

Reconciliation in the Kingdom

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[0 : 00] And with today's talk, I need some help from that famous theologian, Russell Crowe. You know Russell Crowe from the Gladiator movies?

I wish I had a slide here, but it doesn't matter. Because not only does Russell love slaying the Roman soldiers, he loves rugby. And he loves rugby so much, in particular his favourite team, the South Sydney Rabbitohs, that in 2011, when the club was on its knees financially and facing ruin, Russell sort of strode in as he does with his Gladiator millions, and he put them on the line and paid the club out of its debts.

And to this day, Russell Crowe is one of the owners of the South Sydney Rabbitohs. Other people love the club, but no one loves the club like Russell Crowe. You could say, when it comes to the Rabbitohs and rugby, he has more skin in the game than anyone.

Well, thanks Russell, because that leads us nicely to our main idea today of forgiveness. Because just like Russell and rugby, when it comes to forgiveness, God has more skin in the game than anyone.

See, God cares so much that he sends his son to die so we can be forgiven. Where we are here in Matthew 18, Jesus is literally on the road to Jerusalem to die for all of us.

[1 : 30] When it comes to forgiveness, God and Jesus have more skin in the game than anyone. The problem is, forgiveness is not a game, is it?

And today's sermon comes with a health warning. Because today's sermon will be painful for many of us. Painful because any talk on forgiveness will remind us of the times when we have sinned against God.

But painful also because it will remind us of the times when we have been deeply hurt by other people around us.

And forgiveness might seem far too impossible. And so my aim with this talk is that Jesus will give us the key to forgiveness.

Can I say that again? My aim is that Jesus will give us the key to forgiveness. So we can have the same heavenly concern that God has.

[2 : 34] There's a handout in your service sheets. And do keep Matthew 18 open. That will really help me as we work through it. There's a stark warning at the end of verse 35.

Don't turn to it. I'll just tell you because it's over the page. But verse 35 says, This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart. And so we better listen so we can be forgiven just as we forgive those who sin against us.

And so point one, go back to verse 15. Let me read. If your brother or sister sins, says Jesus. Now just after the word sins in verse 15, you'll see a little C there.

That's the footnote. So down at the bottom in the fine print, you can see it there. It says some manuscripts say sin against you. Lots of versions of the Bible say if your brother or sister sins against you.

Not just sin in general, but it's when someone hurts us. And that's the way we're going to take it today. I think that makes more sense of what comes a bit later. So let me start again. If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out their fault just between the two of you.

[3 : 49] If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church.

If they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or tax collector. These verses are not a fascist manifesto for building a Trump style wall around the goody goodies to get rid of the irritating people who hurt us.

These verses are actually a guide so Jesus can give us, I guess, a practical way we can have the same heavenly concern for forgiveness that our father does.

Verse 15 is the first step in this practical guide. Verse 15, it says, Jesus wants us to go to the source, to speak one-on-one with a person.

That means we talk to the person, not about the person. My family is relatively new here to HTD.

[5 : 02] We've been here for just over a year. And so you will be able to answer this much better than I will. Would speaking one-to-one to resolve a conflict, would that be a radical thing here at HTD?

Is there much gossip that a one-on-one discussion would stop? I'll leave you to think about that.

Verse 16 is the second step.

And in verse 16, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy. And he says where every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. You see, Jesus wants there to be integrity and due process when it comes to disputes.

Just as there was in Old Testament Israel. In Deuteronomy, having witnesses around helps up the ante. Helps the truth to be known more clearly.

So that a person might repent. You see, God wanted to make it really hard for anyone in Israel to be lost as they headed to the promised land.

[6 : 08] And so too Jesus wants to make it really hard for anyone to be lost as we, the church, head to our promised land. The new creation.

And the point is this. We are to imitate that same heavenly concern. There are a couple more steps. We don't have time to go into them.

But it is so we can have the heavenly concern that God has for forgiveness. Let me ask you. When Christians offend us, would we be unmoved or even happy if they just got lost?

Or do we have the same heavenly concern that God has that they would be forgiven and won back into the church family? Notice who is driving the situation in our passage.

Verse 15 says, if your brother or sister sins. It says again, if they will not listen to you. Verse 16, if they will not listen. Verse 17, if they refuse to listen.

[7 : 12] Verse 17 again, if they refuse to listen, even to the church. You see, the offender shows they want to have nothing to do with the church. There was a Carlton footballer called Brendan Favola.

