



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 13 September by the Very Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.

Forgiving that we may fear no more

May my words be faithful to the written word and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the merciful One. Amen.

*Wilt Thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt Thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done, For I have more.*

The words of John Donne from *Wilt Thou Forgive*¹, express something profoundly human: our longing for forgiveness and our fear that there may yet be more in us that needs healing.

Throughout Matthew's gospel we see Jesus teach followers to renounce anger (5.21-26) and practice forgiveness (6.12, 14-15), praying, '*forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*'. Many people have suggested this is a new teaching, but actually it has massively clear parallels with a text from 200 years before in the Jewish wisdom text of Sirach:

*Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done
and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray...
If someone has no mercy towards another like himself,
can he then seek pardon for his own sins?*²

¹ The poem, commonly known as 'A Hymn to God the Father', was written during a period of serious illness in the winter of 1623.

² Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus) 27.30-28.4: Anger and wrath, these also are abominations, yet a sinner holds on to them. The vengeful will face the Lord's vengeance, for he keeps a strict account of their sins. Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does anyone harbour anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord? If someone has no mercy towards another like himself, can he then seek pardon for his own sins?

Both texts link two things we often try to separate: receiving forgiveness from God and extending forgiveness to others. Mercy received becomes mercy given.³ This is the context which Peter is asking about: *'Lord if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?'*. But Jesus replies, *'Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'*

This is a reversal of an ancient text from Genesis⁴, where the chest-thumping Lamech says: *'I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.'*

Lamech was Cain's great, great grandson - Cain who killed his brother Abel - and here, Lamech tries to manipulate God to bring protection as God had done for Cain. In Genesis the violence multiplies itself: the cycle of revenge and un-forgiveness stretches back far into the mists of human existence. From Cain to Lamech, and from Lamech to the present day, humanity has struggled to escape the spiral of retaliation. Jesus' command to forgive seventy-seven times is nothing less than God's answer to the seventy-sevenfold vengeance of Genesis.

So, Jesus having moved the seventy-seven times from revenge to forgiveness is entreating us to take on the mercy of God in our lives. The great Anglican thinker Richard Hooker taught that salvation is not merely the cancelling of a debt but participation in the life of God. Forgiveness is therefore more than a rule Christians obey; it is the fruit of God's life growing within us.⁵

Now, hear me when I say this is not easy. Forgiveness is not about pretending that evil did not happen, or the abandonment of justice and certainly not saying we should have inappropriate boundaries. Forgiveness can be costly, painful and is often slow: sometimes it is the work of years, or even our life work.

And yet as Christians, we seek to live this because we know this is what God is like. John Chrysostom wrote that nothing makes us so like God as being ready to forgive. Forgiveness is difficult precisely because it is participation in the very life of God.⁶

So, let's look together at the parable a little more closely. The slave owes a tremendous debt. A talent is about 20 years' worth of wages, so the slave owes the king approximately 200,000 years' wages. So, in 2026 figures that's about £7.2billion!

³ Vitally, it is not that God's forgiveness depends upon our, but that, having received God's mercy, this flows out to extend mercy to others.

⁴ Genesis 4.23-24

⁵ See Hooker Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Book V especially Ch56.

⁶ The Fathers consistently saw forgiveness not as weakness but as spiritual freedom. St Augustine observed that resentment harms the one who carries it. To cling to anger is to remain chained to the very wound from which we seek release. Forgiveness loosens those chains.

To which the king responds that the man, his family and possessions be sold into slavery. Now that's pretty harsh and sweeping (although wouldn't come near to anything like the actual debt!).

The person then falls on his knees - literally in Greek '*worships*'⁷ and says he will pay everything. It's madness - he never could. Yet the king is moved. The word here is usually used of Jesus' compassion for a crowd, or those in need of healing.⁸

Imagine the relief! '*I've been forgiven!*'

Then the slave comes across another slave who owes him an approximate ratio of 600,000 to 1. Still a lot of money, but nothing to his own debt. The contrast is staggering.

This slave grabs his fellow slave by the neck and attempts to choke the money out of him (think back to Lamech at the beginning of the sermon, who murdered someone - and what happens just after that - we get to the Flood!⁹)

I think the point of this teaching is that our forgiveness of others flows from our being forgiven. CS Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*, that everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.¹⁰

Lewis was surely right – forgiveness sounds attractive until we ourselves are wounded. Yet I wonder if this is precisely where Christian apologetics begins, not with abstract arguments but with the human heart. Every generation must wrestle with the same realities: guilt, shame, broken relationships, violence, and the longing for a fresh start. We know instinctively that the world cannot survive on vengeance alone; yet neither can it flourish if evil is simply ignored.

The genius of the Gospel is that it takes both justice and mercy with utter seriousness. God neither denies the reality of sin nor abandons the sinner. Instead, mercy triumphs through sacrificial love. That is why faith in Christ has such enduring power: it offers not merely moral instruction but reconciliation. We see this in John Donne's poem, with his repeated cry, '*Wilt Thou forgive?*'. We know there is always more in us that needs healing and the good news in Christ is that God's mercy is always greater. Where the world often offers you revenge and accusation, Christ offers you forgiveness.

⁷ proskuneō (προσκυνέω), which literally means to bow down, kiss the feet, or pay homage to a superior.

⁸ splagchnizomai (σπλαγχνίζομαι), which literally means "to be moved in one's inward parts". It is used in the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

⁹ Genesis Chapters 6-9

¹⁰ Mere Christianity "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive... And then, to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger." Book 3 Chapter 7

And, vitally, we forgive not simply to put the past behind us, but because we belong to God's future. Forgiveness is not forgetting the wound; it is living now according to the future that God has promised us.¹¹ Forgiveness is the practice of resurrection before the resurrection comes in its fullness¹². John Donne's poem with which I began ends with this theme of resurrection in this beautiful stanza:

*I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun My last thread,
I shall perish on the shore; But swear by Thyself,
that at my death Thy Son Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And having done that, Thou hast done; I fear no more.*

May we know deep within ourselves that Jesus is the source of forgiving and transforming grace. That we, too, may find creative ways to live not in revenge cycles and choked by unforgiving. Rather may we know God's forgiveness of us deep within ourselves. And so find creative, gentle ways to search for forgiveness - that we may we come to fear no more.

Amen.

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¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5.17 "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

¹² Thomas Traherne said that the greatest wrong we can do ourselves is to live as though we were made for anything less than the joy of God. And George Herbert in *The Flower*, writes: "Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart Could have recover'd greenness?"