

From Simon to Peter #18 - How the Forgiven Must Forgive

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of fellowship and forgiveness in the Church, and the principle of forgiveness is that we should forgive others as Jesus has forgiven us, without limit or condition.

Duration: 26:51

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 18:21-35, John 13:34-35, Romans 5:5, 1 John 1:7

Topics: "Simon to Peter"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker tells a story about a man who owed a huge debt to a king. The king showed great mercy and forgave the man's entire debt, freeing him from his financial burden. However, instead of showing the same compassion to others, the man went and demanded repayment from a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller amount. The speaker emphasizes the importance of personal relationships and living up to our Christian calling in a community. He also highlights the need to overcome selfish desires and arrogance, as demonstrated by the disciples' argument about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God.

Transcript

We continue this morning with our theme, From Simon to Peter, and we come to yet another landmark of significance in the moral and spiritual development of this apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, our message this morning is going to be based on the reading, which we took earlier from Matthew chapter 18, the passage beginning with verse 21 and going right over to verse 35. We shall not read the passage again, of course, but we shall refer to it as we proceed.

The well-being of their first fellowship of Christ's disciples lay ever upon his heart, as their first and glorious pastor and shepherd. He was concerned not only to initiate a fellowship of believers and of followers, but to see that fellowship perfected, to see every individual brought to maturity, fulfilling his function, serving alongside his brother, and ultimately that they should go together into the outer world of need and of sin, bearing and also expressing in their lives the message of grace. Now, it's not always easy for people to live and grow together.

We've all discovered this, I'm sure. It's one thing to have an experience of the grace of God for ourselves, but it's quite another thing to live up to our Christian calling in a community. Sometimes the first battle is in

the home, especially if it's a divided home.

Sometimes there is a battle along with other believers. But we shall necessarily find it difficult when we come into confrontation with the evil, unbelieving world around us. Now, here our Lord shows his very real concern for the fellowship of God's people.

Their life together, their relationships, the one to the other, and that really is the burden of the message we have this morning. Personal relationships are the key to everything in the Bible. In New Testament Christianity, it is not sufficient simply to do the right thing.

We have to do the right thing in such wise as we cause no man to stumble, if that is humanly possible. Whilst on the other side, we should be edifying one another, encouraging one another, ennobling one another, and helping one another on the way. It is not simply a matter of my doing my bit, forgetting about everybody else.

Growth in grace means that I learn to grow along with my fellows in the body of Christ. And if I cannot thus grow, then there is something wrong with me. Honesty and charity were two indispensables then in our Lord's day for those who would follow him, and they are equally so today.

The kind of honesty that is prepared to be judged by God at every turn of the road. The kind of honesty that, in the words of James, looks into the mirror of God's law, there to see myself. The kind of honesty that is prepared, indeed, that yearns for God to judge every action, and every attitude, and every desire.

And then the kind of charity that is prepared to bear and to forbear, and, as we shall see today, particularly to forgive others. I suppose you may crystallize this, or summarize all this, in terms of the Johannine twin concepts of light and of love. We need to walk in the light of God's countenance and holiness and word.

But we also need to walk in the power and by the constraints of the divine love. It is not either or, it is both and. We need to walk in the light and we need to walk according to the love of God, which, if we are Christian, is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.

Light and love provide the oxygen of Christian wholeness in which fellowship thrives, in which God is honored, and out of which we may go to be witnesses for our Lord in a manner that tells in an unbelieving world. Now, the passage before us can best be expounded, I believe, by considering, first of all, the Apostle Peter's question to Jesus, and then, secondly, our Lord's answer to him. You have Peter's question in verse 21.

Then Peter came up and said to him, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Have you ever asked that question? How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Now, we begin looking at this by considering the occasion. You will find that there are some little passages in the Gospels and they're almost entities on their own. There are paragraphs that are scarcely related to what goes before or what comes after, but there are others.

