



## Forgiveness

### Matt 18:21-35

*"I have done my best to provide a balanced view of John and our life together so that the Greek court is aware of the troubled times in both John's life and our relationship together.*

*"This result, albeit somewhat unexpected, has left me feeling that Liam lost his young life for nothing. I accept that an act in a moment of complete madness was uncharacteristic of John but to have done this to our children was unforgivable." (wife of John Hogan who killed his son Liam in a bout of mental illness).*

As you look at words like this – unforgivable – you maybe can understand how she feels. How is it possible to forgive when such an awful thing has happened? Well, it does happen. Consider the story of Corrie Ten Boom who was put in a concentration camp called Ravensbrück because she and her family sheltered Jews. It was a forced labour camp where she was humiliated and degraded. The rest of her family died in the camp, including her sister who died in her arms.

*This was especially true in the delousing shower where the women were ogled by the leering guards. But she made it through that hell. And eventually she felt she had, by grace, forgiven even those fiends who guarded the shower stalls.*

*So she preached forgiveness, for individuals, for all of Europe. She is remembered for quotes like the one on the screen. She preached it one Sunday, in Munich. After the sermon, greeting people, she saw a man come toward her, hand outstretched: "Ja, Fraulein, it is wonderful that Jesus forgives all our sins, just as you say." She remembered his face; it was the leering, lecherous, mocking face of an SS guard of the shower stall.*

*Her hand froze at her side. She could not forgive. She thought she had forgiven all. But she could not forgive when she met a guard, standing in the solid flesh in front of her. Ashamed, horrified at herself, she prayed: "Lord, forgive me, I cannot forgive." And as she prayed she felt forgiven, accepted, in spite of her shabby performance as a famous forgiver.*

*Her hand was suddenly unfrozen. The ice of hate melted. Her hand went out. She forgave as she felt forgiven. (as recounted by Lewis B Smedes)*

Corrie Ten Boom forgave what seemed unforgivable. For that story, I could add many other amazing stories of Christians who managed to forgive in "unforgivable" circumstances.

*Marghanita Laski (humanist) "What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have nobody to forgive me."*

Over the last two weeks we looked at the way in which sin destroys lives. It destroys our eternal future, it destroys our relationships and it can destroy everything that is precious to us. And unforgiveness is one of the most destructive of relationships and personal character.

God's character is to forgive. Here's an old quote I picked up: *If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator; If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist; If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist; If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer; But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Saviour.*

God is a righteous God and must judge sin – BUT he is also a loving God and a forgiving God – so he sent Jesus to die for us. And that's the amazing thing – God Himself took the penalty for our sins so that He can offer us forgiveness and new life if we are prepared to take the step of accepting His offer of forgiveness.

And we saw last week how God calls on us to repent – to turn around – and to follow Jesus. After all, if we accept His offer of forgiveness, we should surely not want to do the same things that required Him needing to forgive us in the first place. Why do I say all this and prolong this subject for another week? Because there is one area of sin and being sinned against that lies at the heart of what it means to be forgiven by God – and that's forgiveness.

Let's read a passage of Scripture. We're going to read part of it together. It's from Matthew 6:

*Matt 6:9 (TEV) This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven: May your holy name be honored; 10 may your Kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

*11 Give us today the food we need. 12 Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. 13 Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One.' "*

*14 "If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you.*

*15 But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.*

Look at those two last verses (14-15). *"If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.* Is that tough or what? And it is repeated time and again by Jesus in various parts of the gospels. Forgiveness is important for healthy Christian living. If we had read the whole of chapter 18 of Matthew this morning we would have seen how imperative Jesus was about how we must forgive one another. It isn't a piece of advice, it isn't a good idea. It's a command.

We sang earlier of how excited we should be that God forgives! We're forgiven! *A Sunday School teacher had just concluded her lesson and wanted to make sure she had made her point. She said, "Can anyone tell me what you must do before you can obtain forgiveness of sin?" There was a short pause and then, from the back of the room, a small boy spoke up. "Sin," he said.*

Bits & Pieces, May, 1991.

