

Reconciliation in the Kingdom

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[0 : 00] To start today's talk, I need some help from that great theologian, Russell Crowe. Now, you know Russell Crowe from the Gladiator movies. Now, not only does Russell love slaying Roman soldiers, he loves rugby.

And particularly his favourite team, the South Sydney Rabbitohs. And other supporters love the club, that's true, but no one loves the club like Russell. In 2011, the club was on its knees facing financial ruin because of its debts.

And he strode in there with his Gladiator millions, he put them on the line and he bought all the debts of that club. And to this day, he's still one of the owners. So other people love the club, but no one loves the club like Russell.

You could say he has more skin in the game than anyone. And thanks very much, Russell, because that leads us nicely to our main idea today of forgiveness. Because when it comes to forgiveness, God cares more about it than anyone.

You can see that from our context, where we've been the last week and before. Look at verse 14 in your passage. It says, In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

[1 : 13] Where we are here in Matthew's Gospel is a section where God is talking about how much he cares that no one is lost and lost in their sin. In Matthew 18, Jesus is literally on the road to Jerusalem to die so we can all be forgiven.

When it comes to forgiveness, God and Jesus have more skin in the game than anyone. However, forgiveness is not a game, is it?

And so today's talk comes with a health warning. Because any talk on forgiveness will be painful. Painful because we'll be reminded about what sinners we are in front of God.

But also painful because it will remind us of the many times others have sinned against us. Where forgiveness is impossible.

And so my aim for this talk is that Jesus will give us the key to forgiveness. Can I say that again? My aim for this talk is that Jesus will give us the key to forgiveness.

[2 : 26] So that we can have the same heavenly concern that our heavenly Father has. There's a stark warning which is on the tail end of our reading today.

It's verse 35 of chapter 18. It says, This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart. That's a stark warning.

So we better listen. We better listen so we can be forgiven. And forgiven of our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

And so there's a handout in your inserts there. And there's some points on there that tell you where I'm going. And do keep your passage open. That will really help me as we work our way through. Let me start from verse 15. If your brother or sister sins. And notice just after the word sins there's a little c, a footnote. And if you look to the bottom of your Bibles it says sins against you.

[3 : 26] And that's the way we're going to take it today. If your brother or sister sins against you. I think that makes sense of the rest of the verses. So not general sin. But just when someone sins against you.

Okay. So if your brother or sister sins against you. Go and point out their fault. Just between the two of you. If they listen to you. You've 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. And if they refuse to listen even to the church.

Treat them as you would a pagan. Or a tax collector. It's really important that we grasp. That these verses are not a fascist manifesto. So it's not about building a Trump style wall around us good people.

And keeping the irritating sinful people out. Now this is how we can have a heavenly approach to forgiveness. This is how we can imitate our father God.

[4 : 29] So verse 15 is the first step. It says if your brother or sister sins against you. Go and point out their fault. Just between the two of you. See Jesus wants us to go back to the source of the dispute.

A one-on-one chat with the offender. That means we talk to the person. Not about them. We stop gossip in a second.

My family and I. We're fairly new here to HTD. Probably seems like longer to some of you. But we've been here for just a shade over a year. And so you will be able to answer this question better than I will.

Would speaking one-to-one to resolve a conflict. Would that be a radical thing here at the 1030 service? Is there much gossip that goes on. That a one-to-one conversation would just stop in its tracks?

I'll leave you to answer that for yourselves. Verse 16 is this second step through Jesus' process here. And here he quotes Deuteronomy.

[5 : 32] 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 a conflict.

He wants us to get witnesses as well. Just as there were in Old Testament Israel. Because in Deuteronomy having witnesses helps up the ante.

It helps ensure that the right outcome is heard. That the truth is uncovered. That people really repent. You see God wanted to make it really hard for someone to be lost.

As Israel made their way to the promised land. And in the same way Jesus wants to make it really hard for someone to be lost from the church. As we too make our journey to our promised land.

The new creation. So let me ask you. When Christians offend us. Are you happy that they move on? Are you unmoved if that person was lost from the church?

[6 : 37] Or are we having the same heavenly concern that no one is lost? Notice though who is driving this situation.

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.

And again in verse 17. If they refuse to listen even to the church. You see the offender shows they are unwilling. Or don't want to have anything to do with the church.

There was a footballer called Brendan Favola. And he played for Carlton. And he was a star forward at the peak of his powers. When he was fired by the club.

