

Forgiveness

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[0 : 00] I am hopeful of Matthew, that you will again confront us in the very circumstances of our life, that we may know ourselves to be present with you, and you present with us in our hearts and minds, through your work. We ask this in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

When Peter turns to Christ and says, How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times. Now it's suggested that he had authority to think that it might be three times, and it might be four times, so he thought it exceedingly generous, perhaps that he could offer to forgive someone seven times.

And this introduces us to a parable which Christ then gave. And it's a ridiculous parable. It would be, I suppose, equivalent to the humor of the New Yorker in its own day.

But we've become rather familiar with it and haven't seen perhaps what's involved. That a gentleman who was indebted to his master to the extent of about a million dollars was freely forgiven.

[1 : 48] Which you must admit would be a peculiar occasion. We find it fairly difficult to forgive anybody anything, let alone a vast sum.

And when you think of all the lawyers that could make money out of that, and all the endless litigation that could take place as he tried to recover that money, it seems sad that he just freely forgave him.

But in accordance with human nature, having been freely forgiven, and this is on the realm of the marketplace, he then turns to somebody who owes him a hundred dollars, seizes him by the throat and demands that he pay.

Which you may think on first telling is very inconsiderate of him, but in fact is entirely consistent with human nature and human behavior as we have all experienced it every day.

So here you have a man forgiven a million who won't forgive a hundred. And that story lays the basis for the whole understanding, I think, of what forgiveness is in the Christian church.

[2 : 58] Now, as you go jogging around trying to improve your cardiovascular system, what is it that deep down you really want?

I mean, some improvement in your cardiovascular system will no doubt give you a better perspective on life. And I want you to know that I went mountain climbing this week and my cardiovascular system had the most horrible workout it's had for a long time.

And that I stand before you this morning is something for which I'm very grateful. But next time I'm sure I'll try and get in better shape.

Other people may be devotees of the theater or read good books or watch good television in order to promote their intellectual awareness so that they can be better conversationalists and perhaps better understand the circumstances of the times in which we live.

Or they may seek by long hours and diligence in business to acquire those things that allow them to be generous and allow them to afford the things by which life becomes a gratifying experience.

[4 : 16] If you are seeking to reduce stress, to learn biofeedback, to contemplate and meditate in order that you might come to some radical reality in the middle of your own life, that seems an enviable pursuit.

But what is it that people most need and yet are most unwilling to receive? And that is, I think, forgiveness.

Two of my favorite friends had a serious... I mean, they're favored because I love this story about them. It illustrates something. They were having serious marital problems.

And both of them, in a moment of generosity, decided to forgive the other one. But then in a sad moment that followed soon after, both of them decided that they were not in a position where they required to be forgiven.

And so the exercise was entirely futile. And so you see, it's not just the giving of forgiveness, but it's the capacity to receive it that's terribly important.

[5 : 27] And when Peter starts out in this story this morning, he suspects, I think, that the essence of religion, of true religion, is to be able to forgive. And many of us are in that happy position in life, where we're looking around for someone whom we can generously and open-handedly forgive.

But I suggest to you that the Christian faith makes very little sense indeed, and will not claim any serious commitment from any of us, until we recognize that the fundamental need of our existence is not to find some opportunity to exercise our religion by going around and finding somebody we can forgive, but to come to that awareness of the profound need for forgiveness in our own life, and then to find a source from which that forgiveness can come.

I went to a wedding reception last night, and at one high moment in the reception, the master of ceremonies brought me the bride's beautiful ivory brocade book in which all the mementos and all the signatures of her guests were kept, and said to me, Minister, will you sign this?

And I took it and put it carefully on the table in front of me, and got ready to sign and spill coffee all over me and it. And it was a sad moment, during which I would like very much to have disappeared, but in due course, when the first shockwave had passed at what I'd done, and a whole supply of linen tablecloths were reached up to help me out of my quandary, the host said, you're forgiven, for which I was grateful.

But immediately I began to think, well, I may be forgiven at once, but what if I do it again? And I may be forgiven because I was awkward enough to spill the coffee tonight, but what am I going to do about my awkward and clumsy nature, which I have to impose on almost everybody I meet?

