

Sermon: How many times?!!

Reading: Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction:

Our reading takes us to one of the foundational truths we rejoice in for our salvation but we must never forget it came at a great cost. When something comes at great cost we usually treasure and cherish it. Today we discover the most challenging aspect of our Christian walk and yet the most wonderful when understood and embraced and extended

Context

The chapter opens where we find our Lord at home, maybe in Peter's home in Capernaum. Most of this chapter we hear Jesus teaching, with the exception of Peter's interruption, asking for clarification which we discover in verse 22.

This is the chapter where the disciples have been arguing who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven? The question was self motivated, which of them will be considered the greatest? What positions will we be given and hold? Kingdoms and nations are ruled by kings and governors who appoint those whom their favour rests. Those appointed to these special positions have high profiles, special status and entitled to great privileges. This is what was preoccupying their minds when Jesus enters his Kingdom.

However Jesus shocks them all by what he does next. Taking up a little child in His arms says, you want to know who will be the greatest? 'Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (**Matt 18:4**). They didn't expect that!

What was Jesus referring to with the child? Faith is the key requirement for the Christian life and the one characteristic we can show which makes God smile, 'Without faith it is impossible to please God...' (**Heb 11:6**). We have to start changing our thinking from a worldly perspective to be more heavenly minded way. We must not be motivated by thinking what's in it for me or what will I get out of this, wanting to be the number one, wanting to be the greatest. It's not about how strong we may be, how brave or our academic ability which counts, Jesus astounds everyone saying the opposite, it's the one who is like a child!

Jesus is not talking about being childish, this is what the disciples are doing, arguing amongst one another jockeying for the top places in the kingdom. Therein lies a great distinction. We must first become children of God. We have to be converted, born again and submit our will to God, trusting Him for everything just as a child trusts their parents, so our lives must display the same simple trust like attitude and allow God to be God and not let our ego's, or personal ambitions get in the way. Humility is the operative word here. This is a deep and profound truth which takes time to ponder in order to grasp the magnitude of what this means for each of us.

If we think about it, if heaven allowed me to enter it with my ego, pride, selfishness, and all of my other flawed characteristics it would no longer be heaven! We must dismiss the often quoted nonsense that we can come to God just as we are. Jesus will accept us when we seek Him in humble repentance, but loves us too much to let us stay as we are. If we can come to Jesus as we are and stay that way, we would never be able to enter the Kingdom of heaven. God has to change our heart and nature, thus be born again.

People often struggle with the word conversion today, many will say I haven't had a conversion experience like that of St. Paul on the road to Damascus, when he was surrounded by a blinding light. I know people who claimed to have had conversion experiences but their lives have never produced any fruit and they remained the same as the day they were so called converted. We have to ask were they ever converted in the first place? That which denotes our true conversion is our humility and a life that changes from an old self to a new creation. Our old selfish attitudes diminish and we slowly growing into the likeness of Jesus.

Genuine humility is trusting completely in God and being content in all He provides. The change Jesus is speaking of is not conversion as an experience but a heart conversion (which may derive from the experience), from pride to humility, from my way to God's way, this becomes the test of our faith in action. Humility is the attitude in the Kingdom, it's the humble in heart who will inherit the Kingdom of heaven (**Matthew 5**).

Is seven times enough?

In this chapter Jesus teaching covers stumbling blocks to our faith, and dealing with sin in the church. The conversation now moves on to one of the most challenging attitudes we must develop and display as Christians, offering forgiveness! Peter listening intently and probably still wanting to show he is worthy of being top dog in heaven, interrupt Jesus with a question and proceeds to offer an answer he thinks sounds magnanimous. He asks how many times do we need to forgive, should I forgive someone up to seven times? (**Matt 18:21**). I imagine Peter is looking for praise at this point, after all when someone injures us, forgiving once seems more than enough, so Peter's generous suggestion of seven times seems more than enough to show humility.

We don't need to be in the room with Peter to imagine his face when Jesus replies, 'Not seven times but seventy-seven times (**Matt18:22**), we only need to look in a mirror to see our own reaction. Its important to stress at this point the context is about a fellow believer in Christ who may offend or injured us in some way and then if s/he repents and seeks forgiveness then the heart of the believer is not to withhold forgiveness. The church must not be thrown into division by withholding forgiveness or even create a schism with other believers. The church has to be in unity around doctrinal truth and not harbouring grudges.

It was said of Archbishop Cranmer who practically demonstrated his humility in extending grace and forgiveness to those who had injured him through friendship. How we react and respond and conduct ourselves afterwards is important and is of great importance to our souls, as well as for the souls of those around us. Un-forgiveness takes up room in our heart and head space which becomes a crushing weight to carry, leading to sleeplessness, anxiety and awkwardness when in company of those who have injured us. Forgiveness is a great quality for the Christian to demonstrate and this can become an amazing witness for others to see. The world may never understand the doctrines of our faith but they can surely see the beauty of our faith and the teachings of Jesus when demonstrated in grace, humility and love. This takes great courage, to defeat the flesh which wants justice, revenge and grows into hatred but the converted heart grows in grace, humility and love will follow.

A new parable

So we are to enter the kingdom of God as little children, childlike in faith, trusting and in obedience to the commands of God as our Father. We enter the Kingdom not as orphans but as children of God and God is our provider and protector.

We enter the kingdom of God as forgiven people which is the point of the parable which Jesus speaks today. The disciples by now are very familiar with parables and how they are to be interpreted, so the message is clear and one we need to be careful to observe. Like the previous parables Jesus compares and contrasts situations, people and attitudes in order to make His point.

