

Forgiveness in the Kingdom - Matthew 18

Series: Matthew

Date: 15 March 2026; 4th Sunday in Lent

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 103, Ephesians 4.17-5.2

On the 1st of February 2020, 7 kids were walking down a quiet suburban street in Sydney on their way to get an ice cream to celebrate their cousin's birthday. Out of nowhere, Samuel Davidson, a drunk and drug-affected driver, lost control of his car and struck the children. 4 children were killed, 3 siblings and their cousin. In the week after this unfathomable tragedy, their parents Danny and Leila Abdallah released a statement that read.

“We forgive the driver that killed our innocent children. His actions will be met before the earthly and heavenly judge. We have decided, in our hearts to forgive him – for the sake of our children and more so for Christ's sake.”

“Our faith in Jesus Christ remains the foundation of our family and we believe it will continue to help us through this difficult time. Each day that passes is a day closer to the day we are reunited with our angels. We will look toward this moment; not backwards at yesterday's pain.”

Today we're looking at Forgiveness. Forgiveness at the heart of what Jesus came to do. He came to die for the forgiveness of our sins. Forgiveness is at the heart of how he calls us to live. It's what we pray in the Lord's prayer: “forgive us our sins and we forgive those who sin against us”. Forgiveness starts with small things. But it's a weighty topic because we can suffer grave wounds that make it almost impossible to forgive.

Forgiveness raises big questions for us. What about justice? What happens when I can't forgive because the hurt is too great? What if the other person doesn't repent? Do I still need to forgive them? Every time someone comes to me with a question about forgiveness, I know I'm going to hear a pretty heavy story. That may be you this morning as we come to this topic. I want to say that forgiveness opens the door for healing and hope, for those being forgiven and for those doing the forgiving. Forgiveness is the secret power at the heart of the Christian faith. Well, it's not that secret actually! But our weak and failing attempts at forgiveness draw on the infinite well of forgiveness that God offers us in Jesus.

This morning we'll look at Jesus' parable, and then we'll look at those questions I raised, and how we can forgive. Let's dive in.

Peter comes to Jesus with a question. “How many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Peter knows Jesus’ teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, “If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

He wants to know, surely there is a limit? So Jesus tells him a story. This is what God’s kingdom is like.

There was a king who wants to settle accounts with his servants. One servant owed him 10 thousand talents. A talent was worth about 20 years of a labourer’s wages. So 10,000 talents is basically an impossibly large sum, billions of dollars. Because he couldn’t pay, the king ordered him thrown in prison and his family sold to pay the debt.

At this the servant fell on his knees before the king. “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything I owe.” It’s an absurd claim. There’s no way he could repay the king, but he pleads for his life. The king takes pity on him, cancels the debt and lets him go.

Let’s pause and take a step back. Who do the characters in this story represent? The king is clearly God. The servant is us. Peter. You. Me. Our sin, the things we wreck through our selfishness, lying, greed, malice, envy, laziness, lust, fighting, stealing, cheating, mocking, cowardice, whatever, are offences against God and those made in his image, our neighbours and ourselves, that incur a debt with God. And the picture Jesus gives here is that this is unpayable. We might plead that we can work this off, but that is laughable.

But God sees our plight. He is moved with pity. The word comes from the noun for inward parts. It means to feel it in your guts. This is how God feels about us. He is moved with gut wrenching compassion for us in the mess we find ourselves in. And so what does he do? Cancel our debt. This is what forgiveness is. It first names that a wrong has been done. There is something that needs forgiving. But then it cancels the debt owed. It no longer hangs over our heads. He does not hold it against us.

And did you notice, who bears the cost of forgiveness here? The king was owed 10 thousand talents. In cancelling the debt, he’s not getting that back. It is the king who absorbs the cost. And so it is that on the cross we see God bearing the cost of our forgiveness in the death of Christ, the eternal Son of God, dying in our place that we might know God’s forgiveness.

It's an outrageous, extravagant, immeasurable, undeserved gift of mercy to us, all because God loves us. It's the kind of gift that transforms your life. Before, the four walls of prison were choking out the sun. Now you are free to live again.

