

Sermon for Sunday 17 September 2023 - Matthew 18:21-35

The Parable of the unmerciful servant



*Almighty God, our heavenly Father, your nature is always to have mercy. May we reflect your generosity in being merciful and forgiving. Open up our hearts, our minds, and our souls. Come in, Lord, and abide with us. Amen.*

Our Gospel story today speaks for itself. A servant begs his master for forgiveness. The master wipes his bill clean, cancels his debts and lets him go. The forgiven man has himself a servant. And when that servant begs for forgiveness, the forgiven man does not extend to the servant the grace that was given to him. The master is outraged: 'I cancelled all your debt because you begged me, and you did not have mercy on your fellow servant? You're going to jail where you will suffer torture until you repay me.'

With this parable, Jesus teaches a hard lesson to his followers, and he challenges us: what is it that stops us from saying 'I'm sorry' or 'I forgive you'? Is it the fact that we've forgotten the mercy of God towards us? Or is it that we have forgotten that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one who has been turned inside out and has become like a little child?

The little child is not bothered about counting. Who cares? Again and again, they will forgive and start playing again. Because at the end of the day, it's all about playing and having good fun, discovering life, with eyes full of awe, wonder, and hope.

The grown-up, wonderfully represented by our friend Peter, does count. 'How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me', he asks. 'Up to seven times?'

'Seventy times seven' Jesus replies, and that is a typical example of him teasing Peter. What he means, of course, is 'don't even think about counting, just do it!'

Jesus says this because in all this chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, he is establishing God's new covenant with Israel and the world, the new way of life at the centre of which is... forgiveness. In the prayer that he teaches his

disciples, doesn't he say: 'forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us'?

And in our passage today, what he solemnly says is that those who refuse to forgive will themselves be refused forgiveness. If we had any doubt about the importance of forgiveness, now we know.

But what is forgiveness? What does it actually mean?

First off, we need to remember that forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation requires the involvement of at least two persons, and that was the Gospel story last week. Forgiveness takes place in only one person's heart, it is directed one way. It is a free gift to the one who has broken trust.

Even if the person who harmed you does not ask for forgiveness, you can forgive. Forgiveness is unconditional. Just like the love of God for all his children.

Forgiveness is the *decision* to release the person who harmed you. But for this decision to take place, you need to change the way you look at that person.

Imagine for a moment all the people who ever caused you harm and that you have not yet forgiven. All these people are in a gaol that you've created perhaps to protect yourself. But you are now the gaol keeper. It takes time and energy to ensure maintenance, to feed all these people, to think of them and what they've done, to keep exploring your own feelings and wondering when they will ask for forgiveness.

Do you want to be a gaoler for the rest of your life? What's the point? When we don't forgive, we are as much a captive as the ones we hold captive. When we forgive, we free ourselves every bit as much as we free those who have hurt us.

Let's look at it another way. Imagine you're invited to a wonderful day out. The place is gorgeous. The sun provides gentle heat, the trees provide welcome shade, the breeze provides freshness, the streams sing their soft song, and at the end of the path stands a beautiful cross. It's glorious. You're preparing to take a beautiful walk all the way to the place of prayer.

But before you start on this walk you desire so much, your host gives you a rough burlap bag. That bag, you must carry it around your neck. It's uncomfortable as it is, but your host tells you: 'You will now pick a pebble, a

stone, or a heavy stone from the path for every harm done, according to its size, and for every person you have not forgiven, and you will place them in the bag.' As you start filling in the bag, it weighs heavier and heavier around your neck. You'll never be able to take that beautiful walk.

So your host says: 'As you forgive each offence and each person, take a stone or pebble out of the bag, and put it back on the side of the path... Now the path is clear, your bag is light, your heart is free, and you can walk all the way to the cross, coming to Christ just as you are, having forgiven, and being forgiven.

When we let forgiveness have its way with our hearts, we free ourselves from our debt, our lack of mercifulness, and then even the most elusive peace is within our reach.

That same peace is within our reach when we place our faith in Jesus Christ and ask him to forgive our sins. Divine forgiveness means that God, in his mercy, chose to release us from our sins, they are gone, wiped out completely. And this total and permanent debt relief is available to all who choose to believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

But that is our challenge: to try to grasp, with our human minds and our limited comprehension, the *love* that God lavishes upon us. If we could fully experience the magnitude of our forgiveness from God, we would more readily, even eagerly, grant forgiveness to others.

Our hearts truly would be forever touched and warmed to *want* to forgive – it would be effortless, and all the time we would be inspecting our burlap bag to make sure it doesn't contain even the smallest pebble of anger, bitterness, or resentment.

Jesus today, tells us that every time we accuse someone else, we accuse ourselves. And every time we forgive someone else, we pass on a drop of water out of the bucketful that God had already given us. Forgiveness, says Jesus, is at the heart of our new covenant with God. Let it become our new way of life, a life free of the burdens of resentment, a life fully open to God's grace.

Inspired by...

Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*, London: SPCK, 2004

June Hunt, *How to forgive... when you don't feel like it*, Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2007