And he was a star forward. And he was at the peak of his powers. And he was fired from the football club after one too many scandals.

And they interviewed the captain of the club, Chris Judd. And they said, Chris Judd, why have you gotten rid of Brendan? And he said, listen, we didn't want to lose Brendan.

We're weaker for not having Brendan with us. But Brendan behaved his way out of the club. And that is the same with a brother or sister who keeps refusing forgiveness.

Who is spiritually lost in their hard-heartedness. Verse 17 says, to treat them like a tax collector or a pagan. These people are welcome in our church as well.

[8 : 16] Remember, we were once pagans and spiritual tax collectors too. But if a Christian keeps refusing reconciliation and forgiveness, they will show themselves to be pagan in nature.

It means we'll have to treat them as a non-Christian. But again, this is not a fascist manifesto. We do so, so they will repent.

So they'll want to come back into the church family. We must be desperate that no one is lost.

Verse 18. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

And whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. You see, as we put Jesus' instructions into place, we will imitate our Father's desire to win people back.

And when we do that, this earthly church starts to look like the heavenly realms. Then the church's loosing and binding, which is forgiving or refusing to forgive, that will carry with it the very authority of God.

[9 : 24] Because this will be a little snapshot, if you like, of heaven. When we gather with two or more for reconciliation, it's as though we are appearing before Jesus himself.

For Jesus is with us. Because we're imitating that heavenly concern. And I think that makes sense of verse 19 to 20. It says that if two of you on earth agree about anything, they ask for it, it will be done for them.

By my Father in heaven. For where two or three agree and gather in my name, there am I with them. I think in this context, the anything they ask for would be the wisdom to judge. Our soft hearts to seek reconciliation and forgiveness. But when it comes to forgiveness, Peter asks the question which we're all thinking.

Have a look at verse 21. He says, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?

[10:31] And the answer to that question is our second point. What is the limit to our forgiveness? So I want you to imagine, as someone here at the nine o'clock service, I want you to imagine that they sin against you.

And then you go and speak to them one-on-one, just as verse 15 says. You confront them and they say, look, I'm really sorry. You forgive them. Great. Reconciliation. No problems. But next week, they sin against you again.

You chat with them. They ask for forgiveness. You forgive. No worries. The week later, they do it again. They sin against you. They say, sorry, you forgive. And then again, they say, sorry, you forgive. On and on and on and on.

And in spite of them proving to be the most difficult member of the nine a.m. service, how many times should we forgive? What is our limit? Is it one, two, three strikes, you're out?

I think that's the way it is in Melbourne society, if you're lucky. Peter is pretty generous here. He says, seven times, Lord. But Jesus answered, verse 22, I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times.

[11:38] 77 is a very interesting number in the Bible. It is the number of disproportion or the number of revenge. Because revenge is always disproportionate.

And our first reading was about a really nasty bloke called Lamech. See, Lamech was boasting that he'd killed a man who offended him. Just as his great, great, great grandfather, Cain, killed his brother for offending him when Cain killed Abel.

And Lamech is boasting in this sort of song. He's saying, well, if what Cain did to Abel was really bad, that it required seven times vengeance, what I have done to this young man is so much worse, it requires 77 times vengeance or disproportionate revenge.

And what Jesus does is he uses the same word for 77 here in Matthew. And he's saying, I want HTD to be marked out, not with 77 times revenge, but with 77 times forgiveness.

Not disproportionate revenge, but disproportionate forgiveness. 77 is really what Jesus is saying is just a really huge amount.

[13:02] So out in Melbourne, in the city there, you will find a really huge amount of revenge. Within these walls, we're to find a really huge amount of forgiveness.

And when we do that, we will be imitating this heavenly concern concern for forgiveness that our Father God has. Last week, I met with a bishop as part of my process for ordination.

And on his coffee table, he has this one book, and it's called Creating Heaven on Earth. Now, I didn't read the book, and that's largely because my pockets were in my hand. I was too terrified to touch anything at the bishop's house.

I was nervous. But unless sort of creating heaven on earth says something about disproportionate forgiveness, it will be a waste of paper, won't it?

But here is the rub. Because we carry around the pain and the hurt of being sinned against, and forgiving seems impossible.

[14:08] What is the logic that will give us disproportionate forgiveness? How do we imitate the kingdom of heaven, as Jesus puts it in verse 23?

And the answer is a parable. And what I've done, I've treated the parable like a play, and I've split it into three acts, which are on your handout. So act one, there is a king who's owed 10,000 bags of gold.

