

Forgiveness

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[0 : 00] So Matthew 18, reading from verse 15. If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them. Then Peter came up and said to him, Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I will forgive him?

As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owned him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold with his wife and children and all that he had and payment to be made.

[1 : 48] So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything. And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

But when he came, when the same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii.

And seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, pay what you owe. So his fellow servants fell down and pleaded with him, have patience with me, and I will pay you.

He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.

Then his master summoned him and said to him, you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

[2 : 54] And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you? And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt.

So also my heavenly father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother. If you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

Well, I wonder what you made of the great spectacle of a week ago today, which was the coronation. The pomp and splendor and the royal family center stage providing endless entertainment.

But of course the other thing that the royal family have provided endlessly has been a saga of forgiveness and, generally speaking, unforgiveness. And we have watched it broadcast on a level that none of us would wish to be applied to our own families, let alone ourselves, I rather imagine. I've not come today as an expert on this subject. But like you, I am a sinful woman with tricky forgiveness issues in my own family, with my immediate neighbors.

[4 : 09] There are tricky forgiveness issues from time to time within our church. Historically, when I was in the paid workplace, there were definitely tricky forgiveness issues there. And so I know how deeply painful this issue is.

How unforgiveness festers. How it causes sleeplessness. How it breaks relationships. Divides churches. And even now, the entire evangelical constituency.

Yet Jesus is very clear on it. And that's why it is our privilege this morning to go to the main parable he taught on it, which I hope will really be of great help to us.

We're going to look first at the principles of forgiveness from the parable. And then we'll look at the practice. And then there will be time for us to apply that to ourselves using a few questions. That will be after coffee. And to pray. And at the end of the handout, you'll see there's a resources list if this is a subject on which you know you want to read further.

[5 : 13] And we'll have a book review on one of those books later and a written book review on another later. So, first of all, principles of forgiveness. In Matthew 18, the Lord Jesus is addressing relationships between Christians primarily when one Christian offends another.

And his aim in Matthew 18 is the restoration of the Christian community every time. So, if you look at the little headings in your Bibles, verse 10 to 14, the parable of the lost sheep.

He's telling that there to show God's compassion on even one lost Christian. God doesn't want anyone to be lost from the Christian community. And then verse 15 to 18 is what we are to do to restore a brother or sister whose sin puts them in spiritual danger when they are unrepentant.

So, verse 15, as Lilliana read it to us, you go to them privately if they sin against you. Verse 16, if they won't listen, you then take along one or two others only along.

Verse 17, if that doesn't work, only then do you tell it to anybody else in your church family. And if they still won't listen, then you are to treat them as a non-Christian.

[6 : 27] The parable is where I want to focus now. So, that's verse 21 onwards. And this deals with a repentant Christian offender who re-offends. So, sorry, says our husband or our child or our parent or somebody in the church family or a friend.

We forgive them and then they go and do it all over again. Peter, in verse 21, says to Jesus, And Jewish tradition said three times at that point.

So, Peter is being generous, isn't he, upping it to seven. But Jesus replies to him in verse 22, I don't say to you seven times, but 70 times seven. Or if you look at the footnote, it's 77 times.

In other words, infinitely is what he means by that. Infinitely. The last time that number was used in the Bible was Genesis 4, 24, where Lamech threatens to avenge 77 times for offences caused to him.

So, Jesus is deliberately choosing that number and he is reversing the idea. Instead of seeking revenge 77 times, actually we are to forgive. And we are to forgive without limit.

[7 : 49] So, he's telling this parable to change our thinking on forgiveness, which has really helped me and I pray will help all of us here and those who are going to be listening online.

However well we think we know it, the shock of this parable is that it's the victim who ends up being tortured justly. It is the victim who ends up being tortured justly.

So, I'm going to look at it almost in three acts like a play. And we're going to start with verse 23 to 27, act one. So, verse 23, have a look at it with me.

There is a king. He wants to settle his accounts with his servants. And verse 24 tells us that one of his servants owes him 10,000 talents.

That is a vast sum. Equivalent in real terms today to several hundred billion pounds. So, the gross national product today of 80% of the world's nations is less than this figure.

[8 : 47] So, obviously, Jesus is deliberately using a huge sum to convince us that the debt owed by one servant to the king is completely unpayable.

Absolutely impossible. Now, verse 25, if you look at it there, in those days, if you couldn't pay your debts, you were sold into slavery. But the money raised would be nowhere near enough, since historical records tell us that the most valuable slave ever sold was for one talent.

One talent for one slave. So, this man's going to be in slavery for a very long time, isn't he? No surprise, then, that in verse 26, he implores his master.

So, the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything. Literally, he's saying, be slow, slow to boil or melt.

But it's an entirely unrealistic question from the servant. He can't possibly ever repay him everything. But, look at verse 27. Here's the surprise.

[9 : 54] Out of pity, the servant's master takes pity on him. Incredibly, the master doesn't offer him clana or defer the payment, but he forgives the debt and he lets him go.

So, forgiveness means that the impossible debt is cancelled, which means that the king has paid the debt himself. And here's a really important principle.

Forgiveness means that a payment of some sort is always made by the one who forgives. That's why forgiveness is so painful for us. Because if you're the person forgiving, you're the one who

takes the pain.

Forgiveness is an impossible debt paid. So, that's Act 1, forgiveness. Act 2, 28 to 30. So, verse 28. Have a look at it. The servant is on his way home now. And he finds a fellow servant along the road. And the fellow servant owes him 100 denarii. That's still a significant amount.

[11:04] It was about 100 days wages for a labourer. A debt that hurts. So, Jesus is acknowledging here that when we sin, other people do suffer.

And when they sin, we do suffer. He understands this. There is payment. There is pain here. The forgiven servant immediately acts aggressively.

Verse 28. And he grabs him. And he begins to choke the debtor. And he demands payment from him. Why? Has he forgotten his impossible debt cancelled?

No. It's because the debt owed to him is much more real to him than his own debt to the master. We see that? Much more real to him than the debt he owed to his master.

In other words, he's presumed on his master's mercy. And, of course, this is what we do, isn't it? When we don't really understand our own debt to God.

[12:03] When our hope is really in ourselves and our goodness and not in a merciful God who forgives sinners. We are shown compassion, but we are ruthless with others.

Staying bitter, resentful, very angry. Forgiveness seems impossible. So, verse 29. So, his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him.

Have patience with me and I will pay you. Do you see that response is identical to the servant's original response to the master? Word for word. He falls down and pleads.

Verse 30. Forgiveness is not granted. The forgiven servant throws the other into prison until he can pay the debt. Now have a look at verse 31.

The other servants see this and they are greatly distressed. And they go to their master and explain everything to him in detail.

[13:06] Jesus showing us here the knock-on effects of unforgiveness in a community. Because unforgiveness is never a private matter. Others are watching. Our friends, our family, our neighbours, our church family.

Depending on your celebrity status this morning. Perhaps even the media. So, unforgiveness shows us that we have little or no understanding of our own impossible debt cancelled.

And some of us this morning may need to reflect on our normal response whenever we are hurt or offended. So, Jesus sees, sorry, act three, justice.

Let me go on to verse 32. So, act one, forgiveness. Act two, unforgiveness. Act three, justice. Act two, unforgiveness. Act two, unforgiveness.

The master says to the servant in verse 32. You, wicked servant. I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?

[14:15] In other words, don't imagine that somehow you paid off your own debt. You did nothing but beg me. Don't treat the one who sins against you differently. Forgiven people are forgiving people.

So, here comes the shock. Verse 34. It is the forgiven servant who is handed over to the torturer. Not a jailer as the ESV has it.

They've got a footnote at the bottom. And if you've got very good eyesight, you can see the footnote says torturer, which is what the NIV does say. So, this is much more serious, isn't it?

Hand it over to the torturer until he should pay back all his debt. And the role of a torturer in those days was to exert pressure on the family of the debtor to pay up.

So that justice will be applied. And then verse 35 is Jesus' word to those who are listening to him.

[15:13] His verdict. Remember speaking here to Peter, verse 21. The disciples, verse 1. And so to all those whom he loves. That's us. He says, So also, my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

So those of us here who won't forgive cannot expect ourselves to be forgiven by Jesus' father. Do you notice here that Jesus does not say, your heavenly father, in verse 35.

He says, my heavenly father. So he is speaking to those who might think of themselves as disciples of Jesus, but they are not if they won't forgive.

It's not new. He taught it in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew chapter 6. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. So he sees no inconsistency between his heavenly father who

forgives us bountifully and as bountifully as the master does and yet punishes ruthlessly. Because our heavenly father can't accept as his those who are not displaying his pattern of forgiveness. Justice will be applied.

[16:32] So forgiveness and impossible debt cancelled. Unforgiveness shows little or no understanding of our own impossible debt cancelled.

And justice will be applied by our heavenly father. Those are the principles. Now let's turn to what is arguably much harder, which is the practice of forgiveness.

But we say, you have no idea what it is that I struggle to forgive. And if the offence is serious that's in our mind this morning, we may well say we know perfectly well we ought to forgive, but we cannot find it in ourselves to do so.

Or that if only the offender would actually say sorry, then we could forgive. But they won't. Some of us here this morning, I know, have children who have rejected us.

Some of us have husbands who have neglected us. Some have dear Christian friends or family or church family or colleagues who have turned against us.

[17:38] I'm not dealing with safeguarding implications here. And if you think there are any safeguarding implications in whatever you have in your mind at the moment, you must talk to Mary Burke, who is our safeguarding officer.

If someone has repented, then it's not going to be the offence that breaks our relationship. It will be our lack of forgiveness. So how exactly does this parable help us?

Not by you and I must forgive. Note in the parable the lavish and unconditional forgiveness that the master shows the servant.

First, we need to grasp how much each of us has been forgiven by God. If we're somebody who has personally turned to Jesus Christ and repented of a life lived ignoring God.

How much pain we caused the Lord Jesus by living a life of rebellion against him. What a vast debt Jesus has paid that I can be forgiven.

[18:45] The pain that I feel when somebody wrongs me, however bad it is, is still nothing compared to the pain that Jesus felt on the cross, where he took the punishment that I actually do deserve.

So like the forgiven servant, when we are offended and hurt, our natural instinct is for revenge. That's the world around us today, isn't it?

Revenge attacks on Ukraine or Russia. Revenge social media disclosures. Revenge reactions to those who've hurt us. Perhaps giving them the cold shoulder.

Perhaps making sure we don't sit next to them again in church. Perhaps not really wanting their good anymore. Perhaps running them down verbally before others, of course.

Not including them. Being more demanding of them. All of these are actually revenge. But the king in the parable is God.

[19:44] And he pays the debt for our sin himself by dying on the cross. C.S. Lewis wrote, To be a Christian is to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.

The very opposite of the emerging council culture, where forgiveness is either abandoned or has to be earned. I'm told that secular counseling for forgiveness now includes conditional forgiveness.

So we must pray as God's people for the grace shown by the king to be the grace that he pours into our hearts today, for those of us struggling to forgive our fellow servants.

Just look at verse 33, if you would, again. This is what he says. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?

We're just fellow servants, aren't we? All of us. Two practical things follow, and they are time and self-discipline. And I want to tell you about two men to show us how this works out, Matt and Eric.

[21:01] Matt was a firefighter, and he had been on a shift in the United States for 24 hours non-stop. He was driving home, and he fell asleep at the wheel.

And very tragically, he hit a car driven by a pregnant woman. She was killed, and her unborn child, and her other child survived, who was strapped in at the back.

And when her husband, Eric, got the phone call to tell him this dreadful news, he knew he must forgive. He was a pastor, and he says that he knew that now was the time to put into practice what he had preached all his life.

So when the courts approached him, he asked for a lenient sentence for Matt, which meant that Matt didn't go to prison, but instead was given a much more lenient sentence.

They weren't allowed any contact for two years under the American legal system, which gave him time. But by the time the two years were up, he had a God-given opportunity to meet Matt, which they did, and they spoke.

[22 : 13] And Eric told him that he wanted to forgive him, and for him to know that he had been forgiven. And it turned out that Matt had been born and brought up in a Christian family.

So what was an absolutely disastrous situation developed into one where forgiveness was offered. The men met regularly. Forgiveness was accepted. Matt was then able to go on and live a life. He married. He saw his wife become pregnant and drive in cars and go through the whole horror of what had been on his conscience. And Eric was able to remarry and restart.

That is the difference that forgiveness makes. It's incredible, isn't it? But it took time, and it took self-discipline. Don Carson, David Powlinson, and others helpfully divide forgiveness into two aspects or stages, and they're based on the two verses on your handout.

The first is attitudinal forgiveness, and we find that in Mark 11.25. So do turn to it. Mark 11.25.

[23 : 31] Jesus says this. Whenever you stand praying, forgive. If you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive your trespasses.

So Jesus commanding us there that when there's an issue of forgiveness, we start by praying. This is the internal aspect of forgiveness, which must happen before any attempt at reconciliation is made.

So that's attitudinal forgiveness. And that's something Jesus commands us to do. The second stage, if you just flick to Luke 17.

Luke 17 verse 3. Luke 17 verse 3.

Yep. So Jesus says here, Pay attention to yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him. And if he repents, forgive him.

[24 : 37] And if he sins against you seven times in the day and turns to you seven times, saying, I repent, you must forgive him. Now, this can't mean that we only forgive if someone says sorry.

Mark 11, which we've just looked at, doesn't give us that option. Neither does our parable. The focus of what Jesus is saying here is on the offender in verse 4 who turns to you and repents rather than disappearing.

At that point, when the offender turns to us, our relationship can be restored and it can be restored repeatedly. But reconciled forgiveness, which is what this is called, can never happen without attitudinal forgiveness first.

Restoration of the community, as we've seen, is the primary aim of forgiveness between people rather than just my well-being, which is often the focus of secular counselling.

So in a church family, this will require us to function as a body in the costly work of reconciliation. And we have seen something and learnt something of that in the last year.

[25 : 46] Before Grace Church was planted, Simon spoke to the 36 adults in the core planting group about forgiveness very specifically, because we are sinful and we will let each other down.

So he wanted to make sure, before we began, that we get used to saying sorry and asking for forgiveness and granting it. And it's been something that's been tested many times over 18 years. Reconciled forgiveness may not always be possible because of the nature of the offence. And I recognise that. And those of you in the room this morning who have massive issues, please hear that being said loudly.

Reconciled forgiveness may not always be possible because of the nature of the offence. Or it may take a long time. Listen to C.S. Lewis in Letters to Malcolm.

He wrote, Last week while at prayer, I suddenly discovered, or felt as if I did, that I had really forgiven someone I've been trying to forgive for over 30 years.

[26 : 50] Time helps. I've had the experience of losing a friendship, so far at least, because of my offence and my friend unable to forgive.

I've asked for her forgiveness. I've asked God for forgiveness. I pray for her. But at the moment, reconciled forgiveness is out of reach. And I have to leave this with God.

Time is what is needed. What though if the person is entirely unrepentant? Well, our parable shows us that an unrepentant Christian is a contradiction.

They are not Christian if they are unrepentant. Unrepentant. To the unrepentant non-Christian, we know that God is their judge. And we are to demonstrate Jesus' love to them and his grace, meaning that we forgive the unrepentant offender.

