

# Prayer and Forgiveness

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[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you.

And Anthony Walker died six hours later. Six months on, partway through 2005, and G Walker on the left here stood outside the courtroom where her son's killers had been convicted of murder. And the microphones were shoved in her face looking for a sound bite, for bitterness, for rage, for something printable. What does she think about these things? Her son having been killed. And out of her mouth in front of the press and the BBC with conviction and hurt came the most extraordinary words.

Quote, I've got to forgive them. My family and I stand by what we believe. Forgiveness. You think, what could move someone to be like that?

To be able to let go and forgive when terrible, terrible bad has been done to you? Or what might it feel like to be part of a society free from festering grudges and payback and revenge?

[ 1 : 30 ] Or think of a family or a marriage or a church where anger is dealt with and we refuse to return snub for snub and we do not dwell on the wrongs done to us.

And instead, free forgiveness is asked for and given day by day. We're just finishing this little three week series on prayer from Matthew 6.

And right at the end of these verses, as you'll see, the question for us is, will we stand by what we believe and pray for? Will we be into forgiveness?

Because the truth is, according to the words of Jesus here, our lives and our salvation depend on it. In the middle of the Lord's Prayer, at the heart of a living relationship with God is forgiveness.

You see that, we pray this, don't we? 6 verse 12, we're to pray, forgive us our debts, Heavenly Father, as we also have forgiven our debtors. In verses 14 and 15, Jesus goes on very strikingly.

[ 2 : 40 ] Do you see these words here? 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, as I pray, as I enjoy the forgiveness and care of a Heavenly Father, my heart must beat with forgiveness for those around me.

And if not, if I will not forgive others, end of verse 15, your Father will not forgive your sins. That is, my life, my forgiveness, my salvation depends on whether I will forgive other people.

That's what Jesus says here, plainly. Issues of sin and forgiveness affect us personally and daily, do they not?

We're all involved in hurting and harming others, in being hurt by and harmed by others, and all of us choose, moment by moment, how to relate to people around us.

[ 3 : 48 ] Some of us, I guess, as we talk about forgiveness this morning, will be aware of something personal and larger in our experience. Maybe a close relationship you have where wrong has been done to you, or is being done, and questions of forgiveness are very, very raw.

What is it then to forgive? Why does it hurt to forgive? Where can I find the strength to forgive? And what if I can't, or I don't, or I won't?

To help us with these verses, Matthew does this on purpose, let's turn forward to Matthew chapter 18 and verses 21 to 35, just further forward, back to our first reading. Because in Matthew chapter 18, verses 21 to 35, Jesus is teaching his first disciples what it looks like to be part of his kingdom, and yet again, these verses have a subject of forgiveness, building on, fleshing out what Jesus says in Matthew 6, 14 and 15, this parable here.

Look what happens. In verse 21, Peter, who'd heard Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6, approaches and says, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?

Up to seven times? Well, with Matthew 6 in our ears, with these verses open in front of us, three things to say this morning about forgiving others.

[ 5 : 21 ] Firstly, kind of introductory. Forgiveness costs. And you sense that straight away, I think, in Peter's question.

How many times shall I forgive? Up to seven times? That is, how far must I go? What is the limit? Peter is asking because he knows that forgiving someone is costly.

And that is because forgiveness at root means refusing to make someone pay for what they've done.

You refuse to make someone pay. In the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, we say, forgive us our debts. That's the idea. We owe God debts.

But he releases us from paying. That is forgiveness. That is forgiveness. And it costs. This is very foundational to thinking about forgiveness.

[ 6 : 20 ] Let's just think about it a bit. Think about forgiveness and cost. Say you knock on my door one Saturday morning and you ask to borrow our car. You need to get somewhere quickly and stylishly.

And what you need, you need our blue Skoda Octavia that's quite new. And I hand over the keys to you. But instead of treating our car with respect and care, you go a bit crazy with it. Screeching tyres, zero to 60 trials along the King's Hedges Road, throwing it around, abusing the gearbox. You're having the time of your life in our blue Skoda Octavia until you lose control in a moment of stupidity and you slam sideways into a lamppost. Rear door bent, window smashed.