God is loving and freely forgives. But the command is that we MUST do the same. In Matthew 18 Jesus stresses that in disputes with our fellow believers, we should always be prepared to forgive and win our brother over. In verse 21 Peter sees the clear implications of winning over someone who offends you - probably someone who has got it in for you. You forgive them so they are not lost in relationship to you or to the fellowship. But what if they offend you again. And again and again. How often do you put up with what they're like?

Has anyone offended you? Maybe it has been something that has been said or done. Maybe it was me! The offended are called on to forgive - to win the brother over. It's one sided. *"Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?"* I'm offended but I make the move. I try to bring reconciliation and a real relationship with somebody. It's personally costly because the implication is that the forgiveness is unconditional. My brother offends me but I make the move of peace to win him over.

Shocking stuff. It must have surprised the disciples. "Surely we have a right to be indignant when someone sins against us? It's their fault. They deserve what's coming to them! Hard luck. I'll be glad if I never see them again! "

"What are you saying. I should forgive them. ME?" Yes - that's what the passage says. You can almost hear this going around the disciples. "I should forgive. And they do it again and I should forgive. Surely there must be a limit to my patience!?" Peter states the obvious!" *"Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?"*

Sensible question Peter - for a change. If we are meant to forgive the people that have so offended us, someone who has hurt us - surely there must be the limit to the amount of times we are prepared to forgive them. There was in Jewish tradition - three times. Three strikes and you're out. Surely that's reasonable. If it's not how about doubling it and adding one. "How about seven, Lord?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Or I prefer the AV - Seventy times seven. As we have said in these situations before. Jesus is not establishing law here by saying that the amount of times we should persevere should be carefully counted until we reach 490 times. Most people

would lose count anyway. Its a piece of hyperbole. Seven times? No seventy times seven - in other words, we should be prepared to forgive somebody as many times as it takes even if it goes beyond counting.

Think of those who have offended against you in this church, or maybe in your previous churches. You can't stand them. When somebody offends us, and we don't resolve it - then it eats away at us. In fact unforgiveness just binds us up. It locks us in chains. Some of the most miserable Christians I have ever clapped eyes on have been people who have major forgiveness issues. Usually it started with something relatively innocuous but built into a major issue that robbed them of their joy and robbed them of a dynamic relationship with God. Unforgiveness is destructive. It destroys the one who is unforgiving even if the original offence wasn't their fault. More on this in a moment.

Why should Jesus be so emphatic that we should forgive - again and again and again! The parable of the unforgiving servant helps us here as it puts forgiveness in perspective.

Here was this servant in the parable Jesus told - in massive debt. He deserved what was coming to him. He owed ten thousand talents. The number used is Myriad - a myriad - the largest Greek number. How much money was that. Difficult to tell. You'll have all heard about the French rogue trader who managed to put the Societe Generale bank in Paris £3 billion in debt. On the one hand we're all probably pretty unsympathetic for the bank who were stupid enough to make it that easy for a trader to waste their money, but the trader, if found guilty of mismanaging the account will be thrown into prison.

And this servant was in much the same position. It was a massive sum he owed and as he was a servant, I suspect it was His king's money too!. The king had a right to be angry and deal harshly with him. The king ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. Tough but that was the law. The servant begs for mercy 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' Not a chance Mr Servant. Get real.

This is where the story gets remarkable The servant's king took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. He could not pay, but he was shown mercy.

Why does Jesus tell us this story? Because we are like that servant. We sinned. However much we might beg, the wages of sin is death. We couldn't pay. But in His mercy, the price has been paid on Calvary. Our sins are forgiven because what Jesus did on Calvary. I'm forgiven! I'm forgiven! I'm forgiven! Hallelujah!

