

## Introduction

There's a Spanish story of a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father. On Saturday 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.

Forgiveness is an issue for all of us. It is something we desperately need but often find it very difficult to give. In our reading from Matthew's gospel Jesus is talking about revenge and learning to love our enemies instead of seeking to get even with them. In New Testament Times and still today in some cultures honour is a very important thing in people's eyes and if someone has insulted or wronged you it is important to set the record straight. The measure they used was to exact punishment to the exact degree to which the individual was hurt or insulted.

Jesus' standard is the opposite. He tells us that instead of looking for revenge we should make ourselves vulnerable and offer the other cheek to be struck, to open ourselves to insult. I think this is possibly the most difficult piece of teaching in the new testament and one many of us struggle with. When we are hurt it is natural, and in fact right to feel angry and the human response is to seek revenge.

Jesus tells the familiar story of the servant who finds himself very heavily in debt to his master, hugely in debt in fact. The talent was the largest unit of currency and ten thousand was the largest number so this was an amount that was around a billion pounds. The servant had no way of paying the debt and the master ruled that his wife and children should be sold to repay the debt. The sale of his wife and children would not realize more than a fraction of the debt therefore it must have

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been a punishment. The man had no hope of repaying what he owed but even so begged his master to have patience and allow him time to pay off the debt.

The master takes pity on the man in his distress and canceling the debt allows him to go free and unpunished. Jesus goes on to tell how the man, just having being released from his own enormous debt, finds another servant who owes him about 5P and starts to choke him, demanding his money back. The man is unable to pay so the servant has him thrown into prison until he can pay his debt. Here we see a man who has escaped punishment for his debt refusing to offer the sort of free forgiveness he has received.

Jesus goes on to tell how the other servants distressed at the way the servant has behaved tell their master who pronounces judgment. *Read vv32f*

It seems astonishing that the man having been shown such mercy is unable to show mercy in return. Yet this is often the situation we are in ourselves. The sin of mankind against God is a debt which cannot possibly be wiped out by mankind themselves. God has wiped it out for us in sending his Son Jesus to die on the cross and bear the punishment for our sins – yet so often we are unable to show the same unconditional forgiveness to others. When others hurt us we brood on it and allow our hurt and anger to grow unchecked. We are unable to show the love we have ourselves received.

Jesus tells us that we must forgive freely firstly because we ourselves have been forgiven and secondly because if we don't our free pardon will be removed and we will be found wanting on that final day of judgment.

Forgiveness is a very potent force. It has the power to change and transform us and to change and transform those we forgive. Lack of forgiveness is equally potent. It lives in our hearts and gnaws away at our spiritual, emotional and physical health.

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When the first missionaries came to Alberta, Canada, they were savagely opposed by a young chief of the Cree Indians named Maskepetoon. But he responded to the gospel and accepted Jesus into his life. Shortly afterward, a member of the Blackfoot tribe killed his father. Maskepetoon rode into the village where the murderer lived and demanded that he be brought before him. Confronting the guilty man, he said, "You have killed my father, so now you must be my father. You shall ride my best horse and wear my best clothes." In utter amazement and remorse his enemy exclaimed, "My son, now you have killed me!" He meant, of course, that the hate in his own heart had been completely erased by the forgiveness and kindness of the Indian chief.

However the thing about offering forgiveness is that it needs to be freely offered with no expectation of any return. If we forgive people for wronging us we need to do it without expecting any apology in return. *Tell story of Elizabeth and my experience of offering forgiveness.*

Which leads on to the other part of forgiveness: forgetting.

In the book *A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World*, Ron Lee Davis retells the true story of a priest in the Philippines, a much-loved man of God who carried the burden of a secret sin he had committed many years before. He had repented but still had no peace, no sense of God's forgiveness.

In his parish was a woman who deeply loved God and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Jesus and he with her. The priest, however, was skeptical. To test her he said, "The next time you speak with Christ, I want you to ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary." The woman agreed. A few days later the priest asked. "Well, did Jesus visit you in your dreams?"

"Yes, he did," she replied.

"And did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?"

"Yes."

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"Well, what did he say?"

"He said, 'I don't remember'"

What God forgives, He forgets.

We need to leave our own sins at the foot of the cross knowing that when he forgives us God no longer remembers what we have done. He hurls our sins into the depths of the ocean and puts up a sign that says, "No Fishing".

However this idea of forgiving and forgetting can cause misunderstanding and hurt. About thirty years ago there was a terrible incident where several men high on drugs broke into a vicarage in Ealing, attacked the vicar and raped his daughter. Afterwards in hospital, battered and bruised the vicar said in a television interview that he forgave the men. This caused great hurt to his daughter who had been brutally attacked. It made her feel that her father was excusing what had been done to her, that he was saying that it didn't matter and it left her feeling as if she had been violated again.

We must forgive but we can't always forget – and indeed we shouldn't always forget. If terrible wrong has been done it needs to be remembered and never repeated. When we forgive we aren't saying that no wrong has been done. We aren't excusing the hurt that happened. We are acknowledging that there is hurt – that there is a debt and then we are wiping it out.

Corrie ten Boom, who famously wrote of her experiences in a Nazi concentration camp, told of not being able to forget a wrong that had been done to her. She had forgiven the person, but she kept rehashing the incident and so couldn't sleep. Finally Corrie cried out to God for help in putting the problem to rest. "His help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor," Corrie wrote, "to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks." "Up in the church tower," he said, nodding out the window, "is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging, First ding, then dong, Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops. I believe the same

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thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down." "And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversations, but the force -- which was my willingness in the matter -- had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at the last stopped altogether: we can trust God not only above our emotions, but also above our thoughts."

Many of us have suffered great hurt in our lives. We may still feel wounded and sore but Jesus tells us that as his followers we need to learn to put that hurt aside and forgive in the way he forgives us

Sometimes when we have been hurt we cling onto the pain and find it hard to know where to begin. But the fact is that lack of forgiveness stops us growing as Christians. It stunts our spiritual growth and can also have long term effects on our mental and physical health. My experience was that God had to take me to task and tell me that I would get no further with him until I had learned to forgive my step mother. At first I was unable to even contemplate the thought of forgiving. I had to take a few steps back and tell God that I wasn't willing to forgive but I was willing to be willing to forgive. I had to ask him to change my heart and mind and give me the ability to forgive.

When we are able to do that God always helps us. We heard how Corrie Ten Boom asked God for help to forgive the terrible wrong that had been done to her. I had to have God's help to forgive the wrong done to me. We all need that help. But God is the master of forgiveness and all we need to do is ask him to help us. To move us one step nearer being able to forgive and he will help us to take each step.

Can I encourage you to examine your heart today. Are you harbouring hurt and un-forgiveness? Is there someone that

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you avoid or don't speak to? Bring that hurt and pain to our loving Father who knows all about being bruised and wounded. Ask him to heal your wounds and to enable you to forgive. When you do you will find astonishing wells of love and spiritual power being released in your life.