Half an hour later, you're back at our front door looking a little bit sheepish, handing over the keys to me and mumbling sorry as our pride and joy smokes gently behind you just in front of our house.

You've trashed our Skoda and it'll cost a few thousand pounds, if not more, to put right. What are the options? One, I rightly demand that you pay for what you've done.

[ 7 : 28 ] Option two, I refuse to make you pay for it. I let it go. I forgive you. Notice that the damage done to our Skoda has to be carried by someone.

Either you absorb the cost, you pay, or I forgive you. And I bear the cost myself out of my own wallet. I mean, that is my choice.

Make you pay or forgive you. But it will cost me. But it will cost me. Now, when people do wrong to us, it's rarely just a matter of cash, payback, a trashed car.

Example number two. Imagine we're standing around in a little group and, for a cheap laugh, I start to make mean jokes about you, about your appearance. I point at you, I mock you, and everyone laughs at you.

I've sinned against you. I'm robbing you of your dignity. Now, there's a price tag on the damage I've done.

[ 8 : 29 ] But we know, don't we, even if I very quickly say, oh, I'm so sorry, that doesn't really sort everything out. But there is a cost to that kind of trash talking, a real cost that must be dealt with in some way.

What are your options if I've sinned against you like this? One, you can try to make me pay for what I've done. You can hold it against me. You can go on the attack and insult me.

You can keep telling people how nasty I've been. You can go for payback. You can be cold with me and ignore me. You can spend the next six months thinking badly of me. What you are trying to do is make me pay for it.

That's the easy option. But here's option two. You can forgive and refuse to make me pay for my talk. You won't hold it against me.

You won't ignore me or insult me back. You forgive me. If you do that, it will cost you. When I do bad to you and every bone in your body cries out for payback, yet you refuse to make me pay, it will hurt you.

[ 9 : 39 ] In a relationship, to keep your mouth shut and your heart open and genuinely keep on loving me is so hard. Because as you bite your tongue, you're bearing the damage yourself.

You're absorbing the cost. Because refusing to be bitter, forgiving someone can feel like the most painful thing in the world.

And we know that. That's why it's easier to return evil for evil and look for payback and not let go. That's the first thing. Forgiveness costs.

Because sin is a debt. For God to forgive us costs him. For us to forgive one another and others costs us.

Well, with that in mind, and that will help us make sense of this parable, now see what Jesus says here. Jesus says here, secondly, in this parable, these words, we must forgive others.

[10:42] So let's follow this through together. Verse 21, Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?

Up to seven times? How often in my marriage and my family must I refuse to make the other person pay? Jesus said, I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times.

Or 70 times seven. That is forgiveness without limit. However much I'm hurt. However often the same person does bad to me.

My heart must never harden into payback and revenge. I am to let go and forgive again and again and again.

Sense how radical Jesus' teaching is here. And yet before we and Peter get a moment to think about our own lives and ask questions, Jesus goes on with a story which goes like this, which I think will now make sense to us.

[11:49] Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him 10,000 bags of gold was brought to him.

So I wonder what is the largest amount you've ever owed someone? Or how far have you ever been over your credit card limit? Or have you ever felt the weight of your debt spiralling out of control?

This servant owes 10,000 bags of gold. We'd call it zillions. It's the kind of amount owed which, if not paid back, might break a king and his kingdom.

Verse 25. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. You must pay. And when you're out of your debt and the debt collector calls, the last ditch begging begins.

At this the servant fell on his knees before him. Be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay back everything. In the story, the camera pans round to the king's face.

[13:00] And he looks down at this servant who owes him so much on his knees in front of him. And his eyes soften. And he's filled with pity.

A compassion wells up within him. And the servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. So imagine the disbelief, the release flooding through the servant's bones.

He's let me go. He's forgiven me. He's cancelled my debt. My life and my children and my wife.

They're mine. Thirty minutes later, maybe, on the way out of the palace, that very same servant, quote, found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.

About three months' wages. Pause. What is the servant going to do? He's just had his ten thousand bags of gold debt written off.

He's felt the king's mercy towards him. He's been let go. And yet now the servant's eyes darken and harden. He grabbed him and began to choke him.

