

Matthew 18:21-35

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[0 : 0 0] Well, thank you. It really is. It's been a joy for me to be up this weekend.

Obviously, living in Derby, my two boys are English. Sometimes they say to me, Daddy, why do you not say words the right way? So I try and educate them in the ways of Glasgow.

I said to them, a man went into a cake shop and said, is that a pineapple cake and a meringue? And he said, no, you're right the first time, it's a pineapple cake. And they look at me blankly because they don't understand it.

So it's good to be back in a city that understands quality humor and how to pronounce words properly. If you don't understand that joke, my accent must have changed more than I thought it had.

But it's really good to be here. I've loved being with the church family yesterday and good to be here with you today. We've been looking through Matthew 18 over the weekend and we're coming to the end of that.

[1 : 0 3] So if you've got it open in front of you, that would be really helpful. And I'm going to pray for us as we come to look at it now. Heavenly Father, you are indeed holy and righteous and true.

And we are fallen very far in our sin. And yet we thank you that through the Lord Jesus, you have come and shown us great grace and love and mercy.

And you speak to us for our good and for your glory. And so we ask this morning as we have these spirit-inspired words that you would help us to listen to them.

To believe what you say. And to want to respond with genuine faith and obedience. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. And we've been thinking together this past weekend for those who are here and for those of you who want, it will be a little bit of a recap as well about what greatness is.

[2 : 0 5] And what it looks like in the church family. And Jesus has been speaking about humility and about forgiveness. And those things all seem to flow out of the greatness of the gospel.

And we're going to see them again this morning. But as we begin, let me ask you if you've ever heard of the School of Turin. I don't know if you've heard that name, if that means anything to you. It might be concerning if you had heard of them or were part of them.

Because they were a crack team of criminals who pulled off a rather famous diamond heist called the Antwerp Diamond Heist. Antwerp in Belgium is one of the diamond capitals of the world.

I've never bought many diamonds. I don't have many diamonds. My wife has one diamond that we bought just before, as we got engaged. That's the only diamond we've got. But apparently, 80% of the world's diamonds, they pass through the city of Antwerp before being sold on market.

And the Antwerp Diamond Centre is one of the main places where they're held. It has a huge vault, 10 different layers of security. But in 2003, the School of Turin managed to walk away with \$100 million in uncut diamonds.

[3 : 19] They planned it for years, using copied keys, fake camera footage. It sounds something like out of a Hollywood film, doesn't it? They bypassed the vault security, which was meant to be impenetrable.

It's a massive cost. A massive loss for anyone who had stuff there. Now, just try and imagine, if you can this morning, just try and imagine how you would feel if you're valuables.

All your diamonds, all your gold, whatever you've got, the money you've got, all the money you've got, all £6.50 of it. Imagine, it had all been there in this vault.

You'd be thinking, I thought it would be safe. I thought I could hold on to them there. Now, I want you to imagine something a little bit more ridiculous. Imagine if you discovered, not only was your stuff gone, but that the vault door had been left open.

In fact, it's more than that. Imagine that you discovered that the management of this institution, where everything materially precious to you, had been entrusted.

[4 : 25] Just imagine, if you would, that the management there had adopted an open door policy. That their vaults now had unrestricted access 24 hours a day.

And you heard that after your stuff is gone. You'd be thinking, this is madness. That's madness, surely. And those feelings, if you can even imagine them for a moment, your bank or this bank having an open door policy with all your stuff inside.

If you can imagine feeling that even for a moment. I think those feelings come close to the surface for anyone who hears what Jesus has to say about forgiveness.

Forgiveness. And we'll see it in this passage we've got in front of us. Because Jesus says, look, forgiveness is not to be generous. It's to be unrestricted.

Forgiveness, real forgiveness, involves cost and loss, isn't it? You know that. Forgiveness always involves a kind of cost and loss. That's why we hold little grudges, isn't it? There's a cost, isn't it?

[5 : 31] And you want somebody to feel that. You think, what do you mean by unrestricted forgiveness? Now we may need to define some of these things. But just feel the impact for a moment. See, if you're someone who's genuinely started to follow Jesus.

If you're someone here this morning who would call themselves a Christian. Then you need to know, when it comes to the management of your life. Jesus is insisting on an open door policy.

When it comes to forgiveness. It's unrestricted. I think there are many reasons we find forgiveness difficult. But one that might not occur to us.

Some of us looked at this and thought about this for a bit yesterday. Was that when it comes to forgiveness. The thinking is that we can be generous. And you might be here this morning and you're thinking.

