

Selected Parable from Matthew's Gospel

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Passages: Romans 14:1–14

Matthew 18:21–35

Today, we look at the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant from Matthew 18... And, of course, it's a very appropriate day for us to be studying this parable! Ten years, today, 4 hi-jacked airplanes were used as weapons against the USA, to bring down the Twin Towers in New York City and to cause huge damage to the Pentagon in Washington DC. Indeed, around the globe, people are calling it "**the Day that changed the World!**"

As I said, I think it's a very appropriate day to look at the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Why? Because the parable is all about **forgiveness**. But before we are too quick to apply this parable directly to 9/11, we need to understand its context. You see, just like the Parable of the Lost Sheep that we studied last week (which is also found in Matthew 18), the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant is not directly about how we, as Christians, relate to the world—it's **about our relationships in the church**. If you remember from last week, the Lost Sheep was a church member who had wandered astray from the flock. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was encouraging His sheep to reach out to that 'lost sheep' in love, doing everything possible to draw that person back into the fellowship of the church.

The same vision is at the heart of today's parable! Jesus wants unity in His church! Indeed, He wants His church to be a pure reflection of the unity seen in the Triune God as the church takes her place in the dance of life! And so, through the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Jesus strongly promotes the need for **forgiveness** in the church—It's only as the members of the church learn to forgive each other that the communal life of the church can truly prosper and be a reflection of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Turn with me to Matthew 18, verses 21.

Today's parable is introduced with an important question—Peter comes to Jesus and asks, “**Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?**” The key word here is ‘brother’. Peter is not asking about forgiving outsiders; he’s not asking about forgiving his enemies—he’s asking Jesus to tell him just exactly how many times he needs to forgive his brother... one of the other disciples! “Should I forgive him 7 times?”

That’s a good question! And, no doubt, Peter thinks he’s being quite generous when he suggests ‘7 times’! You see, many Rabbis of the day taught that it was only necessary to forgive another Jew 3 or 4 times— after that, you were no longer held accountable to forgive. The logic went like this: Forgiveness has to have its limits! If you never set a limit to forgiveness, people may take advantage of you— they may abuse your mercy and grace. By limiting the number of times you forgive a person, you are forcing that person to correct their wrong behaviour.

We still do the same thing today! I was talking to Pastor Stewart the other day about how, almost 8 years ago, a man in the Mandarin congregation quietly started borrowing money from various members. Of course, he promised to pay each one back, but when he didn’t come up with the money, like good Christians, they kept forgiving him. One day, however, he stopped coming to church. He disappeared! People were hurt...angry...upset. The debt went unpaid for many years.

Why did this story come out this week? Well, the man has re-appeared! He’s in Villawood Detention Centre—he has overstayed his visa. Furthermore, it has come out that this man has a gambling problem— that’s where all the money went. Now, I asked Stewart if he was going to visit this man? Stewart’s reply was simple: ‘Why would you visit him after what he has done? It would be a waste of time!’ The underlying message is clear: ‘There must be a limit to forgiveness. If you keep forgiving

someone, they will take advantage of you and never learn a lesson.”

Now, before we judge this situation, I want you to stop and ask yourself one question—Do you operate in this same way? Do you ever withhold forgiveness in order to teach someone a lesson? **I think we all do at times!** When you think of it in this light, Peter’s offer to forgive someone ‘7 times’ is quite generous!

But listen to what Jesus says—“**I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.**” (Some translators believe it should read ‘70 times 7’.) Whatever the exact number is here, the idea is obvious—Jesus is saying, “Don’t set a limit! Don’t keep count! Don’t ever stop forgiving your brother/sister!”

And why not? The idea (borne out by the parable that follows) is simply that **this is the way that God has forgiven you—70 times 7!** And since God has forgiven (and still continues to forgive), we must do the same for our brothers and sisters!

It’s here where today’s parable comes in. As with all His parables, Jesus tells it to aid us in our understanding of this difficult topic of forgiveness. And where does Jesus start? He starts with God! You see, the Master in the parable is, quite obviously, God. We, the church, are His servants—that is, we humbly recognise how much we owe Him. He supplies every breath we take; He’s the source of life and the ultimate Force that holds this universe together! **We owe Him everything!**

The parable, however, asks us to imagine that one of us has forgotten this essential truth! Indeed, here’s a servant who (when God wants to settle accounts with him...whether through death or final judgment) not only resists God with weeping and cries of complaint, but who actually argues with God, saying, “Be patient with me and I will pay back everything that I owe you.”

What you see here is total self-delusion! For the fact is, there is no possible way for him to pay the Master what he owes! (10,000

talents is equivalent to millions of dollars!) And that’s exactly the point of the parable—**we are fools** if we think that we can ever pay back God for all that He’s given to us!

But it’s here that the parable takes an unexpected turn...at verse 27! Out of nowhere, the Master says to the servant, “**Keep it all! I forgive your debt to me. It is cancelled—written off!**”

Now, this may look like God has had a sudden change of heart. But that’s not the message of the Bible. From the days when God called Abraham to form a new nation, God’s forgiveness has always been revealed as **a central aspect of God’s character!** Here is just a few of the hundreds of references to God’s forgiveness found in the Old Testament.

