

Trinity XV, September 13th 2026

Matthew 18: 21-35

The Unforgiving Servant

This is a long sermon. I hope you are sitting comfortably.

It is a deeply uncomfortable Gospel.

From experience, I know people are hurt, confused, bewildered by it – people who hear Jesus say if you do not forgive, you will not be forgiven and fear that he means them. And if, right now, one of you is thinking gosh Peter means me, that's exactly what I said to him, do not fear. I'm not talking about you; I'm talking about *lots* of people.

Back to that worry shorty. First of all, the simple point of the passage – something very close to the heart of Jesus' overall teaching. If you want to be forgiven, you must forgive. You must not hold a grudge. You must not insist on your rights, on what you deserve, on fairness, on what people owe you. You must forgive. Blessed are the merciful, for *they* shall receive mercy. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. If you are a Christian, and you are not known for your exceptionally generous, forgiving spirit, you're getting something seriously wrong.

It's important to see the connection between being forgiven, and forgiving others. If you'll pardon a very dull analogy, imagine for a moment a radiator. The hot water flows in, and not only does that metal box become hot itself, but it does what it says on the tin: it radiates. It gives heat to everything around it. If you lean against it, you get hot.

It's the same with forgiveness. What is it to be forgiven? It's to know yourself, with all your mess and difficulty and failure and dark bits, all the you you'd rather not be, to know that whole you as loved. As held by someone who is simultaneously perfect truth, and perfect gentleness, mercy, kindness. It is to be understood, utterly understood. And from being known like that, with all your flaws, to begin being loved into perfection.

If that is real for you, you cannot but share it. Love and truth and gentleness will be soaking into you, permeating your whole being. There won't be any meanness and hardness left in you. If you are forgiven, you will be forgiving: the one follows from the other like breathing out follows breathing in.

At which point, someone will say, quite sensibly – well, hold on. It's not quite as straightforward as that. What about those who have had really terrible things done to them. Not little, trivial things. What if you've been abused, or seen your children abused? Are you meant to forgive? And, worse, is Jesus saying if you *don't* forgive, you're going to Hell? To get tortured for your own unforgiven sins?

That is a completely reasonable response.

And the first thing to say is that if that is your situation – if you're being abused, or know someone who is, report it. Tell our safeguarding officer; tell the police. The number one priority is stop the abuse, and to stop it dead. Forgiving someone does not mean enduring their evil, letting them get away with it. It might well involve police and courts and prisons. Forgiveness, if it comes, comes with all of that rather than instead of it.

But even so, isn't it still asking too much, to ask people to forgive. To show kindness, and love, to those who have offended, perhaps terribly?

It's certainly asking a lot. Forgiving requires strength. Empathy. The ability to bear pain without lashing out. Humility. And all these things in abundance. Indeed, forgiving – especially forgiving the truly terrible – is for spiritual giants. It is certainly not easy – in that respect, it is not at all like the radiator.

And it is harder still, because when a truly awful thing is done to someone, it is like a massive air raid takes place on the soul. The bombs fall all over the place, and they leave wreckage. The person's strength and empathy and depth are all blasted into rubble. The very powers and capacities that they need in order to forgive have been devastated.

And asking them to forgive right then, when they literally cannot do it, would be like – exactly like – blaming a man with no legs for failing to walk. The power, the capacity just isn't there.

Now remember, we are talking about Jesus of Nazareth. The kind one, the gentle one, the healer. He will not condemn people for things they cannot do.

So hear this very clearly, if you have been wounded very deeply, if someone has ruined you, and you cannot forgive: you are not going to Hell.

However, there's more

We are indeed talking about Jesus of Nazareth. He will not condemn a man with no legs for failing to walk. True.

He will, however - no matter how long it takes - give people their legs back.

The whole point of the Gospel is that no-one lies in ruin for ever. That whatever the devastation, there is such a thing as healing. That when Jesus Christ holds you in his truthful, gentle, kind, healing presence – it may take an age, it may take beyond this life - but you will become like him. Father, forgive them, as the nails were pounded in. You will be able to forgive. Your ruins will be built up. You will be a spiritual giant. That's what grace does.

So, perhaps you are not able to forgive right now. Perhaps you will not be for a very long time. Fair enough: grace takes time. As St. Paul said, now we see but in a glass, dimly. *Then* we shall see face to face. Now our experience of forgiveness, and our ability to forgive is weak, small and patchy. *Then* we will be like Jesus Christ. Then forgiveness will flow us from us beautifully, freely, naturally as it should.

And in the mean-time, in the weak, small, patchy time what do we do? I'm reminded of some of the best advice I've ever read on the subject of prayer, from the Archbishop of Canterbury sixty odd years ago, Michael Ramsey. He knew that prayer was difficult. That it often didn't come naturally. That it felt beyond us. And he said this – words that could equally apply to forgiveness:

‘You put yourself with God, empty perhaps, but hungry and thirsty for him; and if, in sincerity, you cannot say that you want God you can perhaps tell him that you want to want him. And if you cannot say even that, perhaps you can say that you want to want to want him. Thus you can be very near him in your naked sincerity, and he will do the rest, drawing out from longings deeper than you knew were there...’

And if, in sincerity, you cannot forgive, perhaps you can tell God that you want to forgive. And if you cannot even say that, perhaps that you want to want to want to forgive. And in time, his own time, He will do the rest. He will rebuild you. He’ll make you a giant, drawing out from you powers deeper than you knew were there...

Perhaps you can say to him that you want to want to want to forgive.

Even that of course, might seem unreasonable, seem unfair. Perhaps even just plain wrong – why should they ever be forgiven, those who have done such things?

To which the only answer can be: leave that in God’s hands. Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay. Leave the wicked person to God. He is a better Judge than you will ever be. He knows it all, more clearly, more truthfully than you. It isn’t your place to judge. What you are responsible for is your own heart, and for your own sake you need to drain all that anger and hurt and snarling out of it. All your unforgiving, all your hatred, isn’t hurting the wicked person: it’s hurting you. It’s not good for a human being to have all that poison cooped up in the soul. It will corrode you and eat you up.

So even if you cannot summon the faintest bit, even the tiniest glimmer, of pity or love for the person who has harmed you. If not for their sake, then for your own, keep on asking God to fill with you his love, his gentleness, his mercy, his tenderness. Ask him to drain away your poison. Leave the offender to God, where they belong. They are God’s business. He alone gets justice and mercy right. He alone can handle this. You hold yourself open to what you need – his gentleness, his mercy, his healing. Drink deeply of that and in time, his own time he will do the rest. Which may not be what you want right now, which may not satisfy your desire to punish, but which will be for your good, and the good of each one of us.

To Jesus Christ, truth and mercy and justice in person, to him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