[14:11] Pay back what you owe me, he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, be patient with me, I'll pay it back. It's the very same words of pleading that our servant had himself used not one hour ago with the master.

But now, unmoved, he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

You think, what do you make of a servant like that? Who experiences huge forgiveness from the king washing over him. And then goes out and chokes the one who owes him.

Something twisted there. Outrageous and wrong to be so hard and unforgiving to those around him.

Verse 31, when the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

And 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?

[15:18] And in anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. Imagine Peter listening to the story. It's squeamish, but the master's right.

The master's right. And then now the sting as Jesus turns to Peter and us. Verse 35, this is how my heavenly father will treat each of you.

Unless you forgive your brother or sister from the heart. Do you get the story? In your gut. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray to our king.

Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors. And Jesus says, 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. And that's exactly what Jesus is saying here.

[16:23] Expand it in this story. That is to call ourselves Christian believers. Begging, praying for forgiveness on Sunday mornings and at our bed at night time.

Praying for forgiveness from God for our huge debts. And then refusing to forgive those around us. Our God won't have that. Rightly.

Because it's wicked. That is, Jesus is saying here, God the Father will not forgive those who refuse to forgive others.

I don't think there's any other way of reading what Jesus says here. He will withhold forgiveness from hard and bitter so-called Christians. Who show by their actions that they know precious little of the value of being forgiven and shown mercy.

Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times. Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times.

[17:30] Or your Father won't forgive you. We must forgive others. Or else, Jesus says. I should have read Matthew 6 more carefully.

I wasn't expecting this at the end of a little series on prayer. Let me ask you and ask myself. How are we on unlimited, unrestricted forgiveness of people around us?

If you're a Christian here this morning, many of us are. If you pray the Lord's Prayer, if we have God as our Father. Is there someone you know who you have not forgiven?

It might be really obvious. It could be that one of your parents has wronged you for years. It could be that one of your parents has wronged you for years.

You're nursing the bitterness. And you won't call them or show love to them because you're making them pay. It could be a parent who's died. And now they're gone.

[18:38] And yet the bitterness is still there. You won't release them. It may be you're married. You're together with someone. And you withhold love and affection.

Or you secretly enjoy making their life hard. Because they haven't met your expectations. And that's unforgivable to you. Maybe over the past while you've had a messy time in your relationships.

And someone's asked you for forgiveness. But it would hurt you too much to stop thinking of them as an enemy. Is there a Christian brother or sister you know who you just refuse to speak to.

Because of something that's happened. I think. I was thinking about this. I think this not forgivingness can be more subtle and below the surface.

I don't know whether you have a bad book. This is just an example. It's not really. There's an English expression that someone is in your bad books. Do you know what that means? I don't actually have a little book like this with people's names in.

[19:39] And unforgiven on the front. But I'll tell you how a bad book works. Maybe in conversation someone doesn't laugh when I try and crack a joke. Or they disagree with me. Or they don't give me the attention I deserve.

And in the back of my mind I think I don't really like that. And in my bad book in my mind next to that person's name a little black mark appears. And next time I see that person my bad book is open at that page and I remember that black mark.

I've been dwelling on how they've sinned against me. And now that person is a little bit more on trial. Will they make it up to me? No. Another black mark.

And then in my mind his faults become bigger and I feel colder towards him. What's that about? He hasn't even sinned against me.

He just didn't laugh at my joke. But now he's in my bad book and I secretly hold it against him. Imagine what happens when somebody actually does me wrong. Slanders me.

[20:39] Puts me down. Hurts me on purpose. Straight in my bad book. Without thinking. And if they come and say sorry I say it's okay. But I don't really let go.

It is possible to go through life with a low grade anger and a payback mentality with tens of people. And I slowly get harder and more bitter and my book fills up with people's names.

She said that to me six months ago and I've never forgotten it. He did this. I've never felt the same towards him. And they really ought to make it up to me.

It's possible to descend into a whole life that shows precious little grasp of forgiveness. Of the forgiveness that I say I believe and need in.

This is what Jesus says. Forgive me if I'm laboring this a bit. If you do not forgive others their sins, your father will not forgive your sins. That is, he won't be mocked, our God.

