

Litigious Servant (Matthew 18:21-35)

How many times are we to forgive others? How big a sin is still forgivable? Jesus's answer to these questions is radical, so he tells a story to help us understand why as Christians it is essential that we always forgive.

Unforgiveable?

How badly might someone hurt you that you would still forgive them?

Someone accidentally knocks over your cup of tea - will you forgive that?

After all don't cry over spilt milk!

Someone knocks off your wing mirror - will you forgive that?

Even if they can't afford to pay for a replacement?

Someone spreads gossip behind your back - will you forgive that?

Or what about someone turning a close relative against you?

Or perhaps someone who steals something precious?

What about someone who tortures and beats you up? - could you forgive them?

Unbroken?

A few years ago we watched a film at Men's Film 'n' Chippy called, *Unbroken*. It was based on the true story of Louis Zamperini. An Olympic athlete before the Second World War, who ended up flying bomber aircraft in the Pacific during the war. His story is of remarkable survival, through horrendous experiences. In a very real sense he was 'unbroken.'

He survived his US bomber plane crashing into the sea, even though most of the crew died.

He survived 47 days adrift in the Pacific ocean.

He survived being in a Japanese prisoner of War camp, where he was severely beaten and mistreated until the end of the war in August 1945.

But had he really survived. Was he really unbroken?

The horrendous treatment of the Japanese left him with emotional scars. After the war, he had nightmares about strangling his former captors and began drinking heavily, trying to forget his experiences as a POW.

His anger at what the Japanese guards had done to him was eating him up. Their behaviour seemed to him unforgivable and it was breaking him.

Peter's Question: Seven Strikes and You're Out!

The story that Jesus tells in the passage is a response to Peter's question. Peter had no doubt taken in something of Jesus's teaching on forgiveness. After all the Lord's prayer that Jesus had taught them says to pray,

"Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us." (6:12)

And one of the blessing sayings at the start of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount says,

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (5:7)

Peter realised that Jesus was into showing mercy. He also knew that Jesus called on them to have a righteousness that went deeper than the righteousness of the Pharisees:

"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

But, Peter wants to know. At what stage do you stop forgiving people. How far can they push it? The Pharisees recommended forgiving someone three times, a kind of three strikes and you are out strategy.

Peter taking on board Jesus's teaching goes much further - 133% further - should you forgive them 7 times, i.e. 7 strikes and you're out.

Jesus's immediate response, shows that even this inflation of mercy comes nowhere near the mercy that God calls us to! Jesus says, 77 times - not meaning for us to keep a careful count all the way up to 77 times, but to say, that our mercy should be limitless!

Then he tells the parable to explain why our mercy should be limitless.

How the parable works...

Like most of Jesus's parables in Matthew's gospel, Jesus introduces it with the phrase, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." In other words, this is the way God goes about things.

In most parables, true understanding comes when you understand who the key characters or elements refer to. This is fairly straightforward in this parable:

The King represents God. The parable wants to show us something about what God is like.

Secondly, sin or guilt is represented by financial debt. This is a natural way to think about someone's guilt. If someone has hurt you, you might say to them, "You owe me!" or "You'll better make it up to me!" or "You'll pay for that!" It's almost like sin needs to be paid for, when we sin against someone we owe them, we need to reimburse them for the hurt done.

And in the story there are two debts: the debt of the 1st servant to the king and the debt of the 2nd servant to the 1st servant.

Now it is worth asking, if the King is God, who in the story we as the listeners are meant to identify with?

At the end Jesus warns that God will treat you in the same way, if you do not forgive your brother. The first servant is a warning example to us of how not to be. The second servant represents a fellow Christian who needs to be forgiven.

The 2nd servant represents someone who has sinned against **you**. And not just someone who has sinned against you a little bit. After all the debt of the first servant is not insignificant - 100 silver coins or Denarii was equivalent to 100 days wages for a labourer. Probably about £5,000 in today's money. If someone owed you £5,000 would you be happy to let them off the debt? That's a lot of money to owe. The 2nd servant represents to us someone who may have really hurt us - this is closer to the torturer end of the scale than the knocking over the cup of tea end of the scale! Jesus wants to show us why we should be so willing to forgive even the most persistent of sinners.

To help us understand why, we need to look at the two debts in the story more carefully.

The First Debt: An Absurd Amount

The first servant is in big trouble.

He owes an unimaginable debt to the king. 10,000 is a massive number, it was hard to express bigger numbers in the language of the time. A Talent was a massive amount of value, the largest unit of money around. It might take a labourer half a lifetime to earn just one talent.

Josephus a Jewish historian of the 1st Century says that the total taxes collected in 4BC from the whole of Judea, Idumea and Samaria was only 600 Talents.

Jesus says this servant owed 10,000 Talents!! This is an outrageous debt, that was impossible for anyone to pay off. The servants promise to pay back everything was absurd. It would take 5,000 lifetimes - no-one can have that much patience!

You may not think you have sinned against God that much. Probably you are a nice person, haven't committed any crimes, don't swear, you give to charity, your faithful to your wife and so on. Perhaps you think of your debt to God as a relatively small thing.

But, remember the first servant is meant to represent you and me. Jesus describes our sin and guilt as this absurd amount: 10,000 Talents. Trillions of pounds. Is our sin really that bad?

