



Words that transform: forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

I begin today a series of addresses that centre upon important words in the ministry of Jesus Christ, which transform our lives.

Each of these words comes from the central section of Matthew's Gospel that we have been looking at together.

In Matthew's Gospel we have a great deal of practicality in terms of the Christian community. We know that there are many things that must happen within a community for it to successfully navigate its way forward. For the Church of Jesus Christ, these things are especially true and we can discern from his teaching much that will assist our life together.

The first word is a huge one in terms of our Christian discipleship—and that is Forgiveness.

The necessity of forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35 needs to be read in the context of what has gone before; the difficulties and hurt of unforgiveness. The gospel writer has talked about those who stumble as a result of others actions and how to deal with wrong in the community of faith.

Throughout these verses, it is apparent that the Lord sees the community as a place in which all (not just the leaders) are responsible for one another. Our text comes from a fairly straightforward question asked by Peter:

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?” (v.21).

We remind ourselves that Peter has featured prominently in this mid-section of Matthew's Gospel— at the confession at Caesarea Philippi (16:13-28) and certainly in the transfiguration account (17:1-13).

Matthew's audience would have been very familiar with the number seven:

- Every seventh day, Jews were commanded to rest and be restored to healthy living.
- Every seventh year, Jews were called to give the land a rest and restore its nourishment.
- Every seventh cycle of seven years, on the year of Jubilee, slaves were released and human relationships were restored.

The number seven would always convey a call to restoration, healing and reconciliation—therefore, in Hebrew thinking, the number seven would be wide-ranging in nature, having universal consequences.

Peter knew all too well that Hebrew law required of him to forgive someone three times—so the question about forgiving someone seven times could be understood as a generous proposition.

Peter does not appear to be placing a limit on forgiveness, but rather he was offering a much higher understanding of forgiveness than was commonly accepted.

Forgiveness is such an important part of our Christian living. It is extravagant by nature and it is quite clearly one aspect of our living which mirrors the generous attitude of God himself.

Let me offer to you four things that are important, as we look at this passage together:



We often want to place limits on forgiveness

I suspect that Peter's understanding of forgiving seven times would be far more than many of us practise in our own lives. Jesus goes right to the heart of Peter's question, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven," (v.22).

Perfect forgiveness is multiplied without measure. This is, after all, what we seek from God, isn't it? In his own experience, Peter will come to understand this.

- We cannot discover or afford to set limits on God's forgiveness; neither must we put limits on our own.
- To limit forgiveness is to come under the law on judgement'
- Peter's question once again brings him into a place of rebuke from Jesus Christ'
- Peter's quick tongue is often followed by some of Jesus' greatest teaching. In this case, the *Parable of the Unmerciful Servant*.

In what is regarded as one of the best known passages in the New Testament, Paul's *Psalm of Love* in 1 Corinthians 13, we are told that one of the characteristics of love is that it keeps no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:5).

All of us can look back over our lives and see the positive impact of forgiveness— or the opposite because of unforgiveness. As the parable begins, we note the familiar words: "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like..." (v.23).

It tells of a man who owes a debt. Some versions of the New Testament have chosen to say that the man owed *billions of dollars* ... I think it is better to talk about *ten thousand talents*.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, says that the income of all Jews at that time was eight thousand talents. Therefore, the point is that this is the largest conceivable debt. Basically Jesus is saying, here is a man who owed an absurd and infinite amount.

Here at Wesley Mission, we know all too well about the problems of debt as we seek to offer support, assistance and help to those who fall into debt. We are also very aware of those who become victims of money-lenders. On many occasions, I have said that this group of unscrupulous lenders should be the focus of attention in the realm of public finance.

When people find themselves in the situation of owing to money-lenders, the debt just increases continually and it gets to the point when it is almost impossible to settle the debt. In the days of Jesus— and at many times throughout history—if you could not pay, you became the person's slave.

I think it is important that we don't restrict our understanding of this theme to financial debts. It becomes a very live issue when we relate it to the occasions when people have wronged us. It is all too easy to maintain an act of wrong against us within our memory and experience.

God is more interested in us being forgiven people than he is on setting limits to his grace.



One of the most endearing Old Testament verses is found in Jeremiah's words in Lamentations, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases" and "His compassion is new every morning", (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Forgiveness can change both the person forgiven, and also the one who offers forgiveness.

When I look back at the millennial year, one of my best memories is not the worldwide fear of a global meltdown through our computers, but the increasing emphasis on forgiveness through the concept of Jubilee that took place.

I preached on it throughout the year, using the Jewish concept of setting people free. And then I was so moved when I met a man in our town centre, who had a broad smile across his face. He told me that he had been to see someone who owed him a great debt—and he had decided to write it off! I am absolutely certain that three were blessed by such an action:

- The one set free from a serious debt.
- The one who actually released the person from their debt.
- God himself, who is always delighted when we mirror his life in our actions.

Because it goes against our human nature, forgiveness must be both taught and practised. It was Martin Luther King who said: "Forgiveness is not just an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude."

God treats us generously (v.v. 26-27)

In this Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, we are given an insight into the way God treats us.

The servant asked the person in whose debt he was to forgive the astronomical amount he owed. He was granted his petition. Shortly thereafter, he saw someone who owed him a debt; significant but nothing like the quantum of the debt he had been released from. We are told in no uncertain terms and with a graphic description that he took hold of the man and began to choke him.

