

## **ST. STEPHEN'S BELROSE**

Sunday, 13 May 2007

Matthew 18:21-35, Ephesians 4:25-32

### **GRACE TO FORGIVE**

*By Tom French*

#### **Looking at Grace**

Recently we've been looking at grace. Today we're looking at the topic of Grace to Forgive. In our reading in Ephesians today Paul tells us to forgive one another just as in Christ God forgave you. For Paul our motivation for forgiveness has to come out of the forgiveness that God has given us. There can be no greater imperative for us to forgive than the fact that we have already been forgiven. And I want to explore this more, by looking at one of the parables of Jesus.

In Matthew 18 Jesus tells a wonderful story to illustrate for us this attitude. If you could turn your Bibles to Matt 18:21-35 with me and well have a look at that passage.

#### **Background**

Jesus has just been teaching the disciples about church discipline and what Christians should do if someone wrongs them. He outlines three steps the wronged person should take. First they must go to the person and confront them with their sin. If they don't repent, you bring two or three people with you and confront them again. If they still don't repent, you bring it before the church. If they still refuse to repent you treat them as if they are no longer part of the Church, in the hope that they might see the error of their ways and repent. That is Jesus' outline for Church discipline. And with this in mind Peter comes to Jesus with a question. He's obviously wondering what happens if this happens and number of times. He wants to know how many times he should forgive a person. So let's see what happens:

*21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

*22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."<sup>[1]</sup>*

*23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents<sup>[2]</sup> was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*

26"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

28"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii.<sup>[1]</sup> He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

29"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

30"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

## **10,000 talents**

Now this is a rather remarkable story. Firstly you have this bloke who's been called before the king with a whopping debt. The debt is 10,000 talents. Now that doesn't really mean much to us these days. But we can get an idea of the amount. In Jesus' day a denarii was a day's wage. In Australia today the minimum wage is about \$107 a day. In a talent there were about 6,000 denarii. So one talent today would be worth about \$647,000, so 10,000 talents would be worth \$647 Billion. Now I don't know about you, but while I'm pretty greedy, I think even I'd struggle to spend \$647 billion. This servant has a massive, unfathomable debt to the king. And when he gets brought before the king, and he couldn't pay the debt, not even by selling all his stuff, and his wife and kids, can he do it. But this guy has the guts to say "Be patient with me, and I'll pay you back." Like he's going to be able to pay him back. The whole notion is absurd. If you owe the entire GDP of a small country you're not really going to be able to pay it back any time in the next million years.

But the King has mercy on the man and forgives his debt. For years activists have been campaigning governments to forgive the debt of developing nations and so far, through masses of petitions, protests, and advocacy they've achieved \$40 billion of debt cancellation. But this king cancels a much larger debt in one

go. It's absurd.

But that's an image of what God has done for us. Through Jesus' death on the cross, God has forgiven all our sin. Our sin, before God, amounts to a lot more than \$647 billion, and it gets cancelled in one go, in one wondrous act of grace. No longer are we seen as sinners, deserving of eternal punishment, but we're free people, totally right before God. Something this huge has got to be a rather life changing event.

### **College Assessment**

One night, a few years ago, I sat down at my computer to check a few things and found out that I had an assessment due in the next day. I thought it was due a week later. Sadly it was midnight, and I was meant to hand it in on the other side of Sydney at 9am the next morning. It wasn't going to happen. So when I arrived at college the next day I was rather worried. I went straight to see my lecturer, who also happened to be the Dean. I went into his office, and the whole teaching faculty was there. Which would be a scary and impressive thing except at my college there was only two people on the teaching staff. So I turned to the Dean and said "Deano, I need to talk to you. I've got issues"

To which he replied "We know you've got issues. Which particular one do you want to talk about?"

"Last night I found out at midnight that my assessment was due in today. I thought it was due in next week." I said.

"Well that depends on who you ask. If you believe that it's due in next week, then for you it's due in next week."

"Really that's cool" I said.

