

Forgiveness

I feel like every time I'm asked to speak, I'm given a huge topic, and tonight is no different. We're going to look at a topic tonight which is central to the Christian message: Forgiveness. I want to try and do this by considering three questions: What is God's forgiveness and how do we receive it? Why should we forgive? and How can we have renewed minds, forgive others and live as forgiven people?

What is God's forgiveness and how do we receive it?

When Jesus explained forgiveness to his disciples, he used parables, stories told to illustrate a message. One of these stories can be found in Luke 15:11-32:

Once a man had two sons. ¹² The younger son said to his father, "Give me my share of the property." So the father divided his property between his two sons.

¹³ Not long after that, the younger son packed up everything he owned and left for a foreign country, where he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴ He had spent everything, when a bad famine spread through that whole land. Soon he had nothing to eat.

¹⁵ He went to work for a man in that country, and the man sent him out to take care of his pigs. ¹⁶ He would have been glad to eat what the pigs were eating, but no one gave him a thing.

¹⁷ Finally, he came to his senses and said, "My father's workers have plenty to eat, and here I am, starving to death! ¹⁸ I will go to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer good enough to be called your son. Treat me like one of your workers.'"

²⁰ The younger son got up and started back to his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt sorry for him. He ran to his son and hugged and kissed him.

²¹ The son said, "Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son."

²² But his father said to the servants, "Hurry and bring the best clothes and put them on him. Give him a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. ²³ Get the best calf and prepare it, so we can eat and celebrate. ²⁴ This son of mine was dead, but has now come back to life. He was lost and has now been found." And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ The older son had been out in the field. But when he came near the house, he heard the music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants over and asked, "What's going on here?"

²⁷ The servant answered, "Your brother has come home safe and sound, and your father ordered us to kill the best calf." ²⁸ The older brother got so angry that he would not even go into the house.

His father came out and begged him to go in. ²⁹ But he said to his father, "For years I have worked for you like a slave and have always obeyed you. But you have never even given me a little goat, so that I could give a dinner for my friends. ³⁰ This other son of yours wasted your money on prostitutes. And now that he has come home, you ordered the best calf to be killed for a feast."

³¹ His father replied, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we should be glad and celebrate! Your brother was dead, but he is now alive. He was lost and has now been found."

In this parable it is the father who has been wronged. First his younger son comes to him and asks him for his inheritance. In Jesus' culture it would have been expected that a man's sons would inherit his wealth when he died, with the oldest son inheriting a double share of what the other heirs inherited. So if a man had two sons, the eldest would inherit two thirds with a third going to the youngest. What is shocking about this request is that the sons would normally receive their inheritance when the father died. What the younger son is saying to his father, by his request, is that he wishes he were dead. His relationship with his father is not what is important to him, he just wants his father's wealth. In a culture where elders were expected to be treated with the utmost respect and honour, Jesus' listeners would be expecting to hear that the father then disowned the son, had him severely beaten

for his petulance and banished. What happens next is therefore even more shocking: the father honours the sons request. Given that wealth in those times was essentially land and property, dividing his wealth would have meant selling up land, resulting in losing a major part of his home and his status in the community. The younger son then liquidises the lot and moves far away, not to spend the money wisely and establish a life for himself and his future family, but to binge on short-term pleasures and blow the lot, leaving himself destitute. When he returns to the father with his rehearsed apology, we might expect the father to give him a hard time and make his son grovel before deciding what to do. But this father doesn't. He doesn't even wait for him to reach the property. While he was still a long way off, the father sees his son, hitches up his robes and runs to meet him. In this society, distinguished patriarchs didn't run. Children might run, women might run and young men might run, but not the head of the family. This father, desperate to be reconciled with his son, runs to meet him, puts a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet and a robe over his rags. The younger son had returned to the father expecting to be a slave, but the father forgave him and restored him to his position in the family, a son and heir. Notice that I said heir. The son's restored position in the family once again makes him an inheritor of a third of all his father's diminished wealth. Such is the father's Joy, that he throws a huge party, of the kind only thrown at special occasions like a wedding, and probably invites the whole community. When the elder brother hears the celebration and discovers its purpose, he is furious. It is at this point that his heart is revealed. He disrespects his father by refusing to go into the celebration and see him. His father though, like with his younger son, humbles himself and goes out to his elder son to speak to him, to invite him to join the celebration and share his joy. But it turns out that the elder brother isn't concerned for his father's happiness, for him too relationship with his father is not what is important to him, he just wants his father's wealth. Whereas the younger son had rebelled by running away, the elder brother had sought to manipulate the father and earn what was his through his obedience.

