

**Date:** 17 March 2024  
**Services:** *Across the Diocese*  
**Series:** Gazing on the Goodness of God  
**Title:** Forgiving  
**Passage:** Exodus 34:4-7; Matthew 18:21-35

Well, welcome to our fifth talk in our Lent series, looking at the character of God, the goodness of God, and our topic this week is God's forgiveness. The God Who forgives. It was CS Lewis who says that to be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in us. It's what Jesus says in the Lord's Prayer: forgive one another, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. So the Bible says when we've experienced the extravagant forgiveness of God, that should flow into forgiving other people.

God's heart, God's character is one of forgiveness. He is forgiving. And knowing how much God has forgiven you enables you, equips you to forgive other people, to forgive those who have wronged you or hurt you or wounded you. Or to put it more strongly, forgiving others must be a natural overflow of a heart that experiences the Forgiveness of God. It's Ephesians chapter 4 that says be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ, God has forgiven you.

But let's be honest, it is so hard to forgive other people, isn't it? It's so hard to forgive that person who has treated you poorly, who has spoken harshly to you or about you. C. Lewis also says everyone says that forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have someone to forgive. And that's the tension with forgiveness. We know that we should forgive other people, but it's really hard to forgive. We know that we personally need forgiveness, and we know that we are all guilty of wrong things. We treat other people badly; we treat God badly. But when someone wrongs us, it's really, really, really hard to forgive.

And I hope you also know what happens when we fail to forgive. When there's a lack of forgiveness, it leads to bitterness, it leads to anger or retaliation. It consumes you; it eats away at you. And I also hope you know how liberating it is when you actually forgive somebody who has wronged or hurt you. It's healing; it's freeing. So we know this; we're called to forgive, but it's really, really hard to forgive somebody who's hurt you. But what about when you keep getting hurt? That makes it even harder, doesn't it?

That's where Matthew 18 is so confronting. The context in that Bible reading is that a brother or sister has sinned against you. A Christian, a fellow believer, has wronged you and wounded you. And if they won't repent, if they repeatedly refuse to repent, it is straightforward. Verse 17 says we treat them as though they're not really a believer. And that's the easy bit. Perhaps we secretly hope that people won't come and say sorry, and then we won't need to forgive them, we think. But what happens when they do repent?

Now, please hear this right. I'm not talking about if somebody has harmed you, that repeated patterns of abuse; you never put yourself constantly in harm's way. But what happens if I wrong you and I'm really, really sorry that I've wronged you, and you forgive me, and then I wrong you again and again and again, but I am really sorry. I just keep on doing it. That is Peter's question in verse 21 of Matthew 18.

How often, he says, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me, up to seven times? I think Peter thinks he's being generous there because the limit of the rabbis was three times. But Peter, Jesus says in verse 22, I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times or 70 times seven. He's saying, Peter, I don't think you understand that forgiveness is ongoing, is infinite. That phrase "70 \* 7" is an Old Testament term, so Jesus does not speak about revenge or retaliation. Jesus speaks about this extraordinary, outrageous, unspeakable forgiveness because that's the heart of God.

Here's our big idea today: Knowing the extravagant forgiveness of God flows to extending forgiveness to other people. Knowing the extravagant forgiveness of God flows to extending forgiveness to other people.

I want to start by unpacking this story in Matthew 18. It's like a story of two halves. Verses 23-27 are about extravagant forgiveness. So, there's a king on his throne, and he summons a man who owes a massive amount of money. Verse 24 tells us that he owes him 10,000 bags of gold. That amount of money is more than the amount of money that was in circulation at that time of history—trillions of dollars in debt. There's no way he could repay it. And you imagine this man getting out his wallet and thinking, "Oh, maybe I could do a monthly instalment." And then he realizes it's just not possible. He can't pay his debt. So, he's about to be sold into slavery. And then he begs, verse 26, he falls on his knees before the king and says, "Be patient with me; I'll pay everything back." Of course, he can't. Dream on. It's impossible. And you get this massive shock in verse 27. The king took pity on him. He took pity on him and cancelled those debts and let him go. And the king is saying, "Don't worry about your debts. I forgive you. The debt's been paid. It's been paid in full." And you imagine this man walking away, just dancing and leaping for joy because his debt has been paid. It's been paid in full. He's experienced extravagant forgiveness.

