

# Sermon for Year A Proper 19

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

In a world where most of our focus is on 'me' and what I want, we often judge our relationships based on whether we profit from them or not. We wonder if our relationships are worth our time and efforts. Are our families and friends giving us what we want?

It also follows we either consciously, or unconsciously, ask ourselves 'What's the minimum amount of effort I need to put into this relationship so I can still profit from it?'

It then makes sense that, in a selfish world, the ledger *has* to be in our favour – otherwise we don't want to keep up the relationship. If the other person still satisfies us, makes us feel good, or gives us what we want, then we may choose to 'invest' into that relationship.

We might be willing to serve them, compromise with them, or give up something precious for them, but only so long as they still provide something in return. When we have a really profitable relationship, we learn to trust them, let them into our hearts, or share intimate feelings with them.

On the other hand, if the relationship is too much hard work, too demanding, too untrustworthy, or we're simply not getting what we want out of it, then we want to put very little into it, or perhaps even end it.

At the very least, we want to make it difficult for them to continue in the relationship, hoping they'll decide to put more in, or even give up on the relationship before we do. If they've given up on the relationship, then we reckon it wasn't our fault and we can blame them for the break-down.

The result of this selfish view of our relationships is more and more people either don't want to enter into long-term relationships, or wish to end the relationships they have.

Joy and intimacy and trust and care becomes harder and harder to find. We end up having very few deep relationships. Without committed and fruitful relationships, we become more turned in on ourselves, isolated, bitter, and depressed.

So, by now you may be wondering what has this got to do with the parable for today? Well, we often apply the same selfish logic to our forgiveness within those relationships.

It usually works this way: If the other person will finally learn their lesson, promise to never do it again, or can give us something in return for the pain and heartache they've caused so that the ledger returns to our favour, *then* we may choose to forgive them.

On the other hand, if we reckon they'll probably hurt us again, or can never repay us for what they've done to us, then we're very reluctant to forgive, and may choose to withhold forgiveness from them for the rest of our lives. Unfortunately, unforgiveness is the poison we drink hoping the other person will die! In this sense, forgiveness in many people's mind is still about seeking a profit in our relationships.

It's more about 'me' and what I can gain from my forgiveness than the other person. If I can keep the ledger firmly in my favour, then I might forgive. But if the ledger is in their favour, then I probably won't forgive. After all, it's not fair unless I end up with things in my favour.

The challenge about forgiveness, then, according to Jesus' parable, is that it isn't about making a profit or about what we can get out of it, but is always about the other person, even if they don't deserve it.

It isn't about making things in *our* favour, but about releasing the debt of the *other* person, which sounds like it's actually going to end up in *their* favour. Forgiveness then, is *always* unfair!

The question about whether to forgive, or about how many times we should forgive, isn't supposed to be about what's best for us, but it's supposed to be an act of mercy or compassion for the other person.

In other words: How much do we pity *them*? How much are we willing to give up for *them*? How much of *their* debt are we willing to let go of? For many, this is asking too much because we have no pity or compassion toward those who have hurt us. So Jesus offers a parable to illustrate his point.

It's quite clear in the parable the first servant couldn't pay back the debt. It's impossible. The debt was far too huge. In fact, even seventy times seven lifetimes wouldn't pay back the debt! The only hope, the only saving grace was the king's compassion. It was about the king's gracious and merciful heart, not about the servant's repentance, how much he pleaded, or his ability to pay the king back.

You see, the king had compassion on his servant. The king knew it wasn't about him having a profitable relationship with the servant. That was impossible. Yet the king showed love and mercy by forgiving the servant's debt. Their relationship was restored because the king showed undeserving grace to his servant. If only the servant showed just an ounce of that same grace to his fellow servant!

In the same way, if only we too showed some of that same grace in response to God's forgiveness of us. Too many times we Christians are so reluctant to show mercy or compassion on those who have sinned against us. Too many times we withhold our forgiveness.

It's in the context of living in peace with those around him Peter thought he was generous with his offer of forgiving up to seven times. And certainly, he was! Jesus was starting to rub off on him for him to offer such generous forgiveness.

I mean, rarely will we get to the seventh time we need to forgive. We've usually cut our losses well before then. The ledger's gone too far in their favour, so until they do enough for us to make up for the imbalance, we're not going to invest into this relationship anymore. We're not going to 'waste' our forgiveness on the undeserving (as if forgiving has ever been about deserving)!

So, forgive seven times? Don't be silly! We've given up well before we get to the seventh. In response to the way they hurt us, we gave them some of their own desserts, or we chose to run away from the relationship. But Jesus' reply is unexpected and comes as quite a shock to us. Despite Peter's generosity, Jesus says seven times isn't enough. Seventy times seven is more like it!

But don't get me wrong! Despite Jesus suggesting about four hundred and ninety times, the answer isn't meant to be literal. He's using exaggeration to make a point. The point is: forgiveness *never* works in our favour. It's *never* fair. It's *never* meant to be to our profit. But this is because it's not supposed to be about us, but about having mercy and compassion on the other.

Now, of course none deserve our forgiveness. They have no excuse and they can't make up for it. They probably have no idea how much they've hurt us and they'll probably hurt us again. The ledger may never return into our favour.

But while we focus on our own hurts and our own desires for justice or profit, it's easy to forget we've already been forgiven a much greater debt we could never repay.

You see, it's necessary for us to forgive our brothers and sisters from our heart, for this is what God the Father, what God our King, has done for you and me.

He's already forgiven our debt; our entire debt. There are no strings attached to God's forgiveness. You and I don't have to earn his forgiveness.

God has forgiven all our sins and we don't owe God anything! Our slate is clean. Through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, we're all mates with God again!

This is part of what it means to be in the kingdom of God. We can't be in God's kingdom and not be forgiven. On the other hand, we also can't be in God's kingdom and not forgive.

If we all have an honest look at our own hearts, we'll see a stubborn and selfish heart which seeks its own good rather than the good of others.

It wants to keep a ledger. It wants to make a profit. It wants to think better of itself than anyone else. It wants people to pay their debts. It's more concerned about itself than anyone else. It also wants to tell God who to forgive and not forgive as if it were God's master.

This means we won't find any reason to forgive by looking at our own heart, but only by looking to the heart of God and his compassion.

When we look at God's heart we see he sent his only beloved Son to suffer and die in our place and receive the punishment we should have received. He paid what we couldn't. We see God's heart dripping from Jesus' thorny brow as he cries out: 'Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing'.

Not only this, but we hear God's heart whenever we hear him announce we're forgiven through the words of absolution. We can see and taste God's heart in the Lord's Supper. We can see God's heart in action when we openly share peace and forgiveness with each other.

Yes, forgiving others is hard, especially when our hearts are so stubborn and reluctant to stop tracking other people's debts against us, or because we're seeking to profit from all our relationships. But when we're reluctant to forgive, we're to dare to look at our own huge debt which was cancelled on the cross. Then, as we look to Jesus, we're to believe our sins are forgiven.

By faith we believe God has truly forgiven our debt against him, even though we don't deserve it.

By faith, God will help us to cancel the debts people owe us as we learn to forgive as we've already been forgiven.

By God's grace and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we may dare to share God's compassionate and merciful heart with others.

By God's grace, our forgiveness may lead others to see their relationship with us is profitable for them because we're a beacon of hope and peace and grace in a world of selfishness, hate, and revenge.

So, by God's grace, may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus so we may be able to forgive as we've been forgiven. Amen.