

# Undeserved Grace ...

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*A sermon given on the Fourteenth Sunday of Trinity, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Minster.*

*Matthew 18:21-35*

Well, we live in a world full of debt. Many of us will live in a house purchased with a mortgage or work in a business which is serviced by a huge loan from the bank. The average student debt these days after three years at university is getting on for £50,000. And after the financial crisis of 2008, the U.K. national debt stood at between one and five trillion pounds, depending on how you calculate it: that is £78,000 for every man, woman and child in the country. That was back in 2008 before the chancellor borrowed hundreds of billions of pounds to prop up the economy in recent months in the current crisis. So debt is a fact of life. And not just financially: we're all of us conscious in different ways of being indebted to each other: someone does you a favour and you say, I owe you one; we have sayings like, I'll scratch your back and you scratch mine; you don't get something for nothing; there's no such thing as a free lunch. Nothing is free, one way or another we all owe somebody something.

And our gospel reading this morning touches on this in a slightly surprising way. Peter is asking Jesus about the question of forgiveness. And in particular, how often should he go on forgiving. And in reply, Jesus tells a story about debt. And to update it slightly, we might imagine a borrower who owes a fantastic amount to a bank, millions and millions of pounds, and then suddenly their credit rating is downgraded by Standard and Poor's and so the bank forecloses on the loan and demands the money back. So the borrower puts on his best suit, goes to the bank and says, "I'm afraid I'm experiencing a temporary embarrassment. There's a short term cash flow problem and please just give me some time." And we expect the bank to say 'no' - kings and banks are never a 'soft touch' - they want their money and we're expecting this man to be made bankrupt very promptly and thrown out in the street because that's what happens in this kind of situation. Debts have to be paid. That's the rule.

But the story Jesus tells, takes a strange twist: when the borrower begs for mercy, the banker or the king agrees, out of pity; he has compassion on him. And straightaway we start to feel that something's not quite right. Banks don't do that, they don't show

compassion. And this king, this banker is not behaving like a real king. He's just written off a loan that would have given Bill Gates sleepless nights to lose.

And then in the second part of the story, the relieved borrower comes across somebody else who owes HIM money, only this time it's a comparatively trivial amount, just a few pounds. And the first borrower insists that the money owed to him be repaid. And at one level of course, he's perfectly entitled to do that: it's perfectly legal; it's what normally happens; it's the rule - debts have to be repaid, otherwise, where would we be? So what's the problem?

It's interesting, isn't it, that insisting that the debt be repaid should be normally uncontroversial and perfectly acceptable? But because this first borrower has been released from such an enormous debt, we expect him to change his attitude towards someone who owes him money. Because of his experience of being forgiven and set free, we expect him to see all debts differently now and especially debts owed to him. And when we the readers, see that his attitude hasn't changed, we're a bit shocked and we think that this man must be an unspeakably awful person.

But when you think about it, all he's doing is just following the rules of debt and doing what the world always does, asking for his money back. So I wonder, what do you make of that? Jesus seems to be cleverly showing Peter and us that the rules of the kingdom of heaven are more real than the rules of this world. We thought the rule that debts must be repaid was absolute and final. But Jesus has shown us there is a higher rule of grace and mercy.

We normally live in this tit-for-tat world where we think that what matters is what others owe us and what we're entitled to. But Jesus opens up the kingdom of heaven, this outrageous, impossible, even scandalous kingdom where enormous debts can be cancelled because showing pity is more important than getting what we're owed; where sins can be forgiven, not seven times, but 77 or even depending on how you translate it, seven times 77 - in other words, endlessly, almost beyond calculation; where nobody knows anything because it's all free; where no one bears grudges or feels a need to settle scores; or stands on their rights; where life is experienced not in terms of debt and obligation, but in terms of freedom and mercy and grace and gift; where everything is undergirded by the love of God, which has been revealed to us as immense and free, unlimited and unbounded, because Jesus broke down the ultimate boundary when he died on the cross and rose again for us.

So I wonder what would it take for each of us to live according to that higher rule of the Kingdom of Heaven, that rule of mercy, which changes the game?

I suggest that what it might take is for each of us to realise we have received far more than we can possibly repay. We've all received the amazing gift of life itself. How do you repay that? We received the amazing gift of this extraordinary world, full of beauty and wonder and mystery, so many delights and opportunities. How do you repay that? We've received the gift of human love, hopefully from our parents and families, but also from friends and colleagues who have supported and encouraged us. How do you repay the love, the shelter, the food and necessities of life we all received in our early years? We've received the gift of education, not just a formal education, but those adults who mentored us, who inspired us, who were role models for us, and who helped equip us with the learning and skills to help us make a go of life. How do you repay that? And of course, we've received the gift of the gospel, the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ poured out without limit on the cross, poured out even to the point of death and beyond. How do you possibly repay that?

And the list could go on, all these blessings we've received and can never repay. And I think what Jesus is saying is that when we become aware of how much has been given us, when we've done nothing to deserve it, it should change us, and it should make us more willing to show some generosity to one another.

So let's take a moment today to consider how much we've been given and forgiven, and to wonder God's generosity to us. Let's take a moment to notice how much more life-giving are the rules of the Kingdom of Heaven, those rules of compassion and mercy, compared to the rules of this world, the rules of tit for tat and I'll get what's owed to me. And let's resolve to cut each other a little more slack. Let's take a moment to wonder at the reality of undeserved grace and to seek to live in its light.

I close with some words from a Persian poet, a man called Hafez of Shiraz, who once wrote this.

*Even after all this time, the sun never says to the earth, "You owe me for all the warmth I have poured upon you." Look what happens with a love like that, it lights up the whole sky.*

So can I encourage you this morning to come into the light? Don't try to pay back the 'sun', or to imagine that you are the 'sun', needing to be paid back: just give thanks for its

warmth. Don't pretend you're entitled to it, just bask in the warmth of God's love and mercy and try to reflect it to others. And then let's see what happens: because perhaps, the whole world could be lit up.

# Reading Text

Matthew 18:21-35

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if another member of the church[a] sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventyseven times. <sup>23</sup> 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'