

## MATT 6.12, 14-15: LOVE AND HURTS – TRUE LOVE FORGIVES

[Chelmsford 4 March 2012]

"Always forgive your enemies", said Oscar Wilde. "Nothing annoys them so much"! But the truth is that forgiving is not easy. As CS Lewis wrote: "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive". Or in the words of an American humorist (Kin Hubbard): "Nobody ever forgets where he buried the hatchet".

Forgiving is not easy when you have been raped or abused in one way or another. Forgiving is not easy- when your loved one has been killed by some careless hit-and-run motorist.

OK, those are extreme instances, but there are many other circumstances in which forgiving is not easy.

If we were all honest with one another, I would imagine that we would discover a host of grievances present within this congregation this morning.

Forgiveness is especially not easy when the person who has done us a wrong refuses to face up to the wrong

- when instead of falling to their knees and asking our forgiveness, they brazen it out and pretend that the wrong never happened
- or if they accept that the wrong did happen, then it wasn't their fault - it was somebody else's - indeed, they may even allege that we were asking for trouble.

And yet forgive we must, if we would go the way of Jesus.

Listen to what Jesus said. He said that when we pray we are to say, "**Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us**".

Or at least, those are the words we use in our church when we say the Lord's Prayer. The GNB translation of this petition as we find it in Matt 6.12 reads: "**Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us**".

- Actually Jesus here in Matthew says "**Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debts**". The **debts** Jesus had in mind were not our financial obligations - but rather our moral obligations. Jesus was using a Jewish metaphor for sin: according to Jewish thinking sins may be likened to "**debts**" owed to God - when we sin, we fail to live up to our obligations to God. All this would have been clear to the Jewish churches for which Matthew was writing his Gospel.
- Luke, with a Gentile audience in mind, does away with the financial imagery altogether in his version of the Lord's Prayer (Lk 11.2-4): he uses a word which came from the world of archery (*hamartia*) - it's a term which refers to the distance by which an arrow missed the mark. I.e. when we pray "**forgive us our sins**", we are saying forgive us for missing the mark, forgive us our failures.

But whether we use imagery drawn from the world of finance or the world of archery, the sense is clear. Jesus says that when we pray, we should say: "**Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us**".

To this Jesus adds the commentary: "**If you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done**" (Matt

6.14,15)

This morning my concern is not our need to seek forgiveness from God. Few, if any, of us here are under any illusion that we need God's forgiveness: With the Apostle Paul we know that we all have "**sinned and fall short**" of God's standards (Rom 3.23). With the Apostle John we know that "**if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us**" (1 John 1.8). I find it significant that beneath the cross made of two charred beams in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral are inscribed two words: "*Father forgive*". Not three words: "*Father forgive **them***" - but two. We all have sinned. That we know.

No, my concern this morning is the difficulty many of us have in forgiving others. This is the context in which I wish to make five statements

## 1. TO FORGIVE IS TO BE FORGIVEN

Sunday morning by Sunday morning we pray: "***Forgive us our sins as we forgive others***". Not without reason St Augustine described this as "*the terrible petition*". It is terrible, because if we are not careful, we may end up asking God not to forgive us. Martin Luther said that for an unforgiving person to pray this prayer would in effect be saying: "*O God, I am your debtor, and I also have a debtor; I am not willing to forgive him, therefore don't forgive me either; I will not obey you even though you would pardon me; I would rather renounce your heaven and everything else, and go to the devil*"

If we would be forgiven, we must forgive.

There are no exceptions - there are no let-out clauses! CS Lewis, *Fern-seed and Elephants* 39f: "*He doesn't say that we are to forgive other people's sins provided they are not too frightful, or provided there are extenuating circumstances, or anything of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated. If we don't, we shall be forgiven none of our own*".

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Or in the words of the GNB: "**Forgive us the wrong we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done us to us**". Literally: ... as we forgive the wrongs that others "**have done**" to us. Past tense!

At first sight these words of Jesus suggest some kind of tit for tat arrangement - as if God says, I shall only forgive you this time if you forgive what Jo or whoever did to you the other week.

But in fact, as the later Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor makes clear, Jesus is stating a general truth. An unforgiving spirit on our part indicates that we have never truly repented of our own sin. To quote John Stott (*Counterculture* 149f): "*Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offence against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling. If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offences of others, it proves that we have minimized our own*".

To be forgiven, we must first forgive. To speak in picture terms, we cannot receive forgiveness, if our fists are clenched and our arms folded tightly round ourselves. We

need to open our hands and our arms. In the words of St Augustine: "*God gives, where he finds empty hands*"

## 2. TO FORGIVE IS NOT TO EXCUSE

When God forgave us, he did not excuse us.

When we broke his holy laws and went our own sinful & selfish ways, he did not say "It doesn't matter". God could not and did not shut his eyes to our sin.

He took our sin seriously. He took our sin so seriously that he sent his Son to die in our place, to bear in his own body the punishment due to you and to me.

The Cross is a sign not just of God's love, but also of God's wrath

God didn't pretend that our offences did not really matter.

Neither should we pretend that the hurts and wrongs others have done to us do not matter. Forgiving others does not minimise the wrong they have done.

CS Lewis, *Fernseed and Elephants* 42f: "*Forgiving does not mean excusing... To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you*".

Unfortunately some Christians find it difficult to forgive others precisely because they pretend that they have not been hurt, whereas in fact they may have been deeply hurt.

Listen to Paul Tournier, a Swiss medical doctor, with years of experience in counselling Christians: "*A committed Christian finds it more difficult than an unbeliever to express resentment and dislike... Then he makes an effort to forgive, and the need for an effort is the sign that he has not truly forgiven*".

