

Midweek reflection – Two debtors and an unforgiving servant

I have never been in financial debt apart from owing money on a mortgage, and even then I have always had sufficient income to make repayments. However, during my time as a Samaritan volunteer I spoke to many people who were. Some through their own carelessness or that of another in their family, most through what we might call bad luck or unfortunate circumstances. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It might for some be the result of losing a job, hoping against hope to get another soon and taking out a short-term loan at exorbitant rates (a so-called payday loan) to tide them over. Or it could be for others needing money quickly to pay a bill, and because of their lack of a steady job having nowhere else to go but a loan shark. And in both cases high interest rates lead quickly to further debt. In my conversations with these people I know that the debt hangs over you the whole time; the despair gets deeper and deeper and it often leads people to see that ending their lives is the only way out. It's a descending spiral of hopelessness.

Today we are looking at two stories that Jesus tells about people in debt. In the one (Luke 7: 36-50 and especially verses 41-43) we hear of two people in debt to the same person. One owes more than a year's salary, the other a couple of months' salary. Neither could pay. They both faced despair and ruin. Both debts are written off and forgiven. Which of the two would show more love to the creditor? The one who was forgiven most is the answer given. And we can see how that must be true.

The other story (in Matthew 18:23-25) tells of a servant who owes his master a ridiculously huge sum – millions of pounds in today's money. There was no way he could ever repay this colossal debt. The master calls him in and says that he and all his possessions would have to be sold. The servant responds (somewhat unrealistically) have patience and I will pay. The master has compassion and forgives him and releases him from the debt. However, the servant then runs into a fellow servant who owes him a comparatively small amount (maybe a few thousand pounds). He demands payment, showing no mercy whatsoever. His master hears about this and changes his mind about forgiving the massive debt.

The first story is told to Simon the Pharisee. Simon has welcomed Jesus into his home, and while Jesus was there a woman of ill repute came in and began to anoint his feet with perfume and tears and, against all social norms, lets down her hair to wipe away her tears from his feet. Simon is outraged. How can Jesus, a prophet, sit by and let this happen? How can he allow someone with such a history, someone clearly steeped in sin, to touch him in this way. And so Jesus tells the story.

With the story Jesus is saying to Simon that the woman's love springs from her knowledge that she has been forgiven. And he goes on to criticise Simon not only for not showing the kind of love the woman did, but also for not demonstrating common courtesies to him as a visitor.

But it's worth noting that in the story neither could pay their debt. For both debtors their position was hopeless. Even though the one who owed less might have felt some moral superiority to the other, the bottom line was that both were in the same boat. They could not pay.

I think Jesus was saying to Simon – "It's no good you thinking you are so much better than this woman. Essentially you are as far from God as she is. No-one can earn their way into the presence of God. You are both in need of forgiveness that comes as a gift from God - it's not something you can achieve through your own effort. At least she recognises that she needs forgiveness and can see how much God loves her."

In the other story the servant has an enormous debt forgiven. His master shows him immense love and compassion. And yet we see that moments later that same servant shows no compassion whatsoever on a fellow servant who owes him a small amount in comparison. The story is told as a response to a question from Peter – how often should I forgive someone – seven times? Jesus says not seven, but seventy times seven – in other words forgiveness is not to be counted in that way – we should always be willing to forgive. The chilling finale to the story is that the master, on hearing of the servant's hardness of heart, changes his mind and does not forgive the debt.

That might sound a bit harsh. Surely if God's forgiveness depends on us forgiving others, then (contrary to the message in the first story) it would be as if that's the way we earn forgiveness. But that cannot be what Jesus meant – he was always clear that forgiveness could not be earned.

The truth is that if our hearts are not open to the position of others, if we cannot look with compassion on those who have caused us pain and harm, then our hearts will not be open to accept the free gift of forgiveness that God offers to us.

The huge debt in the story shows that God's forgiveness has no limit. All he asks is that we follow his example and that we look on others with love, in other words that we treat them as God treats us. If we want to be disciples - followers of Jesus - we will have hearts that want to forgive without limit. Because that is what his heart is like. This picks up a theme we

were talking about in the Way of Discipleship course last week. We were thinking that being a disciple of Jesus involves us being with him, becoming like him and joining in with him.

All this then is about our attitude more than our actions. No doubt we will always get things wrong. It's more than likely that there will be times when we don't forgive others or simply don't feel able to. But the key thing is that we have hearts that want to forgive – or if that's too hard at least to want to want to forgive. Then we put ourselves in a position where we are open to accept the gift of love and forgiveness that comes to each of us from God.

So two stories about forgiveness. Two stories that show the generosity and love of God. Two stories that show that no matter how respectable our lives seem to be, no matter how much we appear to be in debt, we can never work our own way back to God. We always need him to reach out to us in love.

So some final thoughts to ponder. In these stories where do we naturally place ourselves? With Simon the Pharisee? With the woman? With an onlooker? With Peter? With the debtor who was forgiven much? With the one who was forgiven less? With the forgiving creditor? Or with the unforgiving servant?

And when you've thought about that, try putting yourself in the shoes of another of the characters and see if you can find further truths in the stories. Jesus' parables have a knack of speaking to us freshly each time we read them.

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