

Dec 12th 2010 Why I am still a follower series: Matt 18:21-35
Peter: Because He Forgave Me

As I came this Sunday to the final in this series about Biblical characters and the reasons they might give for still continuing as followers of Jesus, I had this leading to focus on Peter the Apostle.

For Peter is one of those 'stand out' characters that we meet in the Bible and then never forget. There is something about him that is so normal. He makes mistakes. He speaks first and thinks later. He is always getting himself into bother and has a lot of trouble keeping his opinions to himself. Consequently whereas we look at Paul and see him as one who is streets ahead of us in skills and knowledge, we see Peter as one who travels at our pace. As someone who we can relate too.

From the very first moment that Peter joins the band of disciples around Jesus he seems to have been accepted as leader and spokesperson. He was the one who asked the questions that the rest wanted to ask but didn't dare to.

So it was that after Jesus presented teaching about the righteous way of dealing with a brother who offends against you (Matthew 18:15ff), it was Peter who came to Him with a question about forgiveness. For it was obvious to Peter and the rest that Jesus' remedy for the person who sins against you was not revenge. It was not upholding your own position and proving to the world that you were in the right and therefore justified in your animosity and bitterness against the one who had hurt you. When Jesus stated in v15 that "If he listens to you, you have won your brother over", they recognized in his approach a softness that was not their usual way. Jesus' aim it seemed, was not to teach the brother a lesson as much as to reconcile the brother back into one's favour. To reach out to him in kindness, despite the fact that he had done the wrong to you in the first place and was not prepared to admit that and seek your forgiveness.

Now Peter it seems had a problem with that. He could accept that some forgiveness was ok but there was naturally some behavior that simply couldn't be forgiven, and surely there was a limit on the times that forgiveness should be given to a brother who sins against you. So Peter came to Jesus and asked: Matthew 18:21

"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Now to suggest a limit of 7 times was Peter wanting to impress Jesus with his own forgiving spirit, because the teachers of the law specified 4 times. So Peter has added to that. Imagine then how astounded he was with Jesus' reply:

"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy seven times" or, as it can be read, seventy times seven. In other words Jesus demands from His followers a standard of forgiveness without limit. Forgiveness that is so total that it has no boundaries and keeps no record of wrongs. That does not wait for remorse to appear but gladly extends the hand of love again and again.

Stop and ask yourself for a moment why Peter, the other disciples, and ourselves too, find that so hard to practice.

Is it our sense of Justice? That they deserve to be punished for their wrong and if we forgive we interrupt that process. Is it our own hurt that is deep and demands a depth of hurt for them too? Is it a sense of fairness that we demand or a belief that they will not learn if they feel that forgiveness comes so easily? Or maybe we feel that forgiveness shows us up as weak...a soft touch...and opens ourselves up to be hurt all over again. Is it the sense that we keep walking the path of forgiveness with that person again and again and nothing changes? That there is a need to put a limit on forgiveness for our own protection and the protection maybe, of others who we love??

Whatever the reason we know that complete and unconditional forgiveness is pretty hard for most human beings, if not all, to practice. We are happier if we have an out. A boundary that gives us the right to not forgive in certain cases. Whether that's a number boundary—endure that sin against you 7 times then you can justly forget forgiveness. Or a serious boundary---if it falls into the category of a really serious wrong then you are free to not forgive. Or any other boundary you can think of. We yearn for an out, but what Jesus says here is that there is no out for the one who chooses to follow Him.

Jesus of course knew that wouldn't go down too well, and so He told a parable to explain why those who belong to Jesus should practice unconditional forgiveness to others. It's one of those parables that presents

situations that are extreme to the point of impossibility in order to get the point across that Jesus is making.

In the first extreme we have a king who has decided that a servant who owes the equivalent today of millions of dollars should, along with his wife and children, be sold into slavery, and everything else he owned be liquidated, so that at least some of the debt could be recouped.

But then the servant begged the king, no doubt with tears and groans and much groveling on the ground before him, to be patient and the servant would eventually pay everything he owed. Now both the king and the servant knew that such was an impossibility. But the king took pity on him—that's this huge change in the king's approach to the man—he wipes out the debt completely and lets him go.

In the second extreme the servant goes out from the king's presence with his massive debt a thing of the past and immediately bumps into a fellow servant who owes him just a few dollars. And he manhandles him. He grabs him by the throat no less, and demands immediate payment. And despite the poor guy's gasps for mercy he has him committed to a debtor's prison, where he has no hope of ever getting any money, until the debt is paid.

The third extreme is presented in v32. It's what happens when the king hears about his servant's bullish behavior.(CEV)

The 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.

