

## Forgiveness

**Readings:** Matthew 18:21-25 & Romans 14:1-12

“If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity”, so said C.S. Lewis. The message of forgiveness can bring great joy but can also make us feel very uncomfortable when we examine what Jesus had to say about it. On the one hand, we take great comfort in the assurance of our sins being forgiven, “hear the comfortable words” as our service tells us, but Jesus’ words about “going and doing likewise” can be somewhat unsettling.

For some people, God’s forgiveness can be difficult to receive; an overwhelming sense of unworthiness can prevent us receiving God’s grace. For others, they still want to pay the debt, to do something, rather than humbly accept God’s riches at Christ’s expense. Yet the message of the New Testament is that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. He did not wait for us to be good enough because we can never be good enough. We need, in humility and repentance, to receive the message of God’s grace, the greatest message in the world. It is the good news of Jesus Christ the Saviour and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. It is a gift we cannot earn, least of all deserve.

As Christians, we tend to rightly major on the forgiveness of God - because of our great need and the sheer amazing wonder of Christ’s redeeming love for us. But we should also emphasize the importance of forgiving one another. This should be one of the hallmarks of the Christian community. God asks us to be forgiving and that can make us very uncomfortable when we think of forgiving those who have lied to us, stolen from us, mistreated us, broken our trust, abused us, told lies about us – I could go on, you can add your own list of hurts. And these hurts are often inflicted by fellow Christians, which makes it even harder to forgive - after all they should know better! The deeper the hurt, the harder it is to forgive. Yet God says we are to forgive and that can be far from comfortable. So let’s have a look in greater detail at our reading from Matthew’s Gospel and see how Jesus’ parable sheds further light on forgiveness.

Matt. 18: 21-25. The rabbis at the time suggested three times to forgive, so Peter might have thought he was being very generous in suggesting he forgive his brother seven times. He must have been blown away by Jesus’ reply – seventy times seven or probably seventy seven is the correct reading. Jesus basically says forgive an unlimited number of times! Jesus then goes on to tell a story that is even more outrageous.

It’s a story that illustrates both the extravagant mercy of God and also the way of the Kingdom that his followers are to tread. The king in the story is probably meant to represent a Gentile king who had satraps who organised the tax collecting in an area. Amazingly this king had let the debt owed by this official to rise to 10,000 talents, possibly more than the annual tax take for the entire kingdom. For example, Josephus tells us that the annual tax take of King Herod was 800 talents and this debt was 10,000 talents! Given the character of the surrounding Gentile kings, it was inconceivable that a king firstly would have let the debt become so large, and secondly would have forgiven the debt, it might have bankrupted his kingdom! The disciples must have been almost laughing at the story because kings didn’t do that sort of thing. Yet in the earlier part of the chapter Jesus tells the unbelievable story of the shepherd who left 99 sheep to find one that had gone astray. God’s grace and love are extravagant - we will never

comprehend the depths of His mercy and grace. But returning to this parable, Jesus goes on to say that this servant who had been forgiven this enormous debt, grabbed his fellow servant and demanded to be paid what he was owed. This debt was about one six-hundred-thousandth of what he had been forgiven. As his fellow servant couldn't pay, he threw the man into prison until he could pay up. The king was obviously angry about what had happened. Firstly, his benevolence and generosity was now put in a bad light, and secondly, the other servant was now in jail and couldn't do his job for the king. The king responded by condemning the first servant for not being merciful, and put him in jail to be tortured until he paid the debt. This of course would have been until he died because there was no way he could ever pay a sum so large. Then comes the punch line "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." God has been merciful to you, so you are to be merciful and forgiving of others. Mere words "I forgive you" do not cut it. Jesus says we need to forgive from the heart - the words must speak from the very depths of our being to be genuine and effective. It is an act of the will and it can be very hard when the wound is deep. And secondly the words must be true for all time. The story is told of a wife who said to her husband "I thought you forgave me?" To which the husband replied "That was yesterday". As R.T Kendall says "Forgiveness is a lifelong commitment; you may need to do it every day of your life until you die."

It is significant that the Lord's prayer has almost the same words as we have at the end of this parable, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Perhaps as we say those words each week or each day, "Forgive us our sins" we forget that there is a condition "as we forgive those who sin against us". I wonder how often we skim over the second part of the phrase as our focus is on our desire for forgiveness for our sins? And yet in Matthew's Gospel immediately after we are given the Lord's Prayer, Jesus emphasizes the essential importance and centrality of forgiveness when he says "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matt. 6:14-15). In Mark's gospel Jesus repeats this idea in a slightly different way "And whenever you stand praying forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25). Have we really grasped the life changing transformation of these words?

