

# St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups 8<sup>th</sup> March 2009

## Good News – for those struggling with Forgiveness

### Matt 18: 21 - 35



#### Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

Forgiveness is undoubtedly the Father's demonstrated love for us in Christ but we can take it for granted. To forgive and to be reconciled in such a way that disappointment, hate and bitterness no longer consume us is a very different matter and not always an easy journey. For some even to receive forgiveness is difficult because of what we feel and know about ourselves. What we have learnt is that we have - instant access, because God's love is always instantly accessible and therefore we need no longer hide from him. Whether we have to forgive ourselves or other, forgiveness is a deep and ongoing process.

Matthew ch.18 is the 4<sup>th</sup> of his discourses and it's all about relationships in the kingdom. It divides into 7 sections. Our study looks at the last 2 sections of the chapter. The reading divides into 2 parts: verses 21 – 22 deal directly with forgiveness and verses 23 - 35 not only deal with forgiveness but also freedom from resentment. The Christian life is born of forgiveness and it must characterise us as God's people all through our relationships.

**Forgiveness v 21 – 22:** Peter wanted to know how few times he should forgive and he suggested to Jesus that 7 times would be sufficient; the rabbis reckoned 3 was enough, so Peter must have thought that he was offering Jesus the moon! He must have been shattered by Jesus response – not 7 times, but 70 times 7 Jesus said. Jesus doesn't mean precisely 490 times, what he really means is that we are to go on and on forgiving. It's a constant process. After all, God's pardon is like that and we are each called to mirror his forgiveness if we are in his family. But how can we do that? On our own it's impossible but if we have first received his forgiveness then he gives us the power and motivation to forgive as well. But we still have to choose to do it. What does forgiveness really mean? C.S. Lewis said *it goes beyond human fairness; it is pardoning those things that can't readily be pardoned at all!* We need to determine not to hold onto the grievance but to accept his or her penitence whole heartedly as God does. Gradually the heart catches up with the head and forgiveness repeatedly reiterated becomes part of us and enters deep into the wounded feelings, until we are at last able to say, *'It is finished.'* Paul Tournier is quoted as saying *'Nothing makes us so lonely as our secrets'* Hidden grievances and an unwillingness to forgive are two things that make shipwrecks of personal relations.

**Freedom from resentment v 23 – 35:** The story of the unforgiving servant in these verses drives home the message that resentment can eat away at us. Resentment is a deadly disease, it's very common and it can have physical results. The first servant (v24) was forgiven a debt of phenomenal proportions a sum equivalent to a thousand times the annual revenue of Galilee, Judea, Samaria and Idumea put together! The King forgave him the lot – what amazing good news – what astonishing grace! This is what God has done for us in Christ; he has forgiven the sins of every disciple. As we read the story we identify with the first servant as we realise how much it cost the Lord to forgive us. But then the story turns on its head. What did the man do? Did he behave with generosity towards others? Sadly no. Do we sometimes see ourselves in his unforgiving and resentful action? What we find is that he seeks out a fellow servant who owes him a pitiful amount – a trifle in comparison - and exacts a horrible revenge on his fellow servant. He must have been brooding over that unpaid debt for years. Resentment had taken hold of his attitude. The King's servant was so enslaved that he was unable to forgive and let go the resentment that had built up. The truth that Jesus drives home in v35 of the story is that if we fail to forgive we shall not be forgiven. If these attitudes are not right or prevail in the church, nothing else will go right. Matthew in telling us this story makes it clear that grace is not a cheap thing to be trifled with. It will not do to claim to be forgiven and then prove by our actions that our lives have not been changed. The pardon of God is dynamic and life changing. It's such good news. Johann Christoph Arnold writes: *When we forgive, we not only pardon a failing or a deliberate act of evil, but we also embrace the person responsible and seek to rehabilitate and restore them. Our forgiveness may not always be accepted, yet once we have reached out our hand, we cleanse ourselves of resentment.* The really good news is that it is at the cross that redemption, forgiveness and freedom from resentment lie.



#### Witness: questions to discuss

**Guidance: Before discussion read the Bible passage, ask God to help you discern what the Spirit wants to say to your group. Consider one or two questions below – don't feel you have to use them all! Make sure there's plenty of room for prayer and ministry.**

1. Is forgiveness a feeling or a choice? Share what this means for each one of you.
  2. Are we able to recognise the depth of the hurt and bitterness we are asking people to let go of?
  3. Can the experience of being forgiven by others (especially in church?) open us up to the possibility of forgiving others? Could this be a valid justification for introducing the practice of confession and absolution?
  4. As Christians, are we forgiven all our sins automatically? How does this relate to the problem of 'cheap grace'?
  5. Is our forgiveness unconditional? What about "if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:15)?
  6. Read the Lord's prayer. - How do we bridge this gap between the words we say, and the reality of our lives?
  7. There is a Chinese proverb that says 'whoever opts for revenge should dig two graves' Is this true and if so why?
- For Personal reflection only** -Think of someone in your family, church family or friends that you may not have forgiven and pray about what you should do.