

The Church's Grace

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[0 : 0 0] Well, hello. My name's David Short and I've been off work for a couple of months with concussion. Thank you to all of those who've supported and prayed and sent best wishes. I'm very grateful.

This is the first sermon I've written with concussion symptoms. And it looked okay on paper, but I don't know. If I get halfway through, Dan might have to take over.

My wife, Bron, is with two other women from St. John's, Irena Tippett and Jan Hobbes. And they just completed a Bible conference, a women's Bible conference in South Africa.

A big one in Johannesburg that was very mixed racially and very exciting. So she wanted for me to say that to you. And I'm doing everything she says these days.

I'm going to ask you please to forgive me if I disappear straight after. I'm not 100% yet. And you have to forgive me because that's what the passage is about. So let's turn to Matthew chapter 18.

[1 : 1 0] Caleb just read for us. And I don't need to remind you that forgiveness is absolutely central. It's central to the Christian gospel. It's central to what it means to be a Christian.

Can't be a Christian unless you know the forgiveness of God. Can't live the Christian life without practicing forgiveness to others. And Jesus ties these two things together in the passage today. In fact, he wants us to know that the power to forgive others, to really forgive them, comes from the reality of God's forgiveness toward us.

And from the beginning of Matthew's gospel, this is central to Jesus' mission and to his message and why he's come. You remember in chapter 1, the angel appears to Joseph and says about Mary, And then on the night of the Last Supper, before he is betrayed, Jesus takes the bread and the wine.

He says about the wine, This is my blood of the covenant poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. That's what his death is about. And as he's nailed to the cross, he says, Father, forgive them.

[2 : 2 3] They don't know what they're doing. And in Luke's gospel, when the risen Jesus gives his commission to the church, he says, Go and preach repentance and forgiveness in my name to every single person.

It's utterly central. We say it in the creed, I believe in the forgiveness of sins. And what a relief it is that we don't have to hold grudges, eh? We're in this remarkable section in Matthew's gospel.

I cannot tell you how frustrating it's been not to be able to preach in this. Chapter 16 to 20. It's all about the church that Jesus sets up and that Jesus leaves on earth and he promises to build against the gates of hell.

And the crowds disappear. And it is private instruction to his disciples. An intensive teaching time. On the privileges and priorities of the Christian life and what sort of community he desires. And if you've been here for the last couple of weeks, you'll know that chapter 18, Jesus speaks a great deal about sin.

[3 : 3 1] From verse 6 onwards, he's talking about sin. About not leading others into sin. About radically renouncing sin in our own lives.

About pursuing sin in each other's lives. About dealing with sin in the body. And now in the longest section from verses 21 to 35, he deals with personal relational forgiveness and how we're meant to forgive one another within the church.

But I have to say, this is very important, that the focus, Jesus' central concern, and the concern of the kingdom of heaven, is never sin in itself.

But the wonder and the working of forgiveness. Forgiveness is central. Jesus assumes the deadly reality of sin. It's ongoing in the life of church.

Which means, if we want to be a kind of church that Jesus wants, we're going to have to do the awkward thing of talking to each other about each other's sins. Not be passive about them or aggressive about them.

[4 : 36] But we're going to need to learn what it means to forgive. Because that's the kind of relationship Jesus wants to build. And we're going to have plenty of opportunity for practicing forgiveness if we have those kinds of relationships with each other.

Okay? So verse 21, Peter raises the issue of forgiving the brother or sister, if you just look down at that verse. And then Jesus tells this long parable where he brings out God's forgiveness and our forgiveness to one another.

And it's a parable, so it's not actually literal. And the parable is very simple. There is a king, and he decides to settle his accounts. And he's a generous king, he's got many servants, and he loans money, obviously open-handedly to his servants.

And one particular servant owes him a massive amount of money that he can't repay. And amazingly, the king just forgives the debt, cancels the debt, and lets the servant go free.

And sooner is he free from the debt, then he finds a fellow servant who owes him a fraction of the debt. He's just been forgiven. And we're all expecting him to pass the forgiveness on.