For one too many scandals. And they asked the captain of Carlton. Who was Chris Judd. They said you know why did you get rid of Brendan Favola? And Chris Judd said well.

[7 : 36] We didn't want to. We need Brendan. We're weaker for not having him in our team. But Brendan behaved his way out of the club.

And I think that's the same here. With a brother or sister who keeps refusing forgiveness. Who's 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. We were all pagans and spiritual tax collectors at some point. But if a Christian continually refuses reconciliation.

They will show themselves to be pagan in nature. It will mean we have to treat them as a non-Christian. But even then.

Not because we're a bunch of fascists trying to cut people off. It's so that they will turn and repent. And want to come back into the church family. Verse 18 says.

[8 : 39] 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. And you see as we put Jesus instructions in place. As we imitate our father's desire for forgiveness.

This earthly church starts to resemble a heavenly realm. Then the church is loosing and binding. Which means forgiveness and refusing to forgive.

That will carry with it the very authority of God. This will be like a little snapshot of heaven as it were. And so when we gather with two or more for reconciliation. It's as though we're appearing

before Jesus in heaven.

That's why he's with us. Because we're imitating that heavenly concern here on earth. I think that makes sense of verse 19 to 20. Where it says.

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 two or three gather in my name. There am I with them. The anything they ask for.

[9 : 43] I think in this context means. Soft hearts to forgive. And wisdom to judge. Where there's a dispute. But when it comes to forgiveness.

I think Peter asks the question. Which we're all thinking. And it's in verse 21. Lord. How many times. Shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me.

Up to seven times. And the answer is. Our second point. What is the limit on our forgiveness. And so I want to do a little.

I guess a case study here. I want you to imagine that someone here at the 1030 service sins against you. Don't look around. Just like. Just in your head. Just. I'm sure you've all got that one person.

Imagine that person sins against you. Okay. Then you go and speak to them one on one. As verse 15 says. Well done you. And they say sorry. And you forgive them. That's excellent.

[10 : 41] There's reconciliation. Well done everyone. But then next week. The same person sins against you again. They say sorry. You forgive. Reconciliation. And the next week.

They sin against you again. They say sorry. You forgive. And then they do it again. They say sorry. Every week this happens. And apart from proving the most irritating member of the church family.

They raise the question. What is the limit on our forgiveness? How many times?

Is it one? Two? Three? Three strikes and you're out? Is that how we operate here? Well Jesus answers verse 22. I tell you not seven times. But 77 times.

77 is a really interesting number in the Bible. It was from our first reading. And 77 is the number of disproportion. And revenge.

[11 : 38] Because revenge is always disproportionate. Our first reading was. It's actually a song. It's about a really nasty bloke called Lamech. You see Lamech was boasting that he killed someone who offended him.

Just as his great great great grandfather Cain killed his brother Abel for sinning against him. And Lamech boasts. He says see if what Cain did to Abel was so bad it requires seven times vengeance.

What I have done to this young man is so much worse it requires 77 times vengeance. And that is the point. 77 is a mark of disproportionate revenge.

And what Jesus does is he uses the same word for 77 here in Matthew 18 to say. I want the 1030 service to be marked out by 77 times forgiveness.

Not 77 times revenge. Disproportionate forgiveness. Not disproportionate revenge. And the number 77 really it's Jesus' way of saying it's a really huge amount.

[12 : 51] See out there in Melbourne you will find a really huge amount of revenge. But within these walls we should find a really huge amount of forgiveness.

And when we do that we will be imitating heaven as it were. We will have our father's concern for forgiveness which we find right through chapter 18.

Last week as part of my ordination process I met with a bishop. And on his coffee table he had this small book. And the book was called How to Create Heaven on Earth.

And I didn't read the book. And that's because my hands are in my pockets because I was too afraid to touch anything. Because I was at the bishop's house. But if creating heaven on earth says nothing about disproportionate 77 times forgiveness.

It will be a waste of paper won't it? But here is the rub. Because we carry around the hurt and the pain of being sinned against by other people.

[13 : 59] Particularly Christians. And forgiving them seems impossible. What is the logic or the dynamic that will give us disproportionate 77 times unlimited forgiveness?

How do we imitate the kingdom of heaven as Jesus puts it in verse 23? And the answer is this parable which Jesus gives.