What we discover here is that there is a relationship between the way God treats us and the consequent impact upon the way we treat others.

At the heart of the Christian message is the fact that Jesus Christ has died for us—and, therefore, the cross will always be the central point of our story and discipleship.

The servant begged for mercy — actually he wanted time and patience. I am not sure what he had in mind could have helped him to pay off such a huge debt. Whatever it was, his idea could not have been legal, moral or ethical. The only response that could set him free is displayed in the action of the king, who "took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go," (v.27).

In Victor Hugo's powerful novel *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean served a nineteen year prison sentence for stealing a loaf of bread in order to feed his sister's family. Finally, he is set free. A bishop is the only person who will befriend the embittered man. Valjean rewards him by stealing some of his silver. He is caught red handed by the police.

You may recall, at the police station, the bishop refuses to prefer charges. Instead, he brings Valjean his candlestick holders as well! The man is forever changed by this undeserved forgiveness.



It is this action which, in turn, leads Jean Valjean to extend grace to an orphan child and raise her as his own. He even forgives the policeman who wanted to put him in back in gaol. Finally, he dies, holding in his hand the candlesticks the bishop gave him; a very moving scene in the stage production.

This is the transformation that comes about through forgiveness. We offer it because we have received it.

We must act toward others as God has acted toward us

The servant received forgiveness from the king, got up from his knees and went out to look for the man who owed him just one hundred denarii, which was loose change compared to the debt from which he had just been released.

We might have expected just a little kindness from someone who had been forgiven in such a way but, as well as grabbing the man by the throat, he demanded payment in full. We are told it happened just after he had been forgiven. "But when the servant went out ..." (v.28).

In this arresting story that Jesus Christ tells, the servant's fellow-servant begged for mercy in exactly the same way as he had done, by asking for mercy and patience. He did not get a warm and receptive response!

The unforgiving heart is an emotion that arises from the deep places of our lives and it reveals our state before God. By failing to deal with the issue, it can increase and cause us to harbour hatred in the heart towards others.

It would be very easy to totally misunderstand the concluding verses of the parable. Some have understood it as saying "If I forgive others, then God forgives me and saves me". This is clearly wrong. In fact it is unrecognisable as a truth of the gospel. We can do nothing to earn God's forgiveness.

However, in order to forgive, we need a tender heart. Only a forgiven heart can become a forgiving heart.

All sin is ultimately a sin against God. The demanding words of the prayer are: "Against you and against you only have I sinned." God's forgiving power is revealed to us and, once we have grasped it, we may offer it to others.

The pastoral dimension of this truth is that at the critical moment when we are wronged in a particular relationship or situation, we must focus our spiritual minds not on what is done to us, but on what God has done for us.

Human nature is inclined to resent, rather than to release; to be demanding, rather than to forgive. The forgiven man was incapable of releasing someone from a debt half a million times less than his, because his heart was not tender enough to do so.



Jesus gives us a word to shatter all our preconceptions (v.35)

One writer described verse 35 as a 'bothersome verse'. You might call this the punch-line of the parable and it challenges every one of us. It must not become legalistic, but the starting point of how we can responsibly express forgiveness towards others:

- Our joy in God's forgiveness leads us to forgive others.
- Our failure to forgive others shows we have not grasped his forgiveness.
- Our lack of forgiveness diminishes any joy we have.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is not intended to make us feel good about ourselves.

One of the most striking examples of forgiveness came to me in the example of Pope John Paul. You will recall that a man attempted to assassinate him. When he recovered, he shocked so many by making a visit to Rome's Rabbibia Prison on Christmas Day to see the man who had shot him, only two years earlier. The white-robed Pope and the jean-clad terrorist spoke quietly in his cell for twenty minutes. When he emerged, John Paul explained, "I spoke to a brother whom I have pardoned." This led to a headline the following week in *Time* magazine. It simply said, "Why forgive?"

Forgiveness means that we must forever surrender the idea that we are judge and jury. It is worth noting that Jesus said, "Love your enemies" and not ... forgive your enemies. Love is the first step toward reconciliation.

Resentment is a deadly disease and sadly I conclude that it is very common. I think we can assume that it affects every area of people's lives. Michael Green, in commenting on this passage, wrote, "It certainly carries severe spiritual consequences. Our relationship with God becomes strangled with it."

From darkness through the dawn to daylight, from experiences of guilt through to forgiveness, God's constancy and love never fail. Through the cross of Jesus Christ, we are linked to the healing touch of the Lord within our lives.

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you," (Colossians 3:13).

In his book *The Prisoner and the Bomb*, Laurens van de Post recounts the misery of his wartime experiences in a Japanese prison camp in Java. In that unlikely place, he concluded:

"The only hope for the future lay in an all-embracing attitude of forgiveness of the peoples who had been our enemies. Forgiveness, my prison experience taught me, was not mere religious sentimentality; it was as fundamental a law of the human spirit as the law of gravity. If one broke the law of gravity one broke one's neck; if one broke this law of forgiveness one inflicted a mortal wound on one's spirit and became once again a member of the chain-gang of mere cause and effect from which life has laboured so long and painfully to escape."