



## Sermon

### “Forgiven and forgiving”

**Matthew 18:21-35; Gen 50:15-21; Rom 14:1-21; Ps 103:1-13**

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Last week, we heard Jesus’ teaching on reconciliation in the church. It involved acknowledgement of the wrong and the asking and giving of forgiveness. Forgiveness has a high value in the Bible. It is arguable that it is the dominant concern of the whole Bible. Today, as we hear Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness, I want to apply it practically to our lives.

Peter responded to Jesus teaching on reconciliation by asking how many times he should forgive his brother. That is a good question. It would not all have been plain sailing in the community of disciples following Jesus. The group of twelve (let alone the wider circle of followers) included brothers James and John, whom Jesus nicknamed “the sons of Thunder”; it included tax collectors who had sold out to the Romans and zealots who were determined to fight to free Israel from the invaders. It included impulsive, loyal Peter and scheming, betraying Judas. A good question then – “How many times...?”

Twice would be pretty good wouldn’t it? But seven times! I think Peter was doing well learning the generosity of his Rabbi. But then Jesus says not seven times but seventy-seven times! And no, you are not supposed to keep a tally up to seventy-seven and then refuse to forgive – he means it’s unlimited.

To drive the point home, Jesus told a story. There is a king who is owed a debt by a servant, It is a large debt – a very large debt – a huge debt - a ginormous debt! It is 10,000 talents – what’s that? If you took the annual revenues in the first century of those countries where Israel is now – it was 1000x more. A thousand times the income of a country the size of modern Israel! It might be about \$36billion in our money.

Now the consequence for defaulting on debt in those days was to be sold with all your family into slavery. Or maybe you would be imprisoned until you could pay the debt – which was rather difficult! Maybe friends or family would pay for you.

This senior official begs the King for mercy and promises to pay. The King is extremely generous and forgives the debt. That means he does not hold it against him anymore. He no longer has to repay the money.

We know how it works. The king in the parable represents God. And we are all accountable to him. Both the Old Testament and Epistle readings happen to illustrate that. Verse 11 of our reading from Romans says:

It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'Every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

It is God to whom we are ultimately accountable.

In the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers, when they ask his forgiveness for selling him into slavery, he says to them, "Don't be afraid, Am I in the place of God?"<sup>1</sup> The clear inference is that the role of judge belongs to God.

And we have all have been the servant in hopelessly in debt and in need of forgiveness. That's what the sin debt is like. We can never repay our only solution is to plead for mercy. The wonderful thing is that as the Psalm we heard says, our God is merciful and compassionate.

Ps 103:8-13 The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger for ever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

I want to take the opportunity to remind you of practical steps to finding forgiveness from God because people quite often get stuck and that keeps us distant from God instead of enjoying the closeness he wants for us.

These are the steps we go through in receiving God's forgiveness once we have realised there is some wrongdoing.

1. Confess - acknowledge to God we have done wrong
2. Repent of the action - decide before God not to do it again.
3. Ask for forgiveness.
4. Trust that he has forgiven us.
5. If relevant, undo the wrong we have done to others (e.g., return stolen property).

We may need help through the steps. Often people get stuck in believing they are forgiven. They have actually asked for forgiveness but just can't believe God has forgiven them.

Our first help is to review what the Bible says about our forgiveness so our faith is in what God says rather than wishful thinking.

1 John 1:9: If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

2 Cor 5:21: For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Ps 103:12: As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Say them out loud and thank God for these truths. Decide to believe you are forgiven because you have fulfilled the conditions and thank God for your forgiveness. It is well worth memorising those scriptures they are instantly available for yourself or to help others.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 50:19

The second thing to understand is that there is a difference between conviction and condemnation. The Holy Spirit brings conviction of our sins – that is he lets us know there is something wrong so we can repent and be forgiven. He tells us precisely what was wrong but he does not crush us. The response is to trust in God’s mercy, repent and ask forgiveness.

On the other hand, the enemy of our souls tells us about our sins and blurs and broadens it so everything is wrong and we are hopeless. We come to believe that God will never forgive us. This is condemnation. It is not the voice of God and it needs to be resisted. Usually when we are under this attack, we have already confessed multiple times and in fact God has forgiven us – we are just believing the lie that he hasn’t. The way to deal with it is to use our authority in Christ and order the accusation to stop. “Condemnation, I command you to go now in Jesus’ Name” And it will go!