[5 : 44] But instead, he attacks the fellow servant, throws him in prison until the debt is paid. And when the king finds out, he gives the first servant over to the torturers, the word is, until he can pay his debt.

And then the last verse of the chapter, Jesus says, So also my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from the heart.

So that's the picture. And I want to say, this teaches us all sorts of things about forgiveness, and I just want to choose three this morning. And the first thing, which is very obvious, is that forgiveness is costly.

Forgiveness is costly. It means you can't take revenge, you can't hold a grudge, you can't make the other person pay, even in little ways, even if it's enjoyable to do so.

It's costly. You see, with all this talk about sin, Peter's question in verse 21 is perfectly natural. He comes up to Jesus, and he says, Lord, how many times am I supposed to forgive my brother when he sins against me?

[6 : 50] Notice, please, it's an accounting question. Jesus, I know you want to deal with sin in our own lives and sin in our midst, but there's got to be a limit to forgiveness, or else we're just suckers.

I mean, we're going to open ourselves to being taken advantage of. You can't run a successful business that way unless you set a limit, you set a line, and you know your rights.

When is it right for us, in our relationships with each other, to draw the line? Now, at the time, the rabbis had a principle. They said, you should forgive up to three times, and after that, just cut the person off.

And Jesus goes for a bigger number, a good Bible number, seven. He says seven times. And Jesus' response is, no, verse 22. No, he says, forgiveness has to be unlimited.

77 times is Jesus' way of saying unlimited. It comes from the most violent man in the Old Testament who murdered a young boy and warns anyone that if they wrong him, he will have vengeance 77 times.

[7 : 59] And Jesus says, we're meant to do the opposite. We're not meant to leave any room for vengeance. We're to leave judgment to God. In fact, we are to move the other direction and unravel revenge by giving forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness.

And it's all part of denying ourselves and taking up our cross and following Jesus. But I have to say, Jesus is talking about the normal life of the Christian church.

Okay? When we sin against each other, he means we need to offer forgiveness and we need to receive forgiveness from each other. And both the offering forgiveness and the receiving of forgiveness require the humility that comes from surrendering to Christ.

It's pride that stops us from offering or giving forgiveness or from receiving forgiveness. You know, for some of us, pride stops us from even thinking that we need to forgive.

We tell ourselves, I'm above being hurt by such an insignificant thing. That's just pride. Or I'm better than that. I say this, that it's just about the normal Christian life because this is not about the unrepentant public sinner in the congregation that was dealt with last week.

[9 : 21] Nor is this about situations where there is abuse. I spoke to a man this week who's come into grips with the fact that he was abused as a young teen by a Christian leader.

And for those who've been abused, it can have a devastating effect on almost every area of your life. If you're physically and sexually abused as a child, you know, create cycles of shame.

And these things need to be brought into the light and they need to be understood and dealt with.

And for people in that context, forgiveness becomes a journey and a path and a direction and I just add, even if you are able to forgive an abuser, it may be unwise or impossible to be reconciled.

That's a separate thing. And if you want to know Jesus' attitude to those who abuse his children, just look back at verse 5 to 6 of this chapter. And if you are an abuser and you know you're an abuser, repentance will mean more than just a private prayer to Jesus.

There are things that you need to do to bear fruit for repentance. That's a kind of a, I've just, that's a cul-de-sac, off the side. I need to get back to the point and that is, that's not what Jesus is speaking about here really.

[10 : 45] He's speaking about interpersonal forgiveness in the normal run of the congregational life. And Jesus does here what he's been doing all along. He calls us to a life that is radical and beautiful and impossible.

It's impossible. I mean, it's hard enough to forgive once or twice when you've been wronged. But to set, to set no limits on forgiveness is humanly impossible. So, he tells us a parable about the costliness of forgiveness.

happiness. And he pictures sin as a debt because every time you wrong someone or every time someone wrongs you, they steal something away from you.

They might steal your place in the traffic or they might steal your happiness or they may steal your reputation. We've already read in the service today that we owe one another to love each other as ourselves and we owe to God to love him with a whole soul, mind and strength.