What does the servant do with this extraordinary grace that he has been shown? The servant went out and, it seems, almost immediately, found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. It's about 3 months wages. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

His fellow servant, (it's so interesting Jesus keeps emphasising how the two servants are on the same level before the king. Anyway), his fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay it back." It's exactly the same as the first servant. The only difference is that this second actually could pay him back.

But he refused. He threw the man in prison until he could pay his debt. The other servants see this and are outraged. They tell the king. The king hauls the servant before him again. "You wicked servant," he said, "I cancelled *all* that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" And so in anger he hands him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed.

And Jesus finishes, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

It's so straightforward isn't it? We owe God an unpayable debt. Out of his great mercy he has cancelled our debt. So when people wrong us, we should extend the same forgiveness we've received to them.

But boy that is hard.

Sometimes it's because of our own pride. We've been hurt. We are innocent. They are guilty. They deserve punishment. We don't want to let it go. We want to get even. We want to give the other person a taste of their own medicine. We can nurse resentment and bitterness and imagine creative ways to make them pay. This is where a desire for justice so easily spills over into revenge. Did you notice how the servant almost seeks out the guy who owes him money, and then when he finds him he grabs him and chokes him. This is not just repaying a debt, it's a violent impulse for revenge.

There's something crooked in us that makes us want to extract payment with interest. But this creates a cycle of revenge and violence. The Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, whose father was tortured by the Yugoslavian communist regime, writes, "To triumph fully, evil needs two victories, not one. The first victory happens when an evil deed is perpetrated; the second victory, when evil is returned. After the first victory, evil would die if the second victory did not infuse it with new life."¹

In the 4th chapter of the Bible we read the tragic story where out of envy Cain murders his brother Abel. God curses him to be a restless wanderer. Cain fears that someone will find him and kill him, and so God says to him, "Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over." Five generations later Cain descendent Lamech says to his wives,

'Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words.

I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me.

If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times."²

It's a strange story, but Lamech shows what a world without forgiveness looks like. A culture of remembering wrongs, nursing grievances, and an endless cycle of revenge and violence.

When Jesus says we should forgive seventy-seven times, I used to think that this was a way of saying, "unlimited forgiveness". I think that's true, but in preparing this sermon one of the commentators I read suggested that Jesus' words are in deliberate contrast to Lamech's unlimited vengeance. I like that. It shows us how forgiveness is vital to our health as human communities. Lamech shows us the way of the world is vengeance. Jesus shows us the way of his kingdom is forgiveness.

Last year we saw that choice in stark contrast at the funeral of Charlie Kirk, a Christian conservative political activist and evangelist who was assassinated while speaking at a university. At the funeral Charlie's wife Erika said, "That man, that young man – I forgive him. I forgive him because it was what Christ did, and it is what Charlie would do." By contrast, when President Trump spoke he said, "[Charlie] did not hate his opponents. He wanted the best for them. That's where I disagreed with Charlie. I hate my opponent, and I don't want the best for them."

¹ Quoted in Clare Boyd-Macrae 'To forgive is a strength not a weakness', *SMH* 8.2.2020
<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/to-forgive-is-a-strength-not-a-weakness-so-all-power-to-the-abdallah-family-20200206-p53yi9.html>

² Genesis 4.23-24

Forgiveness opens the door to healing for individuals, for families, even for nations. One of the questions that is often asked when it comes to forgiveness is, "What about justice?" Doesn't forgiveness undermine justice?" I think this is to misunderstand forgiveness. As we've seen, forgiveness is not excusing a wrong. To forgive something you must name it as the evil it is. The pursuit of justice and speaking the truth are necessary. Forgiveness also expects a change of behaviour. It says, "That was wrong, and I don't want you to do that in the future."

The context for this parable in Matthew 18 is helpful here. In verses 6-9 Jesus warns, "If anyone causes one of these little ones - those who believe in me - to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." This is a warning that those who sin against others are accountable to God. There is a day when God will judge evil, and the truth of what has been done will be laid bare and all will be held to account. Jesus' words here are of special comfort to those who have suffered grievous wrongs as children, and a warning for those who would do such wickedness.

