

MATTHEW 18:21-35  
77 TIMES!

The family are sitting round the house; it is a big family, there are lots of them. They are not sure what to do next because dad has just died, and they are left feeling bereft, and bit unsure of the future. There are lots of brothers and at some point in the past, they had been nasty to one of the younger members of the family. Mind you, he had been a real pain in the neck, but that was no excuse. They had treated him really badly and had lost touch with him for years; they tried to put their bad behaviour out of their minds, to persuade themselves that it didn't matter anymore. He was gone, out of their lives forever. Except that he wasn't! He'd become a bigwig! He'd become a really powerful individual! He had changed so much; so much so that they didn't recognise him when they met him again. He knew them, but they didn't know him. When he made the big reveal, there was a big reunion, hugs and handshakes all round. He'd look after them, he said, but the brothers knew it was really for dad's sake. Now dad has died, what next?

Fear is in the air! There is a fear of resentment and holding grudges. That can be an overwhelming fear. We have done wrong and we know it, but we're not sure how someone else will react. It looks fine on the outside, but is that grudge, that resentment smouldering away, just waiting for opportunity to erupt? We've seen enough families to know how true that can be. That kind of resentment or grudge can strain, if not destroy relationships; families are broken apart by grudges and resentment. But this conversation takes a different turn; there is forgiveness. The brother whom they have wronged promises to treat them as if they had done nothing wrong, to care for them as his brothers, to look after them and love them. *"So then..." (Genesis 50:21)* Of course, this is the story of Joseph and we read his statement of intent, to provide for his brothers, to treat them well, because while they did him down, God turned it around to save Joseph and his family. Joseph forgives!

Peter asks Jesus a big question: *"Lord, how..." (Matthew 18:21)* Jesus had been teaching His disciples about getting on well together and this is the next question. You can see what is going on in Peter's brain: we have to get on well; someone might offend me; I should forgive, but how much forgiveness should I show? The rabbis said 3 times was fine; if someone wronged you for a fourth time, they had gone too far and forgiveness was no longer needed. Peter takes that and wants to go one step further – seven times? The picture on the screen shows what this might look like; there are lots of people there. Can we forgive that number of people, or one person that number of times? It might be seventy-seven, or it might be four hundred and ninety times depending on how we read the text! The whole point is that we stop keeping score; we don't count, but that we be forgiving people whenever we are wronged! The story Jesus tells explains why that is a good idea; it is a hard idea, but it is a good idea!

*"The kingdom..." (Matthew 18:23a)* "this is what life is like when Jesus is King!" The central character in the parable is the servant. In the first part, he is heavily in debt. Ten thousand talents he owes to the king; money was weighed in Jesus' time, so we have no real idea of the exact amount, but "a billion pounds" would be the right kind of exaggeration for effect; it was more than the national debt of all nations around about; it was a debt that he could never repay in many lifetimes, never mind in a matter of months or years. *"Since he..." (Matthew 18:25)* The servant is to become a slave; his family and possessions are also to be sold and even that would not totally clear the debt. He begs the king for mercy: *"Be patient..." (Matthew 18:26)* The king knows that this is a forlorn hope, but in the story Jesus tells *"The king..." (Matthew 18:27)* The debt is cancelled; our servant is forgiven; he is set free from the enormous debt that he owed and could never repay. This is amazing! This is life-changing for our servant; he is free; he is not living in fear of punishment anymore, his debt is gone, cleared; he is forgiven.

He goes out walking on air! He is so full of being forgiven that he passes on what he has received to everyone he meets! Yes? No! Jesus tells the story brilliantly! The servant meets his friend, a fellow-servant, who we discover owes him a hundred denarii, a hundred days wages! Our servant has been forgiven so much, so obviously a forgiving spirit lives in him! You would think! But no! He has his friend arrested and thrown into prison till his debt is paid off. Even when his friend makes the same plea: *“Be patient...”* (Matthew 18:29) – does that sound familiar? It is exactly the same plea that our servant made to the king and the king listened, but when his friend makes the same plea to him, it falls on deaf ears. The king is angry and brings the whole of his wrath and punishment to bear on this unforgiving man!