At this point the other lecturer piped up and said "Now there's grace."

And it was. Not very big in the scheme of things, but big enough that I'm still talking about it now.

### **Grace should change you life.**

Now if you consider getting forgiven something as huge the guy in the parable, or getting forgiven as much as we have been, it has to affect your whole life. It's a lot more than getting to hand in your essay when you want to. But it doesn't change the life of the man in story, and sadly it doesn't seem to change some of us either.

In the story the man gets forgiven his debt, and he's a happy man. He's walking down the street, whistling I bet, because that what everyone does when they're happy. They walk down the street whistling. I know I do. And then suddenly, over the other side of the street he sees that guy who owes him money. And immediately he stops whistling, puts on his angry face, and heads straight for the man. The man owes him about \$10,000 so he grabs the man and proceeds to choke him saying "Pay me back what you owe me punk!" But the man can't pay. He begs, but it's no use, the man throws the other man in prison till he can pay off the debt.

The King hears about this, and he's not real pleased. So he called the first man back in and says "You're a knob. I forgave you your debt because you begged me, shouldn't you have mercy on that other guy, like I did for you?" And the king throws him into jail to be tortured till he can pay off his debt. Which is kinda like being tortured for the rest of his life, because it is rather hard to earn any money at all when you're busy being tortured.

What a lovely story.

And Jesus finishes up by telling everyone that we too have the opportunity to receive eternal punishment! All we have to do is not forgive people as well.

### **Forgiveness Must be Unlimited**

There are a few things we can learn about forgiveness from this parable. The first is that forgiveness must be unlimited.

When Peter asks Jesus, how many times he should be forgiving someone who keeps sinning against him, he suggests seven as a good number. Seven, because it's symbolic of being perfect. And seven because Jewish teaching at the time said that you would only have to forgive someone three times, so Peter would have thought he was being rather generous.

But Jesus replies, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Jesus is effectively saying, "Don't even bother keeping count." As long as someone keeps repenting we have to keep forgiving. Why? Because that's what God does.

### **NRMA**

At the beginning of the year I purchased my sexy white van off my parents. And when I did I decided I should probably get NRMA membership. The van is getting pretty old, and I'm expecting it to die on me one day soon.

So when I was trying decide what membership to get I was looking at the options. I could either get the basic membership which allowed me four free callouts for the NRMA man and 8kms of free towing if my car died. Or I could get

the “Classic” care, which gives me unlimited callouts and 20km free towing. I thought “Well, I’m not going to need more than four call outs. My car doesn’t break down often, and I’m not stupid enough to lock my keys in the car. But I may break down more than 8km from somewhere, and I don’t want to have to pay huge towing costs. So I’ll pay the extra \$10 and get the classic care.”

Well I’m happy to say that since then I haven’t broken down once. Of course my car now only runs on 3 cylinders, but it’s still putting along. Sadly however I have been making use of my NRMA callouts. 4 times since I joined I have locked my keys in my car. On the day I payed for my Membership I locked my keys in my car. Actually I paid for my membership because I was like “Ahh, I locked my keys in the car.”

I did it at small group once, and all the boys wanted to watch the NRMA man break into my car. Which makes the whole experience all the more humiliating when you have 6 11-13 year olds watching you be rescued by a man in little blue shorts and long socks.

I’ve locked my keys in the car twice in the past month. So much for not being stupid enough to do it. And every time I call up the NRMA I think “This will be the time my unlimited call outs end.” I’ll ring and say “I locked my keys in my car.” And they’ll say “Mr French, you idiot! You know normally we give unlimited call outs but not for stupid people, get your own stupid keys out, call us when you’ve got a problem that’s not your fault.”

Or when they say they’ll send a car out, I sit beside my car imagining the man getting out, and just being in a huff. And he’ll spend the whole time muttering “Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid. Four times. Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

But so far they haven’t done any of that to me. They’ve been perfectly pleasant. And unless I’ve missed something in the small print, which I actually haven’t read, I could lock my keys in the car, everyday from now and until my membership runs out and they’ll come to my aid. I have unlimited salvation from my own stupidity in the NRMA.

