

Hazel Davis Sermon 13th Sept 2020

Matthew 18: 21-35

The Unforgiving Servant

“everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive”

CS Lewis

The parable of the unforgiving servant illustrates the principle in the Lord's prayer in an earlier chapter (Matt 6:12): *"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"* which is followed by Jesus saying, *"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses."* The parable of the unforgiving servant builds the theme of forgiveness. The parable shows the compassionate goodness and justice of God. It shows us that God is patient and merciful towards us and that we are expected likewise to be merciful to others too.

Jesus tells this parable in direct response to Peter's question: ²¹....*'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?'* Peter evidently has been thinking over the problem of forgiveness when an offence is repeated. A few verses before we find the teaching about what to do if someone causes an offence against you, ¹⁵ *"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."* Maybe Peter is thinking but what if they do it again and again? Surely forgiving them seven times is reasonable enough to forgive them? However, Jesus answers Peter: ²² ...*"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.* With this answer, Jesus is saying that we are to forgive as many times as it takes to win the offender. This is how many times God has and continues to forgive us.

This is not to say we must forgive those who are hurting us today and let it carry on – forgiveness is not allowing abusive relationships to continue, on the contrary, if we are in a harmful situation, or we know of someone who is, we must tell someone we trust and get the help and support needed to protect and remove ourselves and/or others

from that harmful situation. It is imperative that you speak to someone you trust about it and allow them to help you.

In this parable, it is easy to relate to the servant falling on their knees crying out for patience feeling like there is no hope. I am sure we can think of times when we have been in situations where we are unable to make up for those harsh words we said, to put right the unkind thing we did, no matter how hard we try we are not able to change what is past. But there is an everlasting hope, just as the king in the parable forgives the servant and sets him free, we are also set free by God's limitless forgiveness. When we hurt others and/or hurt ourselves through offensive thoughts and behaviours, God is patient and forgiving every time we acknowledge our faults. What a difference it would make if those we have hurt forgave us in the same way that God forgives us.

A wonderful example of the power of forgiveness is in our Old Testament reading Genesis 50: 15-21. The brothers are so grateful to Joseph for forgiving them for what they did to him. They weep with relief and gratitude. Joseph in his position of power could have withheld mercy and thrown them into prison if he wanted to, but his heart is open to reconciliation and forgiveness. His heart is full of faith in God. Joseph knows that God can and has turned the situation around for good. He and his brothers are reconciled, and this is good.

The story ends differently for the servant in the parable, the servant having received mercy from the king is walking around free, but we are shocked to find that he has amnesia! The forgiven servant's response is truly outrageous. He has totally forgotten that he was forgiven for what he had done and instead he has become judge and jury to those around him. He uses physical violence and is deaf to his fellow servant's pleading. He refuses to forgive him the debt which, although a substantial sum, was nothing compared to the huge debt that he had been forgiven for. Understandably, we read that ³¹ *When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.* I am sure the king's response was greatly appreciated for those who had witnessed the injustice:

³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'

This parable shows us that it is possible for any one of us to forget what God has forgiven us for. It serves as a reminder of how important it is for us to remember that we need God's forgiveness as much today as we did yesterday because as soon as we forget, we will become hard-hearted and start to put limits and conditions on forgiving others. And when we are doing that we are no longer walking as freely as we could before God. Instead by withholding mercy through unforgiveness, we have taken God's place as a judge. By not forgiving others we abuse our position of power to judge them as though they are more undeserving of forgiveness than we are. Those who judge others by withholding mercy heap upon themselves their own judgment. But in Zechariah 7: 9 we are told that *"...to render true judgment is to show kindness and mercy to one another."*

How much we forgive others reveals what is in our hearts. We are tortured on the inside when we don't forgive each other. That's why when that particular person who has done something to hurt or offend us is in the same room as us, it makes our stomach turn or when you think of that someone or hear their name, you feel your jaw tighten with anger and we relive the incident that happened.....and this can go on and on for years and years until, we step down from our self-made judgment seat and forgive them, until we release them, which in turn releases us back into right relationship with God.

Let us use this time of quietness to open our hearts and remember all that God has forgiven us for and how free we are because of how generous and kind God is towards us. It is from this position of freedom that we can respond by asking the Holy Spirit:

Who do I need to ask for forgiveness?

Who do I need to forgive?

Amen