The parable of the unforgiving servant – Matthew 18:21 – 34

A friend of mine has placed the word 'sin' at the top of his list of our society's 'religious giggle words'. These are Biblical words that when used by the general public are often accompanied with sarcasm (e.g. when uttering phrases such as 'sin bin', 'sin city' or 'sinfully delicious'). Perhaps the reason for the scepticism that surrounds this word is that, unlike a word such as 'misbehaviour', 'sin' specifically implies an offence against God; and how can those who won't acknowledge God's role in their lives take seriously the notion of sin?

Jesus teaches us that sin is no laughing matter. In fact, all of chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel is dedicated to Christ's teaching about sin and how it is to be dealt with within churches and Christian communities:

- In the beginning of this chapter Jesus warns against the people and things that cause his children to sin. Jesus also says that it's better to remove a single corrupt part of the body rather than have the entire body thrown into hell's fire. (Matthew 18:1 – 9)

- Jesus then tells a parable about the importance of going after the wandering sheep in God's flock so that they will not be lost to sin. (18:10 – 14)

- Jesus goes on to outline the way he wants his people to deal with the occasions when one Christian sins against another. (18:15 – 20).

- Jesus concludes this section with a parable in which he emphasises the importance of demonstrating to others the mercy that God has shown to us (18:21 – 35)

It would be good to read this entire chapter in order to gain understanding of the wider context of Christ's teaching about sin and forgiveness. However this study will primarily focus on this concluding parable to Jesus' teaching on this subject.

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1. The immediate context of this parable is that Jesus is giving a further explanation in response to Peter's question, "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?" What does Jesus mean by his answer, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."? (Matthew 18:21 - 22)

2. Jesus begins his story by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a king…" (18:23). Therefore, who is the king in the parable meant to be like?

3. In spiritual terms, what does it mean that the king took pity on his servant and freed him of his millions of dollars (ten thousand talents) of debt? (18:23 – 27)

4. Why was the king outraged when he heard that this same man hadn't taken pity on a fellow servant who owed him only a few dollars (a hundred denarii)? (18:28 – 34)

5. In Jesus' parable, who might be represented by the 'other servants' who became distressed and reported this incident to the king? (18:31)

6. According to Jesus, what are the rewards and consequences for forgiving or not forgiving others 'from the heart'? (18:32 – 35. See also Matthew 6:14 – 15).

7. Ask God to search your heart and reveal to you if there are people that you need to confront or forgive or from whom you need to seek forgiveness.