But the second half of this story is called extraordinary unforgiveness. Because the man is leaving the palace, he's just been forgiven an astronomical debt, and on his way home, he bumps into a mate, a fellow servant who owes him a hundred silver coins. It's a big debt, about a hundred days' wages, a third of a year's wages. But he's just been forgiven an astronomical debt, millions of times more. But the man grabs him by the neck and says, "Pay up now." And in verse 29, the words are identical, "Be patient with me; I will pay it back." He's begging. But the first man, who's been forgiven the massive debt, will not forgive. In verse 30, he refuses. He's not willing to forgive his brother or sister. He's withholding forgiveness. It's scandalous, isn't it? The man who's been forgiven an astronomical debt refuses to forgive a fellow man or woman a smaller debt. And we'd like it to end with the first man coming to his senses and thinking, "Oh, how stupid I am. I've been forgiven an extraordinary amount. Of course, I can forgive other people." But it doesn't end like that.

Verse 32, the king summons the first man and says, "You wicked servant, I cancel all that debt because you begged me. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? As a forgiven sinner, shouldn't you show forgiveness to other people?"

So, verse 34, in his anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed, which is impossible. And it's a picture of eternity, of torture in hell. Now, the sting is verse 35, "This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from the heart." What he's saying is when you really grasp the magnitude of God's forgiveness towards you, you're empowered and equipped and enabled to forgive other people.

Let's start with the extravagant forgiveness of God, the extravagant forgiveness from God because that is the heart of God. He is a forgiving God. A verse for this series is Exodus 34:6 and 7: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate, the gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin."

Forgiving friends, forgiveness is not just something that God does; forgiving is who God is. God is forgiving; that's his character. If you remember the story of Jonah in Jonah chapter 4, God told Jonah to go to the Ninevites and preach the gospel of forgiveness. But those Ninevites were horrible people; they were wicked people, murderers, abusers, thieves, addicts. And Jonah is angry. Jonah is angry because he knows the character of God; he knows that God could and would forgive them. He doesn't like that. And that's the big problem, is that we know that God is forgiving, and sometimes we struggle with that. We think about that word "forgiven," but we don't really understand what it costs God. We haven't grasped the enormity of our debt before God. We're very good at seeing other people's debts, other people's sins. But what about our sin? What about all the ways that we have ignored God and lived in God's world and breathed his air and

taken all his good stuff? And we haven't loved him with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and we haven't loved our neighbour as ourselves. And so we need forgiveness, just like every other human being.

I know that is not a popular word today, and I know that we use other words like messed up or shame. But sin is a Biblical word; it's a relational word. It is a heart which is basically saying, "I don't need you, God; I don't want you, God, and I will choose to ignore you, God." And maybe we need to reclaim that Biblical word for sin. The word used in Exodus 34, there's three words. There's wickedness, that's the iniquity word, the crooked behaviour word, the deviating from the right path. Remember the Sydney Olympics in the year 2000, that blue marathon line running through Sydney? If a marathon runner took a shortcut and chopped 10K off the marathon race, you'd say, "You've deviated; you've cheated; you've done the wrong thing." That's the wickedness word.

The word rebellion is a transgression word where you've overstepped a boundary, you've overstepped the mark, you've broken a rule. And the word sin, it is falling short of God's standards; it's falling short of God's perfect standard. That's who we are: wicked rebels and sinners; that's our heart. But God's heart is one of forgiveness. God forgives wickedness, rebellion, and sin. It was costly. Isaiah 55:7, "Let him return to the Lord so he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will freely forgive." So God freely forgives, but it is costly forgiveness. If you know your Old Testament, in the Old Testament, the people of God would receive forgiveness by bringing an animal or a bird to the priest, and the priest would kill the animal, would slaughter the animal, and blood would be shed. It was a costly sacrifice because blood was shed as a sign of forgiveness. Now, of course, it's looking forward to a time when Jesus, the Lamb of God, would shed not an animal's blood but his own blood. That's what it cost God—the death of his own son on that cross, the perfect, sinless one who died in your place and my place and shed his blood so that we could be forgiven. It doesn't get more costly than that. And it's complete forgiveness, costly but complete. You must believe that God has wiped away every one of your sins, and when you're fully cleansed and fully forgiven, it is liberating. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed your transgressions from you." Please don't walk around thinking that you're not fully forgiven. If you believe in Jesus, this is the gospel: God has forgiven you in Christ, and we need to experience that.

I do love Psalm 51. It's a Psalm of confession where David has wronged God and wronged people. He has slept with Bathsheba; he has killed Uriah, and he's confronted by the prophet Nathan. And he writes this Psalm, and it's a Psalm pleading for forgiveness. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassions blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquities." David does what I call the Three A's of forgiveness. He **admits his sins**; he admits that he has done wrong. There's no attempt to cover up. We're good at that. He doesn't try and sweep his sin under the carpet; he doesn't minimize his sin by comparing it to others. He doesn't blame others; he owns it. He admits and says, "It's my sin; my sin is before me." And it is liberating, friends, when you come to God and admit that you're a sinner in need of forgiveness.