So what does this parable tell us about God's forgiveness? In the first part of the story the father forgives the younger son. He essentially says to him, 'I will bear the cost of your sin. There is no punishment for what you've done. You are free.' And with this forgiveness is an extraordinary invitation. Come and take up your position in the family again, be in relationship with me and let me restore you to all that you were meant to be.

His forgiveness is freely offered. The father runs to his younger son, on his way back, ready to forgive before his son can even get the words out of his mouth. Before any apology or act of repentance God longs to forgive us and invite us into relationship with him. Nothing merits the grace of God. Nothing earns it. It is freely given.

I was a "younger brother". I'm the eldest of my siblings, but I didn't play the role well. I rebelled in the same way as the younger brother in this story having made it clear to my parents that I resented their authority and wanted to choose my own path. And so it was in the summer after I had finished my GCSEs that I found myself in Scotland, labouring for my friends dad by day, blowing my wages on cigarettes, getting drunk and getting high by night. [story]

There is nothing that can't be forgiven. In Jesus' description of the younger brother he deliberately shocks his listeners with a litany of behaviours that might be called unforgiveable. But as Timothy Keller says in his book *Prodigal God*, this parable challenges that mindset with a startling message.

God's love and forgiveness can pardon and restore any and every kind of sin or wrongdoing. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. It doesn't matter if you've deliberately oppressed or even murdered people, or how much you've abused yourself. The younger brother knew that in his father's house there was abundant "food to spare," but he also discovered that there was grace to spare. There is no evil that the father's love cannot pardon and cover, there is no sin that is a match for his grace.

But forgiveness must be accepted. The two main objections to God's forgiveness that I often hear are: 1. I'm too bad. God can't forgive what I've done. It's too hideous. This was the heart of the younger son, who went back home believing that forgiveness was not possible, but hoping that he might at least be hired. When confronted with his father's forgiveness, he had a choice. He could continue with his prepared spiel, insist that the father made him a servant and spend the rest of his life trying to pay back the debt he could never repay, or he could accept the freely offered gift of grace and take up his restored status in the family. He chose the latter.

Secondly, a lot of people ask, well why do I need to be forgiven? I'm not that bad. I try to be good, do the right thing. What do I need to be forgiven for? Jesus' answer to this shocked his listeners by turning what they knew about sin on it's head. It was easy to understand the waywardness of the younger brother, but as the story nears it's end it is

the younger brother who is joined with the father in his joy, while the elder brother refuses to enter. There is a barrier between him and the father; his own pride at his obedience and righteousness. His sin wasn't what he had done, but what he had failed to do. Despite having remained with his father, he'd fulfilled what he saw as his obligations, without ever really knowing his father, or understanding his father's heart. He didn't stay with him to know him, but simply to earn what he wanted from his father. The elder brother, when confronted with his father's grace for his brother and seeing that same grace extended to him could choose to swallow his pride and take up his place within the newly reunited family, sharing in his father's joy, or he could walk away and remain in his anger and bitterness at the scandal and cost of it all. The fact that the story ends here means Jesus doesn't tell us what the elder brother will choose. You see the parable was told for the benefit of the elder brothers listening, the Pharisees, and Jesus left the choice up to them.

And what of the father. His forgiveness costs him a huge price: His dignity and respect within society, his status in the community and a third of all that he once owned. Despite the huge personal cost to the father in this story, it pales in comparison to the true cost paid by God in seeing his own son brutally executed in order to make our reconciliation with him possible. Forgiveness isn't cheap. It costs dearly. And Jesus makes this point in our next story which he uses to illustrate why we should forgive.

Suggested questions:

1. Which character in the parable do you most identify with and why?
2. What did forgiveness mean to each of the sons?
3. What were the barriers to each receiving their father's forgiveness?
4. Can we relate to any of these barriers in our own walk with God?
5. How can we overcome them in order to receive forgiveness?

Why should we forgive?

We read this in Matthew chapter 18:21-35:

One day a king decided to call in his officials and ask them to give an account of what they owed him. ²⁴ As he was doing this, one official was brought in who owed him fifty million silver coins. ²⁵ But he didn't have any money to pay what he owed. The king ordered him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all he owned, in order to pay the debt.