Verses 15-17 are also helpful. Here outlines the basics of conflict resolution. When someone sins against you, "go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen, you have won them over. But if they won't listen, take one or two others along..." This is about naming a wrong that has been done, and offering the other person a chance to own what they have done, to say sorry, and to commit to change. In other words, to repent. True repentance involves contrition. A grief over the offense that has been committed, over the hurt that this has caused, and over the fact that you did it. Genuine repentance also involves a willingness to restore to the victim what the wrongdoing took away. This may not be possible, but an act of restitution is a token that repentance is genuine.

Forgiveness is accompanied by an expectation that this will be met by repentance. Likewise, someone may be deeply grieved and truly repentant over what they have done and seek forgiveness, and this may be withheld. Without both forgiveness and repentance, the relationship cannot be healed. But when the hand of forgiveness is met with the hand of repentance, there is the embrace of reconciliation.

Now it's ok when trust has been broken to forgive but also draw some clear boundaries. This may be necessary to care for yourself. It also signals to the offender that change is necessary. It is not loving to let them keep doing the wrong thing! And there are times when people have to face the consequences of what they have done, even when there is forgiveness.

What if the other person doesn't repent? Forgiveness can be offered, but it can also be rejected. Repentance is how you receive forgiveness. Without repentance forgiveness is stuck somewhere between the forgiver and the offender. Again, Miroslav Volf is helpful here. In his book, *Free of Charge*, he writes,

“If they imitate the forgiving God, forgivers will keep forgiving, whether the offenders repent or not. Forgivers’ forgiving is not conditioned by repentance. The offenders’ *being forgiven*, however, is conditioned by repentance ... Without repentance ... the offenders will remain unforgiven, in that they are untouched by that forgiveness.”³

People may refuse to repent because they reject the condemnation of their actions implied in forgiveness: “I haven’t done anything wrong.” Or worse still, because they don’t care that they have wronged you. But often it is because they are too ashamed of what they have done and too afraid of the consequences if they admit what they’ve done. And this is where forgiveness can help make repentance possible. It says I can truly acknowledge and take responsibility for my sin, rather than trying to hide it or deny it, because I know our guilt will be lifted.⁴

This has been the case for Samuel Davidson. Danny Abdallah’s extraordinary forgiveness was transformative for him. Through a restorative justice program, Danny has been able to meet with Samuel. Amazingly, in a TV interview Danny said that “if it was up to me, I’d bring him out tomorrow.” But when Davidson was asked if he deserved to be released he said, “I don’t think I deserve that. It was an accident and I didn’t mean it, but I’m at fault and I’ve done that.”⁵ Through their relationship Samuel has repented, given his life to Christ and received God’s forgiveness. Witnessing their relationship, the reporter writes, “He’s eligible for parole in 10 years, but what Danny did in his amazing moments of forgiveness, set Samuel free. He may be locked in his cell 17 hours a day for the next decade, but his soul and spirit have been released by Danny.”⁶

What about when we find we can’t forgive because it’s too painful? Here, it’s helpful to remember that forgiveness is always a gift. We cannot demand forgiveness, we can only ask for it. God gives us his forgiveness. And we can ask him to help us forgive others. God’s

³ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, Zondervan, 2005: 183

⁴ *Free of Charge*, 185

⁵ <https://7news.com.au/spotlight/spotlight-exclusives/grieving-father-danny-abdallah-sits-down-with-samuel-davidson-five-years-after-he-killed-four-children-by-driving-drunk-c-19711464>

⁶ <https://thenightly.com.au/opinion/danny-abdallah-spotlight-special-what-grieving-dads-meeting-with-kids-killer-taught-me-about-forgiveness-c-19719713>

forgiveness is perfect. Even at our best we only forgive imperfectly. When we forgive, we are in fact participating in God's forgiveness. We pray because we need God to heal our wounds and we need his help to extend his grace. Forgiveness doesn't start with feeling goodwill towards the person who has wounded us. It starts with God's immeasurable forgiveness of us, given at the cost of his Son, and a choice to extend that forgiveness, however faulting, towards the offender.

Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch woman whose family hid Jews during the holocaust. She lost her father and sister in a concentration camp. After the war she wrote and spoke about forgiveness. On one occasion after a meeting one of her old prison guards came up to her and held out his hand asking for forgiveness. She said, "Can you forgive? I can't. But God can. You never so touch the ocean of God's love as when you forgive and love your enemies."