Well, yes, because at heart sin is robbing God of his glory. We were created to be in the image of God, to reflect his glory in the midst of creation. But we rejected that role, we dethroned God in our lives and failed to give him his proper place, rather we replace worship and service of God with worship and service of all kinds of trivial rubbish like money, status, popularity, superstition, human accomplishment, our own self-sufficiency and so on. We have robbed God of his glory and it was the greatest heist in history.

And we may think we can make it up to God by trying a bit harder, being a bit more religious, giving to charity, but to think that is to be as deluded as the 1st servant in the story who thought he could pay back the king given enough time and patience!

We owe God big time and if we don't grasp the seriousness of our debt before God, then we will never grasp the need to forgive others.

The First Debt Cancelled: Outrageous Grace

But, if you are a follower of Jesus, then Jesus is saying that you are like the 1st servant. Because just as the king cancelled the first servant's debt, so God has cancelled your debt of sin and guilt.

In the story, the King shows compassion to the first servant. Compassion is acting out of concern for the wellbeing of the other. It is what Christian love is all about. And in Matthew only one person is described as compassionate - Jesus. On four separate occasions we are told that Jesus acts out of compassion towards those in need.

So, God forgives us our debts, not because we deserve it or have impressed him. Not because we are religious, but because of his compassion towards us, because he understands our desperate need far better than we do. If you put your trust in Jesus and seek to give God back the place in your life he deserves, then like the king in the story God will release us from our debt of guilt. But, without his forgiveness we are lost for eternity and he doesn't want that.

But, forgiveness is expensive, compassion is costly. In the story to forgive the debt of the 1st servant was incredibly costly. Remember 10,000 talents was probably more than the Gross Domestic Product of the whole Roman Empire. It was equivalent to Trillions and Trillions of pounds today.

Debt can only be cancelled if someone is willing to take the hit, to pay the cost. That is what the king in the story does and that is what God does for us.

What did it cost God to forgive us our sin?

Jesus says in Matthew 20:28:

"...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28)

A ransom is the price paid to release someone. To release us from the burden of our guilt, it cost God the life of the Son of Man. That is it cost him the life of Jesus, the very Son of God, the one who was with God from the beginning from before time itself. The most unique and precious person to God, the most valuable thing he could possibly pay. And God gave him up out of compassion for you and me, that we could be forgiven. It was costly compassion and outrageous grace.

Unless we truly understand how much it cost God to redeem us from our immeasurable debt we will never understand how we can forgive others.

In the first part of the story about the 1st debt, the 1st servant represents each and everyone of us as Christians.

The second part of the story, however, about the second debt is meant as a warning. If we have been shown such outrageous grace by God, then how will he respond if we treat others with unGrace?

Outrageous unGrace

In the story, the first servant goes away from the king's presence free of this enormous debt and finds a second servant, who owes him a debt.

Remember this debt is not insignificant. It was the equivalent of £5,000 in today's society. Without the first part of the story, the first servant's behaviour in having him locked up until he paid the full amount would have seemed quite normal.

But, context is everything. The outrageous grace of the first story completely changes the situation.

In comparison to the 10,000 Talents that the first servant has been released from, the debt he is owed is miniscule. It is about 1/500,000 of the amount he was forgiven. But, where the king had shown him compassion and mercy, the first servant responds with anger and brutality.

The other servants, aware of the outrageous grace the king has shown to the first servant are flabbergasted at how the first servant now goes on to treat his fellow servant.

And when they tell the king, he too is profoundly disturbed. A key verse is verse 33:

"Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you?" (Matthew 18:33)

Isn't that the point of the whole story? But the King does not just give a moral lecture, he passes judgement. As the first servant had thrown the second into jail until he could pay back all he owed -

possibly after a few months or maybe a year, now the first servant will be thrown into jail until he can be paid back everything he owes - and now we are talking 5,000 lifetimes!

Jesus says this is a warning to us:

If you are a Christian you cannot expect to receive God's mercy and forgiveness, unless you too are prepared to show mercy and forgiveness. To fail to truly forgive others, no matter how seriously may have hurt you in this life is to make a mockery of God's compassion mercy and grace.

We cannot receive grace if we behave with unGrace. We cannot avoid hell, unless we accept God's grace and show the same grace to others.

So, what sin against you are you willing to forgive?

It may be a really serious sin. The second servant owed a serious debt to the first. God isn't saying that sin doesn't matter. He is not saying to forgive that person isn't costly, what he is saying is that the cost is miniscule compared with the price he paid to forgive you.

If you are finding it difficult to forgive someone, don't try pretending that what they did does not matter, rather look again at the cross and the price paid to release you from your sin against God. In the light of that great truth that paying the cost of forgiving others becomes not only reasonable but an absolute necessity.

Unbroken:

We started with the story of Louis Zamperini. After the war he was being eaten up with anger at the horrors inflicted on him by Japanese prison guards and was turning to drink.

However, during these years his wife, Cynthia, became a Christian and in 1949 took him along to a Billy Graham crusade in Los Angeles. As a result Zamperini became a Christian. He experienced and understood the outrageous grace that God had shown him through the cross.

Following on from this he was able to forgive his Japanese captors and the nightmares and drinking ceased. In the end Zamperini visited many of the guards from his Prisoner of War days to let them know he had forgiven them and many of those guards became Christians in response.

Zamperini was transformed by outrageous grace and turned from an attitude of ungrace to grace himself. Is the same true of you?