And what I've done is I've treated the parable like a play. And I've split it into three acts which are on your handout. So act 1. This is verse 23 to 27.

Act 1. There is a king who is owed 10,000 bags of gold. 10,000 was the largest number in their alphabet. It's kind of like when my brothers and I were little. We would say I bet you a bajillion million gazillion.

It's the same. It's just the largest thing they could think of. It was myriad in the Greek in fact. 10,000. It's the largest number they could think of. And a bag of gold was worth 20 years wages.

[15:02] So I used to be an accountant in a former life and I couldn't help myself. And so I wrote out this big equation for what it's worth. I didn't put all of it on the handout. Thanks. Thankfully for you. But 200,000 years wages.

60 grand apiece. I said \$12 billion. That's the debt. 12 billion. Here is a king who is owed a ludicrous, unpayable amount.

That's Jesus' point. It's ludicrous and it's unpayable. And of course, this servant who owes him this money, he falls on his knees and he begs, be patient with me. I'll pay back everything.

Well, good luck with that. And shockingly, verse 26, the master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. That is grace, isn't it?

That's amazing grace, as we always sing. Free forgiveness of an unpayable debt. And grace was his only hope, wasn't it? Because even 2,000 years later, he would not have been able to pay that debt.

[16:09] I did some more calculations and the interest alone would have crushed him by the Middle Ages. Give us a break. I'm going to come. But the king says, hey, you're free.

That's awesome. The largest personal debt ever forgiven was actually two weeks ago, which is nice and coincidental. It was by U.S. talk show host John Oliver.

And he bought \$20 million worth of medical debt. Medical debt in the U.S. is a big problem, unfortunately. And what he did was he bought \$20 million of people's medical debt and he just wrote it off.

Just like that. Gone. \$20 million is pretty good. But \$12 billion is ludicrous. Act 1 is grace.

We move on to Act 2. Our friend, the forgiven servant, in verse 28, he goes out from this king and he finds his fellow servant, probably in the servant's common room.

[17:10] And this fellow servant owed him 100 silver coins. A silver coin was a day's wage of a laborer. And so, again, I got out my abacus and my calculator.

I reckon \$25,000. So \$250 a day, \$25,000 for a laborer. You can argue with me later. \$25,000 is what he's owed. And he seizes the second servant and he chokes him.

Pay back or else, he says. Act 2 is similar to Act 1, isn't it? There's a debt. There is someone on their knees pleading for mercy.

But notice in Act 2 that it's our first servant who's the victim. He's the one owed \$25,000, after all. And notice that \$25,000 is a much more realistic debt than \$12 billion from Act 1.

Give me time to pay, says the smaller servant. But he refuses, verse 30. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

[18:15] 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. But we move to Act 3.

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 had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?

In anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured. Quite literally there, it's hands him over to the torturers to be tortured. And notice it says, until he should pay back all that he owed.

Remember we just said that \$12 billion was a forever debt? So he hands him over to be tortured forever. That's chilling stuff, isn't it, for a Sunday morning as the sun is shining?

And we would expect to say, we'd expect Jesus to say, you know what, don't worry. That's just a very nasty story and your heavenly father is nothing like that. But actually, Jesus identifies God with the king, doesn't he?

[19:30] The shock is that the first servant was a victim. He was owed \$25,000 after all. But he's the one who ends up getting punished. And here is the sting in the tale of this 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 say every day or every week in the Lord's Prayer. Can you do me a favor? Can you put your finger in your Bible and flick back a few pages to Matthew chapter 6, where the Lord's

Prayer is found?

Page 970. So chapter 6 is where we find the Lord's Prayer. Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.

But notice verse 14. Straight after the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says, But here it is, just like verse 35.

[20 : 37] 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 from others, our Father God will withhold forgiveness for us.

Suddenly God will treat us like the pagan or the tax collector. Outside the family. Act 3 is judgment. And so that is, that's I guess largely our verses today. And so we move to application, and this is really important. And so I want you to hear me rightly. The wrong way to apply this verse, or these verses, is to say, You must forgive, you must, you must, you must forgive, or else you won't be forgiven.

That is the wrong way to apply these verses. Because the truth is, we all know that. And the answer is, well, I know I need to forgive, but I just can't.

It's impossible. Isn't that right? We don't have the moral resources within ourselves. We're in too much pain because of that person's sin against us.

