

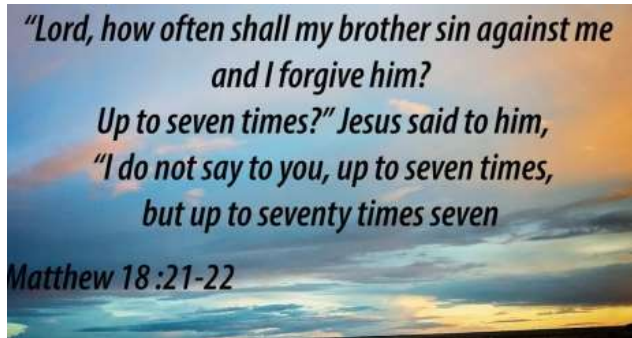
Relationships with Others - Part 2

Forgiveness

Matthew 18: 21-35

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Let's just put this story from Matthew's gospel into some sort of context. If you remember in part 1, Jesus has explained to the disciples how members of the church family should be



accountable to and for each other, that when someone goes off the rails, we are to work to bring that person back into the family – to restore them - and now, having heard this, Peter asks Jesus what is a very important question, "OK Lord, let's say someone does get it wrong, how often are we to forgive them? Seven times?"

Just exactly what was going through Peter's mind? Why does he ask this question? Was he being like those people I used to get annoyed with at University, a small crowd of whom would go up to a lecturer after his or her presentation to ask questions. Usually they were stupid questions the lecturer had already answered – And I believe the questioners only asked their questions to suck up, to get themselves known by the lecturer.

Was this what was in the back of Peter's mind? Was he asking Jesus a question to show that he had been listening and that he was really interested?

Or perhaps he genuinely wanted to have the matter cleared up in a purely intellectual sense so that he could say to himself that he was now absolutely sure of what it was Jesus was driving at. If Jesus now set an essay question Peter would be confident of getting a high mark!

I'll be honest with you; I don't think Matthew includes this passage here for either of these reasons, but for a much more important and essentially human reason. He does it because it is important for Christians to understand two things.

Firstly, how important it is for our wellbeing as human beings that we are of a forgiving nature, and secondly to understand how all-consuming and all-encompassing the forgiving love of God is.

To look at the first question first, how important is it for us to be forgiving people?

This extract comes from a medical magazine –

"Current medical research indicates that persons who are unforgiving are more susceptible to a variety of illnesses than are their more tolerant counterparts. The New England Journal of Medicine reports that certain individuals, long thought to be particularly prone to cardiovascular illness, are actually NO MORE LIKELY than anyone else to suffer heart attack or stroke. The culprit, researchers say now, is anger. The susceptible persons mentioned above are in danger only if they carry around unresolved hostility. It is anger, not activity, that places a person at risk."

These words should strike a chord in us. We know that we are least forgiving when we are angry; when someone has hurt us, or frustrated us, or disappointed us: the alcoholic brother who steals money from you to buy his booze, and who keeps forgetting important family occasions, whom you forgive, and he then promises to do better, only to get drunk again and do the same stuff over and over; a father or mother or child who keeps making promises, but who never keeps them, and makes up the lamest stories to try and excuse themselves; the friend who spreads rumours and false stories about us because they appear to be jealous and envious of us.

FORGIVENESS DOESN'T
EXCUSE THEIR BEHAVIOR.

FORGIVENESS PREVENTS
THEIR BEHAVIOR FROM
DESTROYING YOUR HEART.

We want to do the right thing, but it is difficult to take the same thing over and over again from the same person. Just how much does Jesus expect us to put up with it?? Just how often should we forgive someone who persists in hurting us, someone who persists in letting us down, in insulting us, then asking for our forgiveness only to do it all over again?

Every one of us here wants to do the right thing but every one of us has probably wondered just how much we are expected to take, how often we should be required to give a person a second chance.

You see, I think Matthew is describing Peter asking the question of Jesus out of his own experience. There is probably someone in his life who is driving him to distraction, and Peter is asking Jesus, "Just how often do you really want me to forgive this person – be real, it's not that easy!"

Lord, How Many Times Should I Forgive My Brother?
70 x 7
Matthew 18:21-22

But Jesus doesn't make it any easier for Peter: "Seven times Peter? No, seventy times seven".

But that too needs to be made clear. Jesus is not telling us to keep a note of every time we forgive someone and when we reach the four hundred and ninety first, you then yell out, "Aha! At last! That's it! I don't have to forgive you anymore! Get lost! I hate you"!

Nothing is more destructive for us as individuals than to build up a massive list of grievances towards someone and allow them to fester and corrupt inside our heads. In the end we only hurt ourselves if we do this. We become bitter and twisted and unable to see the good in life beyond the curtain of anger and frustration we have built up in our hearts.

Jesus does not mean for us to count up to 490 and then explode. He means us to forgive and forgive and forgive, for in the end we are protecting ourselves.

"Forgiveness simply
means loving someone
enough to pursue
healing instead of
punishment when they
have wronged you."

And that brings us to the second point. Just how great and all-consuming God's forgiving love is. God does not, I believe, expect us to forgive and keep on forgiving, and then not act in the same way toward us.

Now let me be absolutely honest. I do not think this is possible for human beings. I do not think it is possible for us to forgive and go on forgiving. But we must not allow the lack of forgiveness to destroy us, and we must always be willing to accept the possibility of change. So that if change takes place we are willing to forgive again, to be open always to the possibility of healing.

That is the message of the crucifixion. God's willingness to sacrifice himself in Jesus to show us how much we are forgiven, a forgiving love that is always there.

And when we decide to accept it, when we accept the fact that we are forgiven, then the healing takes place and renewal and restoration takes place.

This is the lesson of the story of the Good Samaritan, and above all the lesson of the resurrection.



Amen to that!