



Introduction to the parables series + study #1

Over the next 3 weeks we'll engage in a short sermon series made up of 3 parables from Matthew 18- 22

Study #1 - Matthew 18:21-35 - A forgiving king

Study #2 - Matthew 20:1-16 - A generous boss

Study #3 - Matthew 22:1-14 - A lavish lord

Jesus' parables employ a particular currency:

- they are memorable - this makes them tricky for us as we often know them almost too well they get you in - curious onlookers beware!
- they generally overturn our expectations - setting us up for a fall
- Jesus uses them to explain the kingdom of God/heaven

Read in isolation, no one parable can capture all that is to be said about the Kingdom of God. However taken together, they help us gain something of a composite picture of what God's kingdom is like and what it is like to live according to its whole system of values. And we're called as believers to live out these values in the here and now knowing that this present world operates under a whole different set of values. We are pilgrims passing through this world en route to our heavenly home.

Our challenge as we embark on this short series is to let Jesus change us, preparing us for

heaven. These parables will help us make "mad" choices in this life (reflecting on Marcus' recent sermon about the rich fool from Luke 12)

Here are some good questions to be asking as we begin:

- What assumptions am I operating with that this particular parable challenges?
- What is it about the nature of the world, about how it works, and how I live that I am not seeing? Where are my blind spots?
- Jesus, via the parable, is going to shake our world. In what areas in my life is he challenging me, bringing me to my knees in repentance and faith?

Jesus' parables are deeply subversive. They are anchored deeply in the culture of His day but that doesn't stop them from speaking powerfully to our human condition. They speak to men and women of every age and open for us a whole new world of thinking and living - where God is king.

Parables play a multifunctional role. Jesus often uses them to describe and explain what is going on in his ministry at the time as the gospel story unfolds. This however does not diminish their power to speak into our lives today. Parables often have a sting in the tale. That sting is a beautiful example of how the word of God in its infinite variety is the power of God to change us. The living God, who loves us and knows our hearts, speaks powerfully into our lives transforming us into the likeness of his Son Jesus, preparing us for life in our eternal home. The genius of parables is that they impact us in a particularly vivid way eliciting an almost visceral response from us.

12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Hebrews 4:12-13

So let us let Jesus' words change us. They may well shock us - but it will be a good kind of shock. Let us learn to love what God loves. Let us let Jesus' words have their way in our lives as we endeavour to live radically for this radical kingdom.

If during this series there are aspects of your life (attitudes, heart, passions) that you recognize that you need to change as a result of hearing Jesus' voice then do not resist. Bring your life into line with the glorious kingdom that Jesus speaks about.

Also don't forget that even though we receive Jesus' words individually, he is often addressing them to a whole community. Are there ways in which we as a whole church community need to respond to Jesus teaching?

Kenneth Bailey in Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes, writes, p280

The listener/reader of the parable is encouraged to examine the human predicament through the worldview created by the parable.

A parable is an extended metaphor and as such it is not a delivery system for an idea but rather a house in which the reader/listener is invited to take up residence. The listener/reader of the parable is encouraged to examine the human predicament through the windows of that house.

Study #1 - Matthew 18:21-35 - A forgiving king

Using your Bible footnotes compare the difference in the amount of debt of the two servants who owe money. What stands out?

Compare Peter's question of verse 21 with Jesus' final response in verse 35. How are these different?

- *In the parable in which Jesus teaches on forgiveness he moves us from the terrain of morality (where the focus is primarily on our actions) to that of the heart and the will.*
- *The emphasis falls not so much on what forgiveness looks like but on the motivation that undergirds it.*

1. Which of these assessments captures most closely the essence of Jesus teaching here? What more might we say to do justice to Jesus' teaching?

In many of Jesus' parables there is a sting in the tale - where something unexpected and surprising occurs. In what way, via this parable, does Jesus subvert our normal understanding of the way we operate in the world?

2. What is the unexpected element that stands out here? What shocks us?
3. Describe the reaction of the servant's fellows in verse 31? Why such great distress? Is it justified?
4. What of the master's reaction? Is this justified?
5. What do you think is the unforgiving servant's state of mind when he goes out and finds the fellow servants who owes him money? Does he seriously think that he won't be found out and reported?

In the context of his disciples asking, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?",

Jesus calls on his disciples in 18:3 "...to turn and become like children...." otherwise they will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

6. In this parable, in what way is Jesus calling us to become like children? i.e., What do we need to forgo in our adult ways of thinking/behaving to become like children?

Through the parable, Jesus has answered Peter's initial question of verse 21. However Jesus is doing more here than simply addressing an ethical question. He is teaching about the cross - about how great a debt we owe. For we are all undeserving recipients of God's great generosity - that which was at such great cost to himself in sending Jesus.

Have a read of the 3 passages in Matthew where Jesus predicts his upcoming death and resurrection:

Matthew 16:21

21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Notice that Jesus makes no explicit reference here to his death as an atoning sacrifice for sins. He speaks plainly about what will happen to him. Or to be more accurate, he speaks of what "must" take place. This is language of destiny - concerning what is God's will for his Son. We see it also in Jesus' rebuke of Peter in Matthew 16:23 where again Jesus indicates that he knows that it is God's will for him to die.

Matthew 17:22-23

22 As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, 23 and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed.

Matthew 20:17-19

17 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, 18 "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death 19 and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."

In the 2 other passages where he predicts his death and resurrection, again Jesus seems to stick only to the bare facts. We need to look elsewhere to discover the why of Jesus suffering and death. The "must" inevitably leaves us asking the question, "Why?". "Why must Jesus die?"

Jesus' parables wonderfully are key to help answer the why question.

In the parable of the forgiving king we see how Jesus' death is an expression of God's incredible generosity towards us in forgiving our sins. And how we can never be complacent in forgetting how great a debt we owe.

Take a moment on your own to conduct an audit of your own forgiveness from the heart (or lack of it) with respect to:

- the members of your family
- your work colleagues
- your neighbours
- your church family

Having read this parable is there any action you realize that God is calling you to take? What might be the first step in the process? Can you think of anyone whom you can ask to help you take that first step?

Heart forgiveness is something that maybe only we and the Lord are aware of. It will probably be completely hidden from the eyes of others. It can't be forced by the opinions of others or our social environment without losing its heart value. The unforgiving servant may have thought that he was acting in secret and that nobody else would discover his failure to forgive. How can we ensure that our forgiveness of others is truly from the heart?

Personal prayer

Please Lord help me to be quick to forgive those whom you have put in my path.

Keep in mind.....

If you have been wronged by another person and have truly forgiven them from your heart, praise God for His work in you leading you to do this. However the question of forgiveness and being restored in your relationship with the person who has wronged you is tricky to navigate. If the other person has never repented of their wrongdoing then it is likely that restoration will be inachievable. Those who have experienced this often find the situation deeply troubling, especially since forgiving another person from the heart will always be costly to you who are doing the forgiving. Sadly, true forgiveness does not always result in restoration of the broken relationship.

Summary

God cares deeply about how we treat other people. As those who have been forgiven much, our lives should be characterised by generous forgiveness. See Luke 7:47. Hopefully we can see that this is a far cry from living life on the basis of transactions - "you do good to me and I'll do good to you in return". It's about heart love for others.

How has hearing Jesus' words today warmed your heart?