



Revive our hearts

Give me a forgiven and
forgiving heart
Matthew 18:21-35

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An unforgiveness story

“Ruth-Ann frequently complained of headaches and back pain, viruses often kept her out of work. After her parents divorced her father married a woman that caused the family a lot of pain... Ruth-Ann was so angry with her dad’s new wife that she even said that she wanted to kill her.

One day someone approached Ruth-Ann about the possible connection between her health and her unforgiveness, but she did not want to continue the conversation...

... Ruth-Ann still gets headaches regularly and still cultivates anger against her father’s new wife...”

This morning we’re going to talk about God’s remedy for an unforgiving heart, a message we all need to hear because none of us are going to make it through life without being hurt by someone else, intentionally or unintentionally, by offences great or small.

And the question will be: how are we going to deal with that hurt? Are we going to Ruth-Ann and hold a harmful grudge the rest of our lives, or are we going to forgive?

May the Lord give all of us here both a forgiven heart that feels the power of the God’s total forgiveness through the suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ, and may he give us a forgiving heart that freely forgives those that sin against us.

Some practical notes about forgiveness

Before we home in on the story Jesus told in Matthew 18, let’s circle out and ask what we should do practically, when someone offends us; then we’ll move back to the inner response of our hearts:

(i) If it is a petty offence rather than a sin, then we should just let it go. If someone spills coffee over your new White Stuff dress ladies, if someone forgets to thank us, if someone else gets the credit for what we have done, or if someone utters a thoughtless word, Proverbs 19:11 is our goto verse: “It is in the glory of a man (or woman) to overlook an offence.” Just forget it, get over it. Don’t become one of those prickly porcupines who remember - and ruminate - over every tiny offence!

When Yvonne and I visited Bath a few years ago we saw “curse tablets” from Roman times in a museum. These were written by ordinary people against someone who had upset them, wishing revenge on them. And the thing that struck us was how many of them were so petty!

"Docimedis has lost two gloves and asks (the gods) that the thief responsible should lose their minds and lose their eyes!!" (What? go mad and then go blind because he nicked a couple of gloves?!)

The petty vengeful human heart hasn’t changed has it?

Prove the nobility of your character and let petty offences go. Are you hanging on to some trivial upset? Just let it go! “It is in the glory of a man (or woman) to overlook an offence.”

(ii) If it a sin, and the person is not a believer—you may want to seek legal redress in a court. If the offence is something much more serious, if it is a sin, and the offender is an unbeliever, and you’re not under persecution (if you’re under persecution you may have to accept all kinds of wrongdoing) you may choose to let it go knowing that God will right all wrongs on the day of judgement, or you may choose to go through the courts. If your neighbour for example, moves his fence 5 metres into your property and won’t respond to gentle reason, there is nothing wrong with a Christian going to court if they are able to. But always peaceably.

(iii) If the offence is a sin and the offender is a believer, you are not allowed by Scripture to take another Christian to court (1 Corinthians 6) Instead you must seek justice in the church and Jesus lays out a three step process in Matthew 18

- Step 1—go on your own, hopefully the situation is resolved, apologies made, reconciliation!
- Step 2—if the Christian denies they have done wrong, then take a witness with you. Hopefully all will end, friendship restored
- Step 3—but if he still won’t admit his wrongdoing then the church must excommunicate him and treat him as an unbeliever—still love him and preach the Gospel to him in the hope he will repent.

That's what to do outwardly, and it might sound a little technical, what we're really concerned about this morning is what we should do inwardly about all the hurt left behind? And the simple answer is that Jesus calls his followers to forgive everyone who sins against them.

If you can be reconciled with the offender according to those three steps in Matthew 18, try to do that, but if you can't because they have moved city or they have died or they refuse to own up to their wrongdoing, if you can't reconcile with them Jesus calls us nevertheless to forgive them in our hearts.

Not to do a Ruth-Ann - harbour a grudge and wish the offender dead—but to forgive the offender from the heart.

And if that sounds virtually impossible to you, if you're thinking, "Pastor if you only knew what she did to me...." I hope and pray that the story Jesus told will equip you to forgive today.

The Story

A king calls in his servants to settle accounts—it's the end of the financial year we might say. And one of them owes, what approximately in today's terms is about £100 million pounds.

The man is brought before the king who rightly demands the amount to be paid back, but since that is impossible, the King commanded that the servant's family and property be sold to repay the debt at which point the man fell on his knees begged for mercy and time to somehow gather the £100 million and repay his debt.

The King (who represents God in this story), had compassion on his servant and because every debt must be paid, personally paid the debt, took the hit and let the servant go free! What a merciful king! What a feeling of relief!

The servant's heart, however, was untouched by this act of vast mercy.

On his way home he chanced upon a fellow servant who he remembered owed him 600,000 times less than the amount he had owed the king. A mere seventeen quid!

What does he do? He grabs the man by the throat and demands repayment! The fellow-servant falls on his knees, "Be patient with me and I will pay you back."

But what does the forgiven servant do? He throws servant 2 into prison because he can't repay the beggarly £17!

Well, all this had been watched by other servants of the king, who were astounded at servant 1's cold-heartedness and reported it back to the King who called in his just-forgiven servant and said:

"You wicked servant I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you? In his anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed."

Jesus ends the story like this:

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart"

The Story Applied

Let's take away three lessons about heart forgiveness from this story.

