

## FORGIVENESS - WITH OR WITHOUT

Pentecost 15 Year A

Ex. 14:19-31; Ps. 114; Rom. 14:1-12; Mt. 18:21-35

Gladstone 13/09/2020

---

I have heard it said that forgiveness is a virtue, but I say that for a church that desires to fit in with the secular world, it is a curse. For the very nature of forgiveness cuts directly across human wisdom and sets Christianity apart from the secular world.

Thomas Szasz, an Hungarian-born American psychiatrist, lecturer and writer, once wrote, “The stupid neither forgive nor forget; the naive forgive and forget; the wise forgive but do not forget.”

This statement sums up, I believe, the world’s understanding of the nature of forgiveness. For Christians, however, naivety is really the evidence of humility.

Last week (for those who were here), we looked at the way Christians should respond to another member of the church who commits a sin against them. We are given guidelines for procedure to ensure the integrity of the church. We are told that church discipline should be carried out in a spirit of humility—a humility that is drawn from the knowledge that we too were once lost in sin, were found and restored by God. We also learned that the primary purpose of church discipline was to restore the sinner to the fellowship of the church.

But what happens when the sin continues? What happens when time after time after time, the person, who has repented and been restored to the fellowship of the church, repeatedly sins against you. This question is the natural progression from all that has been spoken of in chapter 18 up to this point. And this was the concern that Peter had. This is the very natural question that all of us have asked or implied at one time or another—and probably quite often.

The question is: How often should you forgive a person who continues to sin against you? Note the personal element! It could be quite easy to say, “Forgive every time,” if you’re not the one who has been sinned against—if you are not the one hurting because you have been offended. Forgiveness. What is forgiveness and what does it have to do with the nature of the gospel?

Well, there are two kinds of forgiveness illustrated in the passage before us: forgiveness that is exercised without a spirit of grace and forgiveness that is exercised with immeasurable grace.

What is the mark of the first scenario—forgiveness without grace? Well, the first thing we note here is that forgiveness without grace keeps a record of wrongs.

Many years ago, before I was ordained as a minister, I happened to be the chairperson of a particular Uniting church on the Gold Coast, where we were living at the time. On one occasion we were confronted with a person had a complaint about the minister. Note that this is well before the UCA had the kinds of regulations it has in place now for such matters.

Mrs. Jones (not her real name), a paragon of virtue—at least according to herself—was at odds with the minister of the congregation for certain perceived offences he had delivered against her and so brought a complaint to the elders council (as it was then). She was also talking to others and causing dissent, raising support for her cause. Subsequently, she was interviewed by the elders council with a view to some kind of reconciliation and forgiveness. At the end of the discussion, Mrs. Jones declared she had indeed forgiven the minister for her perceived hurts. However we discovered that she still kept a record—in a book—of every perceived offence the minister had made against her.

Rabbinic law suggested that you should forgive up to three times. Thereafter you could be excused for not forgiving. Obviously, so the argument went, if the person continued in their sin, they are not really repentant. So Peter, with his generous heart increases the number to seven times—a sort of biblical perfect number. “Should I forgive the person who sins against me seven times?” Jesus’ answer, however, must surely have taken the wind out of his sails. Commentators differ on the amount Jesus states. Some say seventy times, while others state that it should be read as seventy times seven or (if my maths is correct) 490 times.

Either way, it is not really the number that’s important. Jesus is only using this very high number, which ever one it is, in a metaphoric sense. Jesus is not making a comment on how many times one should forgive a person who sins against you—he is saying something about forgiveness itself. You see, the difference between Peter’s proposal of forgiving seven times and Jesus’ answer, has nothing to do with mathematics, but with the nature of forgiveness. Forgiveness cannot be derived by means of a mathematical formula, because whoever keeps a record of the sins of another has never really forgiven at all. They are only biding their time.

Jesus, in his answer to Peter, takes the discussion out of the legal sphere and puts it into the evangelistic and pastoral sphere, for true forgiveness is enveloped in a spirit of grace and mercy.

Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant, highlights the fact that while forgiveness without grace keeps a record, forgiveness with grace forgets the offence.

Let’s think about King David for a moment.