### **God’s forgiveness in unlimited**

And we need to be people who offer unlimited forgiveness to anyone who wrongs us. Not, however, because they’ve paid a membership fee. They don’t come up and say “I’m a fully payed up sinner, please forgive me.” But because we too have been forgiven, and forgiven an unlimited number of times. No matter how many times we stuff up, God will forgive us. It’s not like we’ll get to our 600<sup>th</sup> sin and God will say “That’s enough, to hell with you, I’ve only got a limited supply of grace.”

No, the Bible tells us God is rich in mercy. Romans 5:20-21 says “where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” God’s not going to give up on us, so we have no excuse to give up on anyone else. As long we’re forgiven sinners we must also be forgiving sinners.

## **Forgiveness is Tough**

The problem is, this is going to be tough. If someone keeps hurting us, we’re not really going to want to keep letting them off the hook. At some point we’re going to want to say “No more” and write the person off, stop having to relate to them, stop having to put effort in, to hold their guilt against them. But we don’t have that choice. Jesus told us the consequences for that are very clear. If we don’t forgive other people, God’s not going to forgive us. He may be a God who is unlimited his grace. But if we can’t show grace, it implies that perhaps we haven’t really received it properly either. God has forgiven us a great debt, there is nothing for us to do but give others the same generosity.

Of course, this isn’t going to be easy. The servant who wouldn’t forgive the man who owed him money was owed a significant amount of money. The hurts that are done to us are significant, forgiving them will be hard. No one is pretending that forgiveness is easy. Forgiveness cost God, and it will cost us. As I’ve said before, I can’t imagine how someone who has been tortured, or abused, or had a loved one killed, can forgive those acts. But it can be done, and it has been done. All I can say is that it must be through the empowering grace of God that that forgiveness comes, because I’m not sure how anyone would be strong enough to do it on their own.

## **Do we forgive the unrepentant?**

The question that all this talk of forgiveness begs however, is do we have to forgive people who don’t ask for forgiveness? Are called just to forgive anyone who hurts us?

Consider Luke 17:3-4 which says “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.”

This passage is often taken as an indication that we don’t have to forgive a person if they don’t repent. And up until I was working on this sermon last night, I thought that’s what it meant too. However I think this is more about having unlimited forgiveness, than it is about unrepentance. It’s saying forgiveness must follow repentance. Jesus isn’t saying unforgiveness must follow unrepentance. Though you can ask me in a week’s time I might have changed my mind again.

But if you look in the Bible there are plenty of instances where we are taught to forgive and repentance isn't mentioned.

## **Bible**

In the Lord's prayer it says: "We forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

In Mark 11:25 it says "when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Luke 6:37 says "Forgive and you will be forgiven"

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

And on the cross Jesus prays for those who are killing him saying to God "Forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

The Bible is rather clear. We have to be forgiving people whether we want to or not. We have to be forgiving people whether people seek forgiveness or not.

## **Not Doormats**

That doesn't however mean that we should just be doormats and let people walk all over us. As we saw before, in Matthew 18, right before the parable of the unmerciful servant, Jesus is talking about how to address the wrongs that are done to you. And he doesn't say "Just put up with it." You confront the person by yourself, then with two or three others, and then before the church. There are clear steps you can take so that people might turn away from their sin. In fact it's our responsibility to those people who hurt us that we do confront them so we don't leave them in their sin.

## **What does Forgiveness Look Like?**

So what does forgiveness look like?

Forgiveness will entail a restoration of relationship. It will mean no longer wanting harm to come to a person, or wanting to punish a person for what they have done, but seeking their best. It will mean not just putting up with a person but loving them. In our context, in the church, we have to be willing work side by side, genuinely caring for the people who have hurt us, rather than just avoiding them. It will mean not dwelling on what they did to us, it will mean not complaining to other people about them, or judging their character by their mistakes. It will mean actively loving the person who has previously hurt us.

## **Cake Story**

Once, a few years ago, I had a meeting with a Christian man. I met with him because we were working together on project and I had some issues with how the project was being run. I raised them with him and he invited me out for a coffee. Over this coffee he was very clear with me about why my views were wrong, and was, I felt, quite belittling, manipulative and patronising.

For a few weeks I stewed about it but I realised I needed to forgive the guy and move on. So I did. Or at least I thought I did. But as time went on, every time I talked about this person I'd feel myself getting upset, I'd say rude things about him, I'd think about what was wrong with him.

After months of this it occurred to me that I probably hadn't properly forgiven him, from my heart. I asked a friend about this, how would I go about making that forgiveness happen. He suggested I actually do something for this guy. Rather than just be neutral in my behaviour (which I wasn't) why don't I act out my forgiveness by being actively loving in my behaviour.

So I plucked up the courage, and one day set off to show this guy my love for him. I went to the cake shop near his work and bought the nicest cake I could think of. And I took it down to his office and I dropped in and I gave it to him and the people he worked with.

When I was asked why I was doing it I said "Because I think you're an idiot but I'm a godly person who doesn't hold grudges!" No I didn't. I just said "Because I thought you'd like it." And for me that released me to love this guy again. It was that act that forced me to give up my unforgiving heart.

Now I just hope that guy doesn't hear this sermon otherwise he'll be like "So that's why I got that cake."

## **Forgiveness needs to be Active**

For us all I think our forgiveness needs to be active. We can't just say "I forgive you" and then keep going on hating the person. The King in the parable didn't forgive the man, but still expect him to pay off the debt. God doesn't forgive us, but still expect us to go to hell.

Just as sin has consequences, forgiveness has to have consequences, and those consequences have to be love.

Jesus says in Luke 6:27-28: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you."

Who are you holding unforgiveness against? Who are you still punishing for the hurt they've done to you? Who do you need to be praying for? Who do you need to be blessing?

Perhaps someone has hurt you and you need to confront them with it so that they might be brought to repentance. Perhaps someone has said they're "Sorry" but you feel they've done it too many times, or the sin is too large. Perhaps you've said you forgive someone, but you don't feel it in your heart, and you need God's grace to help you to forgive. Perhaps you are yet to receive God's forgiveness and you need to accept the forgiveness he offers you in Jesus.

All of us are people in need of God's grace, so we can show grace. Let's be people who are seeking God's spirit, so that he might give us the practical tools we need to actually do forgiveness.

## **Tomas Borge**

Before I finish, I'd like to tell you a story.

Last night my sister read to me a about man called Tomas Borge who was a freedom fighter in Nicaragua. Borge was fighting for the Sandinistas and underwent seven years of imprisonment and torture at the hands of the Somoza diactorship's National Guard.

In 1979, after the Sandinista revolution, Tomas Borge became the Justice Minister of Nicaragua. Many of the National Guard were now in prison, and he was in charge of them. Borge overhauled the prison system, so that good behaviour was rewarded with more human treatment with inmates being allowed to go home on weekends, and guard themselves. One day in court Borge came face to face with his torturers. Borge is said to have been given the chance to chose their sentence, at this he confronted them and said "For your punishment, I forgive you."

Later Borge said: "After having been brutal tortured as a prisoner, after having a hood placed over my head for nine months, after having been handcuffed for seven months, I remember that when we captured these torturers I told them: 'The hour of my revenge has come: we will not do you even the slightest harm. You did not believe us beforehand; now you will believe us.' That is our philosophy, our way of being."

That is our philosophy; that is our way of being. We are the forgivers because we are the forgiven. We bear no ill will, we hold no grudges, we bless those who hurt us and we pray for those who mistreat us. We are God's people of grace. Our

lives are defined by grace, our actions are empowered and directed by grace. We forgive just as in Christ, God forgave us. God help us to be the forgiving people you call us to be.