[7 : 50] Is there any forgiveness for that condition of me, which I feel needs to be forgiven? And somehow I had to come to terms with a kind of deep reality of forgiveness, which would not only accommodate me in that occasion, but which would accommodate some of the much deeper needs of my life.

It's a strange thing to see on last night's television, the boat people being picked up by American warships, and then the vast army of civil servants that arrive on the warships to do what we usually do with meat, and that is to process people.

And they'd go on there to process people. And I wonder what it would be like to be such a person picked out of a sinking boat on the sea and then taken up onto the battleship and being confronted by a civil servant who said, what right do you have to enter the United States of America?

And it would be hard to muster right off hand any reason. But it's very similar to a simple evangelistic technique in which people go around to visit various people in their homes, sophisticated people like you and I, and like those processing civil servants on the American warships to come into our home and sit down in our home and say, eyeball to eyeball, what right have you to enter my heaven?

And then when you think about how you could muster a few facts together to defend the claim that you have a right to enter heaven, you would suddenly sense the depth of your poverty and come up against the awareness that your right, like the boat people's right, is something that's given to you not something that you have acquired.

[10 : 05] And that God has, as it were, rescued us from the sea and brought us to meet with him and has offered us this kind of radical forgiveness and an entirely new life.

And that this is what we are asked to accept. And it's no use, I suppose, if you were in such a position saying, well, I have these professional qualifications and I was very much respected in the community that I came from.

And all the qualifications of the past don't have anything to do with the future because you are now bereft of them. And what you need is some radical acceptance by the person who has confronted you.

And you see, the real discovery of what Christian faith means is the discovery that we have been radically accepted by God.

And that the thing that he offers us is not a religious opportunity in which we can graciously forgive somebody else.

[11 : 19] But he offers us the opportunity in which we ourselves can be radically forgiven. Well, these then are the characteristics of this forgiveness which we are offering.

First, it's a relationship to be enjoyed. In the epistles of Paul, he doesn't talk very much about forgiveness.

It's not a concept he uses particularly. He uses the picture of a man who is in a relationship with God of having been justified through faith in Jesus Christ.

A status is conferred on him. Not the benefit of a single occasion of forgiveness, but a status that's conferred.

And I think that this is what forgiveness is in the New Testament. That a status is conferred on us that we are forgiven.

[12 : 32] That I am not only forgiven for spilling the coffee, I'm forgiven for being the awkward and clumsy fellow that I am. And that I am radically accepted.

And that I live in an environment of forgiveness. And it's something on which I can depend and on which I can count and on which I can build because I have been forgiven.

That's the kind of forgiveness to which we are invited in Christ. The second thing about it, it is an activity in which God is the initiator and the primary source.

It's God who forgives you. And it's him alone who will. Most of us can't afford to forgive one another under normal circumstances.

It's too expensive. There has to be somebody who would be infinitely, charitably disposed towards you in order to forgive you.

[13 : 33] And this is God. And if somebody does forgive you and you are given a new lease on life because of that, it's in a sense only in the continuance of the goodwill of that person towards you that you can enjoy that forgiveness.

It's a kind of conditional thing. And you wonder when it might run out. But when God forgives us, we are radically and deeply and personally forgiven by God himself.

And the ministry which Dr. Packer has to you this morning in pronouncing the absolution was to seek to assure you of the reality of God's forgiveness as the basis on which you should live your life.

And the responsibility we have to one another as Christians is to try and reassure one another that through Christ we are forgiven by God.

That God does it. And so often people get caught in a terrible dilemma of having recognized that God has forgiven them but not being able to forgive themselves.

[15 : 01] And I think that this becomes one of the problems when we don't understand what it means that God has forgiven us for Christ's sake.

God of his own initiative as it were pulled us from the sea and reestablished us and forgiven us. Now I tell you this in order to impress upon you that my concern for transcendental meditation cardiovascular improvement the improvement of my financial means and all these things can't touch that longing which is deepest in my heart and that is that I can be radically forgiven by God for the essential self-centeredness of my own life and that God in forgiving me will allow me the opportunity on the basis of his grace and of his mercy to live the new life in Christ.

