

Matthew 18:21-35
No Limits to Forgiveness
Nunawading and Waverley, 13-9-20

Dear friends in Christ,

Our ascended Lord holds us together. He does so by baptising each of us into himself so that his forgiveness flows from him to us, and then from us towards our brothers and sisters in the church. G. K. Chesterton once quipped, “The Bible tells us to love our neighbours, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people.” Hurt from strangers can be serious, can lead to legal action and so on. But serious hurt to our feelings, usually occurs between us and our friends and the people we are close to in the church. Peter approached Jesus about this: **Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?** Peter mentioned **my brother, my sister**, that is, fellow believers.

As I said, God’s forgiveness holds us together but our sins, unintentional actions, and our personalities can tear us apart. It is a peculiar thing, that what wouldn’t bother us in a stranger can really niggle us when it involves a fellow Christian. The other day, someone wrote to me about a church practice and his criticism of it and copied a number of colleagues into the email. I asked someone else, “Is this person having a go at me?” It definitely looked like it. But what to do?

I think, if someone’s pattern of behaviour is damaging, then our Lord Jesus encourages us to talk about with the person. This is what he said a few verses prior to this passage: **If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.** Most of the time, to avoid confronting a person, we just let it continue. This is not healthy for the body of Christ.

The opposite is not healthy either, that of wiping off a person. This is where Peter was heading. Forgiving **seven times** was pretty generous but it was an admission that the power of Christ’s forgiveness in a community of Christians is inadequate. When Christ says, **seventy times seven** and adds, **forgive from your heart**, he is declaring that his love is without limits, that it is inexhaustible. Forgiveness should never stop. Think about it, if it did stop, would we not be entering into judgement against a brother or sister whom Christ has made into a saint, into a totally forgiven child of God?

So, what did I do? I let the email pass! When the heat dies down the Holy Spirit kicks in and you begin to think about his word and all the things he taught you. One of them is right here in the parable. The king wanted to settle accounts with his noblemen who were in charge of cities and territories. One owed him **10,000 talents**, which is about \$240billion in our terms. It was an impossible amount to pay back. He owed his life and his families lives. The king's response to his pleading and ridiculous proposal to pay him back was to **release him and forgive him the debt**. The king would not put him into custody and would wipe the debt clean. It wasn't because of the nobleman's grovelling but because of **the king's compassion**, his deep inner feeling of mercy and pity for the wretch. Our heavenly Father, our king and Saviour, forgives our impossible debts to him, which we add to every day of our lives. When we are annoyed by what a fellow Christian does, we can remember this and realise that we do the same things and sometimes worse yet we are relying on the unlimited forgiveness of God.

The negative lesson is there, too. If we hold on to a grudge, if we exclude people or abandon church members because they haven't met our standards, are we not becoming like the wicked nobleman, who went looking for a colleague **who owed him 100 denarii**, about \$20,000, an amount he could pay back given a little time. **He grabbed him by the throat**, assaulted him **and roughly had him thrown into jail**. We do not want to keep company with that sort of chap.

Christ baked forgiveness into his prayer: **forgive us our debts** (same words in the parable) **as we forgive those who are indebted to us**. Why is forgiveness so important to God? It is because he wants us to be reconciled to him and to remain his friends. Since that is the way he is, he wants us to remain together as friends. Even if we choose not to be close, at the least, we can be friendly, can remain 'a sinful sort of saintly band', a band of brothers and sisters as the song goes.