

17 September 2023 The Unmerciful Servant. Psalm 103:8-13 and Matthew 18:21-35

After my parents died, for a while I felt a very real pain here, in my heart. They died of natural causes, and many years apart. But I have always been filled with admiration for the grieving survivors who have the courage to declare their forgiveness for those who have caused such misery. How can there be forgiveness? I was very moved by a video which told the story of the murder of a young lad and how his mother and sister had managed to forgive his murderers. I'll come back to that later.

Peter asks a searching question. Is it enough to follow the rules? Jesus responds, not seven, but seventy times seven. (The answer is 490, but this was never meant to be a maths question!) In some sort of pyramid selling arrangement, a man has run up a huge debt. So huge, that it would be impossible to earn that much in a lifetime. Just one talent was worth about 20 year's wages.

To our surprise, the king lets him off. Think about the punishment: he and his family are to be sold as slaves and everything he has, auctioned off. A horrible penalty. He is spared. Astonishing! An amazing pardon!

How does he feel as he leaves the king? Confused? Elated? The question is, will it change him? Nope. Instead of paying forward the pardon, (for a much smaller loan) he insists on his rights. When the king finds out, he withdraws his pardon.

Well, this is a nice story. It seems like justice, doesn't it? The baddie gets what he's due. The generous king is satisfied. No-one is upset or offended. No need for cancel culture or wokism here.

Is that all? After all, God is merciful. He always forgives, doesn't he? He forgives abundantly, doesn't he? We just have to ask. But no, Jesus is quite clear. Shocking news. There is a dreadful sentence awaiting anyone who fails to forgive others.

These days we are so concerned with physical health. Got a headache? Quick, take some paracetamol. Got a sore throat? Try these throat pastilles. Worried by a wasp sting? Hurry to A&E.

God is concerned with the health of our hearts, and this is the deeper message of today's reading. He has these unimaginable riches of forgiveness ready to overwhelm us, as the beautiful psalm tells us. What we have to do is pass it on, however challenging that may be.

Thank heavens, we don't all have murders to forgive. We don't all have debtors begging for more time to pay. We do all have arguments and hurt feelings, unfairness and insults gnawing away at our wellbeing. Are there conversations you keep going over? Affronts you can't dispel? Do you need to get your own back? Did you lose your temper and say things that you shouldn't have? Did you decide to do something on impulse that you knew was wrong? Did you fail to speak out in defence of someone?

Did you say something you regret in order to gain the approval of others? Is it impossible to put right, so let's just sweep it under the carpet?

All that animosity can hurt our hearts. The mother of that murdered boy explained, it was as if all the bitterness and revenge and resentment and anger were too much for her to carry, so she decided to let it go and forgive. The boy's sister explained that it had been hard for her to understand what forgiveness was. She said, it's not healthy to harbour anger and bitterness; it makes you unwell. A reporter asked her if she could find it in her heart to forgive the killers, and she replied, after a moment, that in the Bible Jesus says 70 times 7 you must forgive and that is what we must do. And the whole place went quiet because everyone was just looking at her and thinking: does she realise what she's just said?

So let's clear out that self-destructive resentment, that anger and bitterness which is rotting our souls. Let's make a decision to forgive, however long it takes and however hard it is, and accept the healing which God offers us.

Paul tells the Colossians in chapter 3 verse 13 Don't be angry with each other but forgive each other. If you feel someone has wronged you, forgive them. Forgive others because the Lord forgave you.

It doesn't mean we have to go back for more ill-treatment. We can make peace and say, 'no more'. It does not allow others to trample all over us or take advantage of us. It does not permit the strong to repeatedly do us harm. It means that we can complete the task that God has set us and receive his immeasurable mercy.

So let's rush to message the people we're angry with. Let's ring. Pop round. Send a card. There are people here and watching at home who are suffering great sadness, feeling abandoned and misunderstood. Time to reach out. Forgiveness works both ways. It heals the hurt and the offender. Quick. Because a wound can fester. Jesus is waiting, with his bowl of warm water and his fluffy towel to wash our scarred hearts and welcome us to his table.

See the video on

[Examples of personal forgiveness - Forgiveness - GCSE Religious Studies Revision - WJEC - BBC Bitesize](#)

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