

# Forgiveness and the revolution—Matthew 18:21-35

**Theme:** Forgiveness is at the heart of our relationships because it is the basis of our participation in Jesus' revolution

Jesus calls us to care for one another, to watch over one another in love, being bold to confront sin in each other's lives. But what happens when the sin of another has hurt me; how often do I have to forgive them, asks Peter. It's not about counting, says Jesus, it's about mirroring the grace we have received from God to our brothers and sisters so that we all grow up into God's revolution.

## Questions:

1. Why do we think Peter asks the question he does?
2. Is Jesus really saying that there are no limits to the number of times we forgive someone who sins? What are the implications of this?
3. Which do we think it is easier to do: give or receive forgiveness?
4. How might a proper view of our status (v2-4) affect our ability to give and receive forgiveness?
5. Why does Jesus spend so much time talking about the sins that cause relationships to break down in this section of teaching?
6. Have we experienced a time when we needed to forgive a brother or sister? When we needed forgiveness? [If you feel able to, share these stories with your group]
7. What do you think the parable is about? How does it make its point?
8. Is forgiveness just about forgetting the past? If I forgive and the memory of sin returns, what should I do about it?
9. Can we forgive someone who doesn't acknowledge that what they've done is wrong?
10. Does repentance always have to precede forgiveness? Does it in the parable? Does Jesus expect it?
11. Do we expect our brothers and sisters to fail and need forgiving? Does this make us value them any less?
12. How can we ensure that when we forgive, we do it from the heart?

## Your stories:

## Potted summary

Peter sees that Jesus' general talk about sin could quickly become personal, so he asks how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him. In a telling parable, very similar to the one Nathan told David in 2 Samuel 12, Jesus exposes Peter's true motives and shows us that forgiveness lies at the heart of all our relationships.

We are all equal—equally in need of grace; equally able to dispense it to one another

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# What the passage is about....

In the second half of this discourse on relationships, Jesus fleshes out what he's said about the importance of confronting sin in response to a question from Peter. He's seen that the implication of what Jesus is saying is that we will have to be ready to forgive one another—something not spelled out in v15-17—and he's not sure he likes where that takes him.

## 1) Getting personal

Jesus has spoken about sin in general (15). He's focused on how we ensure that sin doesn't cause another Christian to wander away from the community. But, of course, nine times out of ten a brother or sister's sin personally affects other individuals in the church. Peter sees this and asks 'What if my fellow believer's sin is *against me*?' The issue has subtly shifted from the danger of losing a fellow disciple to the risk of poisoning the church with personal animosity.

**i) putting off the evil day:** how many times do we excuse another's sin before we give up on them? That's really what Peter is asking (21). The Pharisees suggested that we ought to forgive one who sins against us three times and then have nothing to do with them. Peter, no doubt wanting to show that he's grasped something of what Jesus is about, suggests forgiving seven times—a contrast to Cain's sevenfold vengeance in Genesis 4:13!

But Peter is still expecting the evil day to come when he ceases to forgive; his arithmetic is only a show of generosity before his true intention is given free reign—namely, to shun the sinner.

Perhaps he still hasn't grasped what Jesus said about status in v2. Forgiving and excluding are ways of exercising power over those who are weaker or of lower status than we are and the latter comes more naturally to us than the former. Peter can afford such magnanimity because he thinks he's top dog in the disciple group. After all in 16:16-20 he had not only boldly said who Jesus was, but been told that he was the rock on which Jesus would build his church. In 17:24-27 Jesus had miraculously paid his temple tax but not that of the other 11. So, he could be forgiven for thinking that as leader, he was the most important of the Twelve.

**ii) planting grace in another's life:** Jesus' response knocks the wind out of his sails. 'Stop counting' is effectively what he says. There is no calculus in love. The whole point of being a new community of equals (2-4; 18-19) gathered around Jesus (v20) is that we each reflect his love and grace to one another. We should be looking always to forgive, not to get beyond forgiveness to the time when we exclude.

So Jesus echoes Genesis 4 as well—this time v24 where Lamech boasts he'll be avenged seventy-seven times—but he more sharply focuses on Leviticus 25:8, the seven times seven Sabbath years that end with the jubilee—the forgiveness of debts and restoration of property and land to their original owners.

The day of grace has dawned, he says; we've experienced it as we've been forgiven, so we need to pass that grace on as we forgive others.

## 2) grasping the heart of it

To illustrate his point Jesus tells a parable. It is a simple and direct story that illustrates one aspect of what Jesus has just said to Peter—namely the need for us to forgive (v35) because we have been forgiven. It illustrates what Jesus has said before (6:14-15) and is picked up elsewhere in the New Testament (Eph 4:32; James 2:13).

It's a story at once funny and chilling. The amounts owed make the story fantastical and amusing; the attitude of the slave chills us to the heart as we realize Jesus is talking about Peter, about us.

A talent was the largest unit of currency (actually a measure of weight, about 30kg, usually of silver) worth 6,000 denarii. A denarius was a good day's wage for a labourer. *Myria* (ten thousand, from where we get the word *myriad*) is the biggest number in Greek. So here Jesus is saying that this slave owed the biggest number of the largest unit of currency to his master. We'd say that he owed zillions!

Unable to pay such a debt, the slave throws himself on his master's mercy. The master's heart goes out to him (took pity, v27; the same word that's used of Jesus in 9:36) and he writes off the entire debt.

Having experienced such grace, the slave then demands that a colleague pay back the few pounds he

owes him and throws him in jail when he doesn't.

Don't we cheer when the first slave gets his comeuppance! Yet, like Nathan's parable of the poor man's lamb in 2 Samuel 12, we are cheering our own downfall. This, says Jesus, is the outcome of Peter's calculus.

## 3) Growing up

The parable serves to illustrate the foundational principle of relationships among disciples—namely they are built on forgiveness of sins that have been honestly faced up to. Without this our relationships can't grow or the church embody Jesus' revolution

Forgiveness is about two things:

**i) facing up to sin:** we need to recognize and name the wrong that we do and its consequences; the harm it does both to the sinner and to the community of disciples.

Forgiveness is not about sweeping wrongdoing under the carpet, saying 'never mind, it doesn't matter.' It does matter. Our sin is so serious that Jesus had to die in order for it to be dealt with. We experience God's forgiveness as we face up to our sin and confess it (1 John 1:8-10). Likewise we can only truly forgive one another, if we name and face up to our sins and confess them to one another (James 5:16; Col 3:16; Eph 4:14-16). This is why Jesus talks as he does in v15-17.

**ii) freed by grace:** the master in the parable forgave and set his slave free from the debt. It's what God does for us—of a debt which, like the slave's, we couldn't even begin to pay off—and it's what he expects of us in our relationships with one another (6:14-15; Col 3:13).

This is why it's essential we have a proper view of our status. If we insist on our rights, stand on our dignity (such as it is), we'll never really forgive. Like Peter we'll count the number of times we let an offender off as a way of delaying the day we take sweet revenge on him or her.

Forgiveness is like breathing—we can only breathe *in* God's forgiveness of us as we breathe *out* our forgiveness to one another.

Facing and naming each other's sins and forgiving one another from the heart (35) means that we genuinely want our brothers and sisters to grow up and into God's salvation.