And you find the roots of them going back into the beginning of a chapter or even to the previous chapter or even the one before that. Now, this question posed and given to us toward the end of the chapter, this question really needs to be seen in the entire context of the chapter. The occasion is all-important.

I, therefore, must summarize it. The context shows how Jesus had very forcefully and very clearly addressed himself to the carnal, self-seeking, and arrogant spirit which revealed itself in his followers' jungle-like battle for precedence and for honor. You go back to the beginning of the chapter, verses one to four.

Their whole concern has been at this point, who's the greatest? Who's the greatest? On the way toward Capernaum, as Mark tells us, this was their conversation together. As they walked by the side, as they walked along the road, huddled, gossiping together a little and remote from their Lord, this is their one concern. Who's going to lead? Who's going to occupy the uppermost place in the kingdom of our Lord? And apparently all of them had a claim to stake.

Now, the gravity of their selfish desires is matched, of course, on the one hand by their own naivety, and yet on the other hand by their Lord's wonderful condescension. Isn't it marvelous to see and to recognize that our Lord Jesus Christ takes men and women like this, who talk like this about themselves, who want the uppermost places, who are self-seeking and arrogant. He takes them and He molds them and He's concerned to bring these very people into the place where He can use them.

I find this most encouraging. There is much to challenge us here. I find this one of the most challenging passages in the Gospel of Matthew, that there is something here to comfort us.

You may be a self-seeking person today, very arrogant, proud. You want to be leader, you want to be chief, you want to have your own way. It's part of your personality defect, maybe.

Our Lord Jesus Christ would have you in His hand and mold you and change you and transform you that you can fit into the fellowship of the Church and stand not ahead of others but alongside, together like an army. Such is His condescending grace. He doesn't turn them on one side and throw them away and disassociate Himself from them when they raise a question like this.

But He perseveres, He continues, and so He does still. Now, Jesus proceeded from there to speak against those who cause the least of His little ones to stumble. Now that's what you have beginning with verse 5 and 6. Now this is a very serious thing.

Jesus sees a necessary connection. People talking about who's going to be the greatest, who's going to be the leader, who's going to be the chief, who's going to have authority. Now the next stage, and it's a developed thought, causing the little one or the least one to stumble.

Giving an offense to someone who is apparently, in our own estimation at gender rate, less than we ourselves are. Jesus appears to imply that this is a peculiar peril of those who yearn for leadership and authority over others. It is the peril of causing a little one to stumble.

Well, is that a serious thing? Well, now you read the passage and you will see what our Lord says. It is so serious that He puts it in this way. If you cause one of the least of My little ones to stumble, says Jesus, it were better for you to have a great millstone cast around your neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Verse 6. Now this is staggering. I believe I'm far more important than everybody else. And I should have the leadership and I should have authority over everybody.

And He has a little one, in my estimation. But Jesus says, if I cause that little one, the least of His, to stumble, it were better for me to be drowned in the depths of the ocean. You see, His little ones count with Him.

His least disciple counts with Him. Go on through the passage. The least counts in the kingdom of God in this sense.

The least of His little ones has His own angel in heaven, beholding the face of my Father, He says. The least in the kingdom of heaven has His own guardian angel. He beholds the face of our Father.

In other words, the moment the Father in heaven, as it were, says that there is need, that characterizes the experience of one of His children, the least of His children, the angel is ready to move. Do you remember our Lord in Gethsemane? He said, I've only two hours. And in just a moment, legions of angels will come to my aid.

They're waiting on tiptoe. They behold the face of my Father. They're ready to take action.

But that was not only true of Jesus. It's true of the least child of God. Their angels do always behold the face of my Father, ready to come.

But that's not the only thing. When one of the least of His little ones goes into the wilderness and wanders away from the flock, do you know what our Heavenly Father does? He leaves the ninety and nine, says Jesus. He leaves the ninety and nine together, and He goes seeking the very least that was lost.

Can you see the point? He puts a price on the least. Therefore, you who think that you're better than others, be very careful. You'll not get away with it.