Not just admitting, but he's asking; he's **asking for forgiveness**. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; wash away all my iniquities." This coming to God and just pleading, saying, "Please cleanse me, please wash me, please restore me. I can't do that, God, but you can do that." So you admit your sins, you ask for forgiveness, and then you accept it—**accept that you really are forgiven in Christ**. "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean," says David. "Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." That's the confidence that when you come to Christ and you look at that cross, you know that you are fully forgiven in Christ. I don't know; maybe some people watching today still need to fall on their knees before Jesus and ask for forgiveness for the massive debt that you are, and he will forgive you.

That's his heart, but other people here perhaps have done that but are still feeling guilty, or they still are not sure that they really are fully forgiven, and you wander through life just wandering, being weighed down by

your guilt. Let it go; leave it at the foot of the cross. And then Ephesians CH 4:32 will make sense: "Forgive one another just as in Christ God has forgiven you."

When you've experienced and accepted the extravagant forgiveness of God, then it enables you, it equips you to forgive other people because the way that they've offended you is way, way, way less than the way that you have offended God. See, God's forgiveness is like a river; it must flow on, flow from you and me to other people who have wronged us. And the moment that we dam up forgiveness and refuse to offer forgiveness, it becomes like a stagnant lake.

I don't know; perhaps the problem with our forgiving others is that we don't really believe that we've been forgiven by God—things a thousand times more. But if we've grasped it, it will equip us to forgive other people, and that's our second point: extending forgiveness to others. "For forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Here's a good definition of forgiveness: Forgiveness is a verbally declared and personally given promise that affirms that though I have been offended, there is no anger, there is no hatred, there is no bitterness, there's no desire for vengeance and no retaliation. And that verbal declaration is matched in action.

Let me say what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not approving of sin; if somebody does something wrong, we don't just say that's okay. No sin's a big deal. Forgiveness is not pretending that it never happened; sweep it under the carpet. Forgiveness is not the absence of hurt or anger; there is righteous anger, being hurt. Forgiveness is not the absence of consequences; there's always consequences when you've been hurt or wronged. And forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation; for reconciliation, we do need repentance, and sometimes you can forgive somebody, but it takes a long time to rebuild that trust.

What is forgiveness? Resisting all thoughts of revenge (Romans 12), not returning evil for evil (1 Thessalonians 5), wishing them well (Luke chapter 6), praying for them (Matthew Chapter 5), seeking peace as far as it depends on you (Romans 12). That is radical forgiveness.

Few questions: What if they keep on hurting you? Well, Jesus says, 70 x 7; there's no limit to the number of times you forgive people. And again, let me be very clear: we don't put ourselves in harm's way and hope that someone will change. If you're in an abusive relationship, you walk away; you don't put yourself in danger. But what if they haven't repented? Well, then forgiveness looks slightly different. Luke 17 seems to suggest that full forgiveness is only possible if they really repent. But if they don't repent, you're still called to have forgiveness in your heart; you still reach a place where in your heart, you are able and willing to forgive, and you have forgiven them. It's just they haven't asked, and they haven't repented, and that gets rid of your bitterness.

What's at stake if you don't forgive other people? I've already said it: bitterness, anger, an irritable soul, a soul that keeps records of wrongs, and ultimately, you hurt yourself. It's like picking an open wound, and it never heals. And lack of forgiveness will really impact your relationship with God; it will stop you marvelling at the profound forgiveness of God. God, if you are withholding forgiveness from other people, how do you forgive? And I'll finish with this.

Here's how I forgive: there are things, people in my life who have hurt me so deeply and wounded me so badly, and I found it really, really, really hard to forgive them. And so, I've taken the biblical pictures and images, and I've used them to help me to forgive. And so, I went to Bunnings, and I bought a little clay pot, and I wrote on the clay pot all the things that they did wrong against me. And I got a hammer, and I smashed it, and that was liberating. I got a large piece of paper, and I wrote down all the things they had done wrong against me, and I got a match, and I burned it, and that was liberating.

But the most effective one for me is that picture in the Bible of God throwing your sins to the bottom of the ocean where you can't go and retrieve them. And so, I walk down to the harbour, and I write on a stone or on a rock all the things that they did against me and the name of that person. And I fling it into the harbour, and as you watch that stone, that rock sink into the harbour, then forgiveness dwells in your heart.

I know it's really hard to forgive; I know it's really hard to forgive.

But that is God's heart; he has forgiven us an astronomical debt, and that's what we remember every single Easter. And when you grasp how much God has forgiven you, it empowers you to begin to forgive other people.