



THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

For Lent this year we're looking at the Parables of Jesus, those amazing yet curious stories that help us to understand what the Kingdom of God is all about – and what the King of the Kingdom is all about. Who's the King? Jesus is! And today we're going to look at a parable that reflects the very heart of Jesus' mission:

The Mysterious Story of the Unforgiving Servant.

Matthew 18:21-35

I was having coffee with a friend a couple of years back, (back when we still could!), and as we chatted, he began to open up about his dad, and how, ever since he could remember, his dad was criticising, treating him like an idiot, and making him feel useless. And this led to depression and a poor self-image and all sorts. And even now, as an adult, he struggles to forgive his dad for what he did.

I've met many people like that, because everyone has wounds. Some are small, but some are big and deep and serious. It could be abuse. Or neglect. Or betrayal. Or divorce. Or infidelity. Or indifference. Or criticism. And we might know we should forgive, and even try, but then something comes along to remind us of the hurt and the wound is reopened, worse than before.

And that's what prompts this question from Peter: "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to 7 times?"

Jesus replies with "Try 77 times", i.e. as often as it takes (interestingly, in Genesis 4:24 the number 77 is a picture of total vengeance).

And then He tells this story made up of 3 scenes, each scene its own lesson in forgiveness:

Scene 1: It's A Debt Paid. The servant owes the king a colossal 10,000 talents – that's 200,000 years' worth of wages! Now you're probably thinking, "How on earth could a servant pay that off?" Exactly. And the implications are enormous – his entire family is about to end up in slavery. But the servant begs for mercy, and the king does more than give him an extension - he cancels the debt.

Just like the servant in the parable, we are all in debt to a king. Every time we sin, we owe others, but even more importantly, we owe God. In fact, the Aramaic word for sin, *khoba*, also happens to be the Aramaic word for debt. And this debt is so big we will never be able to pay it – which is why God had to pay it instead. And why Jesus spoke these words, which I'm sure a lot of you will recognise:

"Father, forgive them: they don't know what they're doing" (Luke 23:34).

Yes, it's one of the 7 things Jesus said on the cross. In the midst of incredible agony, Jesus was thinking of you and me and absorbing our sin, paying our debt, just like the king in the story. That means the IOU has been ripped up. Actually, it's been paid in full, on our behalf, by Jesus Himself.

So, the king = Jesus; the servant = us; the debt = sin. And it's a debt paid.

Scene 2: It's A Gift Shared. A fellow-servant owes the first servant a mere 100 *denarii* – equivalent to 4 months' wages, i.e. it's not as big a debt (let me rephrase that. It's peanuts!). And yet the first servant demands the money and refuses to forgive. In fact, in the very centre, the very heart, of the whole passage, vs28, he says this:

"Pay back what you owe me!"

We have a word for that, don't we? It's called *revenge*. That's why we use expressions like, "I'll show them. I'll get them back. I'll make them *pay*." And it can take 2 forms:

- **An active form.** When we set out to wound another person, or encourage others to do it for us.
- **A passive form.** When we blank them, give them the cold shoulder, give them the silent treatment.

It's a bit like ping-pong: each person trying to score against the other. Or one of my favourite Wii games (and yes, it's still a great console), *Sports-Resort: Table-Tennis*, where if you judge it right you can actually hit your opponent right between the eyes! *Bam!* And revenge can be like that – only not so much fun.

So, forgiveness is a gift. A gift shared.

Scene 3: It's A Message Received. When the king finds out what's going on, he summons the servant, and says, "I showed you mercy; I cancelled your debt. Why couldn't you do the same for someone else?" And then he throws him in prison until he's paid back everything he owes.

But hang on. Didn't the king cancel the servant's debt? Yes, he did. So where has this new debt come from? This is the debt the man now owes the other servant. He owes him forgiveness. And until he learns to forgive, to cancel the debts of others, he himself will live in torment.

You see, when I refuse to forgive, it means I haven't truly grasped what it means to be forgiven. God loves me, He wants to set me free, but I'm unaware. And I'm torturing myself. And not just myself, but those closest to me: my spouse, my kids, my friends. The people I take it out on.

Because forgiveness releases others. And it releases *me*.

It's a message received.

The Moral Of The Story ...

Jesus sums it all up in vs35: all relationships, divine / human, are linked.

Now, it's important to understand what forgiveness *isn't*:

- **Forgiveness is not condoning.** It's not pretending that whatever has been done to you is ok, because it isn't.
- **Forgiveness is not forgetting.** Where does the Bible say that, anyway? Sometimes forgetting is dangerous.
- **Forgiveness is not reconciling.** It takes 2 to tango, as they say, and reconciliation involves both parties.

And it's important to understand what forgiveness *is*:

- **Forgiveness is intentional.** It's a verb, an act of faith, a way of saying, "God, I'm trusting *You* to sort this out."
- **Forgiveness is gradual.** Some wounds have been with us a long time, and could take a long time to heal.
- **Forgiveness is painful.** Often. Because forgiveness entails paying the debt yourself. Just as Jesus did.

And that's why we need help to do it. Some of you will remember the shooting of a group of children in an Amish school-house about 10 years ago – a hugely tragic story. But what was equally shocking was the Amish response. The families of the kids went to visit the family of the killer, and said, "What can we do to help?" And a reporter hanging around asked one grandfather, "How can you do that?"

He replied, very simply, "With God's help."

May we all learn to cancel that debt; tear up that IOU; forgive as we have been forgiven. With God's help.