

Bible reading Matthew 18:21-35

The meaning of forgiveness

Peter asks Jesus about the extent of forgiveness. Jesus answers with a funny – and chilling – parable about a man who is forgiven much but who forgives very little, and is punished by his master for this attitude.



Give



Have you been in debt? Was there something you owed and could not pay? Financial pressure can be intense and very stressful. Many churches offer debt support and counselling. Is there something like this in your community you could get involved with? Do you need help with your finances? Could you offer your time or money to help others? Is there a debt you could forgive?

REFLECT

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Scrunch a piece of paper into a tiny ball and think of things you have done that hurt God. Now, gently unfold the paper, as a reminder of God's forgiveness, restoring things to where they were. Crease your paper up again, thinking about how we hold on to pain that others cause us. Can you think of a relationship that is a bit crumpled like this now? When you're ready, smooth it out again. Are you prepared to forgive and smooth out the relationship again? Ask for God's help.



Use an empty jar and some rice, pennies or small sweets. Glue seven items to the outside of the lid or jar, then use the rest to fill the jar to the brim. What's on the outside represents how Peter suggested we should forgive, while what's on the inside represents how Jesus says we should forgive.

Bible notes



Peter's question depends on the significance of 'seven', the perfect number in Jewish numerology. Jesus goes further. What does seventy times seven look like? The story of the unforgiving slave explores this, paralleling the Lord's Prayer (see 6:12, which also uses the language of debt). The parable presents cultural difficulties. While slave owning kings were common in Jesus' society, we need to be cautious about any interpretation that directly identifies God with the slaveholder. As with many parables, the person holding power is both like and unlike God.

The structure of slavery in the Roman Empire was complex. While many slaves were manual labourers working in appalling conditions, others held positions of power as administrators and civil servants. They could accumulate money and possess slaves of their own. Perhaps the first slave belongs in this social location. Nevertheless, his debt is unimaginably large and would never be payable in full. The slave does not ask for the debt to be remitted; he promises to pay it off, even though both he and the slaveholder must have known this was impossible. The debt is remitted by the slaveholder as an act of compassion. Then the narrative twists, as the first slave refuses to show similar compassion to the second slave, who owes him a sum equivalent to about three months' pay. This disparity leads the other slaves in the household to bring the first slave's unforgiving cruelty to the master's attention. The master withdraws his forgiveness, and the slave presumably ends his days in a debtor's prison. Where do the limits of forgiveness lie? The cut-off point is not the amount of debt – even 10,000 talents can be forgiven. It is the failure to pass on forgiveness to others.

First impressions

- What does it feel like to be set free after being trapped?
- When have you experienced been set free or let go?
- What does forgiveness mean to you?



Pray



Gracious God, there are debts to you and to others that we cannot pay. There are mistakes that we cannot undo. There are words that we cannot unsay. But because you forgive us, we can take another step, face another day with confidence, and rejoice at your love for us and for all creation. Amen.



Blow some bubbles. Think about someone who has upset you, who you need to forgive. Blow bubbles as you ask God to help you forgive. As the bubbles pop, think about all the times God has forgiven you. God doesn't remember it anymore. Like the bubbles, it has gone.