It's the line that I have highlighted in red that reveals the message that Jesus needed His disciples to understand.

Jesus is saying very clearly that the measure we are to use when we consider forgiving others is not whether we think they deserve forgiveness or not. Neither is it the severity of their crime against us or the degree of remorsefulness on their part. It is not even related to the number of times they have been forgiven in the past by us or others. The measure is found in the fact that we have been saved from eternal peril and judgment by the

undeserved forgiveness that God has given us. A forgiveness that cost Almighty God much more than the total value of all the money in the world.

Now I reckon that Peter didn't take to heart that message then, because he probably didn't realize at that stage how much he needed the forgiveness that Jesus offers. He didn't understand at that point how weak and in need of mercy he was. In his own eyes he had no great debt to pay to God compared to others.

But then came that horrible time when he denied Jesus three times. The moment when he recognized the power of sin in himself as the cock crowed, and the Lord looked at him. And it was then that Peter went out and wept bitterly. And the pain of that betrayal would have stuck with him till the Sunday morning. Till that moment when the women returned from the empty tomb with the news that Jesus was risen from the dead and with a message for the disciples that only mentioned Peter by name. And it was then that Peter knew the absolute joy of undeserved forgiveness.

I am sure that if we had asked Peter then, why are you still a follower of Jesus, Peter would have responded: "Because He forgave me".

Many years later Peter wrote two letters to Christian groups and in 2 Peter 1:5-9 he has some very interesting things to say about the way we should behave.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.

Now he doesn't actually mention forgiveness, but we read this list and we know that forgiving others is a big part of all that is said here. He then goes on to say:-

For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

I wonder when he said those words highlighted in red whether he was thinking back to the parable that Jesus told?? For it is only when we truly remember how much our forgiveness cost Jesus that we can forgive others, and even then we will find it hard.

Sometimes we are like the two brothers, Harry and James, who had a big argument one night before Mum put them to bed. Harry had hit James with a stick and they were still exchanging charges and accusations with each other as mum came to turn the lights off. Mum turned to James and said quite firmly, "James you are going to have to forgive your brother before I turn this light off". And James replied, "OK, I'll forgive him tonight, but he'll better look out in the morning."

Then there's the story of the author of the famous tract, "Come to Jesus," who at one time engaged in a theological dispute. He at last sat down and wrote to some publication of his opponent, an answer, bristling with sarcasm and invective, sharp and cutting as a razor. Reading it to a friend, he asked: "What do you think of it?" "It is a masterpiece of invective," was the reply. "You fairly flay him alive. What have you decided to call it?" "I have not thought of a title. Can you suggest one?" "Well," came the response, "how would it do to call it, 'Go to the Devil,' by the author of 'Come to Jesus'?"—

But not only is forgiveness hard, and un-forgiveness can creep up on all of us so quickly, but it is also an often-misunderstood concept. Sometimes we think forgiveness means saying that everything is OK, even when it isn't. Sometimes we feel guilty because we're unable to forget the hurt that we suffered, despite our best efforts. We say that we forgive but we can't forget. But forgiveness is a process. It takes place over time. Someone wrote that forgiveness is giving up my right to hurt you for hurting me. In other words, forgiveness isn't really about forgetting, it's about letting go. And as often as the hurt resurfaces, we forgive again.

So yes, forgiveness is hard, and harder for some than for others, but it is also powerful. *Henry van Dyke wrote this in Light My Candle:-*

A young Christian working man told me that he lost a valued tool from his tool kit and recognized it later in the kit of his fellow workman. Being the only Christian at work in the room he felt it incumbent upon him to show forgiveness. So he went to the thief and said, "I see you have one of my tools, but you can keep it if you

need it." Then he went on with his work and put the incident out of his mind. During the next two weeks the thief three times tried to give the value of the tool to its rightful owner—once by offering to give him something else of equal value, again by offering his services between hours, and again by slipping money into his coat pocket. The incident closed with a lasting friendship between the two men, because, said the thief, "I couldn't stand being forgiven."

Forgiveness is always powerful, and not just as far as the person who has been forgiven is concerned. Often it's greatest power is the power it has to release the person who forgives from the weight and pain of the hurt they have been bearing. And especially is that the case when the hurt forgiven is so deep and seemingly unforgiveable.

Christmas is the ideal time to think about forgiving others. To ask the Lord to show you those you have avoided—those you may have despised or hated from a distance. And then tell Him that you are prepared to make the first move, but only if He gives you the strength and courage to do so. And He will, because He loves you so much and wants you to be free and effective in your service for Him.