

A Community of Jesus – Matthew 16-18

If I asked you to name the most important threats to the witness of the church I wonder what you would say? More specifically perhaps what is the most significant threat to the witness of this church?

Top of our list would probably be sin. We need only look at the travails of the Roman Catholic Church with its various scandals over paedophile priests to see how sin mars the reputation of Jesus.

Perhaps the more theologically minded amongst us would suggest heresy. No church is immune from that danger.

But I want to add another possibility to that list: lack of forgiveness!

That certainly seems to be high on Jesus' agenda in Matthew 16-18. Just to remind us, remember we have been tracing the story line of the whole bible, looking particularly at what it say about the church.

☞ Church-new creation

We saw that churches are communities of God's people on the brink of eternity – the new creation. But story went further back than that.

☞ creation

We saw that in creation God created us in his image as relational beings – designed to live together in relationships, but we sinned, the image was marred and our relationships fell apart.

☞ Abraham

We saw that God promised Abraham that he would restore the world, and centrally he would restore human beings in his image. Remaking human community.

☞ Law

We saw how the law warned that sin was the great obstacle to the fulfilment of God's plan.

☞ *Prophets*

But we saw that the prophets promised that God would not give up on his plan. They foresaw a great gathering of people from every tribe and nation led by Jesus, forgiven through Jesus' death, transformed by Jesus.

☞ *Jesus*

And so today we come to Jesus – the gospel of Matthew. Matthew 16:18 is one of the great pivotal verses in that gospel.

Matthew 16:18 (NIV - Anglicised)

¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

“I will build my church”

The next few chapters, then start to focus on the characteristics of this new people of God – the church of Jesus. In the rest of chapter 16 and chapter 17 that church will be defined by their attitude to Jesus.

☞ *Our attitude to Jesus*

(not time to justify these headings – let you wrestle with them another time)

Matthew 16:21-17:27 – our attitude to Jesus

Matthew 16:21-28 – disciples who will devote their lives to Christ

Matthew 17:1-13 – disciples who know Jesus

Matthew 17:14-23 – disciples who trust Jesus

Matthew 17:24-27 – disciples who belong to Jesus

☞ *Our attitude to ourselves and others*

Matthew 18 – Our attitude to ourselves and others

Matthew 18:1-4 – disciples who understand true greatness

Matthew 18:5-14 – disciples who care about little people

Matthew 18:15-20 – disciples who resolve their differences

Matthew 18:21-35 – disciples who forgive

The end point of all this is Matthew 18:21-35. The next verse moves us into a new section by saying “after Jesus had finished saying all these things” (Mat 19:1).

And Matthew 18:21-35 is a parable all about forgiveness.



Matthew 18:21-22

Peter perhaps thinks he is being generous in suggesting seven times. The rabbis thought three times was enough. But Jesus takes it further. “Not seven times but seventy seven times”.

He may actually be alluding back to a story in Genesis 4. Lamech, a seventh generation descendant from Adam, boasts that he will avenge any injury on himself “seventy seven times.” Thus in just a few generations justice has become distorted into disproportionate revenge. But Jesus expects his church to reverse that with disproportionate forgiveness – “seventy seven times.”

Then he tells this parable to hammer his message home. One thing stands out in this parable.

☞ Human beings are astonishingly inconsistent

He tells a simple story. A king finds that one of his servants owes him a massive debt. But he has pity on that servant and cancels the debt.

Astonishingly the servant goes straight out, and ruthlessly bullies a fellow servant for a much more minor debt. Refusing to have pity on him. What hypocrisy! The onlookers can see it, they are deeply distressed by it, but he does not.

It is not confined to the church. History is full of great and admired leaders who were horrible to their family in private. Millionaires who were misers. Great ethical thinkers who couldn't keep their trousers on.

The group Green Day were uncommonly candid when they sang in their song Walking Contradiction

I have no belief but I believe
I'm a walking contradiction and I ain't got no right

More than that we have the capacity to compartmentalise things. This servant had clearly made no connection between his status as someone who had been forgiven much by the king, and his dealings with this fellow servant who owed him money. They were different compartments.

An extraordinary recent example of that was the case of Colin Howell. He was apparently a devout member of a Baptist church in northern Ireland. But in reality he had killed his own wife, and the husband of his lover and faked it as a double suicide. Only years later did this walled off part of himself break out, and he broke down and confessed to his pastor.

We may not be as extreme as that, but we must recognise that we human beings are dangerously inconsistent. Jesus tells this parable to break down that compartmentalisation. He is forcing us to make a connection between two things: our status as Christians, and our behaviour.

Firstly he establishes our status

☞ *We are forgiven much*

The debt that the servant owes is astronomical. In today's money it would be billions of pounds sterling.

So the servant's plea in verse 26 is utterly lame



V26

It would be like a banker, in the recent crisis, saying "I will personally pay back the debt of the bank." Even with a million pound bonus he is not going to pay back billions.

Now there are plenty of people who would question this part of Jesus' story. They see what Jesus is doing – setting up a picture of the enormous price owed for our sin – but they say "my sin is not so bad. Surely if I live a good life, I can pay the debt for anything I do wrong."

