

## Sermon 13 September 2020 (YouTube) Forgiveness

### Matthew 18:21-35

When Peter asked Jesus how often he ought to forgive his fellow human being, and then answered his own question by suggesting that he should forgive seven times, he thought he was being quite generous. And he did have background justification for this. It was the traditional teaching of the rabbis that a man should forgive someone who had committed an offence three times. After that, you weren't expected to forgive.

So Peter doubles that, adds one for good measure, and expects to be warmly commended. But instead Jesus replies that one should forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven! In other words, there is really no limit to our forgiveness. He then goes on to tell the story of the servant who is forgiven a large debt by his master and then goes away and deals mercilessly with a fellow servant who owes him a debt that is a fraction of the debt he was forgiven. He suffered the consequences.

This is a theme that runs through the New Testament and so lies at the heart of the teaching of Jesus. *'For there will be no mercy for you if you have not been merciful to others. But if you have been merciful, then God's mercy will win out over his judgment against you.'* James 2:13. And from the Beatitudes, *'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.'* Matthew 5:7.

One of the interesting aspects of this story is how very quickly the servant who owes his master a massive debt forgets about his own shortcomings and turns on his fellow servant with a vengeance and demands pay-back of a much smaller debt. How human is that? This is one of Jesus's prime lessons. Before we pass judgment or sentence on anyone, we need to have a good look at ourselves, at our own iniquities. It is something so many of us are guilty of.

I think this lies at the heart of the message in this story. We must accept that our faults are significant enough to warrant endless forgiveness, and that expecting endless forgiveness, we must in turn offer it to others.

There is a very important truth about forgiveness. It is only when we truly forgive someone who has hurt us in some way that we can move on. Not being able to forgive can eat us up, can smother our ability to be freely open and loving in any relationship, and especially our relationship with God. Forgiveness can be truly liberating. I believe we saw some wonderful examples of that following the Christchurch massacre. Let me illustrate with a story.

Not so many years ago there was a woman named Pascale Kavannagh, who lived in New Jersey. As a child Pascale endured constant torment from her mother. Her mother had had an abusive childhood and this was reflected in her treatment of her daughter. Her father

tried to intervene but he copped it as well. When she finished school she left home in order to get away from her mother.

A few years later her mother suffered a massive stroke. Pascale went to see her in hospital and was shocked to find her mother unable to communicate and possibly didn't even understand anything that was being said to her. As her father had died, Pascale was the only relative capable of caring for her mother and she felt duty-bound to help. She sat by her mother's side around the clock, reading to her and just talking, though not sure if her mother could understand anything.

At first she felt angry that her mother had put her in this situation, especially considering the relationship she had with her mother. But as the days went by, her anger slowly dissipated. Finally, one day an exhausted Pascale suddenly laid her head on her mother's lap. She says, 'The hatred went away. It was just gone. For the first time, I stopped condemning her. And that gave peace.'

Forgiving her mother also helped Pascale let go of other resentments, such as the rift with her ex-husband, with whom she had recently split. She said, "I became less interested in holding on to all forms of bitterness. I see now that forgiveness is as much about what you receive as what you give.'

And that is why forgiveness is so powerful and is such an agent of change when relationships are threatened. Jesus understood this so very well which is why forgiveness was the cornerstone of his teaching.

I want to finish with a couple of contrasting quotes, and I mean contrasting. The first is one you would have heard from me before . General Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander of the Coalition forces in the Persian Gulf War, when asked if he thought there was room for forgiveness toward the people who harboured and abetted the terrorists who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks on America, said, 'I believe that forgiving is God's function. Our job is simply to arrange the meeting.'

The second and very different quote come from Mahatma Ghandi who said, 'The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.'