10,000 was the largest number they had in their language, kind of like now when we say billions and millions and trillions and gazillions. 10,000 was their way of children saying that. And a bag of gold was 20 years' salary.

So you've got 10,000 times 20 years' salary. So 200,000 years' salary. And I used to be an accountant in my former life, so I couldn't help myself. I crunched some numbers.

It's \$12 billion, basically. 12 billion. And Jesus is basically saying, there was a king who was owed a ludicrous, unpayable amount.

[15:14] And of course, the servant who owes him that, he falls on his knees, and he begs, be patient with me. I will pay back everything. Well, good luck with that. And shockingly, in verse 26, the master took pity on him, cancelled the debt, and let him go.

That is grace, isn't it? Amazing grace. That is free forgiveness. And grace was this servant's only hope, because even now, 2,000 years later, he wouldn't have been able to pay the debt.

I crunched some more numbers. The interest alone would have crushed him by the Middle Ages. But the king says, you're free. On you go. Fantastic, isn't it?

The largest personal debt ever forgiven was actually a couple of weeks ago, coincidentally. It was by a US talk show host called John Oliver. And what he did was, he went around, and he bought up \$20 million worth of people's medical debt.

In the US, medical debt is a real problem. He bought \$20 million of it, and in one hit, he just forgave it, just like that. That is \$20 million. That's pretty good, isn't it?

[16:26] Here is a king who wrote off \$12 billion. That is ludicrous. That is astronomical. Act 1 is grace.

We move now to Acts 2. And our friend, the forgiven servant, in verse 28, he goes out from the king, he probably goes to the common room with the other servants, and he finds a servant there who owes him, it says, a hundred silver coins.

A silver coin was a day's wage, so it's a hundred days wages. And again, I crunched some numbers, I took a stab at what a laborer earns. I reckon it's \$25 grand. There'll be a few accountants here, you can tell me if I'm wrong.

\$25 grand is what I think it is. But he grabs this other servant, he sees and he chokes him. Pay up or else, he says. And Act 2 is very similar to Act 1.

There's a debt, there's someone on their knees pleading for mercy. Although this time, our friend, the first servant, he is the victim.

[17:31] He's the one who's owed the money. And this time, the debt, \$25 grand, it's much more realistic, isn't it? Give me time to pay, says the smaller servant.

Verse 30, 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 outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Act 2 is vengeance. And so we move to Act 3 now. Verse 32. 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 mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? In anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured.

Literally, that says, he handed him over to the torturers to be tortured. And notice it says, until he should pay back all he owed. Remember we said \$12 billion was a forever debt?

[18:38] He's going to hand him over to be tortured forever. That is chilling stuff for a sunny Sunday morning, isn't it?

And we would expect Jesus to say, don't worry, that nasty story is just a story and my heavenly father is nothing like that king. But actually, Jesus identifies his father with the king, doesn't he? And the shock is that our first servant, who is actually a victim, remember he's owed \$25 grand, he's the one who actually gets punished. And here is the sting in the tale of the parable, verse 35. So also my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

That's what we pray almost every day, every week here at church. That's from the Lord's Prayer. But can you do me a favor? Can you please put your finger in your Bibles and turn back to page 970 to the Lord's Prayer where I just quoted from in Matthew chapter 6.

[19:53] So turn to page 970. Excuse me. Page 970, chapter 6, verse 14. Straight after the Lord's Prayer, what does Jesus say?

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your father will not forgive your sins.

That is a sobering warning, isn't it? If we withhold forgiveness, our heavenly father will withhold forgiveness for us.

Suddenly God will treat us like the tax collector and the pagan. Suddenly we will find ourselves outside the family. Act 3 is judgment.

And so that is our passage today. And we must move now to applying it. And this is really, really important.

[20 : 52] So please, if I've lost you, please listen. This is really important. The wrong way to apply this passage is to say you must forgive or else. You must, you must, you must forgive with a bit of finger pointing.

You must forgive or else. That is the wrong way to apply this passage. Because the truth is we all know that anyway. And the response will be, well, we know we have to forgive but we just can't. Isn't that right? We just don't have the moral resources within us. We're in too much pain because of the sin. And that will be that.

And in a room this size, there will be many of us for whom that is true who have been very hurt very deeply by other Christians.

If that's you, I'm really sorry about that. Maybe your parents did things to you that seem unforgivable. Maybe your children have thrown your love back in your face again and again.