Romans 8:1-2 is reassuring in this situation:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

Finally, if we are still struggling, it can greatly help to speak out our confession to someone and be assured that we are forgiven. The old adage about confession in the Anglican Church is “Some should; none must; all can.” We don’t have to confess to another, it is available if needed and some people do need it for their spiritual health.

Part of bringing the matter into the open is that it puts it into proportion and we start to see the lies of Satan (such as: it is unforgivable, our wretchedness, the uniqueness of our sinfulness) for what they are. It also allows us to hear a statement of forgiveness.

Years ago, I taught on this and an elderly woman came to see me afterwards. She had carried guilt for something since her early teens. When we prayed together, she was able to believe God had forgiven her. She had such joy knowing closeness with Father God which she had been denied by believing she could not be forgiven. It was wonderful to see, but sad that she had carried that burden for so many years.

Let’s return to the Parable. We pick up the story at verse 28. The servant who owed so much and has been forgiven then goes out and demands the repayment of a debt from another servant. This is 100 denarii that is about \$6000. That may sound a lot to you, but what is it compared to \$36billion? When the other servant cannot pay, he is thrown in prison until he does repay all the debt. And Jesus continues the story by telling us that the master finds out and is very angry with the servant and in turn throws him in prison to repay his debt.

When we receive God’s mercy we are expected to extend the same mercy to others. That is the point of the Jesus’ story.

We all find ourselves from time to time feeling unable to forgive someone for what they have done to us. It is a miserable place to be. We are tense inside and miserable. And we really are commanded to forgive. If this parable is not enough, it is in the Lord’s prayer: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive them who sin against us.” And if that is not clear enough Jesus goes on in Matthew immediately to say:

Mt 6:9-15: but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The key fact is that we are commanded to forgive by Jesus. That being so, it must be possible. The key to forgiveness is to understand that it is a decision of the will - not a feeling. It is true we cannot order out feelings but we can decide matters of the will. And when we decide to forgive then the feelings start to come into line.

An objection, Helen and I hear quite often is, "If I forgive, they will get away with it." God says "Vengeance is mine; I will repay" Forgiveness is our stepping away from being judge and letting God be judge. We are not able to carry it the burden of judgement. We do not know all the facts as he does.

Turn your mind back to Joseph and his brothers. He had been badly sinned against. Most of them had been prepared to kill him but one of them had been persuaded the rest to sell him into slavery instead. Joseph had risen to the highest rank in Egypt. He was ruler of all Egypt second only to Pharaoh. He has already received his brothers and forgiven them. Now that their father Jacob has died they are afraid he will punish them. It is pretty obvious that they have concocted this story that Jacob had passed a message to Joseph through them asking him to forgive them. If Jacob had thought that was necessary he would surely have addressed his favourite son directly before he died. In spite of this latest deception on top of all that preceded, Joseph is quick to assure them of his good will and protection.

**Genesis 50:19** But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Do you see how even as he repeats his forgiveness of them, he says he is not God. That is because it is God's role to judge. Furthermore, he is saying that God had a plan and wisdom in what happened that used it for good. Because Joseph was taken to Egypt, in the long term he was able to save the lives of all his family from the famine.

So how do we forgive others?

1. It helps to pray aloud declaring forgiveness for the offending party specifically, "I forgive [name] for doing [the action] to me and I release them from my judgement into God's judgement."  
Watch yourself lest you say, "I would like to forgive [name]..." or "Please help me to forgive...[name]." If I say to you, "I would like to give you \$10." Have I actually given it? No. Liking and asking for help are only steps towards the action.
2. You can ask for God's love for the person to flow through you.
3. You can ask God to provide opportunities to serve or bless the other person
4. If further things come up afterwards, keep on with the process as God reminds you of other issues to be forgiven. Sometimes there is much buried hurt to be dealt with.

Having forgiven does not mean that we are expected to trust that person instantly if there has been a breach of trust. Trust is established over time based on actions.

We all need to know this stuff for ourselves. I do. You do. We need to keep short accounts with God and be confident that we are forgiven and loved by him. We need the freedom that forgiving others gives us for our own health and for our relationships.

Jesus expects that we will behave like our Father who is full of grace and give it to others. If what I have said today has raised issues get the copy of the sermon from the website so you can read it through and apply the steps I have outlined. If you still need help, please contact me, Anne or Helen so we can pray with you.