

that we begin to understand the full weight of this story and its impact. The trouble is that most people read this story without knowing the simple fact about how much one talent really is in monetary terms!

#### Ideas for discipleship programme

- As you walk around in a town or city, look at the people all around you, and imagine the weight of sin that Jesus bears for all of them, and this is only the people you can see! Pray for all who carry sin and need Christ's forgiveness.
- Ask yourself very carefully whether you are like the servant in the story. If there is anyone you have not forgiven, then do your best to make every effort to forgive by saying so to God in prayer, and if possible, wise or practicable to the people involved.

## Final Prayer

All glory be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for when we are in despair, You minister hope to our souls; when we are in turmoil, You minister peace into our hearts; when we are clouded in the mists of uncertainty, You minister Your assurance into our minds. You have an answer to all our needs, all glory be to You, Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

## Prayer

Thank You Lord God, for the daily provision You make for our lives. We often thank you for food and drink, but fail to remember those things which give our lives vigour and excitement such as sights and sounds, or characteristics such as inspiration, fascination or intuition. Open up our minds and our lives so that we may enjoy to the full the glory of our potential in you, Lord God; AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Land

Pray today for your country and the land on which it is set. Each has its characteristics, which affect the people who live there; so ask God to bless and use your land for good.

### On-going prayers

- Pray for the worsening situation for poor people in Zimbabwe
- Give thanks to God for the fellowship of the church
- Pray for all who are affected badly by the world recession

## Meditation

Why is life so complicated and taxing,

And why, Lord God, is there so much for us to learn?

We would like love without responsibility,

Yet its glory lies in the beauty of mercy and forgiveness.

We want faith to be simple and sound,

Yet the Gospel demands that we read God's Word and think.

We aspire to a life with no trouble or strife,

Yet we are bored and frustrated without the challenge of the unknown.

We long for peace of heart, and healing,

Yet know full well that life has its cost, and the last cost is death.

Lord God, reveal the truth of our condition,

And lead us to life eternal, and the goal of ultimate perfection.

## Bible Study - Matthew 18:21-35

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, how often should I forgive someone's sin against me? As many as seven times?' <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven times!

<sup>23</sup> 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> Since, as he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, to repay the debt. <sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees before him and begged, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything." <sup>27</sup> Out of deep sympathy for him, the servant's master let him go and cancelled the debt.

<sup>28</sup> But that same servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He seized him by the throat and threatened, "Pay what you owe!" <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow servant fell at his feet and pleaded with him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you!" <sup>30</sup> But he refused, and had him thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

<sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw all this, they were extremely upset, and went to their master to report all that had happened. <sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned the servant and said to him, "You wicked servant! I cancelled your debt because you begged me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?"

<sup>34</sup> 'In anger, his master handed him over to debt collectors until he paid his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> That is how my heavenly Father will deal with every one of you, if you do not forgive others from your heart.'

## Review

This is Jesus' clear teaching about forgiveness. The first two verses give His response to a question from Peter indicating that real forgiveness is limitless, and the rest of the passage is a powerful story reminding us of the human and divine consequences of failure to forgive. These are two very different messages about forgiveness, but they are both very important, and also closely related. The whole passage is very well known, and yet its teaching remains a stern challenge for all Christians.

**Peter's question** It was natural that Peter should ask his question about forgiveness. Jesus had just spoken about how to deal with problems within the fellowship of believers and Peter wanted to the limits of forgiveness (or 'loosing' see Matt 18:18,19). Rabbis of the day generally agreed that forgiving a person three times was sufficient, but Peter went further by suggesting a figure of seven; he was clearly seeking Jesus' approval! Jesus' reply has long been debated, because it is uncertain whether the Greek text means 'seven times seven', or 'seventy times seven!' You will find both translations within different common versions of the Bible. Whichever it is, Jesus clearly taught that counting how many times you forgive a person is not the point; forgiveness must be limitless if it is to be real; and when it is offered, it must be total, free and unconditional. Each of us knows that when we ask for forgiveness, this is exactly what we are looking for; and limited forgiveness is barely forgiveness at all. As Peter would one day discover, the limitless forgiveness of Jesus was to prove to be his salvation (John 21:15ff).