“The Christian life is born in forgiveness.” (Michael Green) *“Son, your...”* (Mark 2:5) said Jesus to the paralysed man. “He died that we might be forgiven” wrote Cecil Frances Alexander in our most famous Good Friday hymn; all through the New Testament, the key central blessing of Christian faith and Christian life is the forgiveness of sins, the idea that God forgives us. We owe a debt: we have made mistakes, we have got things wrong, we have fallen short of what God expects of us, we have disobeyed His commands. Hour after hour, day after day, that debt just builds up and up. When we come to realise that, the instinct in us wants to put it right and knows that we need to put it right; we try to put it right by being religious or by trying to do more good than bad. The debt will take many lifetimes to repay! In the meantime, it keeps growing! Here’s the thing – God forgives us; the slate is wiped clean; the paper is shredded. However you want to picture it, this is the reality of the gospel, of what God has done for us in Jesus; He forgives us; He treats us as if we had done nothing wrong. He blesses us, provides for us, listens to our prayers, and loves us as if we were Jesus Himself!

We find all of that hard to compute. The longest journey for many of us is the fourteen inches between our head and our heart. We can say, in the creed, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins”, and we do that gladly, but to say “I believe my sins are forgiven” is so hard for lots of us. Yet it is true! Against all that you’ve been told about how much you are a failure in life and how many times you’ve got things wrong, here is God saying, “your sins are forgiven; the slate is clean!” This is the gospel, good news; lifetimes of debt are gone! Surely, you say, that is being presumptuous? No, that is believing the key promise of God – the Bible calls it faith!

The challenge that faces us then, is to be forgiving as we have been forgiven. God treats us as if we have done nothing wrong; that is how we are to treat one another. God’s forgiveness is life-changing and this is one of the key areas where that change is seen most, in the way we treat other people. Resentment kills relationships; holding grudges eats away at our spirit and poisons the way we treat others. It’s instinctive in our human nature – you see it in children: “you hit me, I’ll hit you back!” That cycle of resentment, grudges, and even violence tarnishes human relationships, and breaks up community; adults are more subtle about it at times, but we do it too.

How do you react to Jesus’s story? Whose side are you on? The servant is hard to like, because he has been forgiven, but refuses to forgive. Have you caught yourself saying “I’ll never forgive X for what they did?” But that’s exactly what Jesus is challenging us to do. Seventy-seven times? It is not about keeping score, but about being forgiving people, generous people, with lives shaped by grace. Imagine a church where everyone has a grudge, or is full of resentment to each other because we have all offended and hurt each other – what kind of community would that be? Imagine, on other hand, a church where people forgive each other? It is a totally different atmosphere. We are called to be a community where we know that someone has offended us and we may even tell them that they’ve hurt us, but we treat them as if they’d done nothing wrong – that’s forgiveness. That is not being a dormant and we can be robust as we point out to others their faults, but then we treat one another as if they’ve done nothing wrong – that’s forgiveness and that is crucial part of community life!

One last thing: somehow these two kinds of forgiveness are connected! In Jesus' mind, God's forgiveness of our sins and our forgiveness to one another are connected. God's forgiveness comes to us through our repentance; one of the sins of which we repent is our resentment of other people; the inexhaustible forgiveness of God is life-changing and one of the places where that transformation takes place is in the willingness to forgive those who wrong us. It is a huge challenge; it goes against human instinct for revenge and bearing a grudge; but this is also the place where the gospel shines out through Jesus' church when people are different, forgiving people.

What's it to be? A life full of grudges and resentment to people who have done you wrong, eating away at your spirit, poisoning your relationships? Or costly, precious forgiveness, treating people who have offended you as if they have done nothing wrong? That's what God has done for us in Jesus; the centre of the gospel is Jesus saying, "*my son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven!*" Do you find this inspiring? Worth celebrating? Life-transforming? Challenging? Is that how we will be with one another?