You cause the least of His little ones to stumble, and you'll arouse the holy ire of your Heavenly Father. You cannot do it and get away with it. He puts a price on the head of the least, and therefore cause the least to stumble, I repeat, is to bring forth His anger.

Now at that point, Jesus proceeded to address Himself to those who may be offended. Now notice the change. Up until now, He's talking about those who give offense.

Now He comes to the people who are offended, those who are offended by their brethren. But what should we do if a brother offends us? Well, says Jesus, here it is, and we're dealing, of course, with personal relationships here. Well, the first thing to do is go to your brother privately.

Don't talk about it. Don't shout about it. Don't put a notice on the notice board and say, My brother's done something against me.

I'm going to talk to him at three o'clock on Friday. There's no need for that. There's no need for an announcement in the press.

Privately. Love covereth a multitude of sins. Go to him privately and then tell him his fault.

Tell him what he's done. If he listens to you and therefore sees the wrong that he's done and apologizes, just forgive him. And therefore you've healed the fellowship.

Disaster has been obviated. Now, what if he doesn't? Well, if you're sure that he has really grieved you and you have a case, which needs to be put right not only for your sake but for the sake of the fellowship, which is larger than the two of you, take two or three witnesses with you. And if he doesn't listen to the two or three witnesses, ultimately it has to come to the church.

And here the church, gathered in the presence of the one who is always with the two or three that meet in his name, in the presence of the one Lord and head of the church, must exercise the power of the keys and exercise authority and decide if this brother is wrong and refuses to acknowledge his sin and to repent, either he must be excommunicated from the fellowship or he must be withheld for a while at any rate whilst discipline is exercised. All this was suggested by the disciples' talk about being greatest in Christ's kingdom, greatest in the kingdom. This talk about greatness.

My friends, whenever you meet a Christian who wants to be the first or a head of his brother, there's danger for Satan is there. Make no bones about it. It may come from the minister in the pulpit.

It may come from the member in the pew. Make no bones about this. The devil is there.

Jesus saw all these hideous things as almost unavoidably following from the simple question, which of us will be the greatest? He saw the brood hatched before it was born. The occasion of it, the revelation made by and through the question, is the next thing. Peter's question discloses his soul.

Have you noticed that? Most of our questions do, and not only our questions but our answers likewise. Let a man speak and he'll soon reveal himself. Perhaps Peter's personality and privileges were such as to elicit harsh words from some of his friends.

I don't know. I have a feeling that is so. You see, Peter was rather impetuous.

He was the first to talk. And then, of course, our Lord had honored Peter, especially alongside of James and John. He had uttered words to Peter which were singular, even going beyond anything he uttered to James and John.

And therefore, it is more than probable that some of the others were just that little bit jealous. Why should he lead us? Why should he be the first one to speak? Why should he have authority over us? We're as important as he. Blessed be the Lord.

Peter had forgiven them many times, but he was getting a bit too much. How long has this thing got to go on, says Peter, in effect? My brother offends me. How many times must I forgive him, up to seven times? Now notice the magnanimity of that.

To forgive once is a very beautiful thing. I deliberately use the word beautiful because it speaks of the beauty of holiness. A man is never more God-like or Christ-like than when he or she forgives and forgets.

Do you yearn to be God-like, Christ-like, Spirit-honoring? Then, my friend, you are never more positively God-like in this world than when you forgive others. And so Peter says, first, I'm willing to do that, and I'm not only willing to do it once, but... Lord, he says, need one go up to seven times? As if to say, I'm willing, I'm willing to fix that ceiling and to go as far as that. Now I spoke of it as Peter's magnanimity.

I say that because the rabbis in contemporary life taught that you should never ask anyone to forgive you, once they have done so three times. That is, if I have trespassed against Mr. Lowe here, and I ask him to

forgive me three times, and then I do something terrible, I should never ask him the fourth time. That was rabbinical teaching.