What's this got to do with my forgiveness to others? *28 "Then the man went out and met one of his fellow servants who owed him a few pounds. He grabbed him and started choking him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he said. 29 His fellow servant fell down and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!" 30 But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt.*

A few quid wasn't much and it was payable. But the first servant wasn't forgiving and threw him in prison. He had been forgiven a huge debt but he wanted his paltry couple of quid!

*31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were very upset and went to the king and told him everything. 32 So he called the servant in. "You worthless slave!" he said. "I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. 33 You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you." 34 The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount."*

Quite right too. Serves him right. He was forgiven much but he was not prepared to forgive a little. The parable is obvious. We have been forgiven much. All those times we have offended God with our persistent sins, not just before we became Christians. What about the sins of the past week. Those words we shouldn't have said. Those malicious thoughts we shouldn't have thought. That accusation we shouldn't have made. And what do we find. If we confess our sins, God is able and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. I'm forgiven! Hallelujah!

So I'm forgiven. You're forgiven. No longer headed for a lost eternity. So what about that person you can't forgive - or won't forgive. God has forgiven you. So why haven't you forgiven them? Why?

But you say.. I can't. What they did was "unforgivable". God is prepared to forgive you all your unforgivables. Why not. You see, I could understand if someone had killed your son or your daughter, your wife or your husband. I could understand if you felt that way if you've been the victim of physical or sexual abuse. But we've heard from the story of Corrie Ten Boom, that it is possible to forgive even the most horrible offences against us. Sometimes it's fast, sometimes it's slow, but God can give us the grace and strength by His Spirit to forgive.

And if you are trying to struggle with forgiveness for something horrible like that this morning, there are people here who can help you, because God wants to free you from that burden of unforgiveness this morning because in doing so, you'll find He removes the hurt and gives you freedom. Otherwise, things will just fester on.

But I also know that most of us will never have to struggle with that intensity of hurt. In fact, what right have any of us to be offended at some of the things which do offend us when we look at the case of Corrie Ten Boom or the Hogans. Most unforgiveness amongst Christians and in churches is pretty petty stuff and Matthew 6:14 is especially for us.

*Matt 6: 14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

Pretty clear isn't it. Understand this. If you are unforgiving, God is angry. Not just a bit miffed. Or it kind of doesn't matter. He's angry! You've been forgiven much. You deserve to have that anger aimed in your direction. If you harbour unforgiveness and you haven't felt God's anger then you'd better repent quick. Or maybe you have felt God's anger?

Harsh words. But true words. Do you want to know God's blessing in your life? Do you want to feel His presence in your life? If there is unforgiveness, I would be surprised if you are finding really deep blessing and a real sense of God's presence. Quite the reverse. Maybe you are in turmoil and you can't understand why. After all you come to Church. But with unforgiveness or resentment? The shackles are on and satan's got you!

You want forgiveness from God. Then forgive others. Amy Carmichael once said this: *If I say, "Yes, I forgive, but I cannot forget," as though the God, who twice a day washes all the sands on all the shores of all the world, could not wash such memories from my mind, then I know nothing of Calvary love.*

If you understand what Christ has done for you, then deal with it. Deal with it now! The message is clear. *34 The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount." 35 And Jesus concluded, "That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."*

It's tough, it's uncompromising. But what does it mean that God won't forgive us; that He'll treat us the way the king treated the unforgiving servant? I could give you lots of theories about what those words mean. I'm not going to go into that because whatever, the implications are bad. If you're unforgiving this morning I really don't recommend you remain in unforgiveness a minute longer!

So do you have someone you just can't forgive this morning? Perhaps they did something really awful to you. You feel you can't forgive. God gives us the grace to do that. Start the process this morning. Pray. Share with someone and see the healing and freedom that Jesus can bring into your life.

Have you fallen out with someone in your family this morning? Perhaps it's with someone in the church. Come on. Get it into perspective. Deal with your unforgiveness. Ask God to give you His grace. Go to whoever you have the problem with, make your peace. Forgive them. And see the peace and freedom that God gives you!