²⁶ The official got down on his knees and began begging, "Have pity on me, and I will pay you every cent I owe!" ²⁷ The king felt sorry for him and let him go free. He even told the official that he did not have to pay back the money.

²⁸ As the official was leaving, he happened to meet another official, who owed him a hundred silver coins. So he grabbed the man by the throat. He started choking him and said, "Pay me what you owe!"

²⁹ The man got down on his knees and began begging, "Have pity on me, and I will pay you back." ³⁰ But the first official refused to have pity. Instead, he went and had the other official put in jail until he could pay what he owed.

³¹ When some other officials found out what had happened, they felt sorry for the man who had been put in jail. Then they told the king what had happened. ³² The king called the first official back in and said, "You're an evil man! When you begged for mercy, I said you did not have to pay back a cent. ³³ Don't you think you should show pity to someone else, as I did to you?" ³⁴ The king was so angry that he ordered the official to be tortured until he could pay back everything he owed. ³⁵ That is how my Father in heaven will treat you, if you don't forgive each of my followers with all your heart.

The first answer to the question of why we forgive is because as children of a loving father who forgives, we are commanded to do so. Jesus highlights in this parable how unreasonable it would be for us to deny others forgiveness given the amount that we have been forgiven. In the parable, the king forgives his official 10,000 talents. 1 talent was a quantity of money that the official could have expected to earn over a period of 20 years. So 10,000 talents would have been 200,000 years' worth of wages or £4.5 billion in today's money. The official who he meets owed him 100 dinarii, which was about 4 months wages or £7,500 in today's money. Jesus' point is that we have been

forgiven more by God than anyone could ever repay, even if they had 2,000 lifetimes. Anything that we might have to forgive, pales in comparison.

We are told that our forgiveness is dependent on our forgiveness of others. In Matthew 6:9-15 we read the Lord's Prayer. We are taught to pray in verse 12: *Forgive us our sins, as we forgive others*. The Aramaic word Jesus probably used for sin was *khoba* which includes both things we have done wrong as well as things we have failed to do, which is why we have in different English versions both the word trespasses and the word debts. Jesus then goes on to say in verse 14: *If you forgive others for the wrongs they do to you, your father in heaven will forgive you. But if you don't forgive others, your father will not forgive your sins*. It would be easy to see this as a kind of punishment, or way of forcing us to forgive, but I think it is much more nuanced than that.

If we go back to the parable of the two sons, the older brother was furious with his father for forgiving his younger brother. He essentially said to his father, *"How dare you forgive him. Do you not realise what he's done? Do you not realise what his forgiveness would cost me?"* Because let's not forget, that his restoration as a son would cost the elder brother a third of his inheritance. A choice not to forgive would mean a choice to remain outside of relationship with both his father and his brother. He would forever be imprisoned by resentment and a desire to get even. We might say he would lead a tortured life. In the story the father offers forgiveness and communicates his desire to be in relationship with his eldest son, but to receive it the elder brother must also forgive the younger son. Likewise, in the parable of the king settling his accounts, the servant walks out of his audience with the king a forgiven man, but his actions later show that he has failed to grasp his own forgiveness. He acts like a man who is not forgiven, who calls in his debts so that he may pay his own. It is his own choice that imprisons him, his failure to forgive that tortures him.

This is a reality that many have pointed out as another reason why we forgive. Whether we know God or not, whether we understand our own forgiveness or not, forgiving others sets us free. In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, the former Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, cites many examples from his experiences leading South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He recounts the story of how when apartheid ended in South Africa and the white government were voted out, the world awaited the usual bloodbath as blacks took revenge for years of oppression. This is the normal course of events. We only need to look at the drug gang wars in Mexico, Honduras and the US, the wars in South Sudan, Israel, Palestine and Yemen, and numerous conflicts around the world to see this pattern of unforgiveness, getting even and the endless cycle of loss, bitterness, hatred and revenge that it causes. But the world didn't expect someone with the moral fortitude and grace of Nelson Mandela, who set an example by forgiving those who had imprisoned him and brutally killed many of his friends and followers. He then asked his friend Desmond Tutu to establish the truth and reconciliation commission to begin an extraordinary journey of forgiveness and healing in the nation. The former archbishop said this of forgiveness. *"To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanises you inexorably dehumanises me. Forgiveness gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all effort to dehumanise them.* What he means is that unforgiveness produces in us bitterness, resentment and ultimately hatred, all of which are contrary to God's nature and who he made us to be. They strip us of our humanity and leave us imprisoned, forever tied to the person or people we haven't forgiven, and tortured by the memory of what they did to us and how it has made us suffer. Tutu says later in the book that, *"Forgiving means abandoning your rights to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss which liberates the victim. At the Commission we heard people speak of a sense of relief after forgiving."* Forgiveness ends the cycle of violence, sets us free and allows us to heal.