We pray for them. We try to do good to them. And so demonstrate the gospel to them. So first, time. Secondly, self-discipline.

[27 : 53] And this is the battle for our minds. Any of us who've been hurt, and I assume that that is all of us in the room and everybody listening online, will know how hard it is to stop going over the offence in our mind, especially at night.

The more we go over it, the more upset we become. One day life can be straightforward. We have no sense of broken relationships with anyone in particular. And then because of even just one event, one snappy conversation, one misjudged comment, our whole world can plummet as we realise that we've totally fallen out with somebody.

So would you turn to Romans chapter 12, which is really the purple passage on how we actually exercise forgiveness. And one that I hope you'll go back to in your own time, perhaps in a quiet time or two.

Romans 12, 9 to 21. We don't have time to read it all, but I'm just going to pick out the headlines and jot down what's helpful to you.

So verse 9 at the top of it and verse 21 at the bottom of it both have the same principle of not being overcome by evil, but overcoming evil with good.

[29 : 07] So evil wins when we nourish a low level resentment or anger against somebody. Evil wins when we speak aloud against the perpetrator rather than bless those who persecute us.

That's what verse 14 is commanding us to do. If you look down to verse 16, we are to live in harmony with one another.

We are not to be haughty. So that means moving towards the one with whom I've fallen out with, not moving away. Verse 17, repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all.

And verse 18, if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Can we see that withdrawal is all about me? It doesn't help at all, even though that's our instinctive sinful reaction. Verse 19, beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. So vengeance is all about me and my wounded pride.

[30 : 11] It is not about God or the good of the offender or the good of the victim. God is the judge and he will deal with all wrongdoing. Verse 20, do good to them.

Do good to them. Whatever degree they will permit you. Just to remember and jot this down because somehow it's fallen off the outline. Ephesians 4, 26 and 27 for your note says, In your anger, do not sin.

Do not let the sun go down while you're still angry and do not give the devil a foothold. Satan uses unresolved relational issues again and again.

That's Ephesians 4, 26 and 27. He uses unresolved relational issues again and again to divide and destroy God's people, as we know only too well. So forgive by an act of will because left to ourselves, we may not reach a point where we feel like forgiving.

So we ask the Holy Spirit to enable us to forgive from the heart. Let's not allow the sin of the offender to ruin us and our families as well.

[31 : 20] Forgiveness is a promise not to keep on bringing up the matter to ourselves or others or the person concerned. I don't know about you and those of us who are married, but I have a terrible temptation to keep on just alluding to something that happened about six years ago.

You know, don't do it. Self-discipline may include praying daily to forgive the offender. Because that's doing good to them, isn't it? Pray for them daily. Praying for them because the hurt is so deep. So first time, second self-discipline. So as we finish, why forgive? Forgive because we are people who are forgiven an impossible debt.

As we forgive in our church family, as a church family, we demonstrate the gospel of sins forgiven, entirely undeserved, to our watching wider community, to the rest of our church, to our perhaps onlooking, not entirely converted family, or to our school community, whatever it is, whoever's observing you.

And in doing so, we point them to Jesus the King, who paid our impossible debt. That's the role of any local church, to demonstrate Christ to the community in which the Lord has put us.

[32 : 41] That was what we were trying to do when we began, and it's what we need to keep on doing. Let me just pray. Our Father, look with mercy on us here in this room this morning.

Look with mercy on us where we have unforgiving hearts, where we don't look at each other as fellow servants, but we have some sort of pecking order of godliness.

We pray that you'd help us to see ourselves rightly, massively in debt to our King, the Lord Jesus, who died for us on the cross. And we pray that you would help us now to ponder on your word and to apply it to ourselves and our families, our broken friendships and relationships, and that you would help us as a church to demonstrate what forgiveness looks like to a watching world.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.