage immediately before this one on forgiveness sets out a method for redress through repentance. (Matthew 18: 15-17)

Tell your brother his fault. If he won't listen, go back with another. If he still won't listen, take two more. If he still won't listen, bring it before the church and if necessary, shun him, in order that he might learn that he needs to repent.

These Scriptures place equal weight on repentance and forgiveness.

5. Forgiveness

Coming to the point of forgiving - of letting go of the debt that another owes us because they have wronged us, both intellectually and emotionally. God wants us to arrive at this point because it frees us from bitterness and resentment. For some of us, and for some harms, it will be a short journey. For other harms, it may be a lifelong journey to healing. It may even be that it is not in this life, but in the next that we are made whole. (Revelation 21:4)

Conclusion

So, what does it mean to forgive from the heart? You get to answer that question. All I want to ask is: Have you begun the journey, please can I join you and can I help?