



Introduction

The encouragement to be at peace with everyone – to be friends not enemies – is all very well but what about the real world where people hurt others again and again? Some enemies just don't seem to want to become friends!

This is at the heart of the very practical question that Peter put to Jesus once as recorded in Matthew 18:21. Aren't some people and some situations simply unforgivable? Jesus tackles this important question by telling a story. It is a story about what it is like in God's scheme of things – God's kingdom. He is saying that people are like the servant in the story who owed millions and there is no reason why the king in the story should let them off. However, the story says that the king chose to show mercy, and this makes forgiveness possible. The servant is forgiven, but then this forgiveness needs to be passed on.

Peter and the others who heard the story for the first time would have reacted with anger at the way the pardoned servant failed to pass it on and at his treatment of those who were dependent on him. So Peter has the answer to his question. Just as Jesus explains when commenting on the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:14-15), Peter should pass on forgiveness to others, because he has experienced forgiveness himself.

The following lesson outline explores the parable with some practical suggestions as to how to earth it in the children's experience.

Preparation

Use the retelling of this story from The Barnabas Children's Bible (story 286).

Development

1. Introduce the topic of forgiveness and its relationship to turning enemies into friends by making or adapting a die. Print off some labels to stick on to the different sides with the following phrases: I find it hard to forgive others when...

I find it hard to forgive others because...

I find... unforgivable.

I would forgive others but...

I can only forgive others if...

True forgiveness means...

Ask the children in turn to throw the die and then to complete the sentence that is uppermost. This

should get some discussion going.

2. Make the parable very visible by piling up lots of coins of different denominations on one side of a table (include some notes if you dare!) and a comparable but much smaller pile of just a few pence on the other side. Imagine the reactions to being let off from one or the other of these different amounts by a bank or credit company.

Explore how the class feel about this. Now tell the story from the Bible about the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35) and help the children to unravel its meaning for themselves. Perhaps some of the following questions might help the discussion:

- I wonder why the king let off the man with the big debt.
 - I wonder how the forgiven man felt.
 - I wonder how the members of his family felt.
 - I wonder why he then went away and behaved so differently towards others.
 - I wonder what the others in the story thought of him.
 - I wonder what Jesus means by his comment that the servant didn't know what it means to be able 'to forgive from his heart' (18:35).
3. In groups, try and put together costings on a bill for some of the things that the children enjoy each day but which have no 'market value', such as: the air we breathe; friendships and family; good health; beautiful scenery; wonderful parks and gardens to visit; new sights and sounds to enjoy.

Draw up an imaginary price list for all this and then in bold letters across the whole list write 'no charge'. Seeing it like this, what consequences might it have for their relationship to and thoughts about all these things?

Christians would add: 'no charge, love God. How does the class think this might affect their relationship to God?

4. Read the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6:9-15.

Why do you think that Jesus feels he has to add further comment on the section about forgiving others?

For further ideas on this section of the Lord's Prayer, including more stories, craft, drama and prayer suggestions, see [The Lord's Prayer Unplugged](#).

5. Unwillingness to forgive creates barriers between people, which grow harder and harder to break down the longer the situation is allowed to continue. Read what Jesus had to say about this in Matthew 5:25-26.

Back in the Genesis story, following the murder of Abel by Cain, the breakdown in friendship led to a 77-fold revenge (Genesis 4:24). Jesus turns this whole idea upside down with his words to Peter by



speaking of a 77-fold forgiveness. Discuss with the class whether they think that this is really practical/possible.

Now look at Matthew 5:43-44, where Christians are told they should forgive even their enemies. How can people ever hope to do this 'impossible thing'?

6. Friendship is for-giving... but it doesn't come quickly. It's like building a paper chain between objects, link by link. Every time we forgive, we strengthen the possibility of a link-up.

In a time of reflection, create some 'forgiveness paper chains' made up of chains with the word 'forgiveness' written on each. String these between some symbols or words for those things, which build barriers between people such as:

- distrust and fear
- angry words and ignorance
- jealousy and unfairness