Forgiveness 2: 18th October 2026

Matthew 18: 21-35

**Unforgiven and Forgiven**

In this sermon we shall explore the theme of forgiveness that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew writes about in chapter 18 of his gospel.

We need to acknowledge that Jesus didn't define what he meant by forgiveness; he never sits the disciples down and says to them, 'now I am going to explain what I mean by the word forgiveness.' Mark and John have hardly any mention of forgiveness between people.

In fact, in John, we read that forgiveness is conditional. See John 20:23

*"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

The parable of the unmerciful debtor is also a powerful story of the connections between God's forgiveness of us and our ability to forgive one another.

**Matthew 18: 23-27 The parable of the unforgiving servant or of the mean or ungenerous servant?**

In this first part of the parable, we learn that one of the slaves had an impossibly large debt[1]. Jesus was speaking of an infinite, immeasurable sum. Forgiveness always means the loss is absorbed by the granter of forgiveness, i.e. a cost. Forgiveness is a form of voluntary suffering. In this example, the master, i.e. God, does not seek redress or retaliation in some way, God makes the choice to bear the cost, to fully reconcile with the servant. This is a description of the nature of God and of God's kingdom.

The parable makes clear that we all owe an infinite debt to God. We owe God love and obedience, which we fail to do perfectly. So, we all receive God's mercy in some way. Our own treatment of other humans falls short of the generous mercy God shows us. The parable also reminds us that God's

[1] A talent was the highest currency denomination and 10,000 was the highest number for which the Greek language had a word. An ordinary man may earn the equivalent of a talent in a year. So, the debt would be equivalent to about £300 million in today's prices, assuming a salary of £30k p.a.

forgiveness of us can never be merited. The debt is too large. Nothing we can say or do will meet the debt. We can't repay it. God's grace comes into play. We are forgiven anyway.

The parable continues with an ***act of unforgiveness*** by the very slave who was forgiven an impossibly large debt[2].

The impossibly indebted and forgiven servant was not changed by God's generous grace and mercy. The servant does not forgive the servant with a miniscule debt. He was not changed by God's generous grace and mercy.

We receive God's grace and mercy, and can also fail to be kind, merciful, generous, gracious and forgiving.

**Justice and love applied to abuse.**

From our reading of this parable it could read that God requires us to forgive the most horrendous and costly acts against us. But, to be clear, this parable is about money debts, not abuse.

Several theologians recognise that there are some acts that require a different approach. An approach that incorporates love and justice, especially where the wronged person has been the subject of abuse. We all know that remaining silent in the face of abuse continues the abuse. Counselling victims to forgive and forget, is wrong.[3]

Sin and evil are not trivial things. The cross shows us this. God is committed to both justice **and** forgiveness, there is no pitting one against the other. On the Cross, God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself. The Cross can help Christians in refraining from seeing criminals and abusers as 'other' or fundamentally different from ourselves. Justice requires that the person becomes aware of their sin or criminal misdeeds and understands the severity, reality and impact of the actions. Only in confronting and understanding these things can someone experience true repentance and then forgiveness from God. This is the difference between retributive and restorative justice.

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[2] Matthew 18:25-35

[3] Stephen Cherry's latest book on the subject is very welcome and places theology in the real world.

**Definition and process of Forgiveness in Matthew 18**

- ✞ God had the servant brought before him.
- ✞ The debt was named/identified. Truth was told. There was no cover up.
- ✞ God took pity on him. Pity – understanding the perpetrator's situation, & vulnerability. The debtor is a simple failed human, just like us.
- ✞ God cancels the debt. He absorbed the loss himself. Refused to make the person suffer. This is costly.
- ✞ God restores the relationship. But the relationship breaks down when the servant shows they have not learnt, and are unable to forgive someone else a small debt.