And when we do not love, either by what we do or what we fail to do, we put ourselves in debt. And when someone sins against you, there are only two ways for that debt to be dealt with.

[12 : 01] Either you make that other person pay the debt by some sneaky revenge or you absorb the debt yourself.

You swallow the pain yourself. And at the heart of this parable, I know we're talking about very serious things, at the heart of this parable is an almost funny comparison between the astronomical debt that we've been forgiven by God and our reluctance to forgive others.

So, verse 24, the amount that we owe God is ludicrous. By the way, just pause here. Are people with me so far? Good. Okay.

It's ludicrous. The servant owes the king 10,000 talents. What's it? This doesn't really come across. A talent is the heaviest measure, the heaviest weight measure in Israel and Palestine of the day. And 10,000 is the highest Greek numeral. And in the original, Jesus puts it in the plurals, 10,000s of talents. Now, just prior to the writing of this gospel, we know from Roman historians that the entire tax income from Palestine and neighbouring countries was 8,000 talents.

[13 : 21] So, last year, the total tax collected in Canada, I looked it up, was 313.6 billion. Should help you when you're voting this week. It's like Jesus saying, he owed zillions, you know, gazillions, whatever the word is.

And this is what God has done for us. And this is why Jesus has come. Forgiveness is unspeakably costly to God. So, despite the fact that he's given us life and breath and all our abilities, we haven't loved him with our whole heart.

We spend most of our days thinking about ourselves. And in the Old Testament, God reveals that whenever we sin against him, it's like a wound against a lover. And that God's people, we frequently are like a wife who throws herself happily into prostitution against God.

And sins throughout the Bible are not so much breaking God's laws as breaking his heart. And every time, every time we sin, we do violence to the love of God. But on the cross, Jesus cancels our debt.

He takes the pain, he absorbs the pain into himself to free us for him. And our debt to God is unimaginable.

[14 : 36] And it's been my experience that the longer you're a Christian, the deeper you realise your indebtedness to God and the greater the joy of the forgiveness, frankly. But here's the first point. Forgiveness is costly.

Can't take revenge. You can't dream up misfortune scenarios for the other person. You can't rejoice when they fall into difficulty. Forgiveness means not treating that person as they've treated you, not holding their sin against them.

In fact, treating them well, loving them, letting go of the past, creating a space for a new relationship. But when someone wrongs you, it creates a debt and the pain of that debt either you bear or they bear.

I've said that before. However, if forgiveness is costly, I think the point Jesus makes here is that this is where the math runs out. That is, the massive forgiveness that the servant receives does not change him.

It shows up the shabbiness of how he treats his fellow servant. And I think there's something more in this parable. It's more than just morality.

[15:50] This is very important. If I was to say to you, you ought to forgive because you've been forgiven more, that's morality. But it doesn't touch the heart.

It doesn't deal with the root of unforgiveness. There is something else here and it is a change of heart. This is what Jesus is talking about. So if you look at the very last word in the parable, you are to forgive your brother from the heart.

And that moves us to our second point. Forgiveness is not only costly. Forgiveness comes from compassion. So, the picture of the first servant is a great challenge to us.

In verse 26, when he comes to the, when he realises how deep the trouble he is in, what does he say to the master? He says, have patience with me and I will pay you everything.

He thinks that he can pay the king back. He really has no idea how deeply in debt he is. And he asks for patience. He asks for a time schedule to pay back the loan.

[17:01] But he could live 100 lifetimes. He's never going to get close to it. He says, I'll pay it all back if you're just patient. And then the master absorbs the debt he cancels the debt and gives him freedom from the past.

But it makes no difference to him and hasn't changed his heart. He goes straight out, finds a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii. Not insignificant. Three months salary. But so unaffected is he by the great cancellation and forgiveness he's just received that he grabs this guy by the throat, it says in the Greek, and starts to throttle him.

Oh! And the second servant says to him exactly what he said to the king. And instead of cancelling the debt with violence, he throws him in prison.

And when the king hears it, he calls him and he says, you wicked servant. And the word wicked means diseased, sick. He says, you are heart sick.

