

Dear Friends,

Matthew 18: 15-27

Peter wants to know how often he needs to forgive a person who keeps offending against him. Jesus tells him not to count at all, but to keep on forgiving. It's important to notice the passage that comes before this one. In that there is guidance about what action to take when someone does wrong. We are told to meet and talk with them about their fault. If they will not listen, we are to keep challenging them. If they persist, we are to expel them from the church. This is pretty harsh, but the Jesus we meet in Matthew's gospel can be pretty harsh. We will see that again at the end of our story.

These two passages side by side remind us of two things that need to be held together. Judgement and grace. How we live matters, wrong doing causes hurt and harm, it needs to be confronted. But it would be a hard world without the grace and mercy which each and every one of us needs.

Jesus does what he does so often by putting his teaching into a story. He begins to speak and everyone relaxes. "Good" they think "a story". They open their ears to listen and as they do, they also open their minds to hear and think about his teaching.

And what Jesus does is to turn the perspective around. So, Peter has been seeing himself as the king of the castle who is standing on the moral high ground. Below him is a dirty rascal who has been doing wrong. In the same way, the passage about what to do when someone offends, puts you as the king of the castle working out how to deal with a dirty rascal. Jesus turns the perspective around by making the story about a dirty rascal who is in need of mercy. Maybe he's asking Peter to remember that before being in the position of deciding whether to forgive, he is first of all in the position of one who needs to be forgiven.

The story is about a slave. He owes the king ten thousand talents. It would take a labourer fifteen years to earn one talent. Therefore, if this slave were to put all his earnings towards paying off the debt, it would take him 150,000 years to pay it off. The idea is that the sum is unimaginably large. Today we might call it zillions or kajillions.

The slave is brought to the king. Obviously, he cannot pay what he owes. The king orders that he, his wife and children and all of his possessions be sold. He won't make much on that, but it will be something and will act as a warning to others who dare to consider not paying their debts.

The slave in desperation, falls on his knees before the king and says, "Have patience with me and I will pay you everything". He is being unrealistic. He can never pay the debt he owes. The king, however, has pity on him and chooses to write off the whole amount and let him go. Notice, he doesn't say, "Okay, I'll give you until Friday". He doesn't change the terms and invite the slave to pay it back in

instalments with added interest to compensate for the delay. He just, in one move, releases the slave and allows him to walk away free from the huge burden that has been weighing him down.

The question is, how will the slave now use this freedom that he has been given? He has been shown kindness. What will he do with the kindness that he has received? What effect will it have on his heart?

God bless you,

Tony