

Sunday 17th September, 2017

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt.18:15-21)

One of the problems with preaching on Jesus' parables is that often you think, well, what's the point? What's the point of trying to clarify or explain what he has said, when it is so well put in the first place? Why not just read it and say, 'right, there you go, go and do what he says.' That temptation was especially strong this week. You may or may not be relieved to know that I have not succumbed, and you do indeed have a sermon this week.

1. You cannot begin to imagine the mercy of God

The place to start is with something that isn't obvious from just reading the parable today. We're told that the first slave owed ten thousand talents. Now 'talent' here of course does not mean being good at something, it means money – a serious amount of money. One talent was worth fifteen years wages for the average labourer. Ten thousand talents is just an astronomical sum of money. I make it about 2.8 billion pounds. The mind boggles at quite what the slave must have done to run up a debt like that: horses, girls, drugs – it must have been quite some party. And then he says, rather optimistically, 'just give me time, and I'll pay you everything.' But here's the astonishing punchline: *and out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him, and forgave him the debt.* Not, wrote off the interest. Not, arranged a reasonable schedule of repayments. Released him, and forgave him the debt.

God is like that. You might think that you are just the worst, screwed up, indebted, sinful disaster of a human being there has ever been. You're almost certainly wrong, but you might think so. You might have lied and cheated and hurt those around you; you might have been violent, you might have been unfaithful, you might have secrets that you're sure would make everyone in this church look down on and despise you. You might be just like that guilty, stupid, panicked slave. Well here is the Good News: out of pity for you, your Lord releases you, and forgives you your debt. Not, writes off the interest. Not, arranges a reasonable schedule of repayment. Releases you, and forgives you your debt. More than that, as Jesus says elsewhere, God welcomes you home and sets a great banquet before you.

Let's say it as simply as possible: there is simply no sin, no debt, however great, however terrible, that God will not forgive. Not because you deserve it, but simply out of pity for you. Because he loves you.

2. You must be merciful

There is, however, a catch.

Slave One goes out and meets Slave Two, who owes him some money. A hundred denarii – I think about £8,000. So a reasonably serious debt. Not astronomical, not £2.8 billion, but reasonably serious. Slave Two falls to his knees and begs for time, just like Slave One did – but Slave One is not as stupid and soft and weak as his master, so there's no forgiveness here. Slave One seizes people by the throat and hisses 'pay what you owe'.

And then Slave One learns that his own Master is not stupid, and soft, and weak after all. There is a debt he will not let go. There is a sin he will not forgive.

If, when you have been shown the mercy of God, you show yourself hard and vicious to others – well then, God's mercy will disappear. If you are so determined to have justice, to get what rightly belongs to you - then in the end you will indeed have it, to your eternal regret.

This bit of the sermon is not quite as nice as the first bit, is it? We love to hear about the forgiveness of God, about the great, generous, inclusive, forgiving love of God which accepts all our wreckage and mess, which runs out to meet us before we can begin to deserve it. That is grace, and we love it.

But it is *half* the Gospel. Listen to what Jesus says – *Jesus*, not some angry Old Testament prophet: 'And in anger, his Lord handed Slave One over to be tortured, until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart.' *So my heavenly Father will also do to you.* Jesus is not above threatening to make his point. It is that serious. Unless you forgive, you cannot be forgiven. God is not a cuddly teddy bear, and this is a matter of your life and death.

3. How can I forgive?

Which means that learning to forgive is really important. It is *much* more important than being clever or successful. It is more important than knowing lots about the Bible and faith. It is *even* more important than being good. Of course, God wants you to be good. But He can and will cope when you're not. But the person who will not forgive – well, that is where God is stuck. So the big question: How do you get a forgiving heart?

Well, the first and most basic way is to remember that you yourself have been forgiven. You are a broken wreck who could never begin to pay what you owe, and nevertheless God touched you with kindness. God holds you to himself, with love that you could never begin to deserve or merit. Really know that, and it becomes quite difficult to despise another, to seize them by the throat and hiss 'pay what you owe'. They're just another piece of wreckage. Just another mix of pain and sadness. Just another of God's broken children. If you really know that *you* are forgiven, forgiving others becomes – well I won't say *easy*, but certainly more *natural*.

So the first thing is to know you are forgiven. Which also involves knowing quite how badly we are broken to start with. People sometimes complain that Christianity is sin obsessed – that we're *always* banging on about how bad we are, how hopeless and rubbish and guilty. And there is a lot to justify that complaint, and it has often gone wrong, but the point of that focus was always to make us gentle with each other. Only people who know their own broken-ness really deal gently with each other. It's the righteous, the strong, the true who tend to also be the harsh – which is why Jesus tended to aim his heaviest fire against precisely those people.

Know your broken-ness, know your guilt. Many of you will know it all too well already, every last painful bit of it. Here is a strange truth: you are lucky. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit; yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who mourn, for you shall be comforted'. Some of you, though, will be rather more polished, rather more together. Well, in this respect you are unlucky. Indeed, you're in danger. Your faults, your chaos, lies deep within, well hidden perhaps even from you. You need to get to know it. You need to be put in touch with all that uncontrollable, mysterious vulnerability and confusion which lurks beyond even the most well-ordered and reinforced surfaces. If you don't, you'll find it harder to love and forgive.

How? Well, perhaps the simplest way is to simply ask. Try praying: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. Some of you will recognise what Eastern Christians call the Jesus Prayer – a simple prayer to be said over and over and over again, until the words sink deep down into the heart. It's a good prayer to pray especially if you *don't* instantly think of yourself as a sinner, if you *don't* think mercy is the first thing you need. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. As you pray it over days, weeks, month, all I can say is that God opens your eyes. You come to understand – you come to *feel* – more of who you really are, and even more of the gentleness of God. And knowing that gentleness, you will begin to pass it on.

4. What about the unforgiveable?

But what if you just *can't* forgive? What if there are people who have wounded you so badly that you simply *cannot* forgive, even if you know you should and perhaps even *want* to? I know there are people in this congregation for whom that is true; and I also know if the things that have been done to them and their loved ones had been done to me, I would be in the same boat.

Two thoughts suggest themselves. First, remember that forgiving someone is not saying what they did doesn't matter. It is not even saying that they should not be punished. It's saying that that *you* will let the anger and the hate out of your heart, that *you* will deal with them gently. That you accept it is not up to you to deliver justice. As the Bible famously says, '*vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.*' When you forgive someone, you are *not* giving up on justice. You are simply leaving it to the One whose business it is, who will get it right, who will deal with the wicked with perfect wisdom and perfect justice. With us judgement would be a confused howl of pain, rage, resentment, fury: with God it is perfect. We cannot imagine what that looks like, and we do not need to – but it will come. There will be a time for justice.

And as God will judge the wicked with perfect wisdom, so he will judge you. And you simply *cannot* forgive, if your capacity for gentleness has been simply ruined by the evil done to you – well, you need healing, not punishment, and Jesus of Nazareth will heal. That does not excuse you from trying: you must try to forgive, you must ask for the grace to forgive, you must do everything you can to control your thirst for vengeance But when you fail, Jesus will heal. There is a big, big difference between 'can't forgive' and 'won't forgive'. Sometimes we kid ourselves as to which is really the case, and sometimes we find God makes us capable of more than we thought possible... but if it really is 'can't', then Jesus will heal.

I end with a prayer:

Lord Jesus: touch us with your gentleness. Turn our harshness to mercy, that we may be gentle to all around us. And so we entrust ourselves and all your children to your perfect judgement.

Amen.