God's this is what I need the awareness of this radical forgiveness as a place to live as a place to live in my relationship to other people as a place from which to pray as a place from which to worship as a place from which to read with utmost interest every word which is written for me in the scriptures it's the place of having been radically forgiven by a God who makes it his purpose to forgive us and that we can't accept this forgiveness as something which is conferred upon us by men but as something which is given to us by God and gives us that unique freedom as a child of God to know that I am forgiven it may take my friends a long time to come to terms with it they may find stark unbelief when I tell them about but the reality is that God has in Christ forgiven me and that's who I am and though there may be slander and there may be all sorts of accusations made against me the reality is that I can know the forgiveness of God through Jesus

Christ that it is a personal act forgiveness thirdly is not spoken of in the New Testament apart from repentance if you want to understand the word forgiveness you have to understand the word repentance and repentance means simply turning in faith to God you see it's the story of the two brothers and the prodigal son where the one could find as it seemed no place of repentance and so never enjoyed the thing which the father wanted to give him the opportunity for the father to share his whole heart with the elder brother was not possible because there was no point of repentance there was only the constant reiteration of self indication I have labored I have worked

I have never asked for anything I have this on my side this must be recognized but there was no place of repentance but for the younger brother the experience of repentance was magnificently summed up by the fact that he came to himself to who he was as a person and said I will arise and go to my father he came to the place of repentance in order that he might be able to receive what the father longed to be able to give him and that was forgiveness and restoration which came from fourthly it is apparently a boundless resource that's available to us and what I think this means is that God can forgive bigger than you can sin most of us are proud of our capacity to sin and think that by years of practice by years of lying and deception we have got to the point where the grace and mercy of God are not big enough to cope with like an alcoholic who's been drinking for years so that he despairs of there being any solution so we as sinners who are habitually in that condition doubt that there is a capacity to forgive us but there is

[20 : 27] God's capacity to forgive is bigger than your capacity to sin and lots of Christian counseling consists in nothing more than helping people to become convinced of that fact as they unfold the extent and the reality and the duration of their persistent sinfulness you are required to unfold the reality and the extent and the persistence of God's love and mercy toward that person in Christ that they may come as Gideon did to worship realizing God had been there before and we realizing that God's capacity to forgive is infinitely greater than our capacity to sin and that's a bit humiliating for us proud sinners that we are and fifthly it is the reality the proof of which is demonstrated by the fact that we share it with others and that's what the parable is about this morning the man who was forgiven a million and couldn't forgive a hundred dollars hadn't understood that he had been forgiven and when we come to understand the extent of the forgiveness which God has guaranteed to us in Christ then we don't have any trouble forgiving others it doesn't become a problem if you look at the extent of the damages which you are required to forgive your brother for they may be very extensive indeed and if you become fascinated and absorbed by the extent of how your brother has sinned against you and what would be required to forgive him you may find that you can't do it and so you have to be totally absorbed by the reality of

God's forgiveness forgiveness of you and what God has done in Christ through his death on the cross in order that he might freely forgive you then you don't have any trouble forgiving your brother and the reality of your having entered into the experience of God's forgiveness is that it becomes both possible and logical and practical for you to forgive your brother not seven times but seventy times seven an infinite number of times and so that's the working principle of our life in Christ and not to have received forgiveness from God not to have been aware that God personally forgives you in Christ is to have missed what

Christian faith is all about try and make something meaningful out of Christian faith which lacks the experience of having been forgiven is a waste of time I think but to experience God's forgiveness in Christ makes life in Christ infinitely worthwhile let us pray our God we confess to you the obtuseness of our mind by which we can on the one hand receive the benefit and on the other hand decide by the same logic not to confer it on another our God so fill us with your

Holy Spirit that we may be brought to a place of deep radical repentance forgiveness so that we may be aware of the deep and radical forgiveness in Christ which you have conferred upon us and help us from this perspective to see all our brothers and all the petty things that they have done against us as being matters which we can because of the grace shown to us we can readily and lovingly forgive our God create in our midst such a community of those who having been forgiven are able to forgive one another in Christ's name

Amen