

17 September 2023

Matthew 18:21-34 Pastor Fraser Pearce

Do you want the will and strength to forgive
Your Christian brother or sister when they sin against you?
Then listen to today's parable: it is given to us by our Lord,
And his word has power: His word will free us
To forgive others as God forgives us.

Here's how the reading starts: **Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.**

The context: forgiveness in the Christian community.

Especially when our fellow Christian has sinned against us.

St Peter's question: a generous outlook from a human point of view.

Jesus' reply: a parable, filled with the power of the Spirit.

Listen to what he says: **'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.**

This is what God's kingdom is like:

It's like a great settlement of accounts between a king and his slaves.

Picture the imagery in your mind's eye; tune in.

By the way, this is a lot like what St Paul is talking about

In today's reading from Romans, where he says:

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written,

**'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.'**

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

So in the Gospel we have in parable form

What St Paul says in his apostolic teaching.

OK, back to the parable: **When [the king] began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he**

could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

One is brought to him; was *offered* to him.

It's as if: Here is an example of the debt of slave to king.

One talent is about 15 years wages: he owes 10,000 talents.

A payment is demanded that draws in his family and all he has.

So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."

What does the slave ask for? *Patience*.

And he says that he will pay back the debt.

What we to make of this? It is an impossible figure...

The parable goes on: **And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.**

Pity: a word used of the Father, of Jesus,

Of divine figures in the parables.

Released: the man is free to go- he will not be imprisoned –

And this, by the way, is a lot like the action St Peter and the church

Are called to do in the life of the church (Matthew 16 and 18)

Forgave: the man does not have to pay his debt.

What would you expect to find if you were released?

If your debt was forgiven? Peace; freedom; a new lease on life.

What does the man actually find? A fellow slave: a debtor.

Pause: this is what we find, too.

But listen to what happens next:

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon [literally: found] one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe."

One hundred denarii – one third of a year's wages.

A big some considered on its own, but not relatively.

He tries to cut off the fellow slave's capacity to speak.

He demands repayment.

This is how it is naturally with us:

When we meditate on what is owed,
We forget what we have ourselves been forgiven a great debt by God.

What then happens has a familiar ring to it: **Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt.**

Again: the request is for patience.

But this time, it is reasonable; but there is refusal.

When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

What do you think the nature of their great distress is?

The injustice of it?

But are we meant to think they know about the forgiveness?

That one slave of the same master can treat another in this way?

A fear of what might happen to them?

A question regarding the mercy of the king? Did *really* forgive?

If so, why is this happening?

The king acts: **Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?”**

The king calls his own action of releasing and forgiving one of *mercy*.

So: pity, and releasing from prison, and payment of debt

All these things constitute ‘mercy’.

The slave received mercy, but would not share it,

And the king gives his evaluation of the slave: evil.

What happens next, and Jesus’ conclusion, is confronting:

And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.

To be tortured: he was handed over to those

Whose job it was to extract what was demanded through torment.

A note: What was owed at this point?

Mercy: that's what the slave should have freely given his fellow slave.

But listen to Jesus: **So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'**

Jesus is not speaking to the crowds

Or to the Pharisees or the Sadducees.

He is speaking to his disciples; he is speaking to us.

If we refuse to show mercy: if we bind when we should release

If we keep in debt those we could forgive

Then here is a dire warning from Jesus.

Is there harder law than this is the whole bible?

Can we live out Jesus' teaching?

In the bitter medicine of Jesus' teaching there is sweet gospel.

If this Jesus, who knows our weakness and frailty,

Commands us to behave,

Then how much more will he keep his own teaching –

How much more will he receive us in mercy

As we come to him in our need?

Brothers and sisters: we have been released,

Our debt has been forgiven;

We have received mercy from God.

As free and forgiven people *we will find brothers and sisters*

Who are in debt to us.

Today we have received Jesus' word, a word that has power

To free us to share what we have received:

To free us to share the mercy of God.

Thanks be to God, who frees us to be sharers in his mercy

In Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.