

The Church's Grace

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[0 : 0 0] Yeah, my name is Dan Glover. I'm studying at Regent. I am working half-time also at St. John's as a curate, focusing mostly on ministering with Ecclesia and doing some preaching and teaching as well. It is my privilege to be with you this morning. A small group of raccoons tried to prevent me writing this sermon when they smashed my study window and glass shattered all over everything. But we got that dealt with, and it's very good to be here. I've forgiven them, which is good, because that's the theme of today. We're wrapping up chapter 18 in our series on the church's life together. And chapter 18, as you will recall, is basically all about dealing with sin in the church. In today's passage, Jesus teaches that his people, the church, are called to radical forgiveness of each other. In verse 21, we just read, Peter asks how many times he ought to forgive a brother who has sinned against him. And it kind of makes me wonder if Peter might have had somebody specific in mind, maybe a certain circumstance he was thinking of. Maybe he was anxious to implement the process of confronting his brother that Jesus had just finished explaining not long before.

We don't know for sure, but we know that Peter offers to Jesus what he thinks is probably a very generous suggestion, that he should forgive his brother seven times. And Jesus says, no, Peter, try 70 times seven. Now, Jesus isn't giving us an equation to do so that we can tick off how many times we've forgiven somebody. And once we hit 70 times seven, that's it. He means that his people must forgive each other when we sin against each other without limit, as we have received forgiveness from God. To help his disciples understand the radical nature of the forgiveness that they are called to, Jesus tells a parable, which divides naturally into three acts. Act one, a king settles accounts with all his servants. One servant owes 10,000 talents. Now, if you read ahead to Matthew 20, verse two, you find that a denarius is a day's wage. A talent is about 6,000 denarii. So 10,000 talents, by my calculation, is 60 million denarii. So at that rate, and my figures are approximate, the servant would have to live for another 164,383 and a half years. And he would have to work every single day of that time to pay back this debt. In other words, Jesus is saying, this debt is impossible for this servant to repay.

As far as this servant's concerned, this is an infinite debt. Because the servant cannot pay this debt, the king orders the servant, his whole family, and all his possessions to be sold, and that money be put towards his debt. The servant falls on his knees and begs the king for patience, which is a very odd thing to beg for. He wants more time to repay the debt, but it's an infinite debt.

The king knows there is no way the servant can settle up. But because the servant has fallen on his face and begged before the king, the king is merciful and he has pity. And he doesn't grant the servant what he asks. He doesn't grant more time. He actually releases the servant and totally forgives his debt, canceling it completely. This, you could say, is immeasurably more than what the servant could ask or imagine.

That's act one. Act two. The servant doesn't appreciate the depth of mercy he has received. He finds a fellow servant immediately after who owes him a comparatively minuscule sum, and he starts to choke this servant, telling him, pay up now. Now the shoe is on the other foot. The fellow servant falls before him and pleads for the very thing that the first servant had pled for before the master. Give me time. I beg of you patience.

[5 : 2 0] I will repay your debt. And actually, in this case, it's realistic that he could. 100 denarii. But the first servant refuses. Apparently, he has completely forgotten the mercy he was just shown.

Not only does he not imitate the king's mercy and forgive this far smaller debt, but he actually has his fellow servant thrown in prison until the debt is paid. Some of the other king's other servants observe this, and they report it to their master. Open act three. Hearing this report, the king summons the first servant, and the king is understandably angry. You wicked servant, he says in

verses 32 and 33. I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And shouldn't you have shown mercy to your fellow servant since you had received far greater mercy from me? The king imprisons this servant until he should repay his entire debt.

So that's the end of act three, the end of the parable. Not everyone lives happily ever after. Jesus interprets the parable for us. He goes on to say, remember at the beginning, he said, this parable tells you what the kingdom of heaven is like. And now at the end, he says, the heavenly father will do as this king has done in the parable to every person who claims to be his child, but who does not forgive a brother or sister who has wronged them.

Ouch. No wonder that in Luke's gospel, when Jesus is teaching this same radical forgiveness to his disciples, immediately after, they say, Lord, increase our faith.

This is a hard teaching. Now, my temptation is to qualify Jesus' interpretation, to soften it with explanations of grace, that our forgiveness is not dependent upon our good works of forgiving others.

[7 : 39] And in one sense, that is all very true. But I don't want to dull the sharp point of Jesus' words here. Scripture tells us repeatedly that true faith in Jesus will produce fruit that looks like Jesus.

Remember, as Christ's disciples, we're called to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and follow Jesus. This is what he is demanding when he calls us to forgive 70 times, 7 times.

This is the kind of fruit that can only be borne by branches that remain firmly in Christ. Now, like this parable, the Christian life is a three-act play.

Act one is when we hear the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection and his reign, and we realize our debt of sin before God.