(1) Jesus says that his followers must forgive everyone who sins against them.

At the start of this forgiveness story Jesus says to Peter that all of his followers must forgive, not seven times, but seventy-seven times, which means they must possess a forgiving heart. Followers of Jesus must have a forgiving heart.

As soon as I say that, folk who have experienced severe and perhaps prolonged offences against them, perhaps mental abuse, perhaps physical or sexual abuse, may find this hard to accept: "Jesus is calling me to forgive them for that?"

But this understandable objection, often comes from a misunderstanding of what we mean by "forgive." When we say that followers of Jesus must forgive those who sin against them we are not saying those terrible offences are insignificant or inconsequential, we are not minimising wrong behaviour, we are not condoning evil, we are not overlooking sin. Instead we are handing justice over to God, "Vengeance is mine says the Lord" (Romans 12:19) "Lord you deal with this offence, you are the Judge of the Universe." (And God will repay everyone for whatever they have done...) and since we are handing judgement to God, we are releasing that person from repaying their debt to us—we are no longer expecting them to apologise or to grovel. We are refusing to grab their throats and demand repayment, we let them go.

Are you with me? When we forgive someone from the heart, we hand justice to God and release the offender from their debt however small or big it may be.

And if this sound hard—and if someone has hurt you seriously, it may sound hard, there are lots of forgiveness helps in the Bible, such as

Don't ruminate over the offence, forget just as God forgets, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Hebrews 8;12) Nothing more unhelpful to a forgiving process than to rehearse all the details of a grievance!

Try to put yourself in their shoes—were there certain events in their lives which led up to their sinful behaviour towards you? Not to excuse them, but to understand them. From the cross Jesus cried "Lord forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

Consider your own faults? Be humble. Haven't you hurt people yourself?

Consider the damage you will do to yourself if you don't forgive. "Unforgiveness" says one expert, "has unproductive outcomes such as increased anxiety, depression, elevated blood pressure, vascular resistance, decreased immune response, and poorer outcomes in coronary artery disease."

And remember that forgiveness is a process, don't be hard on yourself, it will take time: that's why Jesus says to us that every time we ask God for forgiveness we should add "as we forgive those who sin against us."

Lots of little helps from Scripture to encourage us in the command of Jesus that all his followers be forgivers. But no help is as great as the one we find in this story, our second lesson, this morning:

(2) Jesus gives us the greatest help we need: forgive others as you have been forgiven.

The servant who had been forgiven the much greater £100 million should have found it in his heart to forgive the far less £17.

If God has forgiven you and I the colossal mass of our sin, which he has, in Christ! then we must find it in our hearts to forgive the lesser weight of offences done against us.

"If you only knew what she did to me you wouldn't be calling it £17" I hear someone say!

But the answer to that objection is this: if you and I were to add up all your offences against God, all the thoughts you have had against others and against God, all the evil words we have spoken, all the things we have loved more than God, and all the sinful things we have done; if

you were to add up the great big phone-book of your offences (in the olden days in Wolverhampton, every house would get a phone book 2 inches thick listing the 250,000 people in it!) If you were to add up all your sins over your lifetime, past present and future, they would amount to an unrepayable £100 million debt in comparison to the £17 debt your offender owes you.

When we are struggling with heart forgiveness, Jesus is saying, we need to go back to the Gospel and find, at the foot of the cross, renewed power to forgive others we need to take a fresh look at our own wickedness, we need to consider again the immeasurable mercy of God who through the death of his Son has forgiven all of our sin, we need to feel afresh the soothing waves of forgiveness that roll over us from heavens' shore.

Alas, and did my Saviour bleed?

And did my Sovereign die?

Would He devote that sacred head

For such a worm as I

Was it for sins that I had done

He groaned upon the tree?

Amazing pity! grace unknown!

And love beyond degree!

At the cross, at the cross where

I first saw the light,

And the burden of my heart rolled away,

It was there by faith I received my sight,

And now I am happy all the day!

The logic of Christian heart forgiveness, the power of Christian forgiveness is that since God has forgiven me the mountain of my sin, it behoves me to forgive the molehill of my brother's sin.

And thirdly and finally,

(3) Jesus issues a warning: if you can't forgive someone, it proves that you are not forgiven by God

If you say today "there is someone I cannot forgive, I will not forgive, no way, no how" that proves that you yourself have never been forgiven by God, it proves that you are not a Christian, that you have never felt or experienced the overwhelming and overflowing forgiveness of God for yourself. That king told the unforgiving servant that he would be jailed and tortured forever. Jesus said that God would treat everyone who refused to forgive that way. Jesus is talking about the punishment that unrepentant unbelievers will suffer in hell.

If you are a Ruth-Ann, with no intention to forgive and no power to forgive, it proves you have never felt the softening, overwhelming, empowering forgiveness of God roll over your own soul. And today is the day to experience for yourself God's forgiveness offered to you freely, no matter who you are or what you have done:

Seek the Lord while he may be found;

call on him while he is near.

Let the wicked forsake their ways

and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them,

and to our God, for he will freely pardon. (Isaiah 55)

Summary and conclusion

Jesus says that his followers must be forgivers

In the Gospel, Jesus gives us the greatest help our hearts need to forgive: forgive as we have been forgiven

Jesus warns us that if we can't forgive, it proves that we do not belong to him, and today is the day to turn to him sincerely and experience his free pardon.

May the Lord speak to all our hearts today.