For us, it isn't so easy. If we remain angry we enable the debtor's actions to continue to hurt us. We should acknowledge the hurt and how it feels. Then, bit by bit, we may find a way to grant forgiveness, eventually we can start to feel forgiveness. It isn't a straight linear line. And from personal experience I know I can just as easily slip back quite a few steps and have to do some more work on forgiveness to get back to a point I had already been at. There is a catchy saying, 'you must feel it to heal it'.

God lets the debtor go. The relationship is restored. In the parable forgiving and pursuing justice went hand in hand. What the process of forgiving does is to eradicate thoughts and deeds of revenge.

The parable points to the truth that anyone who truly forgives is open to the possibility of reconciliation, to the restoration of the relationship. Critically, it is dependent on the response of the one to whom forgiveness is extended.

In the parable, the king's servant is not genuinely repentant so the relationship with the King breaks down.

**Dimensions of Forgiveness**

Divine mercy can change our hearts so that we are able to forgive as God forgives us. Human forgiveness is dependent on divine forgiveness.

- ✞ Vertical (Upward and downward) – God forgiveness to us.
- ✞ Internal (Inward)– granting forgiveness to anyone who has wronged us.

- ✞ Horizontal (Outward) – if wrongdoer repents and receives forgiveness, it opens up the potential for a new, not necessarily the same, relationship to be formed.

We must consciously base our forgiveness of others on God's forgiveness of us.

Not forgiving does put us in a form of jail… the final part of the parable has the unforgiving servant in prison. He is self-centred. He has become a prisoner of his thoughts and feelings; staying angry with someone. If we don't forgive, that person can have a form of power over us, and we give them rent-free space in our heads to distract and tire us.

Jesus on the cross said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'. He acknowledges they have done wrong but still asks that they be forgiven. Jesus doesn't scream for revenge or say they will get their punishment at some time. He pleads for his executioners to be forgiven.

So how are we to treat those who do us wrong?

**The Tension of the Limits of Forgiveness**

We have explored the perfect example provided by Jesus: the example of his life and in this parable on forgiveness and unforgiveness. We have also briefly explored the dangers and abuse of someone who is pressured into granting someone forgiveness 'because it is the Christian thing to do', but in actual fact will cause harm to the person being pressured to grant forgiveness.

I believe when we have been seriously wronged, we need to start down a therapeutic road towards forgiveness; to do this for the sake of our own mental health. In the process I think we can start the process of forgiveness and comprehending that the actions and behaviours of another person speaks volumes about their own issues and internal struggles far more than it does about us. And I think that is a starting point for us – we are learning about and experiencing the gift of God's Grace.

Today's Gospel reading sets an exceedingly high bar. It continually calls us to strive for a life more akin to the life of Jesus.

You have probably already been recalling times when you have not forgiven someone for an action that harmed you in some way. You may have recalled

minor slights that still rankle, or deeper emotional, physical or psychological episodes, may be where you could never approach the perpetrator or chose not to.

In order to be set free from these, what aspect of God's grace might you need? What actions might you want to take to achieve justice, and to stop these memories from causing you further harm?

Forgiveness can be hard, it is deeply relational, and in many instances we need to take our thoughts and feelings to God in prayer, to ask God to set us free from the actions of the offender. It can also help to lift up the offender to God, asking God to do the work required in them, that they may have a truly contrite heart.

In God's kingdom, as Jesus portrayed it, the hurts we have experienced are healed, and we are whole, and there is true and perfect reconciliation with the offender who fully acknowledges the actions and harm caused. This is the ideal, but for us humans it is hard to achieve that perfect peace of wholeness within ourselves and with all others in our community. Full reconciliation is not always possible or the right thing to do; a different relationship with new boundaries may be the best that can be achieved.

Forgiveness is hard journey. Restorative justice is our goal. God is available to help us journey through the process of healing and achieving wholeness once more. If we don't start on the journey of forgiveness, we remain diminished and captive to the offence and the offender.

God yearns for us to be healed and once more be living the life God knows we can have. I pray that for each one of us today.