

Sunday 17 Sept 2023

Sermon on Forgiveness: Matthew 18:21-35

Preached by Norma Graham, St David's Church, Chelmer

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

The challenge of Forgiveness!

The gospel reading this morning found in Matthew chapter 18, is the fourth of Matthew's great collection of Jesus sayings that are given as a guide for life. We can also find more in Chapter 5-7, in Chapter 10 Jesus is instructing the disciples how to live, Chapter 13 has parables that refer to lessons for life. Here we are this morning in Chapter 18 with a command on Forgiveness. I would like to share with you some of my thoughts on this passage of Scripture.

Jesus is establishing God's new Covenant of loving one another. The way to forgiveness is love and reconciliation. When Jesus was asked about how to pray he gave them what today we call the Lord's Prayer. It is short and to the point and includes the confession - Forgive us our sins and the promise - As we forgive those who sin against us. In Matthew 6, v12 in the New Revised Standard Version that we usually use in the Anglican Church, the word debt is used instead of sins. Today we use the word sins as we find that it is more encompassing and understandable in our world today.

Many of us were brought up in a Christian household where the Lord's Prayer was used in the home every day. In fact you might have said it at morning assembly at school. I wonder how many times we have used that prayer every day - "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us?" If you have been saying it every day for 10 years that's 3650 times. If you are about 80 it would be 29,200 times. I wonder if it has sunk in yet? Is it automatic or do we really think about what we are saying?

At the beginning of the chapter the disciples ask Jesus "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus' response was that if you wish to enter the kingdom of heaven you must become humble as a little child. Jesus then addresses the issue of the temptation to sin and reproving others who sin against you.

This leads to Peter asking the question “How often should I forgive? As many as 7 times?” Jesus answers seventy times seven. It seems that if you are counting there is a problem with your attitude.

In 1 Corinthians 13: 5 we read that our attitude of love and forgiveness should not be “irritable and resentful”. That reminds me of an irritation I had with my husband when he would sometimes introduce me to one of his acquaintances as “The Wife”! Although I found it annoying he was introducing me in what was to him a special way and I know that he loved me - so that was OK, and I learned to put up with it as it didn’t happen too often.

Jesus then tells the parable of the Unforgiving Servant to illustrate the command on Forgiveness. There are 3 scenes the first is v24-27. The kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. These slaves were really more like servants or subordinate officials. One owed 10,000 talents. I found one explanation about the value of talents. It was equivalent in those days to the annual tax of King Herod plus the total annual tax of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria.

The total talents owed was such a large amount that the king said that the slave was to be sold - together with his family and everything that he owned. The slave pleaded for mercy from the king promising to pay it back. Despite this being highly unlikely the king released him and forgave his debt. This was such a generous, compassionate move by the king.

In verses 28-31 the same slave came across a fellow slave who owed him a hundred denarii. This was equivalent to a hundred days wages for a labourer - such a small amount compared with the 10,000 talents he had owed the king. But the first slave showed no mercy at all and threw him in prison. His attitude was quite outrageous. He showed no mercy or forgiveness, so the fellow slaves reported this treatment to the king. In response the king takes back the forgiveness shown to the first slave and handed him over to be tortured until he paid his debt.

As so often happens in the parables that Jesus told he exaggerates a situation in order to get the attention of the people listening, in the hope that they will understand the command, in this case - forgiveness.

Here we understand that it does not matter what wrong we might do, if we ask God , God will forgive us, BUT we are expected to forgive anyone who sins against us without holding a grudge or being resentful!!! Don't count like Peter wanted to do!! We might have met people who feel wronged and say they can't forgive and thereafter they become very bitter and feel tortured. I would suggest that this has happened to the first slave when the king took back the forgiveness and handed him over to be tortured.

I read where someone suggested a moral to this story - It can be argued that one who does not forgive others has never really asked and received God's forgiveness in the first place. It illustrates for us a terrible situation that could arise if we fail to forgive others as God forgives us.

As the Lord's Prayer says:

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

The command to forgive those who sin against us must be one of the most difficult commands to follow. How could you forgive the perpetrators of the twin towers disaster in New York if you had a beloved family member killed, or if a friend or relative has been badly treated or even murdered?

We live in community and it seems that wherever people live in the world whatever their culture we all want the same basic things - safe shelter, enough food to eat, and a loving caring community. But we are all very different as people. You only have to look at your own family where your siblings, or children or grandchildren can be very different from each other, even though they have the same biological parents. No wonder there are disagreements, arguments or irritations. Just look at a simple thing like sharing the family bathroom!

Unfortunately there are times when incidents are more serious. We hear far too often about abuse in the home where the partner, whether male or female is physically or emotionally abusive or controlling. Following the event they often apologise and promise that it won't happen again, but so often it does. We are told to forgive - even unconditionally! If the perpetrator says they are sorry but then continues with that same behaviour I am sure God would want us to remove ourselves or make sure the perpetrator is removed so that the behaviour does not continue. God does not want people to suffer.

The challenges of forgiveness are there in our everyday lives in small and big ways.

Confrontation sometimes has to happen when there is disagreement but we must try to keep in our minds that we are seeking forgiveness for the hurt and never seek revenge. Forget the phrase that you might mutter to yourself “You just wait I’ll get my own back”! If we are open and willing to forgive others, we will also be open to receive God’s love and forgiveness.

I quote.....

Forgiveness is an expression of love but it is not about regulating behaviour, as in the law, but rather about maintaining and nurturing relationships. It is really about how we regard ourselves and others as valued people worthy of dignity and love. End of quote.

God created in us the capacity to love and forgive and accept forgiveness from others that we might be drawn into relationship with each other and God. We have a choice on how to behave and how we respond to others - in fact it isn’t just to people but to the whole of creation. We are not perfect we make mistakes Jesus acknowledged this and so included in his prayer

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Amen.

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