That was the principle operating among the synagogues of the Jews. Three times, full stop. If you can't control your temper after you've been three times reprimanded in relation to an individual, then you don't deserve forgiveness anymore.

Said Peter, I'll double that, and I'll add an extra one for good measure, making it the perfect number seven. Up to seven times? You know that's wonderful, isn't it? Seven times. And yet, not only must we see the magnanimity of Peter's soul here, we must also see the immaturity of his approach, judged from a Christian point of view.

That his magnanimity betokens a great change is unquestioned, and reveals the influence of the Lord Jesus and of his grace upon his heart. He was willing to go that far. But despite his advance upon rabbinic thought and practice, Peter, you see, is also thinking of forgiveness in terms of a fixed number of times.

In terms of an arithmetic figure. And forgiveness is never that in Scripture. God's forgiveness is never that.

Though your sins be a scarlet, though they be like the sand of the sea. And there are many other analogies of Scripture talking about the multiplicity of human sin, yet in Christ God forgives the penitent. God doesn't say to any man or any woman, sin 70 times and I'll forgive you, but the 71st time, too much.

Not 7,000 for that matter. This is not divine forgiveness. And you see, Peter is still trying to make it a matter of a figure, rather than the matter of an attitude.

An attitude that belongs to me as the forgiven of the Lord. And because it is an attitude of soul, it is not with me today and not tomorrow, it should always be here. So that whenever there is a brother who pleads for my mercy, I should be willing and ready to forgive, as my Lord is.

Now, so much then for the question. Come to the reply. Jesus deemed the question to be so vital and so terribly important, he deemed it so necessary that we should grasp this principle that he is enunciating, that he couched his reply, one in parable and then in very plain, of plainest language.

First of all, he speaks in parable, verses 23 to 34. And we look at this first. Jesus' reply in terms of parabolic illustration.

Now let me just go over it briefly. Describing the kingdom of heaven in terms of a king, settling his accounts with his servants, Jesus described one particular servant coming before his Lord to settle the accounts. And lo and behold, when the books were opened, it was discovered that he owed his king, his master, his Lord, a fantastic amount, ten thousand talents.

Now the value of a talent, of course, depends, first of all, as to whether it's a gold talent or a silver. And then again, whether we are referring to Attic, Syrian, or Jewish coinage, because they vary. It is computed that however we come to this figure, it is computed that the debt here envisaged, we would put in our terms, as upwards of five million dollars.

So you see, our Lord is referring here to a fantastic debt. It's not just a trifling. So the king has got his books open and he sees that this man owes him over five million dollars.

Immediately the king says, pay up. The man says, well now, wait a moment, give me time. But the king wasn't prepared to give him time, and he determined that he should be sold and his family, and that they should serve to pay something of the debt for the rest of their lives.

Their lives were mortgaged as an entire family. Now the man began to plead for time. Not only did the master, not only did the king say, all right, I will have mercy upon you.

He had such compassion upon him that he forgave him the entire debt. How would you feel? Five million dollars debt, cleared in a moment. And the books are clear, and you go right out and you breathe freely, and in the joy of it you don't know what to do.

But notice what happened to this fellow. Going out, he met one of his fellow servants. And this fellow servant of his owed him a trifling debt.

Now in our coinage, the debt that the fellow servant owed to the man who had just been forgiven amounts to only about twenty dollars. So you have a tremendous dichotomy here. On the one hand, he's been forgiven over five million dollars.

Here's about twenty dollar debt. And he sees him coming and he says, man, pay up what you owe me. And he half strangles him.

And then he's about to throw him into prison until he pays the debt because he has authority to do this kind of thing. News went back to the king. News filtered through to the king, whose anger was seriously and justly aroused.

Calling that forgiven man back, he said to him, Look, man, don't you understand what's happened? I forgave you that immense debt. Should you therefore go out and extract from one of your fellow servants the trifling little debt that he owed you? Look, he says, I'm going to reverse the whole thing. You shall be put into the hands of the tormentors until you pay the very last farthing.

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