In the Old Testament, Genesis records an ancient saying (Gen 4:24) 'if Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy times seven fold', recalling the slaughter of Abel by Cain (Gen 4:1-18). Jesus wanted to say that the love and forgiveness He was talking about was as large if not larger than this ancient blood-feud in Israel's long distant past.

**The unforgiving servant** Jesus then told a story to illustrate the dire consequences of unforgiveness, but it is also a story that highlights the abundant forgiveness of the Master. The story is simple enough; a servant digs himself into a hole from which he cannot escape justice by obtaining superabundant generosity from his master, but fails to act in the same way towards those who owe him only a little (18:28,29). The consequence of the whole episode is that the servant ends up having to pay of the entire original sum, because he could not show simple mercy to someone else, having received the master's mercy. This much is clear, but the story does in fact say much more.

The picture presented by Jesus is that of an oriental overlord collecting his taxes. Taxes were calculated and gathered in 'talents', the largest unit of currency in use in the Roman world. The entire Roman tax for one year for the whole of Judah was 600 talents, for

example. When Jesus said that the servant owed ten thousand talents (using the largest numeral in the Greek language), He really was saying that this was the largest imaginable sum of money; we might as well say 'billions of dollars'. The equivalent today would perhaps be Bill Gates forgiving his accountant for squandering his entire multi-billion fortune! It is unthinkable, but this is of the magnitude of what we owe God, and is ultimately forgiven us by the Master. The Master in our story is clearly God and we are the servants, so the size of the debt forgiven indicates the vast extent of God's love for us.

**Limitless love and limitless debt** Having been shown limitless love, the servant in our story turned around to treat his fellow servant harshly over a sum as little as three months wages (110 denarii). His problem was that he could receive love and forgiveness, but he was unwilling to give it. In reality, he had no need to call in debts himself, because he was under no further financial obligation to the Master, so the action he took was pure greed (18:28). This is the sin for which, in the end, he was punished severely; the master had no alternative but to act with justice (18:33,34) and hand him over to 'the torturers'. This sounds rather evil, but the word 'torturer' means one who extracts money from people by force to make them pay their debts, and the painful aspect of this is that the wicked servant has no hope of ever paying the debt!

**Forgiveness** The story Jesus gives the disciples is not a parable with analogies and mysteries. It is a teaching story with a clear message; and neither is it wholly new, because Jesus has already taught 'if you do not forgive people their trespasses ... neither will your father forgive you your trespasses' (Matt 6:15), and 'blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy' (Matt 5:7). We are invited to respond to the story of the wicked servant by accepting that we are in debt to our God because of His incalculable forgiveness of our sins, and we are called to imitate God in offering forgiveness to those who genuinely seek it from us. The challenge of text is profound; who of us have found it easy to repeatedly forgive under the constant 'drip' of sins committed against us, or in the face of heinous abuse? Yet forgiveness is the only way to deal with sin. This story also teaches us that forgiveness is not some 'cheap grace' as if anyone can have it with no intent to change. Unless we recognise what sin is and how it affects us, then we act like the unforgiving servant in this story, and find ourselves on the receiving end of God's wrath.

There is both good news and bad news within this story, and we need to know where we stand before God to know which applies to us!

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What limits do people place upon forgiveness today? Are any of them justified in the light of Christian faith?
2. Even if you are willing to forgive in all circumstances, is it wise? Answer this question from the text of our reading today, and from your experience.
3. How can we forgive those who have sinned against us and show no sign of accepting their role in causing us

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*Every time I read this story, I am amazed at the extraordinary size of the debt owed. In my mind it is linked to the debt owed God, and is like the weight of sin Jesus bore to the Cross for our sakes. When I am faced with the problem of trying to forgive someone, then in the light of what Christ has done for me, how can I not forgive? Surely, not to forgive is unthinkable! It is when we are taken over by this sense of the importance of forgiveness*