

Romans 14:1-12

Do Not Judge Another

14 Welcome those who are weak in faith,^[a] but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord^[b] is able to make them stand.

⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.

⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?^[c] Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?^[d] For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.^[e] ¹¹ For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to^[f] God.”

¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God.^[g]

Matthew 18:21-35

New Revised Standard Version

Forgiveness

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church^[a] sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven^[b] times.

²³ “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents^[c] was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii;^[d] and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister^[e] from your heart.

“Forgiveness Economics “

Today’s Gospel passage Starts where last weeks finished. It has two connected elements – an exchange between Jesus and Peter, and a parable which is ostensibly about God’s forgiveness. It is organically linked to the passage we explored last week and, like it, can sometimes fall victim to being confined to a particular way of reading.

However the power and beauty of the Gospel texts is that they are seldom exhausted by a single interpretive slant; in particular the parables of Jesus are not simple allegories to be decoded – a way of making moral points; rather they are devices for initiating conversation and inviting us into critical reflection on our ways of being and doing. They are designed to make you : stop; think; and evaluate.

Delivered in the hope of our response being one of repentance, change, re-birth.

So, while this passage does indeed have important things to say about the magnitude of God’s forgiveness, and our need to likewise forgive those who fail or injure us, it also contains pointers which can direct our attention to things which might hinder our journeys towards forgiveness, reconciliation, and the repair of our fractured relationships.

When we read the parables of Jesus it’s all too easy to forget that they were not simply stories told to passive listeners, delivered and over in not much more time than it takes us to read them. As John Dominic Crossan points out, they would almost certainly have been given and heard in a much more extended and interactive form – with questions from the hearers directed towards Jesus, and no doubt with debate and discussion also going on between themselves then and later as they tried to tease out the purpose of the story.

Remember all those passages that recount how “later the disciples asked Jesus “to explain and expand.

To go over the meaning of the teaching to deepen their understanding.

In the same way these parables of Jesus invite us to engage with them in a deep way – to think, reflect and wrestle with their many layers of nuance and meaning. So, if we take a step away from the issue of forgiveness and the all too common jump to discussing what seven times and seventy-seven times means...and how much forgiveness am I expected to give?..... what else might this parable direct our attention towards, especially when read within the wider context of the whole chapter?

This is not an economics class and Jesus is not talking about quantity.

Jesus’ parables of the Kingdom of Heaven go beyond a personal coaching of the individual and often ask us to reflect on the bigger world view and on how we live and treat one another in our culture.

Every human culture or society has rules and regulations. They are necessary to make it function.

Jesus challenges us to constantly evaluate them to judge whether they support or suppress, free or imprison, bless or curse., give life or death. Especially with regard for the “ least of these”

The parable outlines a pyramid involving status, power, control, and the resulting upwards flow of wealth (with those at each level taking their ‘cut’) which would have been completely familiar to Jesus’ 1st Century listeners.

Indeed, it is not that alien to us in the 21st Century either! Without getting bogged down in the specifics of the system here or the fantastical figure involved, it seems reasonable to assume that the King begins his reckoning with those at a high level of power and uncovers financial malpractice of some kind. His initial response is calculated to not only put a stop to this but also to send a message down the pipeline to those below that level.

However, in response to the servant’s pleading he reconsiders and instead from pity – and perhaps a dash of pragmatism – overlooks the malpractice. But, just as with the initial punishment, this amnesty too has implications not just for the top–level defaulter but also for the whole pyramid below him. Perhaps it is only a temporary state of affairs but, for the moment at least, the King has introduced a different narrative, one of financial amnesty, and with it a chance for some recalibration.

A different economic system.

However, as the story moves on from this promising position, we come to a second key moment which sees the first servant immediately returning to the old paradigm of ‘pay me what’s mine!’

He rejects or doesn’t recognize that the King’s actions overturn the status quo and open up a whole new way of relating with others. A whole new way that opens rather than closes, new channels of action.

In so doing, he also rebinds himself to everything associated with the “ usual way of doing business”. Including its retributory aspects, and it is this choice rather than the actions of the king which ultimately determines his fate. We’re not told why he chooses this path – and as we know human motives are rarely unmixed – but the story leaves us in doubt as to its disastrous consequences for him.

In the parable the King’s judgement is :

“³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you? ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. “

Followed by this dire warning from Jesus:

³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister^[a] from your heart.

This scripture points out how doing “ business as usual” can sometimes drive us deeper into cycles of conflict and relational breakdown.

This parable then might raise a number of questions for us:

Are there narratives or patterns of behavior which we use every day ,without thinking ,which are hindering progress towards the resolution of a conflict or the restoration and repair of a particular relationship?

If so – what are they and is there some way in which we can address them and, if necessary, free ourselves from their power?

What patterns of our thinking or behavior is derailing our journey towards forgiving/accepting forgiveness, or to repairing a damaged relationship or situation?

This is the lesson Jesus is trying to teach Peter when he asks if he should forgive even seven times. That number is far in excess of the requirements set out in the Old Testament -which Peter believes he has already generously exceeded.

It is not simply that Peter's understanding of forgiveness is *too small*, but that it is also still tied to an economy of perception and action which is predicated on *calculation* – something which is alien to the Kingdom of God.

Rev George MacLeod called God's economy of forgiveness a 'chaos of uncalculating love'.

Love and forgiveness which is uncalculating, unmeasurable, without limit. That would really cause chaos, but it is the kind of chaos out of which God produces good.

Amen