[22 : 04] There's lots of marriages here. Maybe it is the sin within marriage over years and years and years. There are no cheap debts here this morning.

And we can, I can stand here and I can exhort you until the cows come home. But there will be no forgiveness in this church or outside in Melbourne society unless we grasp the logic of this parable. And here it is. This is awesome by the way. If we are to have limitless 77 times disproportionate huge forgiveness, the Spirit will need to make us realize that no one can sin against us the way we have sinned and offended against God.

It is like comparing 25,000 to 12 billion. And this is the point of the parable. You see, every time I offend you, there is a horizontal element to be sure.

But primarily there is a vertical one. All sin is a sin against God. It is an offense to Him first. The reason we struggle to forgive others is because we have forgotten how much God has forgiven us first.

[23 : 24] And to help drive this home, I want to do something which on the face of it seems quite heartless. But actually, I think it's the love strategy of Jesus.

And here it is. The God who made the world gave us everything. That we were conceived and born in the first place, that is His gift. Each breath we take is His gift.

Each beat of our hearts, His gift. The food we eat, that is His gift. The talents we have, that is His gift. The food, the clothes, the house, the cars, the job, all His gift.

Every person who's ever loved us, His gift. Every person who's ever taken care of us, His gift. Every person who's ever talked to us and taught us, His gift. Everyone who's ever made us laugh, His gift. Every moment of pleasure and happiness, His gift to us. But in our nature, we throw these gifts back in His face, don't we?

[24 : 27] Do we, by nature, respond with hour after hour of praise? Is our natural response to sing of His goodness, to long to hear from His word, to meditate on His ways day and night, to want nothing more than to walk in His parts, to love Him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength?

Is it? It isn't for me. See, it's my nature to take all the good things God has mentioned and use them for me.

Is it our nature to use everything good ceaselessly for the benefit of humankind? It's an outrage that I don't do this at every moment with every part of me.

Jesus says the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength and if I don't do that, which I don't, that would make me the greatest of sinners, wouldn't it?

What's more, God has entrusted the ruling of this world to make it fruitful and ordered. He's made it that way. He made it very good. But all I've done is put in sin and ugliness.

[25 : 42] What we owe is ludicrous. It's astronomical. It's worth more than I could ever repay. Worth more than all the money in circulation in Australia.

Actually, it's a debt the size of a ruined world, isn't it? And yet here is Jesus on the road to literally pay that debt so we can be forgiven and brought into God's family.

But Acts 2, I think, is the main event today. Because Acts 2 says that however big the debt of sin that other people have clocked up with, however much they've hurt us, it is nothing compared to the debt and ways we've hurt God.

Which is why the key to limitless forgiveness in the church and in wider society is the preaching of sin and grace. It is an act of love to tell someone about sin but to do it all the while conscious of how sinful we are.

That is sin, that is grace. See, the church should be a community of people who remember they were graciously forgiven billions and so now we can freely forgive thousands.

[27 : 05] You see, the servant was ultimately tortured not because he owed 12 billion. It's because he forgot to freely pass on that gracious forgiveness to the other servants.

Responding to graciousness with vengeance leaves us in judgment. I think that's the graciousness vengeance judgments. Responding to graciousness with vengeance leaves us facing judgment. And so that is a really tough message this morning. Thank you for listening. And we're grateful that Jesus tells us hard things lovingly.

And we should pause for a moment of quiet. Maybe you wouldn't call yourself a Christian here today. Maybe you used to be a Christian. Maybe you're just starting to realize how ludicrous and astronomical your debt of sin to God is.

that's great. You need to know God is like a king who when owed a ludicrous astronomical unpayable amount he just freely forgives.

[28 : 17] He cancels the debt. No questions asked. That is amazing. It's great to be a Christian.

And for the Christians here we need to remember that we will be numbed by the pain that we carry of unforgiveness.

We will not be able to forgive others unless we realize God has graciously forgiven us astronomically more. We need to pray that our hearts don't hold on to that wretched 25 grand and remember the 12 billion that we were freely forgiven.

Amen. Let us pray. Let us pray. verse 26 At this 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. Our Father God we thank you that you love to forgive. Thank you that you freely forgave us 12 billion each.

And please Father help us remember this so we can pass on this forgiveness to others who've hurt us. It is so difficult for us Father we are numbed by the pain over years and years.

[29 : 34] Please help us to have a picture of your grace and we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.