Well, look, surely generosity is a commendable virtue. But not when it comes to forgiveness. And let me try and explain why. If you get the passage open in front of you. Just look at what Peter says in verse 21. You hear what he says.

[6 : 33] Oh Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times. What's going on? Well, there's been a long discussion from the beginning of chapter 18.

There was a question from Jesus' disciples in verse 1. They were asking, who is the greatest in God's kingdom? Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? They're wanting to know the way God arranges life.

The way God wants life to be lived. What kind of people are at the top? And Jesus turns their ideas upside down. He gets a child. And in verse 4 he says, Whoever humbles himself, like this child.

Whoever takes a lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And he's not meaning to become childish or immature. The key idea is humility. A child in those days didn't have much in the way of status.

Couldn't start comparing himself, thinking he was better than someone else. They knew they were dependent. Part of a family where everyone was to be looked after equally. And for the rest of chapter 18, Jesus refers to Christians as little ones.

[7 : 37] If you're a Christian, it's one of the way God refers to you, as a little one. And you get his point. That's what you're to be like in God's family. Humbly trusting. And enjoying equal love and care.

And when it comes to being great, Jesus starts telling them, Look, being a genuine little one, being genuinely great, looks like caring for other little ones.

So in verse 5, you look back to that. To welcome other Christians, whoever they are. Verse 6, he'll say, We're not to do anything that would cause another little one to sin.

In verses 10 to 14, we saw this yesterday. Jesus says, Look, if one of these other little ones begins to wander off in sin, if they do sin, you're not to despise them. Not to look down on them.

You're to go after them and try and bring them back to God. And then in verses 15 to 20, he says, If they do sin against you, if they do something that really hurts you, you're to be the one who makes the first move to try and sort things out.

[8 : 46] Now, there might be times, Jesus says, when the church gets involved, there might be sanctions for people who behave really badly. If I bully people and won't stop, I shouldn't be allowed to lead a ministry team, should I?

If I won't attempt to lead my relationships in a way that looks to what God says, I can't expect to be involved in leading God's people.

But you read Jesus' words, and even those sanctions, they're not designed to exclude people ultimately, but out of care to warn them and bring them back. And after all that, Peter comes with this question in verse 21 that we've just read.

And you understand what he's asking. He's saying, What about the serial offender in church? The person who keeps doing things wrong. How often do we forgive? And the rabbis of the day had discussed it, and the answer they'd come up with was three times.

So when Peter says seven times, you realize he's been generous to the point of extravagance. But then Jesus replies, I tell you not seven times, but 77 times.

[9 : 56] Julia and I got married 10 years ago this year. It's our 10th anniversary. I don't know, for those of you who are married, you can remember back to just when you got married and what it was like.

I remember it in all sorts of ways. But when Julia and I got married, and she came into the house that we share, she brought all sorts of things with her. She brought questions with her that I'd never been asked before.

So I'd say to her, Oh, I'd really like to get a new computer. And she said, Why would we need that? I'd never been asked that question before. I'm not sure I liked it very much.

She also said things that I've never heard them words used in this kind of way before. So going out to buy a new pair of shoes, she said, I need to go and invest in a new pair of shoes.

And I say, Really? Invest? What's the rate of return we're expecting to get in these? And when will we see the profit? She'd never been asked anything like that before.

[10 : 57] And I'm not sure she liked it. And there was other things as well. But when Julia came into, and we shared a house together, all sorts of little colorful objects started to appear around the house.

Little colorful things appeared all over the place, so I'd never seen them before. And I said to her, Julia, what's all this stuff? And she said, That's fruit and veg, David.

There's going to be a lot more of that in the house now. Life with Julia began to get healthier as well.

That was just when Julia came into my life, those kind of questions, those use of words, life becoming healthier. If you're a Christian, have you found that with Jesus as well?

When Jesus comes into your life, he'll start asking questions in all sorts of ways. And at times you'll think, I'm not sure I like those questions.

[11 : 57] He'll start to say things in ways that you think, I've never really thought about stuff that way before. But as he does that, and the things he brings in, they're all designed to make you healthier.

That's what he's doing. And when he speaks to you, it's for your good, to bring health to your life. Jesus says to Peter, I tell you not seven times, but 77 times.

It's an odd number to choose until you realize he's alluding to that story from Genesis 4. There's a nasty character called Lamech. He killed a man. And then he promises vengeance on him, on anyone who attacks him, 77 times over.