- **Exodus 34:6–7** “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.
- **Numbers 14:18** “The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion.”
- **Psalms 86:5** You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.
- **Psalms 130:3–4** If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.

And we haven’t even opened the New Testament! The point is, God is forgiving and merciful—that is His eternal nature!

Getting back to the parable, then, it’s not that the Master has suddenly changed His mind and become merciful to His servant. It’s just that this particular servant had somehow forgotten this truth about His Master! That’s why, instead of leaning on the mercy and forgiveness of God, he tries instead to strike a bargain—**he offers to repay God!** The irony is, of course, that the money which he offers to God has ultimately come from God! That’s how much he has forgotten!

And the same can often be true for us! When you lose sight of God's grace and mercy, you have lost sight of one of the most fundamental definitions of being human! Without exception, every one of us depends on God's mercy and grace! Our very existence is dependent on Him! But once you lose sight of this truth, you can easily begin to think that you're the centre of the universe and that everyone owes you something in life. You begin to demand your rights and to exert (what you think is) your independence.

Isn't this what happens in today's parable? Even after the master lets him off the hook, this first servant turns around and exerts his rights over the second servant, mercilessly demanding that he pay back the debt owed to him (...even though it's miniscule in comparison to the debt that he owes to the master!) By losing sight of the Master's truly generous nature, he has developed a distorted view of himself and his own importance. That's why he can justify treating another person (a fellow servant) with disdain.

In the end, this is the central point of the parable—It's about community! One church made up of servants, all with equal standing, gathered together by a mercifully generous and forgiving God! **If** we lose this central focus on God and His true nature as He graciously welcomes us into His Triune community, **then** we will lose sight of our responsibilities towards each other (as equals) and end up destroying what God is building...namely, His church! That is why we must never stop forgiving one another. That is why we must continually develop this habit of grace, forgiving each other as God has forgiven us! For it is as brothers and sisters in Christ that we are called, as one, to bear the family resemblance ... to reflect the image of the **Father** (the eternally merciful One) and **the Son** (the recklessly gracious One), who, in the power of Spirit, draws us into one cosmic family!

Since they have so graciously included us in their fellowship, the only debt that we can ever truly re-pay is to live out in our communal life in a way that reflects the divine unity.

L. Gregory Jones, in his book entitled Embodying Forgiveness, writes: “Through our practices of Trinitarian community, we attempt to grasp how, in diverse ways, we have (all) become complicit in breaking apart and further dividing God’s harmonious Creation. In doing so, we begin to unlearn those patterns of destructiveness as we also begin to learn (slowly, fitfully, and painfully) the patterns and habits of God’s forgiveness through holy living. This is part of what it means to practice the craft of forgiveness.”

Indeed, as we practice forgiveness in Christian community in the **present**, we are enabled to look with expectation towards that **future** day when our heavenly fellowship will be perfected in the fullness of God’s grace...in a universal community of love in which there will no longer be any need to forgive. **What we do today, as we forgive each other, is a window on eternity!**

And that’s why the forgiveness that we’re commanded to have towards each other (70 times 7) has a very strong effect on how we relate to the world outside the church? You see, today is the 10th anniversary of attacks on the USA, and the way that the Christian church forgives one another should have had an incredible impact on how we view those horrible events, 10 years ago. The fact that we’re a community of forgiveness...a living window on eternity... should have projected the church into the forefront of actions towards peace and reconciliation. Sadly, the Christian President of the USA, in consultation with others who called themselves Christians, chose the path of war! Churches around the world stood behind them, in nationalistic fervour and pride, calling for the downfall of foreign powers as if they were our real enemy. We, the people of forgiveness, should have been known in the world by our forgiveness towards others....70 times 7! And now, tens years on, I think we all know that we made a bad choice! An article by Simon Mann in Saturday’s Sydney Morning Herald tries to calculate the cost:

The plot, according to bin Laden, cost less than \$US500,000 to stage, but property damage alone was put at more than \$US100 billion and ensuing economic losses beyond \$US2 trillion.

Then, the wars: 10 years on, the US still has more than 90,000 soldiers deployed in Afghanistan, while 45,000 remain in Iraq (though no longer in combat roles); the former reportedly costs \$US10 billion a month. Overall, the cost of the two conflicts has been estimated by the Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz and fellow academic Linda Bilmes, of Harvard University, to be nearing \$US5 trillion, including billions in development aid invested to win hearts and minds on the ground.

Their study calculated future disability payments and healthcare costs of veterans alone could climb to \$US900 billion, while the "social costs, reflected in veteran suicides (which have topped 18 a day in recent years) and family break-ups, are incalculable".

Ten years on and we all know the reality-- Revenge is costly!

Peter asks Jesus, "**Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother?**" Yes, that's a question about relationships inside the church. But, ultimately, if the church lives by the rule of forgiveness, you can only imagine the impact we will have on an unforgiving world!

To the glory of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen!