

# Sermon preached at Gisborne, 13 September 2020

*Lord God, you have declared that your kingdom is among us. Open our eyes to see it, our ears to hear it, our hearts to hold it, our hands to serve it. This, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

## **The heart of forgiveness**

Last week we talked about reconciliation. A theme for today is 'the heart of forgiveness.' We'll explore it through the two readings from Matthew and Romans. First, we'll talk about forgiveness through the passage in Matthew. Next, our focus is on the word 'heart' to see the meaning and the usage in the New Testament. Finally, the heart of forgiveness as the life of the church will be explored.

## **Forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35**

In the first half in Matthew 18:21-35, Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive another church member who sins against him. And he proposes his own answer – seven times. The rabbinical standard was three<sup>1</sup> in which God forgives three sins and punishes the fourth. Peter seems to think that seven times would be enough. The Greek word, *hebdomekontakis hepta* (ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ)<sup>2</sup> can mean either seventy-seven or seventy times seven (490 times). Either way, Jesus doesn't want us to keep careful records, but he is setting a standard that makes record keeping impractical. To keep track is not to forgive but to excuse ourselves in case we quit forgiving.

The word 'forgive' – (ἀφίημι - *aphiēmi*) in Greek is to let go, leave, leave alone, release, or forgive. Once we let something go, there is no way to retrieve it. While we may count seventy times seven in our heads, what Jesus asks us is to do it in our hearts. Then he tells a parable of the unforgiving servant as an example. We'll find a few elements of forgiveness in the parable.

First, forgiveness in this parable is extraordinary. A 'talent' is a measure of weight, close to about 130 lbs. In monetary terms, a talent was roughly equal to about 15 years' worth of wages for the typical worker. The king in this parable is owed 10,000 talents or about 150,000 years' worth of income. This is no little debt. On the other hand, a denarius (plural = denarii) is a small silver coin that was roughly the daily wage for the typical worker.<sup>3</sup> The slave in the parable is owed 100 denarii. It is no little debt either, but it is still possible to pay it back. The king forgives the slave out of pity for him, yet the same slave failed to forgive his fellow slave.

Second, forgiveness is not only relational but also reciprocal. When teaching his disciples to pray, Jesus would have us say, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."<sup>4</sup> As a prayer, it puts the emphasis on what we will receive in turn for the forgiveness we have offered. The parable is teaching us that we have been first forgiven and encouraging us to forgive in turn. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like, and the kingdom we practice here and now. At this stage, questions may arise.

Why does the first servant, having been treated so generously by the king, immediately act so ruthlessly toward his fellow slave? The king is certainly justified in his harsh retaliation-torture and imprisonment. Also, does the v 35<sup>5</sup> mean that if I do not forgive those who injure me, God will withhold forgiveness? Is divine forgiveness conditional on my letting go of grudges and hurts?<sup>6</sup> We usually hear that God is love and the love is unconditional. If so, how do we reconcile this case with our understanding of namely the unconditional love of God?

<sup>1</sup> Amos 1:3 Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 18:22 - λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· οὐ λέγω σοι ἕως ἑπτάκις ἀλλὰ ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ.

<sup>3</sup> One talent is equal to 5,475 denarii

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:12

<sup>5</sup> "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

<sup>6</sup> See also in Matthew 6:12, 14-15

Now we notice that there is a remarkable gap in the parable. On hearing of his release from the obligation, the slave shows no appropriate response—no rejoicing, no gratitude, no celebrating with wife and children who are spared imprisonment, no reflection about the meaning of freedom. We hear only that on the way out, he refuses the pleas of a colleague. As seen, the first slave clearly has no 'discovered' forgiveness. We already see something of the problem in his initial plea to the king. Though in debt beyond any conceivable capacity to pay, he nevertheless makes his case by saying, "I will pay you everything."<sup>7</sup> He imagines that he is capable of repaying the debt. He fails to see that he is forgiven by the king's mercy. His heart hasn't changed even after he is forgiven.

### **Heart**

In the Greek understanding, heart - *kardia* (Καρδιά) is not considered as an organ in a physical sense, but the location of mental and spiritual feeling.<sup>8</sup> It refers to the inner person, the seat of understanding, knowledge, and will, and conscience. It is used as a place of concealment makes it possible for a person to speak 'in' his or her heart,<sup>9</sup> or to bear something that has been experienced 'in' his or her heart.<sup>10</sup>

The theological meaning of *kardia* (Καρδιά) is that it is the 'place' of the person in which the encounter with God is realized in the positive or negative sense by which the person's ethical behaviour is determined. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13, the request is made to God that God might establish, encourage, and strengthen the hearts of the believers.

In his preaching of the kingdom of God, Jesus addresses the heart of humankind. In Matthew 13:19, the parable of the sower, it reads: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path." We see that the word of God is sown in the heart. When one's actions no longer come from the heart, and when thought, speech, and activity are divided, one is a hypocrite.<sup>11</sup> Over against this hypocrisy, Jesus demands unity of heart, word, and deed.<sup>12</sup>

The question of the greatest commandment is answered by Jesus with reference to Deuteronomy 6:5<sup>13</sup> in that one should love God 'with all the heart' in the first place.

### ***The heart of forgiveness in the life of the church today***

Now we have many more questions as follows: Does Jesus require that we place ourselves completely at the mercy of an uncaring and unrepentant sinner? What about those who are seriously injured while battling with shame and alienation? One thing we should remember is that this forgiveness discourse is among believers in the church context where the law of love is exercising. The foremost reward of forgiveness is peace in our heart that can't be taken or disrupted by anyone. Peace in our heart doesn't depend on the other's repentance or changed environments. Even with this, harmony within the church is already restored which is the purpose of the parable for forgiveness. This morning, we celebrated spring and blessed the spring flowers. What does it tell us? For me, they are one of the wonderful examples of God's forgiveness of sins in the world. We destroy nature in the name of economic development. We disrupt our relationships with our neighbours in the name of power and success. Despite all the human errors, spring still comes and flowers bloom year after year. God still forgives us seventy-seven.

Paul says that we should not judge or despise our Christian brothers and sisters.<sup>14</sup> We Christians are those who practise these two disciplines—seeking to resolve issues with fellow Christians through reconciliation and forgiving fellow Christians. It is only after this, we will be able to love our neighbour – the world as ourselves. May God help us live with the heart of forgiveness this day and always. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> 18:26

<sup>8</sup> It is the equivalent for Hebrew - *leib* (lēb/lēbāb)

<sup>9</sup> Matt 24:48 par. Luke 12:45; Rom 10:6; Rev 18:7

<sup>10</sup> Luke 1:66; 21:14; Acts 5:4

<sup>11</sup> Mark 7:1-23

<sup>12</sup> Matt 12:34

<sup>13</sup> Mark 12:30, 32

<sup>14</sup> Romans 14:10