You have not allowed the forgiveness that I gave you to permeate your heart. You've not grasped the love behind your cancelled debt. Sure, you've done your sums but you haven't seen the heart.

[18:13] And here's the question Jesus wants us to ask. Why does the king forgive? Even when he knows this servant is a bad nut. And in verse 27, it's easy to roll over this quickly.

It's not such a great translation. It says, out of pity, the master of the servant released him and forgave him. pity. The word pity is the word compassion.

It means to be moved in the depths of your being. This word is used again and again and again of Jesus in the Gospels. This is the only time it's not used of Jesus and it's used of God the Father because Jesus is the revelation of God the Father's heart.

In the last century, B.B. Warfield, theologian, wrote an essay called The Emotional Life of Our Lord. And he studied all the Greek words that refer to Jesus' emotion, love and sorrow and all those sorts of things.

This word, this deep movement from the heart is used of Jesus more than any other. Deepest kind of love.

[19:20] Can't be manipulated or dragged out of someone by any circumstance. It's the natural movement of compassion. And it's this combined with the size of the debt that melts our hearts.

You with me? It's not just the size how much we've been forgiven in comparison with what we have to forgive. It's the fact that it comes from the sheer overflowing goodness and grace of God's goodness.

God put the most precious resource of all heaven, even Jesus himself, out to forgive our debt, to pay our sin, to die for us, to bring us back to God.

Instead of inflicting the pain on us as we deserve, he absorbs it out of compassion. It's this that changes our hearts. Quote one commentator, only a heart that feels absolutely loved, that feels the weight of its own debt and the weight of its own forgiveness has the power to forgive others. So Christian compassion and the forgiving others is the overflow of his heart of compassion and forgiveness to others. John Piper, who's an American preacher, wrote this.

[20 : 35] He said, When I feel most guilty at the horror of my own sin against God and against Jesus, when I feel most amazed at my own forgiveness and most stunned at the magnitude of what it costs Jesus' suffering, I'm least likely to be angry at those moments with those who've wronged me.

And he says, My suggestion, he was dealing with a man in pain, is to linger longer and deeper over the cost, the hope, the preciousness, the amazing wonder of being forgiven at the cost of Christ's life.

So forgiveness is first costly, second compassionate, and thirdly, and quite quickly, forgiveness is also creative. By the way, don't, just between us, I stole these three headings from Jim Packer in his little book on the creed.

So it's costly, compassionate, and creative. Why is it creative? Well, it creates a space for a new relationship on both sides.

You notice when we pray the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. The person is the focus of our prayer, not how much I've been wronged.

[21 : 47] God's forgiveness of us opens up the possibility of reconciliation and peace and the possibility for us to offer peace and reconciliation to others, to have relationships that are marked by truth and not by pretending.

A community that allows God be God and doesn't judge each other harshly or hold our hurts against each other. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. So when someone sins against you, we can't brood on it, hold them to their debt.

You can't look down on them or freeze them out. You have to bear the pain, absorb the pain and only that will create the possibility for a new connection. And forgiveness creates a whole new connection.

Now let me just, I want to just go up a level here. This has been one of the key burdens of chapter 16, 17, 18 and to 20. It's how Jesus is the connection between heaven and earth.

And right before our passage, if you look back at verse 18, speaking about sin, Jesus says, truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

[23 : 05] These are the words that Jesus commissioned Peter with back in chapter 16 and now he extends the commission to all disciples. Yes, Jesus is the connection between heaven and earth but that connection is made real in our lives and extended through our lives through the forgiveness of sins.

We are included now in that dynamic of allowing God's forgiveness to flow through us to others. And he's not saying that heaven just rubber stamps whatever we decide but he's saying that when we really live out the gospel and proclaim forgiveness to each other, when we allow forgiveness to flow through us to others, we're not just releasing ourselves from bitterness or the other person from their debt.

We are confirming the decision of heaven itself. On the other hand, if we hold on to grudges, if we look down on others, if you will not forgive someone their sin, it calls into question whether you are forgiving yourself.

That's a deep challenge. It's a true Christian forgiveness, costly, compassionate and creative. The overflow of a heart that has been gripped by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.