Today's parable is no exception. A certain King who is owed money by one of his servants and the amount is vast. Fear comes over the servant when the loan is called in. He has no means to repay what he owes. He knows if he cannot come up with the money an awful fate awaits him as well as his family, all will be thrown into prison until every penny is paid back. It's an impossible debt which can never be repaid. He does the only thing he can do, he humbles himself and throws himself before the king, pleading for mercy.

We marvel at the generosity and grace of the king who not only relieves the servant from a prison sentence but also wipes out his debt, cancelling the fortune he owed him. Such was the graciousness of the king.

By contrast when the servant is given an opportunity to extend the same level of forgiveness and grace to one who owed him just a small amount, this wicked man who has just seen his own debt wiped clean, takes this poor servant by the neck and begins to choke him, threatening to take his life unless he pays back all he owes. There happened to be bystanders who heard of the king's generosity and were appalled by the wicked man's reaction to one who owed him a pittance in comparison and showed him no mercy. He was hard hearted, selfish and unscrupulous in his response, even after he had been shown such amazing mercy and grace.

Our attitude

Far too many people today think good works are what will make us right before God and as a result give them access into the heavenly kingdom. We make the momentous mistake of assuming our good deeds will be placed on a set of scales and weighed against our misdeeds. Most people think they are generally good so are confident that the scales will inevitably tip in their favour. Never forget, it is not our good works that will get us into heaven no matter how many good works we do, for the scriptures tell us, "Each of us has become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.." (**Isa 64:6**). So it is not our righteous acts or good deeds which will get us into the heavenly kingdom but it is our sin which keeps us out!

Let us be clear on this point, we may have lived our lives that we have ninety-nine righteous acts worthy of all honour and praise and when placed in the scales of justice against just one sin, the scales will not tip in our favour, for the Scriptures are clear, 'The wages of sin are death' (**Rom 6**).

That one sin which offended God is enough to keep us out. Consider it this way, I may have been driving for fifty years and never break any of the rules of the Highway code, but one day I went over the speed limit, doing 35 in a 30mph zone and I got caught by a speed camera, would I deserve the fine? The law was broken and the penalty and fine still stands.

So the debt we owe for our sin (even one sin) demands our very life, this is why we could never repay the debt. This is the point of the parable. So if we have been forgiven such a great debt because One took our place and bore our sin and was crucified in my stead as the substitutionary sacrifice. In comparison when someone has upset us, or wronged us in some way we need to remember how much we have been forgiven by the king and not throttle the one who has injured us! At this point in the sermon feelings and emotions may

well be running high, some who find it difficult to forgive have carried their injuries for such a long time and cry each night for justice and don't want to forgive. So keep on reading for there is more to say.

So what is forgiveness?

Firstly forgiveness is a great quality of witness to those who never understand our doctrines of faith but they do recognise the depth of love and grace which is extended in forgiving one who has brought injury and pain. Forgiveness and grace becomes a testimony to the grace and forgiveness of God towards those who have caused pain, injury and loss, undeserved and yet freely given. This testimony borne out practically, is seen and observed which cuts through the dry religiosity of dead tradition and reveals the beautiful sweet smell and fragrance of life we have and the faith our Lord Jesus calls us to display.

Jesus knew how much forgiveness costs and the pain the bearer has in order to extend it. Consider Jesus own words as He was dying on calvary's cross, exhausted, suffering terribly, battered, bleeding, mocked and scorned and yet with His dying words He prays, 'Father forgive them for they no not what they do!'

Secondly forgiveness in a biblical sense is a way of letting go and a freeing your soul from a chain which continues to bind us to the one who injured us like a chain which grows heavier as each year passes. When we hold on to grudges and anger our heart becomes weighed down with its burden. A heart filled with anger and hatred will overflow and turn our souls bitter, Jesus warns us, from the heart overflows and spills out from our mouth bitterness and resentment which manifests in our lives. Even if we can keep a lid on the hurt and watch our tongues and lives, what is hidden cannot stay hidden forever and will manifest itself in other ways, e.g. depression, physical or mental illnesses.

To some people forgiveness is seen as weakness and feels like surrender, letting the other person off the hook when they should be punished and made to feel the pain we have felt. However this is the wrong way to look at it. Often the person who we are most angry with isn't aware of the depth of anger we may hold towards them! Withholding forgiveness ultimately crushes our spirit and weighs down our souls, not theirs.

Forgiveness is not letting another person off with their misdemeanours but freeing ourselves from the pain caused by the one who injured us in order to let God heal us. The healing of a splinter cannot take place while we refuse to remove the splinter. If we don't, it will simply fester in our flesh. Get rid of it, extract it now and be free and let God's healing come in, let the light shine in the darkness to bring healing and wholeness to our souls. The gospel is truly a liberating gospel of good news for those who have been injured and for every one of us who owes a great impossible debt to the king who will demand justice on Judgment Day. Is not this good news and bad news, depending on how we receive it and how we apply it?

Summary

Forgiveness is costly, it cost Jesus His very life and so we must bear with one another as Christ bears with us. Perfect love keeps no record of wrongs (**1 Cor 13:5**). Love between fellow believers must be demonstrated and given wholeheartedly when repentance is sought. Please note if a crime has been committed, we also abide by the laws). May we have the childlike faith Jesus calls us to display, the mind of Christ to follow His example and the courage to let go, for when the Son sets us free, we are free indeed. **Amen.**