Forgiveness: Sermon 4, 1st November 2026

Psalm 51:-17. Romans 12:9-21. Matthew 6:9-15

A Community of Reconciliation

As we come to the last of these four sermons on the theme of forgiveness, what is there left to deal with?

Firstly, let us address one of those thorny issues – God's anger, which seems to run counter to the idea of grace, mercy and forgiveness.

God's anger is not like our anger, based on hurts. God only gets angry when evil destroys the things he loves – his creation and the human race.

Jesus sums up God's law (Matt 22:26-40), to love your God, and your neighbour as yourself. When we fail in these things it damages creation, other people, and our own hearts – all the things God loves. So, God's wrath because of disobedience to his law is both a call to love and an expression of his love. The wrath of God is an expression of a loving God rightfully demanding love from human beings toward one another and toward him.

God's anger is ultimately about love. Real love stands against the deception, lies, the sin that destroys. We can feel pain and anger at these things, therefore God feels it even more.

I hope these sermons have shown that forgiveness can bring inner healing and can be part of the pursuit of justice. In some situations the purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of community. Forgiveness is not to humiliate, defeat or drive out sinners, but to correct and restore them. The church is called to the costly work of reconciliation, to heal individuals and communities.

The two following scriptural examples show an overlap. Luke 17: 3-4 presupposes repentance on the part of the offender. In Luke 17 'forgive them' means 'reconcile with them'. It is not unconditional forgiveness. Mark 11: 25 does not presuppose repentance. In Mark 11 'forgiveness' means inwardly being willing to not avenge oneself and seek the best for the other person. A movement from antipathy to love.

So, one sort of forgiveness is internal only ('attitudinal forgiveness'), the other external towards a possible reconciliation, a restored relationship ('reconciled forgiveness'). These are not completely different kinds but two stages or

aspects of it. Attitudinal forgiveness can occur without the other, but reconciliation cannot happen without attitudinal forgiveness first.

Christian forgiveness often seeks to move beyond the individualistic – our own inner feelings and healing. God is concerned about outer and social healing of the community as well. Christian forgiveness promotes the pursuit of justice.

The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's prayer mentions forgiveness; 'forgive us our trespasses/sins/debts, as we forgive those who trespass/sin/debt against us'.

If we find it hard to forgive, does that mean God only forgives us when or if we forgive others? The answer is no. Let's unpack this.

The words for 'trespasses' or 'sins' are not the direct translation of the Greek word for sins, but the standard Greek word for 'debt'. So we can think back to the ungrateful or mean servant, and consider similar points. This is not about the big things, but about minor 'littler things', the ***misdeeds*** (a word used in the 12th century English translation), which became 'debts' in the Wycliffe translation of the 14th century and became 'trespasses' in the 16th century Tyndale translation. So, the Lord's prayer isn't about harm caused by abuse, oppression, exploitation, or life-changing traumatic harm. The Lord's Prayer is about the small everyday sins with a small 's'.

Also, do we really pray to God that since we have forgiven someone God must forgive us? That doesn't sound right, far too transactional. Surely the prayer tells us that in response to God's abundant mercy we should try to be generous, merciful and loving to others.

The Aramaic version of the Lord's Prayer may be even more helpful, translating as 'Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of others' guilt.' This aligns with Jesus' desire for us to be generous of spirit. The Gospel message isn't about putting pressure on the abused, exploited oppressed or otherwise harmed to give a free pass to those who inflict harm on them.

Injustice grieves God. It mars creation, it harms people and the wrongdoer. What is justice? It is to speak the truth in love and to not shield people from the consequences of their actions. It isn't about being right or owning the moral high ground or a desire for revenge. It is being morally outraged out of love of God, creation, and people. Doing justice is a form of loving our

neighbour enough for them to be freed from sin; pursuing justice and forgiveness, renouncing revenge, is good for all.

When we wish to receive forgiveness, we must recognise our need for and our reception of forgiveness from God. It helps remove our guilt and shame. It also helps us to forgive others.