That's where this number 77 comes from. It's not there now. I used to go to Homely Primary School in Cthcartes, and then Kings Park Secondary School. Some of you might have heard that. But whatever school you went to, you know the kind of playground talk you used to engage in?

I'm 10 times better than you. The response that comes back, oh yeah, well I'm 100 times better than you. The response back to that is, well I'm 1,000 times better than you.

[13 : 05] And then the killer line, I'm better than you by infinity. Remember saying that? And then some, that's it. I was going to say some smart aleck would say as well, I'm better than you by infinity plus one.

It always goes up. That's what Lamech's saying. He's saying my vindictive vengeance will be infinity. It will be unrestricted. And the Bible says that's the kind of people sin eventually produces.

And Jesus is flipping that round, and he's saying the kingdom he's producing, the church we've become part of, will have occasions for sanctions. But it's intended to be unrestricted in a different direction.

Jesus says being in God's kingdom, you're acknowledging you don't have any rights to withhold forgiveness. And so generosity would be the wrong way to think. It suggests there's an agreed limit above which you've moved into generosity, but there's no limit.

It's an open door. It's an open door policy. And you think about the people in this room. At some point, one of them will sin against you. And Jesus says if they come and ask for forgiveness, you're to give it.

[14 : 13] And get this, as some of us saw yesterday, if they don't do that, you are to go to them and graciously persuade them that they need forgiveness.

And that's hard. There's times when Jesus says things, a bit like Julia coming into my house. I'm not sure I like that.

But he says it because he wants us to be healthy. There's a cost with forgiveness, isn't there? There's a loss involved. See, imagine I came around your house and I start messing with your stuff and you ask me to stop but I'm just whacking around the place and I'm being really careless and I spin around and I knock what looks to me like an old clock off the mantelpiece and it falls and it smashes and I kind of laugh and I say it was just an old clock but it's not really, is it?

It's actually worth a lot, it turns out. And more than that, it was given by a relative, somebody you really loved and they've gone now but this was a kind of final, tangible thing, a token of the affection you feel towards them and my stupidity has destroyed that.

There's a loss involved, isn't there? I've taken something from you physically, financially, emotionally and if you just forgive, well, who's paying for that cost?

[15 : 36] Well, it's you, isn't it? You're the one that's paying for it and you think about that and you think, well, is it fair? Is it fair that you have to pay? Where's the justice in that?

Although that might seem like just a little thing but do you see, with genuine forgiveness, there is a cost. Someone is always paying for it. It doesn't just go away. The wrong doesn't just disappear.

Someone's picking up the cost. Forgiveness is costly and Jesus seems to be saying, you've given up your right to withhold forgiveness if you've become a Christian and he'll explain why that's not unjust but there are times when I think, I'm not sure I can do that and that's why Jesus said back in verse 3, we read it yesterday, it's why he said, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven and you think, why would becoming a Christian mean I've got to change in this way and more importantly, can becoming a Christian really change me like this?

Martin Luther, the reformer, described true Christians like this. He said, Isn't that an incredible thing?

Martin Luther says about Christians, they're more worried about the sin of their offender and getting them to experience forgiveness than trying to avenge themselves in any way and you think, why would becoming a Christian make someone live that kind of way?

[17 : 35] Why would becoming a Christian change you to be like that? Well, here's what Jesus says as he tells this parable. He says, Look, with God, you'll either live by debt or by pardon.

Jesus tells us a story. If you've got it there in front of you, it begins in verse 23. He tells us a story in verses 23 to 35 and it's a gospel story. There's a king, verse 23, who has a servant who owes him effectively millions, I think it says thousands, of bags of gold in your version.

And the compensation claim, verse 25, will mean that the servant will lose everything, his family and his freedom, and the servant begs for more time to pay it all back, but the king in pity doesn't give him more time.

There wouldn't be enough time to pay this debt. Instead, he cancels it and you understand what the king's doing. He's saying, if you like, I will absorb the loss in myself. That's what the king's doing.

He says he will absorb the loss in himself. And for the servant, it's like new life, free from debt. But then the story takes an unpleasant turn.

[18 : 42] And this man finds a fellow servant who owes him a small amount in verse 28. But his begging doesn't even get more time, never mind the cancelling of the debt, and a ruthless compensation claim is enacted.

And then we read what the king does when he finds out. And the point of this gospel story that you've got in front of you is about how we relate to God and other Christians.

I've got a really well-designed slide for you. I spent ages on my PowerPoint. Can we just pop that up on the screen? Can you see it? There you go. There's you. Do you like my design?

