

25. Should I forgive?

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow-servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. "His fellow-servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

I'm sure you've got the point. If we have been forgiven by God, we must forgive others. It would be scandalous not to, even if it feels very costly to us.

But do we all need to forgive Bird? After all, only those who have been wronged have the right to forgive. In what sense did he wrong those people who had no direct connection to what he did?

Martin Luther King said, "Injustice any where is a threat to justice everywhere". In other words, there is no such thing as an isolated wrong. When someone commits murder, they have demeaned the value not just of the life they have taken, but of all life. Likewise, if someone commits adultery, it undermines marriage for everyone.

Why should one sin have such a wide impact? That's just the way God's law works: "The God who said, 'Do not commit adultery', also said, 'Do not murder'. If you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a law breaker" (James 2:11).

Just as one stone that shatters a windscreen, if we break one law we have broken them all, because God's laws are all from the same mouth. In the same way, God made one human race. So if we sin against one member, in principle we have sinned against every other member too.

Usually we don't notice this. But when a wrong as extreme, public and devastating as Bird's is committed, the entire community knows it has been sinned against, even though most are not direct victims.

We do need to forgive Bird, all of us, because his crime is to some extent against our whole community.

We don't need to do it because he deserves it. While he may have been a decent man for 53 years, that doesn't off set what he did. Still, the whole point of forgiveness is that it's undeserved; otherwise it wouldn't be forgiveness.

Some will argue that we need to forgive him because if we don't we will suffer in the long term. True; refusing to forgive ought to carry a health warning, quite literally. But the reason we must forgive him goes deeper than that.

We need to forgive because if we don't, we prove that we have never received God's forgiveness. But if we have received it – and if you are not sure if you have or not, talk to someone who can help you – who are we to hold anything against anyone?