Suggested questions:

1. What is your experience of receiving God's forgiveness?
2. Have you previously considered the cost to God of your forgiveness?
3. Can you think of any other examples of the cost of unforgiveness?
4. What are your thoughts on the reasons we should forgive others mentioned here?

How can we have renewed minds, forgive others and live as forgiven people?

So how do we have renewed minds, forgive others and live as forgiven people?

I think whether we know God or not we are able to forgive, and we are able to experience the fruit of forgiveness. There are many stories from the truth and reconciliation commission in South Africa that demonstrate this. But forgiveness is hard and I think that it is of enormous benefit to understand just how much we have been forgiven. For the younger brother in our first parable this wasn't hard. He had been confronted with the harsh consequences of his choices, he'd hit rock bottom and understood how far he'd fallen. He hoped for mercy and a job as a servant. So when he was met by his father's forgiveness he knew just how much he was being forgiven. For the younger brothers amongst us it is easy accounting to tot up the 10,000 talents of our many failures and thank God for his grace. But what about the elder brothers? What about those who haven't understood their need for forgiveness? Perhaps for many of us, we need a revelation of our sin and the extent of our need for God's forgiveness. In John 16:8 Jesus says that it is the Holy Spirit who will show us the truth about sin, righteousness and God's justice. And I can almost hear the protests of "Great! So I can pray and ask the Holy Spirit to show me how rubbish I am so that I can repent and be forgiven." But I don't think it's like that. Remember that Jesus radically redefined sin, not just as those things we do that are wrong, but also of the good we fail to do. Sin is simply that which dehumanises us from the image of humanity that God always intended us to be: in relationship with him; a nation of kings and priests, bringing his wise order into the world and reflecting back the praise of the world to him in worship. The revelation is not how rubbish we are, but a realisation of just how much God loves us and the realisation that he wants us to be more completely human, more completely ourselves and more completely free than we ever thought it possible to be. It is that revelation, seeing ourselves as God sees us, which shines light on all that takes us away from that and gives us the freedom to accept God's forgiveness and begin a journey of transformation. When we've grasped even a fraction of the depths of that, all that we might have to forgive is put in perspective, and while still extremely difficult, we are enabled by that.

Jesus makes it clear that if we are to receive our own forgiveness, be renewed in our thinking and be transformed by that, we must also forgive others and give them the same opportunity to be transformed. So how do we do that, especially if what we are being asked to forgive has hurt and damaged us so much? A story from Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch prisoner of war in the Second World War may contain some answers. This is from a book called *Tramp for the Lord*:

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him - a balding, heavysset man in a grey overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear. It was 1947, and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favourite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown. "When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says NO FISHING ALLOWED."

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the centre of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

The place was Ravensbruck, and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard - one of the most cruel guards. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!"

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course - how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there." No, he did not remember me.

"But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein,"- again the hand came out - "will you forgive me?"

And I stood there - I whose sins had again and again been forgiven - and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place - could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there - hand held out - but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it - I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war, I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion - I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperament of the heart. Jesus, help me! I prayed silently. I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart."

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Romans 5:5: "... because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."

So forgiveness is a choice. We may not initially feel it, but we can choose to forgive and we can count on help from the Holy Spirit. But I don't say that lightly. Many of us carry deep hurts and awful damage from the past. We may make the decision that we want to forgive, but there may be a journey towards actually forgiving someone from that point that may require healing from the hurt and damage done to us. And even once we have chosen to forgive, we need to remember that it is a daily need, a daily choice that we pray in the Lord's prayer.

Finally, I want to end with a personal anecdote, which again goes back to my days with my old mentor Phil, who I have to name drop in every talk I do. [story]

So after we have forgiven others, we also need to forgive ourselves, allow God to renew our minds, so that we can see ourselves as God sees us, as sons, daughters and heirs of a loving father, forgiven, righteous, unpunishable and allow that revelation and that love to transform us into all that we were created to be.

Suggested questions:

1. To what extent have you previously considered the cost to God of your forgiveness?
2. What is your experience of forgiving others?
3. Is there anyone you still need to forgive?
4. Is there anything you need to forgive yourself for?