

Forgiveness 1. 11th October 2026

Today we are kicking off a short four-week series on forgiveness with a look at the parable of the Prodigal Son.

I did wonder about taking a short cut and reading you my take on this parable that I wrote two years ago. However, I decided to take pity on you.

Firstly, it was the biggest chunk of my dissertation for my Masters and so would have taken me 30-45 minutes to read it and you certainly wouldn't have thanked me for that, Secondly, and to my surprise, on rereading it, it had little to say about forgiveness.

And that's because the parable actually has very little to say about forgiveness and rather more to say about unforgiveness and lack of repentance. They are very much part of the discussion around forgiveness and so it's a very good starting point.

When we were discussing this theme at a team meeting, Nick was keen on a new book by Stephen Cherry, Sue Crosfield's son-in-law, entitled Unforgivable?. In it he argues that in his view some things are unforgivable, in particular child abuse.

While I can see where he is coming from – and clearly child abuse is particularly despicable but then so are racially and sexually-motivated murders – I do have a theological problem with his approach.

If there are some things that are unforgivable, it raises the possibility that there are some things that we do that God thinks are so terrible that He won't forgive us.

Yet that's not what Jesus tells us, indeed He tells Peter that he should forgive up to 500 times. Cherry gets round that by arguing that what Jesus was really saying there was don't sweat the small stuff and that Jesus wasn't talking about major sins of the sort we might regard as unforgivable.

Where Cherry is on much stronger ground is in criticising Christianity for the way it has sometimes weaponised forgiveness, while ignoring what should be the prelude to forgiveness – repentance.

Cherry is, rightly in my view, highly critical of the hypocrisy of the Church in general for the way it has often told victims of sexual abuse committed by priests that it is the 'Christian thing to do' to forgive them, while at same time doing everything it could to protect the offender for the sake of its own reputation.

It gives the impression that the justice the victim needs in order to be in a position to offer genuine forgiveness is secondary to the church protecting the perpetrator. The Church may preach repentance but too often it fails to walk the talk.

Cherry's case is intellectually logical and well argued; he's right to say that forgiveness isn't as straightforward as sometimes suggested, but his arguments seem to come from the head and not the heart.

By contrast, Amy Orr-Ewing, a public theologian, has a much more optimistic take. She argues in her latest book, *Forgiveness*, that forgiveness – whether we receive it or whether we offer it – is the greatest gift that Christianity can offer today's world.

Christianity pays more attention to forgiveness than any other religion, she says, and also offers possibilities of redemption through the love of a Saviour who can restore us both when we harm and when we are harmed.

And forgiveness is at the heart of the traditional Christian understanding of today's parable. That interpretation tells us that when we go astray and then come looking for God again, he will run and scoop us up in his arms to forgive us unreservedly. There is no limit to which he will not go to restore and redeem us – and we know that because Jesus went to the cross for us.

Unfortunately there is a huge BUT to that version. I'll come to this later, but the reality is that each of the three characters has hurt the other two, but not one of them repents and no-one offers forgiveness. Indeed, the father never speaks to his younger son. He's just super excited that he's found what he thought he had lost, which is exactly the theme of the two preceding parables that I read just now. Unfortunately the father doesn't notice that both his sons are, in reality, lost.

Given the lack of any woman in the story, it's possible the father was a widower and being a single dad then was probably even harder than it is now, when you're working every daylight hour six days a week trying to eke out a living in difficult terrain, so we should probably cut him some slack.

It suggests too that we should be wary of allegorising the story by thinking of the father as God. After all, God only has one son, this father has two. And in many ways this father has failed.

And another thing. The Jewish Jesus was telling this story to other Jews, so their expectations would have been for the younger son to be the good guy as they normally are in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Not in this story. Both brothers are deeply unattractive characters – in completely different ways. But they have one thing in common, they each have what might be called a transactional relationship with their father. What really interested them was what they could extract from their father.

One commentator describes the brothers this way – as the one who ran and the one who stayed. And she doesn't have a good word to say about the one who ran. Did he really understand in his heart how much pain and upset he'd caused? Was he genuinely repentant for what he'd done? The English words used in the story sound pretty performative rather than penitential. Did he pull his weight in the fields the next day or had he eaten too much fatted calf and drunk too much wine? Did he apologise to his brother? Did he take forgiveness for granted? He certainly hadn't earned it.

The answer is we don't know because Luke doesn't tell us.

The same commentator has more sympathy for the one who stayed and worked hard in the fields for years on end. At least he had done his duty and supported his father rather than indulge in riotous living. That's often what happens with the oldest child isn't it? They feel a sense of responsibility and like order in life.

But of course he explodes, doesn't he, and launches into a tirade of anger laced with self-pity, using his brother's special treatment as an excuse to unload all his pent-up resentments onto his father's head about how he hasn't been treated fairly. What parent hasn't had to fend off tear-sodden complaints of 'it isn't fair' .

Dad didn't see that coming did he?

The traditional allegorical interpretation is that the older brother represents self-righteous Pharisees, but perhaps what actually underlies his outburst is deep pain. How long had he been seething inside – since the day his brother walked out? Had his resentment burned brighter with every demand his father made on him?

Why did he feel he couldn't ask his father for a goat so he could have a party with his friends?

Was he screaming inside because he longed for the sort of bearhug he guessed his brother had just enjoyed? Had he suppressed his feelings so much that he'd become incapable of knowing how much he was loved? We don't know the answer to any of these questions because again Luke doesn't tell us.

What we do know is that in their different ways each of the three has both harmed the other two and BEEN harmed by the other two.

How can that be resolved? Can it be resolved? the genius of the parable is that we don't whether it was resolved then and there, in the next few days or ever.

The power to resolve it lies entirely in the hands of the older brother – and rather like the cliffhanger at the end of each episode of Celebrity Traitors – we don't have a clue as to which way it will go.

Well, I think it can be resolved, through a combination of genuine repentance and the willingness of each to offer genuine forgiveness for the hurt they have suffered as a result of the actions and words of the other two coupled with acceptance in the same spirit of the forgiveness offered to us.

Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting, but it does mean letting go of those resentments, those little flashes of anger that suddenly spring unwanted into our minds. And letting go can be hard, really hard, because of course we know that we were right and justified.

As someone once said unforgiveness is like drinking rat poison and expecting the other person to die. Waiting for an apology that never comes is very stressful. Research has shown that forgiveness is actually good for both our mental and physical wellbeing

And we have a model to help us don't we and it is course the love of God. Our weekly confession begins with God is love and we are God's children. Unlike Jesus on the Cross, who asked God to forgive those who played their part in putting him there, we ask for forgiveness for our own sins – and we receive it. Indeed in our weekly service of Holy Communion we ask three times quite specifically for forgiveness for our sins – and more frequently if you count the indirect requests.

But we cannot take forgiveness for granted. Forgiveness, as the word suggests, is a gift from the person who has been harmed to the person who has harmed them. We have no right to demand forgiveness and no right to assume we will be forgiven just because we have said sorry and asked to be forgiven.

I know that I have found it hard, very hard at times, to forgive those people who have harmed me in life-altering ways in the past. Yet I hope I have finally learned that while forgiving them has been costly, not forgiving them has been even more costly.

I pray for those of you who might feel trapped in a cycle of unforgiveness that the Holy Spirit will remind you of how much you have been forgiven and set you free.

Amen