[21 : 53] And at the end of the day, that will be that. It is gone. And in a room this size, there will be many of us for whom that is the experience. If that's you, I'm very sorry.

Perhaps your parents did things to you that seem unforgivable. Perhaps your children have repeatedly thrown your love back in your face over years and years.

Perhaps it's the pain within marriage of sinning against one another over years and years and years. There are no cheap debts here this morning.

And I can stand here and I can exhort you to forgive until the cows come home. But there will be no forgiveness in the 1030 service or here in Melbourne unless we grasp the logic of this parable.

And this is it. This is awesome, by the way. Here it is. It is.

[23 : 12] It is like comparing 25 grand to 12 billion. And that is the point of the parable. See, when I sin against you, there is a horizontal element to be sure.

But primarily my sin is a vertical element. It's a sin against God. It's an offence to him before it's an offence to you. And the reason we can't forgive others, according to the logic of this parable, is that we have forgotten how much God has forgiven us astronomically more.

And to help drive this home, what I want to do, on the face of it seems a bit heartless, but I think it's the love strategy of Jesus. And so here it is.

You see, the God who made the world gave us everything. So the fact that we were conceived and even born, that's his gift. Every beat of our hearts that we're given, that is his gift.

Every breath of air, that is his gift. The food we eat, that is his gift. The talents you have, or we have, is his gift. Food, clothing, shelter, jobs, money, cars, they are his gift.

[24 : 26] Everyone who's ever loved us, that is his gift. Everyone who's ever taken care of us, that is his gift. Every laugh we've had, every moment of pleasure, every bit of happiness, they are his gifts to us.

But in our nature, we, I, we throw these gifts in his face, don't we? Do we by nature respond with hour after hour of praise to God for all that he's given us?

Is our natural response to sing of his goodness, to long to hear from his word, to meditate on it day and night, to want nothing more than to walk in his paths, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength?

Is it? It's not for me. See, by my nature, you can join in with me if you feel convicted. By my nature, we take all the good things that he has given us and we use them for ourselves.

Do we use them ceaselessly for the benefit of our man, our fellow man around us? It is an outrage that I don't do that at every moment.

[25 : 40] If Jesus says, love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and I don't do that, if that is the greatest commandment, that would make me the greatest of sinners. And what's more, God has entrusted the ruling of this world.

He gave it to us very good. It was ordered. It was fruitful. Have we kept it that way? I haven't.

I've just put in sin and ugliness. What we owe is ludicrous. It's astronomical. It's worth more than we could ever repay, worth more than all the money in circulation in Australia.

Actually, it's a debt the size of a ruined world. And yet Jesus is literally on the road to pay for our sins.

We're in a chapter where God cares so much that none of us will be lost in sin. And act one is the main event today.

[26 : 44] Because however big the debt of sin someone owes you, or however much they've offended you and me, it is nothing compared to the debt we owe to God.

which is why the key to limitless forgiveness in society and in this church is the preaching of sin and grace. It is an act of love to talk to someone about their sin, but to do it fully conscious that we are sinners too.

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

You see, the servant was ultimately tortured not because he owed 12 billion. He was tortured because he didn't let that gracious forgiveness pass on to the next person.

When we reject gracious forgiveness with vengeance, we're left with judgment. Responding to graciousness with vengeance leaves us facing judgment.

[27 : 56] I think that's the logic of those steps there. And so that is a really tough message to hear today. We're thankful to Jesus that he lovingly tells us the truth.

We should pause for a moment of quiet. Maybe you wouldn't call yourself a committed Christian. Maybe you used to be a committed Christian, and you're only starting to realize how astronomical your debt of sin to God is.

That's great. That is act one. You need to know that God is like a king who, when faced with 12 billion, just writes it off freely.

No questions asked. He's that kind of king. And for the Christians here today, we will be numbed with the pain of hurt and unreconciliation as long as we live.

We will never be able to forgive unless we realize that God has graciously forgiven us so much more. We need to pray we don't hold on to that wretched 25 grand and remember the 12 billion.

[29 : 10] We were freely forgiven. Let's pray. Father God, we're so grateful that you would cancel our \$12 billion debt we have with you.

We're so grateful that you freely forgive us graciously. And Father, we are numbed with the pain of not forgiving others, and we're hurt by these sins.

Please help us remember how much you have done for us. Help us pass this forgiveness freely on to our brothers and sisters. Please free us from this pain.

We need your help. In Jesus' name. Amen.