

## Sermon 17 September 2023 Forgiveness

### Colossians 3:12-15 Matthew 18:21-35

When Peter asked Jesus how often he should forgive his fellow human beings, 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. From the Beatitudes – *'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.'* Matthew 5:7. And James emphasises this – *'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.

One of the interesting aspects of this story is how 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' prime lessons. Before we pass judgment or sentence on anyone, we need to have a good look at ourselves, at our own iniquities and shortcomings. It is something so many of us are guilty of.

I think this lies at the heart of the message of 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. 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 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 is the corner stone of his teaching.

Interestingly, forgiveness is as much about the person forgiving as the person being forgiven. To reiterate what I said before, it is only when we truly forgive someone who has hurt us that we can move on. Pascale, once she found it within herself to forgive her mother, she was able to move on with her life, not just in terms of her relationship with her mother but also in terms of the way she related to other people in her life. Her whole attitude to life changed.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, *'When you forgive you are free of the hatred and anger that locks you in a state of victimhood. If you can find it in yourself to forgive, you can move on, and you may even help the perpetrator to become a better person.'* Author Philip Yancey puts it so very well, *'Forgiveness does not erase the past. Rather, it opens up a new future by blocking the past from poisoning the future.'*

Another point that needs to be made about forgiveness is that it is not easy; on the contrary, it is very difficult. Our natural response to any hurt is to strike back. In that sense, forgiveness is something of an unnatural act. Elizabeth O'Connor, Christian author, writes, *'Despite a hundred sermons on forgiveness, we do not forgive easily, nor find ourselves easily forgiven. Forgiveness, we discover, is always harder than the sermons make it out to be.'* Mahatma Gandhi said, *'The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.'* I think that is undoubtedly why forgiveness is so powerful.

The last point I want to make is that forgiveness has to be the ultimate form of love. In any intimate relationship, if there is no room for forgiveness, then that relationship will founder and dissipate. And taking love in the Christian sense, in other words, being kind, respectful and generous to someone, if forgiveness is not allowed to be present, then that all falls apart. I would put it to you that an attitude of kindness and generosity can be a lot easier to implement than that of forgiveness, mainly because forgiveness implies a degree of hurt.

In our first reading, Paul says, *'If anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.'* Colossians 3:13-14. That really does say it all.

Robert Muller, Assistant Vicar General of the United Nations and a tireless worker for peace, said, *'To forgive is the highest, most beautiful form of love. In return, you will receive untold peace and happiness.'*

I finish with that immortal quote from 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.'*

I guess that deviates somewhat from the thrust of what I have been saying!