When we first hear that, we might be tempted to plead for leniency, or to try and negotiate with God for easier terms, or we might imagine that we can work off this debt of sin that we owe against God.

[8 : 57] But it's a debt we can never repay. In fact, it must be paid. But we can't. So it must be paid by another. Jesus pays our debt.

He credits his own righteousness to our account, and he takes upon himself our debt of sin, nailing it to the cross. It is on this basis that we are forgiven by God.

Now, sometimes we think, okay, there we've got Christ's death and resurrection and our conversion, and that's the end of the story. That's only the end of act one.

Act three is coming. That's where Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. He will demand an account from us.

Excuse me. Those who claim God's boundless forgiveness for themselves, but who will not extend forgiveness to others, are not faithful but false servants.

[10 : 04] That's what Jesus is telling us in this parable. Such false disciples should only expect judgment. This sounds quite heavy.

But if we hear only the condemnation in this passage at the end, we're missing the whole point. Jesus is that king. And when a debtor falls on their knees before him in repentance, he grants forgiveness of sin.

Now, we live between act one, Jesus' first coming and his death for us on the cross and his resurrection and his ascension to the right hand of the Father, and act three, Jesus' second coming, when he will come to judge all people.

In other words, we live in act two. We've received forgiveness through Christ's blood and Christ is coming again.

Now, nobody wants to identify with the wicked servant in this parable. But actually, that is the character in whose place we stand.

[11 : 21] We have received immeasurable mercy from God. Forgiveness of a debt we could never hope to pay. So, in act two, the question for us is, will we extend the mercy to others that we ourselves have received?

Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, as we shall, this is what we pray, isn't it? Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Have you ever pondered, what if God actually answered that? What if God forgave me to the very extent of the lowest common denominator that I forgive others?

What if he forgave me as I forgave the trespasses of others against me? Remember, immediately after the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says, if you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will

also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive them, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Now, that's not contrary to grace. That's not making repentance, sorry, forgiveness and salvation dependent on some good work.

[12 : 45] It is simply stating a reality of God's kingdom. Those who have truly received and understand God's gracious forgiveness toward them will be those who forgive others.

So what do we take away from this passage? It's tempting for me, and perhaps it's tempting for you to go away and think, I need to be forgiving more.

I need to be more forgiving. This is something I need to do. But I don't think we should be applying this passage about God's immeasurable grace and mercy by turning forgiveness into a work that we must do simply to avoid judgment.

Forgiveness is not an end in and of itself. When God forgives us, it's to renew communion between him and us. And he calls us to forgive each other so that we would renew communion between the body.

This passage reminds us of the immense forgiveness that we've received in Christ. Perhaps we should meditate on Jesus, who, as he was being crucified, asked the Father to forgive those who were doing it.

[13 : 58] Or on Stephen, the first martyr, who prayed for God to forgive those who were killing him for preaching the gospel. Now, I realize forgiveness is not easy.

Some fellow Christians can hurt us very badly in the church. And Jesus is not here just glibly asking us to forgive and forget.

And he's not asking us to pretend that nothing bad happened, that we were not hurt. Jesus, of all people, knows how much pain sin causes.

As we looked at last week, he prescribes a way to deal with serious unrepentant sin in the church. But forgiving others when they wrong us is to let God be God.

And it's to accept that he is the perfect judge, not us, that vengeance is his, it is his to repay.

Forgiving others is acknowledging that God will either require payment from them on the day that he comes again to judge, or else, if they've turned to him in faith, that he has already provided payment for them in his son's death on the cross.

[15 : 22] Either way, by our withholding forgiveness, we cannot right someone's wrongs against us. One commentator says, our Lord does not, from his perspective, our Lord does not allow our sin to become the colored lens through which he views us.

Rather, he views us through the lens of the blood of Jesus Christ. God views his children not as eternally stained by sin, but as cleansed by Christ's blood.

And this passage is simply telling us that it is through that same lens, the lens of Christ's blood cleansing all sin, that our Heavenly Father wants us to view our brothers and sisters who wrong us. Forgiving those who sin against us is one way of taking up our cross and following Jesus, which he calls his disciples to in the previous chapter. It is a death to self, a demonstration that it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us.

Now, we cannot conjure up the inner strength to forgive somebody who has wronged us for the umpteenth time, perhaps. Maybe for seventy times, seven times.

[16 : 51] It's only possible to forgive genuinely from the heart as Jesus calls us to. if it is a work of the Spirit, the one who gives us new hearts.

There's Christ living in us, the gracious, forgiving King that allows us to extend that same forgiveness. We're not just imitating Him. We're passing on the forgiveness we have received. May God increase our faith to know in our heart the immeasurable mercy and forgiveness we have received. And may God help us to forgive others from the heart.

Amen.