

March 4th 2012 "Forgiveness: God's Pattern Isn't Easy—But it's the Best" Matthew 18:21-35

I have one of those desk calendars which contains a different Christian saying for each day and last Thursday's was: "Religion is a package deal—you can't pick and choose the parts you like."

I reckon that really applies to forgiveness. Whether we like it or not God commands believers to be forgivers. Indeed, Forgiveness of others is one of those commands that God stresses to the point where a stubborn, unforgiving attitude is shown as absolutely unacceptable to Him. God has also set down a standard of forgiveness that He expects us to seek to attain to, for, as we learnt last week, He commands us to forgive in the same way that He has forgiven us.

So last Sunday we looked at 4 characteristics of God's Way of Forgiving, and today the aim is to apply them a couple of them to our forgiveness of others. And for our starting point we turn to the parable that Jesus told in Matthew 18. My Bible calls it "The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant" but there is no doubt that it is a parable about forgiveness. Jesus was answering Peter's question about forgiveness and it is obvious that He wants His disciples to practice forgiveness, not out of a sense of the other deserving it, but because they themselves have first received undeserved and immense forgiveness from God.

So in the story Jesus told we find a man with this huge debt.....it's so huge that it's beyond believability.....being completely released from the debt and every implication of it by a King who is rich in mercy and abounds in Grace.

Straight away our expectation is that this man would now be so overcome by such a generous act, and so freed from the past encumbrance of this massive debt, that he would be full of love and joy and forgiveness towards others. But he's not! In fact he is the opposite. He seems to have no thought whatsoever of forgiving his fellow servant who owes him very little. Instead he is harsh and brutal with him, but he doesn't get away with such unforgiveness for long. The king hears about it and Matt 18:32-34 tells us what happened next. (CEV)

³²The king called the first official back in and said, "You're an evil man! When you begged for mercy, I said you did not have to pay

back a cent. ³³Don't you think you should show pity to someone else, as I did to you?" ³⁴The king was so angry that he ordered the official to be tortured until he could pay back everything he owed.

Now remember Jesus was talking about forgiveness here, and what He is emphasizing is that Christians or Christ-ones, have received such total forgiveness from God that we should automatically be extending the same merciful forgiveness to others.

This lines up well with the first Characteristic of God's Forgiveness to us: **That God graciously offers forgiveness to all, freely, though it cost Him so much.**

There is no one that God doesn't expect a Christian to offer forgiveness to. Now that is quite scary when you think about it! But even more than that this story, with its severe warning about God not forgiving us at the end of it, hints at something that Paul later stresses. That not only are we forgiven but we have become new creations in Christ with a new spiritual DNA that includes the desire to want to forgive others, and so we show we are truly forgiven and in Christ by the way we approach forgiveness. So at times we see someone who is so evil, and has hurt us or others we love, and our natural reaction is to hate that person and definitely not to forgive them. But our spiritual DNA is saying to us, but I should forgive, and so the conflict rages. And in the end God the Holy Spirit will not let us rest until we have dealt in some way with such an issue.

Occasionally on the TV there is a news story of someone who has suffered themselves, or a loved one has suffered brutally at the hands of another, and yet you notice that there is something about their reaction that stands out as different. They seem to care more than you might expect, about the predator. They are still just as distressed, upset, and even angry if the crime is evil, but there is something else there. You sense a willingness even in this to be merciful. And you think to yourself, I reckon they could be Christians. The spiritual DNA has come to the fore, or is striving to come to the fore in their lives, and the world can see the testimony of Christ's presence in them.

This characteristic of God's forgiveness also reminds us that forgiveness is costly. Whenever we forgive there is a cost to be paid emotionally and often physically as well. The cost of letting go of what we and others may see as

our right to hate, or to be angry, or to take revenge. At times we have seen that cost on the faces of fellow Christians as they struggle with this whole issue of forgiving another person who has so badly wronged them.

What helps a Christian with such a battle is the knowledge that God's pattern of forgiveness is actually made up of two stages. God is able, because of what He suffered on the cross, to now offer forgiveness to everyone, and He does—unconditionally. That's the first stage. But before He hands over the benefits of that forgiveness and accepts them completely and without fault into His family, they have to show their desire to accept that forgiveness through Repentance and Faith. **That is the Second Characteristic of God's Forgiveness.** That full forgiveness is conditional on Repentance and Faith. After that follows the blessings of reconciliation.

God expects no less from us. That we offer forgiveness to all with the desire to be reconciled with them, trusting that they will admit their wrong against us, repent of that wrong, and receive our forgiveness. But as we all know, there are times when the other person refuses to accept any wrongdoing or are content with the way they treated us. They have no plans to receive our forgiveness or wish to be reconciled. So like our Father in heaven we are at times unable to complete the act of forgiveness because of the hardness of heart of the other, but in our hearts we must set them free, and be open to a changed response from them that may one day lead to reconciliation.

Forgiveness is never easy, but we all know that there are times when forgiveness is so hard that we wonder how anyone can ever forgive in such a situation. The answer to that is only found in the power of Christ and the enabling of the Holy Spirit.

There are times when I am loathe to talk to someone about the forgiveness that they as a Christian should offer, because I find that the crime against them is so great that I do not feel worthy to tell them what they should do. I can only point to the Bible and pray that the Spirit will guide and help them to do what they must do as a Christ-one. But I also find it so encouraging and inspiring when Christians in severe situations of pain are able to forgive as Christ forgave them. To win a massive victory against the powers of darkness.

Such was definitely the case in the story of a ten year old boy called Chris Carrier, who was abducted by a man just a few days before Christmas in

1974. The man's name was David McAllister. He had worked for Chris' elderly uncle but was fired for drinking. So to get back at the family he took their son into the Florida Everglades and stabbed him many times with an ice pick and burned him with a cigarette. Chris was a young Christian and at one point during his ordeal cried out, Father forgive him because he doesn't know what he is doing.

McAllister finally finished with the ice pick and he forced Chris from the car into the remoteness of that swampy area and shot him in the head. Amazingly the bullet didn't kill him or cause any brain damage, although it did leave him blind in one eye. For six days he lay unconscious. Then on Boxing Day he was found by a hunter, covered in blood and extremely confused. His recovery was very slow and for many years he was plagued by dreadful nightmares. The police suspected McAllister but nothing could be proved.

Even though Chris was scarred emotionally and physically, and despite his attacker going unpunished, when Chris was asked whether he would ever want to speak to the person who attacked him—to offer the forgiveness again for which he had prayed when he was being tortured, he said that he would jump at the chance. (Read from Forgiveness Unpacked p58...)

As I read that story I said to myself, "Now that's true Christ-like forgiveness". And I thanked God for giving Chris Carrier the strength, power and passion to carry that through. And I praised God for the way his story touched the hearts of so many through the testimony of that TV reporter. And how Jesus was honoured through the obedience of a man such as Chris.

And then I realized that Forgiveness comes in all shapes and sizes, and whether it is a massive wrong or a small issue, God expects us to forgive, and if we are willing He gives us the strength and the heart to carry it through. And through our willingness to offer forgiveness to all, we bear testimony to the world that we are truly forgiven servants of the King of Kings, showing forth the characteristics of our Saviour.