But we are helping no one by pretending - least of all ourselves. For when we pretend and suppress our true feelings, we run the risk of damaging ourselves.

Instead of letting the hurt and anger out, many Christians unconsciously turn it inward and as a result become either depressed or bitter individuals.

I find it significant that the Greek word for "to forgive" (*aphiemi*) literally means to "*let go, allow to depart, dismiss*".

This is the opposite of suppressing, which basically means holding on to.

If we are to forgive, we need to allow the anger and the pain to surface - we need to face up to the truth of the damage done - and then let go.

## 3. TO FORGIVE DOES NOT MEAN WE FORGET

There is a wonderful verse in Isaiah where God says not only that he will forgive, but also "**I will not remember your sins**" (43.25 NRSV).

Wow! God when he forgives, forgets. The story is told a young Christian who went on his knees before God and confessed to a particular sin, promising never to do it again. Within an hour he was back on his knees saying, "*O God, I have done it again*". A deep voice boomed from heaven, "Done what?" God's forgiving love is so perfect that it is utterly forgetful.

But it is neither realistic nor right to believe that we can always forget the wrong done to us. Let me give you four reasons:-

1. We have minds - to say 'to forgive is to forget' is to deny the existence of our rational faculties.
2. The emotional wounds of a wrong may be so deep that we may hurt for a very long time. It may take many years before these wounds can be healed. A scab and then a scar may form over the wound, but there may well always be a tenderness there, with the result that the wound can be re-opened with ease.
3. The effects of wrong may remain with us for ever. There are times when as a result of a wrong done, life is never the same. This does not mean that life is necessarily worse. If Paul was right - & I believe he was - that : "**In all things God works for good**" (Rom 8.28), then we may discover that life is a 1000x better. But nonetheless, life is often different after a great wrong.
4. It just may not be right to forget. Helmut Thielicke, a German pastor who endured the darkest days of the Nazi Third Reich, said: "*One should never mentioned the words 'forgive' and 'forget' in the same breath*".

Precisely because we cannot always forget, forgiveness must therefore entail an ongoing attitude.

Yes, there are times when forgiveness is a one-off action.

But there are other occasions when forgiveness is an ongoing process - indeed, if the truth be told there are times when it is an ongoing fight.

#### 4. TO FORGIVE IS TO TAKE THE INITIATIVE

But can we forgive if the person who has hurt us is not truly sorry? Can we forgive where the offending party refuses to face up to the wrong they have done?

It is certainly more difficult to forgive when those who have hurt us refuse to say sorry - maybe refuse even to see their need to say sorry.

Yet the example of Jesus reminds us that forgiveness can never be truly dependent upon others. "**Forgive them Father. They don't know what they are doing**" (Luke 23.24). In one sense they fully knew what they were doing - at the very least they knew they were crucifying one who was innocent - and yet they were blind, they were blind to the true significance of what they were doing.

Is that not true time and time again in life?

People may know they have done wrong - and yet they are blind to the extent of the wrong they have done - and so in their pride they refuse to say sorry.

But if we are to go the way of Christ, we must take the initiative and forgive - just as God in Christ took the initiative and forgave us.

If God has waited for us to say sorry, then there would have been no Cross - there would have been no hope for you and for me. But as it was, God took the initiative - he sent his Son to die on that Cross, that we might be forgiven

True, for the full cycle of forgiveness to be complete, there must be repentance on the part of the one who has done wrong.

We can only enter into the fulness of God's forgiveness in Christ when we see our need. Relationships can only be restored where there is sorrow and penitence on behalf of the one who has done the injury.

But a failure on the part of the offending party to see their need for forgiveness does not lessen our need to forgive. **"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"**.

Indeed, sometimes it is precisely the fact that we are willing to forgive, which shames the other to forgive.

But whatever, we must be willing to take the initiative and to forgive, regardless of the attitude of the other.

## 5. TO FORGIVE IS TO BE SET FREE

To forgive is to be set free

Richard Nixon was right when he said: *"Always remember, others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them - and then you destroy yourself"*.

On a number of occasions I have spoken to people who have been abused as children or in teenage years. Some of these people understandably struggle with forgiveness.

The fact is that what they have experienced was wrong – dreadfully wrong.

And it is dreadfully wrong too when their abusers fail to acknowledge their dastardly acts.

And yet not to forgive – not to let go – is to allow the past to control us.

It is to allow the abuser still to control us.

In this context – and indeed in many others – to forgive is to be set free.

To forgive is to bring about healing

- In the first place, it can bring about healing in our own lives - for when we forgive, the poison of bitterness and hate leaves the system
- In the second place, it can also bring about healing in our lives of others:  
Margaret Magdalen: *136 "Forgiveness releases a power that can only be described as spiritually therapeutic too . Think... of the marriages healed through forgiveness, the churches united thro mutual forgiveness, the friendships remade through forgiveness"*

We are never the losers when we forgive - we are always the winners.

Yes I know that to forgive is not easy. Maybe even at this moment my preaching on this subject has stirred up old wounds and old hurts. You remember a past wrong, and all the anger floods back.

But forgive you must, if you would be forgiven. **"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"**.

But how can I forgive, you say, when I have been so wronged?

Forgiveness is in the first instance an act of the will - "I will forgive, in spite of the hurt and anger I feel".

Yes I know it is not easy to find - but that is one reason we come to church - to find strength for our daily living - and for our forgiving.

In conclusion: most if not all of us have been hurt in one way or another. Let me plead with you this morning to forgive those who have hurt you – so that you might

*[Matt 6.12, 14, 15]*

enjoy the forgiveness that God offers you. Yes, true love forgives, whatever.