

## Matthew 18:21-35. Forgiving from the heart

Thursday June 6<sup>th</sup> this year was the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the D-Day landings on the Normandy beaches, and leaders gathered to honour all those involved in the operation including 22,000 British soldiers who died during the campaign. Harry Read was just 19 when he was sent into battle and if you have ever seen films like Saving Private Ryan you will know just how horrifying that was. On the German side Paul Golz was just a little older but equally was one of those who had to face the huge onslaught of allied forces.



75 years later the two of them met and Channel 4 news filmed their encounter. The heart warming footage shows the pair greeting each other for the first time, agreeing they were “once on a different side” but now are “partners together”.



Mr Read said: “I’m so glad to see you and to hold your hand and say bless you. Once we were on a different side, but now we are partners together in the rebuilding of the world.”

German veteran Paul Golz replied “of course”. Mr Read continued: “My common sense told me that there were people very peacefully minded. And their voices, so often, were silenced.”

Mr Golz agreed: “Look at the cemeteries. The people died for us. Now we have peace for 75 years long. Keep the peace. God bless you.” He finally adds: “Now we are friends.”

How wonderful it is for former enemies to find forgiveness, peace and reconciliation. Psalm 133 says ‘How good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity’.

Remembrance Sunday is not just about honouring the dead, it is about coming to terms with what happened in order to seek peace and reconciliation for the future.

Forgiveness is one of the most precious things we can experience as human beings, because the one that forgives is the one that curtails the pain of continual conflict and unlocks their state of self-imprisonment.

Last month I read a magazine article which questioned whether Christians sometimes overemphasize forgiveness and reconciliation at the expense of justice. It focussed on the case of a murdered man's brother who publicly forgave and embraced his killer on live TV, which was hailed as a triumph in the Christian press. But the writer of the article felt that in some ways justice had been overlooked and the systemic problems of racism and prejudice that contributed to the murder were in danger of going unchallenged.

Yet the truth is that if we are to 'forgive as the Lord forgave you' the reality of forgiveness can sometimes seem scandalous and inappropriate. We all want both justice and forgiveness but we need to face the fact that this cannot be achieved without divine help and eternal perspective.

Jesus talked about forgiveness a lot. Forgiveness features at the heart of the Lord's prayer and Jesus taught about it in many stories and parables. I think he taught about it because forgiveness is one of the keys to spiritual freedom and a pre-requisite to receiving more of the Kingdom and experiencing God's presence. In our sermon series *Fully Free* we have looked at some of the thought patterns and spiritual strongholds that can hold us back or keep us captive but forgiveness is a really big one to deal with.

Our reading today from Matthew may seem straight forward but the implications are profound. The parable of the unmerciful servant should challenge us to think carefully about our own life and situation.

#### *Matthew 18: The parable of the unmerciful servant*

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?' <sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> 'Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. <sup>26</sup> 'At this the servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." <sup>27</sup> The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

<sup>28</sup> 'But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded.

<sup>29</sup> ‘His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, “Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.” <sup>30</sup> ‘But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Then the master called the servant in. “You wicked servant,” he said, “I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” <sup>34</sup> In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

<sup>35</sup> ‘This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’



Forgiveness is a widely applauded concept. Even outspoken atheist Ricky Gervais says ‘forgiveness is probably the greatest virtue there is’ but he denies it is a uniquely Christian virtue.

He is right that forgiveness features in most religious and ethical philosophies, and as a Jew Peter knew it was important to forgive your brother. But the huge difference with Jesus’ revised application of forgiveness is that it is *unconditional* and often *unreciprocated*.

Peter says ‘how many times should I forgive my brother – seven times?’ and Jesus replies ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times!’ – in other words, ‘why are you counting at all?’ If you start to tally your forgiving actions and cap it all with ultimatums, maybe that isn’t really Christian forgiveness at all.

To emphasize the point Jesus tells a massively exaggerated story but we can easily miss some of the meaning because we need to translate the quantities for our culture and context.

Scholars seem a bit inconsistent when it comes to the value of a ‘bag of gold’ or a ‘talent’ as it was called in Jesus’ day. Some say it was worth between 10 and 20 years worth of the minimum wage - in other words £250,000 in our money. Others are more conservative saying a Talent was worth around £1000. However even if we go for a minimal valuation, when he said he owed ten thousand talents in the story, clearly Jesus meant he owed an unimaginably massive debt – Millions and millions of pounds! How the servant got into this debt we are not told – but somehow he screwed up enough to be in big trouble.