I spent ages on that. Took me hours. Look, there's you. And then on that side is everything that people owe to me.

There's everything I'm owed by those who hurt me. Everything they've done to me is all piled up there. And on the other side, here's everything I owe God for all the wrong things I've done. And the logic of Jesus' story is this.

[19 : 44] Because of the debt we owe God and the cancelling of that debt, it would be ridiculous to insist on compensation from others. If we were to operate on the basis of debts and paying back, anything that was paid back to us, we would already owe to God and it wouldn't begin to cover our debt.

Do you understand what Jesus is saying? He's saying, look, when someone sins against you, when someone does something wrong to you, whether it is physical, financial, or emotional, you really do experience loss.

They take something from you and that can hurt. There is a sense where they run up a debt. They owe you something. But here's the point. That debt is tiny in proportion to the debt you owe God.

And if you want to live on the basis of claiming and paying your debts, you will always owe God way more than you can ever receive.

And eternity will not be enough time to pay it back. But here's what the gospel is telling us. Can you just pop the next slide up? It's saying, God has offered a new way to live on the basis of pardon.

[21 : 03] the God we have sinned against has decided to take all our debt into himself. And he has offered to absorb the loss caused by our sin.

He has offered to take the just penalty through the death of the Lord Jesus. He says through that, I'll buy you up. I'll buy you entirely.

I'll buy all your debt, but I'm buying everything that's owed to you as well, and it's all mine now. And then he says to you, there are two ways to live.

You can either live on the basis of debts, claiming them back and paying them off with where that will end. Or you can live on the basis of pardon.

But if you really accept the gospel, if you accept the pardon for your sin God has provided for you and the death of his son, if you really know that freedom, it will change you.

[22 : 07] And it will begin to free you to forgive others. You will begin to want, as Martin Luther says, to see others find forgiveness.

It's a question for us this morning, isn't it? Are you believing the gospel? The good news of what God has done for us. I heard the story of a supermarket in America that every day used to give out tickets to those who were shopping there and every day they would say there would be like 10 tickets that would say \$5 off your shopping and there would be about 5 tickets that would say \$20 off your shopping and there was one ticket every day that would say your entire shopping for free.

And the story goes there was a young woman in the supermarket, she was a mum, she didn't have much money, she had a trolley loaded up with all the cheap stuff for her family and she was so longing to get that ticket to get her shopping for free and just ahead of her in the queue was a young man he had a basket with three items in it a bottle of beer a ready meal for one and some breath freshener you know the kind of guys you see at the supermarket on their own single chaps and you think oh bless and he pulled out the ticket and it said your entire shopping for free for those three items and the young mum standing behind was just deflated and then he turned round and said darling our luck is in and she'd never seen him before in her life and she was so overwhelmed by I guess you could call the grace of the man sharing with her something that she wasn't entitled to hadn't earned didn't deserve couldn't demand it's a silly story isn't it but have you understood something of the gospel have you understood something of the debt that you owe God and what the Lord

Jesus has said to you my little ones I'll share all of this with you motivating you in forgiveness as well we saw yesterday Matthew 18 begins with a question who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and you understand it must be the one who's been most sinned against by his brothers and sisters and yet in humility comes to them and patiently without wanting to embarrass tries to persuade them to accept his forgiveness and you know who that is that's the Lord Jesus and even now even this morning he's come to you by his spirit through his word and is persuading you to perhaps accept his forgiveness for the first time and maybe this morning is unforgiveness in your own heart and maybe he's persuading you again this morning to turn from unforgiveness and to live a life built on pardon that flows from the greatness of the gospel and the Lord Jesus would say the living out of that gospel is what produces a great church

I'm going to stop there let's have a moment of quiet I think the music group are going to come back up and we'll sing in a moment but why don't we have a moment just to bring our own thoughts to the Lord just to pray yourself and then I'll round that up with a short prayer and then I think we're going to sing again let's have a moment of quiet and then I'll pray dear Lord Jesus that you are such a kind and gracious savior even though you're God over all even though you're the one that we have sinned against you come to us and you speak to us and you bring into our lives all sorts of things that can make us at times feel uncomfortable we kick against them we act as if they're they're bad for us and yet everything you say to us is for our good to make us healthy to bring us into a close relationship with you thank you for the forgiveness and the grace you show to us and please would you help us to live in light of that not on the basis of claiming debts and paying them back but on the basis of pardon receiving and giving forgiveness we ask for your help in that and in your name we pray

[26 : 42] Amen