[ 21 : 44 ] You cannot simply cheaply pray for and claim his forgiveness like the servant in the story. And then live a hardened life towards others.

One, forgiveness costs. Two, we must forgive others or else. And so you ask, where does that leave us?

Final thing. Say some of this does make sense. It should do. That I know how costly it is to let go and forgive people.

And that I see how uncompromising our God rightly is. And yet I know that in my heart of hearts I so often fall short of this kind of full of forgiveness life I'm called to.

Where does that leave us? What must we do? It's not explicit in the story. And Jesus at the end of that section on the Lord's Prayer just leaves those words hanging.

[ 22 : 49 ] But surely what we must do, what we have to do, is turn to our merciful Father. That is, faced with this command to forgive, it's so straight, this 70 times 7, the answer cannot simply be must try harder.

Would lead to despair. No, no, the only way to find both forgiveness and the power to change is surely to turn to and pray in desperation to and run into the arms of my merciful Father.

As we kneel and pray the Lord's Prayer, forgive us our debts. I think I so need to recognise with genuine honesty and humility that my debt to him is unpayable.

Because it is, isn't it? Like every second of godless anger and bitterness and pride and bashing the kids verbally and refusal to forgive, it offends my God.

Pushes me further and further into... By myself I owe 10,000 bags of gold. And there is no way for me to pay for my sins and my debts.

[ 24 : 10 ] To know that deeply, that's so important. But then now, like the servant in the parable, when you fall on your knees before your king and look up into his face, what do you see? You see pity and compassion.

You see a compassion that moves our father and costs him the life of his son. Because that is what it costs for the Lord God to cancel our debt and let us go.

The infinite worth of the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ who comes to live as a servant and stand in our place and take on our debts.

What we talk about so often, it's the heart of the gospel. Do you know this? Your sins and debts, it's the heart of the Lord. Your sins and debts piled on his shoulders on the cross and he's suffering and paying until he cries, it's finished.

The debt is paid. Such that now our heavenly father, with the cost of compassion written on his face and the offense of our sin absorbed, can turn to us and say, your debt is forgiven.

[ 25 : 17 ] You may go. I guess simply I want to ask this morning, right now this morning as we sit here, do you get that? Have you experienced for yourself the Lord Jesus Christ having paid your debts?

Do you see with clarity right now in this moment how the Lord treats you so mercifully? Do you sense something of the flood of release that comes from knowing I'm debt free?

It's done, I'm forgiven, I'm loved. Do you see that the wrongs done to you by others are as nothing compared to what the father has forgiven you? If you know and sense right now his stunning forgiveness of you, then today with God's Holy Spirit in you, would you let that forgiveness flow out of you?

Go out into your week and your life and rip up your little bad book with its black marks and give up looking for payback and let go of festering bitterness and from the heart release and forgive the people who've wronged you.

Brothers and sisters here and others too. If there is someone particular and you're able to and you need to, could you go and speak to them today or get in touch or call them and say, I'm so sorry I've

been trying to make you pay.

[ 26 : 45 ] Please forgive me as I forgive you. And would we pray that more and more our father would give us this heart that beats with his, a heart bursting full of forgiveness.

It's very straight teaching from Jesus here in Matthew's gospel. Hear the Lord's warnings today.

Take the Lord's supper in a moment as we taste and reflect on his forgiveness of us. Pray the

Lord's prayer on your knees and then go out into your life and obey the Lord's commands.

And know this, he is good. He's a forgiving father. He hears his children's prayers. And he is able to free us to forgive others.

Just as in Christ, he forgives us. Let me lead us in a prayer. And then we're going to sing together.

[ 27 : 46 ] 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. Almighty God, in these moments now, as we sing and share the Lord's supper and taste again your compassion and forgiveness of us.

Please soften us and change us. You and we know our hearts. Know how easily we can fall into not forgiving others.

Even as we claim the forgiveness that comes from you. Please have mercy on us, heavenly father.

Please forgive us our sins on goingly.

Please work in us by your spirit. And make us those who don't seek for payback but forgive others rightly. We ask in Jesus' name.

[ 29 : 02 ] Amen.