- King David, as you all know, had an affair with his neighbour’s wife when he should have been out with his troops.
- Subsequently the woman became pregnant.

- He then tried to cover it up so that her husband would think the baby was his, which didn't work.
- And so he had her husband killed and then took her into his own home.

In Psalm 51 we see the record of King David's contrition.

- He recognised that his sin was against God – "Against You, you only have I sinned" – note the use of the superlative.
- One might ask, Is his repentance enough? The answer appears to be Yes!
- Could he ever hope to atone for such an abuse of power? – No!
- David was still left with the consequences of his sin. We see this throughout OT history.
- An yet God continued to use him.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is an allegory to illustrate the nature and significance of forgiveness. In the context of the chapter, the debts represent sin, the king, as we discover, represents God and the slaves, of course, represent us.

The first slave was probably not someone who swept the floor or took out the garbage, but someone vested with a considerable amount of financial responsibility within the kingdom. Like so many public servants, he was probably promoted beyond his capacity to handle the job, for it would seem that over a period of time, he had lost a considerable amount of his master's money. So much so, that it was impossible for him to repay the debt.

The second slave owed the first slave a small amount, in comparison; yet it was still significant enough to warrant the need for time to pay.

The parable draws a contrast between two debts. The first debt is impossible to repay. There could only be one of two outcomes: condemnation or mercy. Either the king must condemn the servant and get whatever he can from the sale of his property and possessions, including selling off his family into slavery—or show mercy by forgiving the servant his debt. Notice that the servant did not ask for forgiveness, only time to pay—which of course was impossible. The second debt, in comparison, is trifling and could be repaid without much sufferance at all.

The king, probably in a rare moment of compassion, knowing that there would be nothing that could be gained by imprisoning the servant, showed mercy and forgave him his debt—completely wrote it off (and there wasn't even a tax advantage—the taxes all went to him anyway). With the display of such mercy, then, it's understandable that the other servants were concerned at the forgiven slave's behaviour when he met another slave who owed him a small amount of money. His attitude displayed that he did not fully grasp the impact the graciousness of the king, nor did he have any feelings of gratitude for being let off the hook so easily. His anger and ferocity toward the other slave, while legal, was totally irrational and inexcusable. Hence the king's reaction when he heard of the event.

Forgiveness with grace forgets the offence—it does not keep a record of wrongs. By and large, the parable speaks for itself. It illustrates the true nature of forgiveness but while ever it remains just an illustration, the reader does not get the full force of what Jesus is trying to say.

And what he is trying to say here, is that the primary pattern for forgiveness is found in Christ himself.

Underlining this parable, is the truth concerning the nature of God's forgiveness for the sin of humanity. It's the truth about the gospel—that God sent his own Son to die on a cross for your sin and for my sin. It's the gospel of grace. It's the gospel that gives freedom from the eternal consequences of sin and restores us in our relationship with God. It's the gospel in which God says, "I forgive you". The nature of forgiveness is the nature of the gospel. Forgive others as you have been forgiven by God.

It is impossible to repay the debt that we owe to God, who sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die on our behalf. How can you repay God for what he has done for you? Just as the slave could not repay the king for the vast amount of money he had lost, neither can you or I repay the debt that Christ paid for our sin. Yet God has forgiven us.

We have been forgiven an enormous debt by God and when God forgives, God forgets. The slate is washed clean and we have the freedom to start over again. Our response to this forgiveness is to worship God in gratitude and show the same mercy and forgiveness to others. So when someone sins against us—and they will—what are we to do? We are to forgive them, having the same attitude as God, who forgives us all our sins.

Forgiveness is not a feeling. Primarily it's an act of the will. It's the choice we make when we are confronted with the enormous grace of God. And there are also other benefits of forgiveness. The English writer, Hanna More once wrote, "A Christian will find it cheaper to pardon than to resent. Forgiveness saves us the expense of anger, the cost of hatred, the waste of spirits."

When we pray *The Lord's prayer*, we pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." The issue of forgiveness for Christians is so important for us to remember, that Jesus even included it in the model for prayer he gave his disciples.

So, finally, love, as you have been loved. Show mercy, as you have been shown mercy. Forgive, as you have been forgiven—over and over and over again.

To our merciful God, be all glory honour, majesty and praise. Amen.