We are to be a forgiving people because we follow a forgiving Saviour. Paul picks up this thought in Colossians "bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." (Col. 3:13). And again in Ephesians "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Eph. 4:32).

Forgiveness can be so hard when the wound is deep, yet it can be a powerful witness to the one who has wronged us and to the world at large. You may have heard this story before but it is worth hearing again.

The scene is a courtroom in South Africa a few years ago. A frail black woman stands slowly to her feet. She is something over seventy years of age. Facing her across the room are several white security police officers, one of whom, Mr. Van der Broek, has just been tried and found implicated in the murders of both the woman's son and her husband some years before. It had been established that Mr. Van der Broek had come to the woman's home a number of years back, taken her son, shot him at

point blank range and then burned the young man's body on a fire while he and his officers partied nearby.

Several years later, Mr. Van de Broek and his cohorts had returned to take away her husband. For many months she heard nothing of his whereabouts. Then, almost two years after her husband's disappearance, Van de Broek came back to fetch the woman herself. She was taken to a place beside a river where she was shown her husband, bound and beaten, yet still strong in spirit, lying on a pile of wood. The last words she heard from his lips as the officers poured petrol over his body and set him aflame were, "Father forgive them."

And now the woman stands in the courtroom and a member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission turns to her and asks, "So what do you want? How should justice be done to this man who has so brutally destroyed your family?"

"I want three things", begins the old woman calmly, but confidently. "I want first to be taken to the place where my husband's body was burned so I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial."

She pauses, then continues, "My husband and son were my only family. I want, therefore, for Mr. Van der Broek to become my son. I would like for him to come twice a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining within me."

"And finally", she says, "I want a third thing. I would like Mr. Van der Broek to know that I offer him my forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive. This was also the wish of my husband. And so, I would kindly ask someone to come to my side and lead me across this courtroom so that I can take Mr. Van der Broek in my arms, embrace him and let him know that he is freely forgiven."

As the court assistants come to lead the elderly woman across the room, Mr. Van der Broek, overwhelmed by what he has just heard, faints. As he does so, those in the courtroom, friends, family, neighbours - all victims of decades of oppression and injustice - begin to sing, softly but assuredly, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

Forgiveness can be very powerful as that story shows. It is not a sign of weakness but an outworking of love. Mahatma Gandhi admitted "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong."

We need to be very clear on what forgiveness is not and what it is. R.T Kendall is an American pastor who served for 25 years at Westminster Chapel in London after Martyn Lloyd-Jones retired. He has written a very challenging book on forgiveness called "Total Forgiveness" and a sequel was also published a few years ago describing the experiences of some who put this teaching into practice. Much of what I am saying is based on his writings.

So let's begin by looking at what forgiveness is not. Forgiving someone does not make the crime any less serious. We do not excuse what they did or even pretend we were not hurt. What was said or done still happened, my forgiveness does not alter what took place. Forgiveness is not some kind of denial, saying it never happened.

Now what therefore is forgiveness? Forgiveness is a choice to keep no records of wrong. It is not a feeling but an act of the will; in many cases a painful choice. Forgiveness says "I have no desire to get even with them or punish them. I will do nothing that will damage their reputation or their future. I will truly wish them well and pray God's blessing upon them." Do you think that is extreme? May I suggest that is what God does for you and me.

I've been doing quite a bit of gardening recently, spring means the weeds are growing fast. Anger, bitterness and resentment are weeds that can grow rampantly in the soil of unforgiveness. They are the kinds of weeds that can twine around our hearts and limit our fruitfulness in our Christian lives. But forgiveness can cut them off at the roots. Can we ever forget the deep hurts that some have inflicted upon us? We may not be able to forget, memories may surface from time to time from our memory bank, that's part of being human. But when they do, we have to say again "I forgive" from our hearts.

I need to make it clear that we have a duty to report criminal abuse when we can, to prevent others being damaged by someone else's actions. We do not report them to punish them or get our own back for what they did to us but to help them and others. But that does not excuse us from forgiving what they have done to us. Does this sound crazy? Jesus is the One we follow, who said "Father forgive them, they know not what they are doing." And what was the occasion of those words? Calvary. He suffered gross injustice, physical abuse, was stripped naked, nailed to a tree and suffered the taunts of those he came to save, and took upon himself the sins of the whole world. The Spirit of the One who said Father forgive them, now dwells within us. Christianity does not always make us feel comfortable but it is God's good news. His forgiveness sets us free to forgive others by His Spirit whom He has shed abroad in our hearts. Amen.