But the Bible describes sin against God as adultery, because he made us to be in a covenant relationship with him, like a marriage. As the sixteenth century reformer John Calvin points out an adulterous husband can't say to his wife "My sin is not so great. I was faithful to you on more days than I committed adultery."

Every human being owes an unpayable debt to God.

The master's response therefore is amazing. Notwithstanding the lameness of this servant's pleas, the master has pity on him, cancels the debt, and sets him free.

It is the most unimaginably glorious and gracious thing that he cancels our debt. It cost God everything – the death of his only Son. If you are a Christian here today you are unimaginably privileged.

So here is the connection – or the lack of connection in the story.

☞ *So lack of forgiveness is inexcusable*

The story is excruciating. The forgiven servant immediately finds another fellow servant.

The fellow servant owes a hundred denarii. That is quite a significant sum – about three or four months wages. It is not trivial. But it is compared to a thousand talents.

Jesus repeatedly makes the point that this is a “fellow-servant”. They have the same status. But the first servant “grabs him” v28. The word has a sense of taking control of him, lording it over him. And he is violent

He began to choke him v28

He seems to be entirely deaf to the echo of his own pleas to the king.



V29

He has no mercy.



V30

Everybody else makes the connection.



V31

But he doesn't. So the king reverses his clemency.



Vv32-34

If you are a Christian here, the stakes are that high, as you deal with people who have wronged you.

In marriage for instance. Frankly I didn't really realise I was a sinner until I got married. Living closely with someone brings out all kinds of unsavoury things in us that we just did see before – selfishness, anger, pride, thoughtlessness – if there is no forgiveness in marriage there is no marriage. Thank you Judy, you have forgiven a good bit more than 100 denarii.

In families too. The miserable feuds, horrible loneliness, and deep bitterness that family members so often inflict on one another through unforgiveness. Christian families do not hold together because of their sinlessness. Sin is an ever-present problem. They hold together because of forgiveness.

In friendships. Someone described to me her response to a disagreement with a friend

I unfriended her on Facebook, and wrote her a note saying “so long have a nice life.”
I will never see her again.

So easy – and so arid. Imagine God treated her like that – according to this parable perhaps he will!

And in churches. So many people come to church with a fantasy that this place is a sin-free area. It is not. The fellow-servant, the “brother” as Jesus calls him in v35 has incurred quite a significant debt with his fellow man. People here will hurt you and you them.

But the debts that we owe one another are as nothing compared with the inestimable debt you owed to God that was cancelled when Jesus died on the cross.

So Christian cancel your small debts! Lest your main debt gets re-added to your account. Your life depends on it!

And the life and witness of this church depends on it too. It is not by accident that this parable is the climax of this section of Matthew which is teaching about the formation of the new people of God – the church of Jesus Christ. Unforgiveness splits churches, it is a cancer in their heart, it is an infection which eats away them, it is like nuclear fallout deposited in their bones – it sits there quietly but in time it produces all kinds of maladies, deformities, and misery. It is like an earthquake waiting to happen – the pressures slowly build up and one day unexpectedly - catastrophe.

“Forgive your brother” says Jesus “from the heart.”

I know that such a subject raises deep questions, and sometimes profound pain. I have had to hear people ask me “Should I forgive the man who sexually abused me as a child?” “Should I forgive my husband who left me for another woman when I was

pregnant with our fifth child?” “Should I forgive the bullying work colleague who drove me to depression and almost to suicide?”

And actually scripture is more nuanced and subtle about forgiveness than many of us think. Our duty, as in this parable is to mirror God. And God is quite clear that he only forgives repentant people.

The mother of one of the victims of the 7-7 London tube bombings was an Anglican priest. She resigned her pastorate saying that she could not forgive the bomber. Now I don't know her story. There may have been a wider crisis of faith but I listened to her on the radio talking about not being able to forgive and I thought – God doesn't ask her to forgive her daughter's killer. He did not repent. He intended evil and he carried it out. There is no indication that God will forgive him, and he doesn't ask us to do more than him.

But it is different amongst believers. They are penitent people. As we saw a few weeks ago, if a church member demonstrates clearly and consistently that they are not penitent, then they have no right to be called Christians. So we must treat one another as basically penitent people – sinning again and again, but overall penitent.

I want to finish by telling you the true story of a man called Chris Carrier. As a boy he lived in Florida and one day a scruffy man met him at the school gate telling him that his father had asked him to pick him up. He was in fact a disgruntled employee of his father. He took Chris to the everglades, shot him in the head and left him for dead. Amazingly Chris survived – blinded in one eye but able to function. His assailant was suspected but there was insufficient evidence to convict him.

One day years later Chris received a message. His attacker was terminally ill and had confessed. He wanted to see Chris. Chris Carrier was a Christian. He went to see him – the man sought his forgiveness and he gave it. He also shared the gospel with him.

This dying pathetic scrap of humanity sought God's forgiveness under Chris' guidance. Chris Carrier then began visiting this man regularly, praying with him, encouraging him. Shortly before his death he told a reporter that Chris Carrier was the best friend he had ever had.

God has forgiven you so much. There is nothing that, with God, you cannot forgive.