



Message Transcript

17th September 2023

I FORGIVE YOU

Are we prepared to forgive as we are forgiven?

Greetings!

It's so good to be here, with our church family, as we come together celebrate the 16th Sunday after Pentecost. May I welcome all who are watching via 'live stream' and I pray today's message will be of great encouragement to us all.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, as we gather together as living stones, part of your Church, we ask the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts, kindling in them the fire of your love.

Almighty God, speak to us through your Holy Spirit, and as we walk in the light of your Spirit may we grow in wisdom, always rejoicing in the comfort He brings, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We have just listened to, our two passages from the New Testament, from Paul's letter to the Philippians and then our gospel reading from St Matthew, concerning compassion and forgiveness.

Both these readings knit together, teaching us about how life in the church should be.

Rev Mel's message from last week encouraged us to from Paul's letter to the Philippians to live joyfully in the ever-present challenging times of the 21st century, so I'll continue on with theme from Chapter 1.

At the beginning of this reading, St Paul starts with an impressive statement about life and death, and challenges our perspectives on death, and how our centeredness on the resurrected Christ can make a big difference to our lives.

I would like to talk about how verse 27 "*Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,* speaks to us today!

It turns typical human perspectives on life upside down.

- Attitudes of 'living life to the fullest' suddenly become questionable.
- The quest for more material possessions suddenly becomes vain.

Paul turns his attention instead to the people who had gathered around him to hear the message of Christ. Clearly Paul wants to be their servant, and therefore makes a few recommendations on how followers of Christ should live.

His words convey expectations of an endearing relationship between the members of the congregation in Philippi, who are to be (1:27). *"Standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel"*.

These are high ideals for communal life. Yet do we not all know how divided our church congregations are today?

Divisions because of worship styles, dogmatic issues, dress codes, or matters of lifestyle are ever-present, leaving the 'body of Christ' separated into a myriad of different denominations and sub-groups.

It might help us to reflect on the fact that this situation in the Christian Church is not recent; it probably existed already during Paul's time.

If Paul reminded the congregation in Philippi to be unified, doesn't this imply that there were divisions?

In the end, the crucial question to us is, whether essential or secondary aspects determine corporate church identities! We are therefore constantly reminded, that there can never be enough focus on Jesus Christ, that is, on the story of his life, suffering, and death, and on the gospel of salvation through faith in him.

Now linking this to our Gospel passage, with Jesus's instructions to the church (that's us), on how to deal with a brother or sister who has sinned. Jesus tells the parable of the unmerciful servant, and follows it up with a final warning.

Here, Jesus is teaching us about the need to settle conflict.

Peter, (and I can relate to him), is led to wonder just how generous he has to be. He thinks that he is being very generous in suggesting that he might forgive his brother or sister seven times. Seven is a perfect number, thus Peter is not being mean.

Have a think about this scenario, suppose, we only had seven chances of being forgiven our sins in our lifetime?

Supposing we were to confess our sins, and keeping no record of them as one does, were then told: "Sorry, mate, we've been keeping a record of your sins and according to the records, you've used up your quota." So, sorry, you knew the rules, no forgiveness for you, ever!

Wouldn't that be frightening! Destroying hope!

As Christians, we have the great assurance that every single time we genuinely repent we can renew our relationship with God?

Many of the men we meet in prison through Kairos, believe they cannot be forgiven and many haven't forgiven themselves.

They haven't known that God doesn't keep a record of our sins, they haven't asked for God's forgiveness, for what they have done. When they come to understand the Christian message on forgiveness, their lives are changed, transformed to give them peace, hope and a future. Wow! Praise God!

But thanks be to God for Jesus' reply: 'Seventy-seven times', which tells Peter and us, that there is to be no end of forgiveness in the kingdom.

You see Peter felt that he could solve the problem by counting the number of times. However Jesus and the Father, whom he has come to make known don't work like that.

The parable of the unforgiving debtor which follows stresses this point even further. Through this parable Jesus teaches that there must be a parallel between the abundance and unfailing forgiveness of God and the unfailing forgiveness of the members of God's household, that's us!

In those days, a single talent was the largest unit of money known in the Near East, and ten thousand the largest number. So ten thousand talents would be like our billions of dollars today!

Here, Jesus is exaggerating the point, as it would be impossible for any servant to have such a debt, and even more impossible to ever pay it back.

So, following the logic of a worldly-wise relationship between the one who lent the money and the person in debt, the Master would move to exact everything from him. Strangely, and quite wonderfully, he cancels the incredible debt as he 'felt so sorry for him'.

There is no reason for such an action except a deeply felt compassion which is acted upon. There is no revenge!

Then we come to the story of the relationship between the forgiven servant and his fellow servant is an exact parallel, except that now the debt is trivial and the servant's response to the request for time is outrageous.

The inability and unwillingness of the "forgiven" servant to match his master's forgiveness are powerfully highlighted. Indeed, he moves in exactly the opposite direction. While the forgiveness of the Master was based upon compassion, the forgiven servant resorts to violence *'he seized him by the throat and began to throttle him'*.

The whole household has now seen what has happened, and stands in judgment upon their fellow servant. They draw the Master back into the story. He casts out the unforgiving servant, into the hands of the torturers.

The Father abundantly forgives each member of his family, but, and this is a big but for all of us as forgiveness remains conditional: *'do unto others as I have done unto you'*.

So what does this gospel passage say to us to day?

Well, firstly, we cannot earn God's forgiveness, but we can lose it by jealously hoarding the blessings that God gives us, and never sharing it with others by the quality of our own forgiveness.

The household of God, that's us the church, both experiences and dispenses the love of God in its forgiveness and compassion.

Secondly, as shown in the parable, there is no real proportion between the offence of our sins against an all-holy God and those made against us by others.

Every time we say the Lord's Prayer we commit ourselves to this: *"Forgive us our sins JUST AS we forgive those who sin against us."* This is indeed a courageous prayer to make.

Ask ourselves.... Do we really mean what we say?

Do we even think about forgiveness when we pray it? Amen