The problem with self-forgiveness

How often do we find it hard to forgive ourselves? When do we experience true guilt – for something that really was wrong – and false guilty feelings. And even when we have asked for forgiveness and been forgiven, we too often hold onto feelings of guilt and shame. Yet, God is the final judge of who we are and what we have done and can override our heart's guilt and self-condemnation. Christianity does not minimize the wrongness of sin but provides a powerful antidote for guilt. We deal with true guilt by taking it in prayer to God who is gracious and merciful. Ps 51:1-2 states:

1 *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;*
according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.
2 *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*

We need to banish all pretence and evasion when we are before God. We all have the capacity to do something wrong. God knows this, too.

Prov 28:13 **13** No one who conceals transgressions will prosper,
but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.

So what do we do?

First: confess. A full clean admission of wrongdoing, without qualification or excuse, without minimizing or relativising. Hebrew 'ydb' = confess, includes a sense of praising and thanking God. So confession is admitting that you have been failing to love and honour God, and you return to glorifying him by admitting how you have wronged God and others.

Forsaking a transgression is to recognise the sinful behaviour and commit to making changes so as not to behave that way again. Luke 3:8 states: Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance… i.e. do something to reverse the wrong behaviour.

Second: receive God's forgiveness, God's mercy, with rejoicing. Hebrew 'rhm' is the word for womb. It comes from the mother's feeling of love to the child that

is not based on the child's behaviour. The mother's heart simply moves her to love. God's mercy is free, unmerited, personal, an acceptance of God's mercy by the repentant.

Repentance begins when blame-shifting, self-pity, and self-righteous despair end. It begins when confession, renunciation, and the acceptance of free grace take place.

Third: will their good. On the cross Jesus said, "Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing". Jesus acknowledged they were sinning but understood they didn't really know what they were doing. Stephen (Acts 7:60) asks for mercy for his killers. It helps us see the act as distinct from the person. The evil is in the person, and we want it defeated in them and in us. When we do, that evil is contained and does not spread. Hatred and pride do not spread to us. We wish them good and pray for growth and development of the person. When we pray for them, we follow Jesus' example to love and pray for our enemies (Matt 5:44-48). This is undoubtedly the hardest part of forgiveness; well, it is for me. I came across verses in Ps 122 that really helped me.

8 For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you."
9 For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

I have used the two phrases, 'Peace be within you', and 'I will seek you good', as part of my prayers for people I find difficult, and use it as part of the invitation to share the peace in church. Saying and praying these words has helped me.

Practising forgiveness

We start with granting forgiveness; a promise not to exact the price of sin from the wrongdoer. We make a promise despite our hurt feelings. We can't wait to feel it to grant it. So, it is something we 'will' to do, in prayer. cf Mark 11:25.
25 *"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.*

Resources to help foster forgiveness

Spiritual humility: we are to forgive as God forgave you (Eph 4:32). Accept what the gospel says about how we are made in God's image and God is in everything. Do we truly love him according to the Shema; with all our heart etc.? Romans 12 says the wrath of God has its place, and vengeance is mine,

says the Lord. We are not to replace God in the judgement seat. Only God can judge.

Spiritual wealth: When we have experienced God's love in Christ, we have the resources to be generous to others.

Romans 12: 14-21 provides a principle and 5 practical ways to realise it.

Principle: Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

5 ways to overcome evil with good:

- ✞ Pray for them
- ✞ Forgive them
- ✞ Don't avoid them
- ✞ Give them what they need (if your enemy is hungry feed them, if thirsty give them a drink…).
- ✞ Do it humbly

Christians do not need to see full justice done in this life or expect it. Pursue what we can, the rest is up to God.

And finally let us come full circle and recall what I said at the beginning:

> *God is love, and we are his children. There is no room for fear in love. We love because God loved us first.*

Practising forgiveness is not easy. Some find it easier than others. For those of us that struggle with it, we need to remember that God loves us, and we can access the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and we can spend time with God in prayer to help us. And I come back to Psalm 122 and the words of the last two verses, as a way of thanking you for listening to this sermon series, and to equip you to go out from here, and that our own communities may be communities of reconciliation.

'Peace be within you'.

'I will seek you good'.