But amazingly when the servant got on his knees and begged for mercy the King in his kindness forgave him the entire debt! Now that is Amazing grace.

Jesus paid for the unimaginably massive debt of our sin on the cross. When he said 'it is finished' the Gospel records the word 'Tetaleste' which was what was written on a receipt meaning 'Paid in Full'. This is the salvation that is on offer to everyone.

But that's where the trouble starts. Those who receive grace and forgiveness are then in turn required to show grace and forgiveness to others, otherwise the salvation gift is nullified and they risk bringing themselves back under a worse judgement than before.

The first servant seemed to forget the amazing grace which the King had shown him and just carried on with his selfish life. He refused to forgive another fellow servant just a few pounds and had him thrown in jail. The law would certainly allow it of course, but that doesn't make it right. When grace is abandoned, justice and retribution takes over with a vengeance and the other servants complained to the King about the situation.

Unforgiveness has knock on effects. It doesn't just hurt the immediate parties – it impacts more widely too. Some of the most painful situations I encounter in my role are those who are experiencing family breakdown because of unforgiveness, people taking sides and relatives refusing to even communicate.

So how do we go about forgiving others as God forgives us?

Psychologist Rubin Khoddam suggests that there are three common components to the process of forgiveness:

1. Gaining a more balanced view of the offender and the event.
2. Decreasing negative feelings towards the offender and potentially increasing compassion.
3. Giving up the right to punish the offender further or to demand restitution.

This parable emphasises the primary need for us to gain God's eternal perspective on our situation. If we can admit our own need of grace and forgiveness then maybe we can start to have compassion on those that offend us. This is where counselling may help – talking it through or writing it out can begin to untangle the mess of our emotions and start to reframe our perspective.

Forgiveness can take time. Even after several years of working for peace and reconciliation it took all of Corrie Ten Boom's willpower and spiritual humility to manage to reach out and shake the hand of a Nazi soldier who had been one of her guards in the concentration camp at Ravensbruck. She said 'I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.'

“Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. “I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

Even after she had done that Corrie describes being frustrated that she was still plagued sometimes by angry vengeful thoughts. But a Pastor friend pointed to the bell-tower of the church near where they were standing and said:

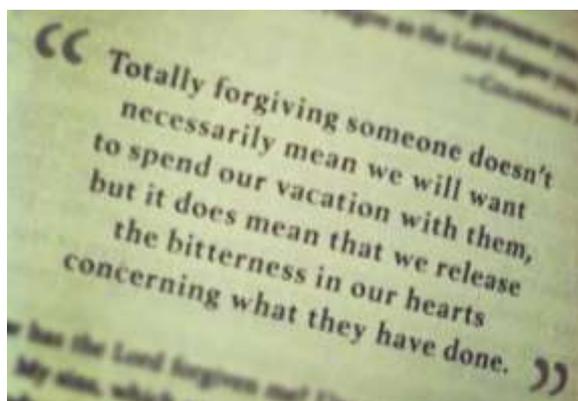
“Up in that church tower,” he said, nodding out the window, “is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the bell ringer lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding then a dong. Slower and slower until there’s a final dong and it stops.

“I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive someone, we take our hand off the rope. But if we’ve been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn’t be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They’re just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.”

And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversation. But the force—which was my willingness in the matter—had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at last stopped altogether.

If we can learn to forgive others as God forgave us, then we also need to learn to forgive ourselves too. I was chatting to Marilyn yesterday and she told me she often adds an additional line to the Lord’s prayer. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive others who sin against us, and help me forgive myself for all my past failures too.

RT Kendall wrote in his book *Total forgiveness*,



He also said “When you totally forgive your enemy, you have crossed over into the supernatural realm.”

The ability to forgive is one of the surest evidences of the Holy Spirit’s activity in a person’s life, because without God’s empowering presence, true total forgiveness may be an impossible ask. But thankfully the Holy Spirit is all too willing to come and fill and help those who ask him. So perhaps if you know you need God’s forgiveness yourself, or if you are struggling to forgive others or if indeed you are struggling to forgive yourself, then today let’s ask the Holy Spirit to come into our situation and pour out his mighty power of forgiveness.