Forgiveness 3: 25th October 2026

Genesis 4: 8-16. Romans 14: 10-12. Mark 2: 1-15

Dimensions of Forgiveness

In this sermon I am going to explore some aspects of forgiveness and provide some further resources to use to reflect on this subject and challenge and help us to work through our need to forgive ourselves and to forgive others.

Forgiveness is complex. We can find ourselves wanting to start the process, but may not get it right, or others may wish to guide us and take us in the wrong direction all together. So, to start with we shall look at some of the processes of forgiveness.

Nonconditional forgiveness
There is an external pressure to forgive, using Christian teaching to hide an act worthy of punishment, of justice and judgement. This is not good at all. The one who perpetrated the act does not change their behaviour. In fact, it may embolden them to continue. It is a form of easy or cheap grace.

Transactional forgiveness
People must earn forgiveness, a form of merited forgiveness. It is a way of exercising power over someone. Saying, 'I forgive you', exerts a moral superiority. It isn't true forgiveness at all. We can pay people back and get control over them, a form of revenge. The perpetrator pays in some way. This has little grace.

No forgiveness
There is often pressure in our society to not forgive at all. To hold onto a 'wrong'. To be consumed by anger and grief is likely to ruin our lives. There is no grace when no element of forgiveness is present.

All three of these have no **vertical** dimension – God's forgiveness to us.

Costly Grace
Contrast the above with the costly grace model of forgiveness assumed in the Bible. The experience of divine forgiveness brings profound healing. Grounded in Jesus' costly sacrifice for our forgiveness. The gospel reminds us that we are all sinners in need of mercy, like everyone else. Also, that God fills our hearts with love and affirmation.

This makes it possible, although definitely not easy, to forgive the perpetrator and then go speak to that person seeking justice and reconciliation. We do it, not for our sake, but for justice's sake, God's sake, for the perpetrator's sake, for potential future victims' sake. The motivation is totally different. Our society doesn't survive without forgiveness: otherwise there will be acts of revenge, people nursing grudges.

I know that when I have chosen to forgive it has never been easy. Sometimes I have had to recognise my need to have the 'cost' aired in some way, so it is externally acknowledged. A close confidant, counsellor, spiritual director, sometimes my dog would do - she never gave away my secrets…; or sometimes it is writing it out in a journal. Understanding the cost is important to me. Then I often have to reflect on why the other person behaved as they did. It can be pure speculation or some knowledge of the person. But that process helps me see them as another complex human being who is acting out in ways that harm others. Do I then confront the person? Sometimes it is possible, normally with another person. Sometimes I know that to confront them will add nothing. And all the time praying for God's grace, to understand, to have pity, empathy or patience.

I wonder what has worked for you?

How do you deal with small everyday slights, let-downs, inadvertent hurts, as well as small intentional ones? Have you managed to discern when to forgive some of these silently and when to bring the matter up, and how to forgive the other person even if they are reluctant or refuse to admit their fault. We can't love without forgiveness, but we can't live without forgiveness either.

The human need for forgiveness is ever present.

In the gospel reading four friends bring a paralysed man to Jesus in hope of getting him healed. They lowered him through the roof as the crowds were too great. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralysed man, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'. Mark 2:1-5

The man had come for healing, not forgiveness! He just wanted to be able to walk, like almost everyone else. Jesus knew he needed healing, restored to physical good health, but saw the bigger picture, he knew that even the physically well were not happy and content. So, he went the extra mile, and offered him forgiveness, for all his wrongdoings, so that he could once more be

close to God. Jesus knew that humankind's deepest need is for a restoration of relationship with God. Total healing involves being totally whole.

In our own desire for a full relationship with God, we can work towards an understanding of God's ways, seek the power of God to fashion our thoughts and our actions. To seek to learn from Jesus, to wash away our desires for retribution and revenge, no matter how small and insignificant they may seem, and to see the image of God in the eyes in the person who has wronged us, and to understand that God loves them as much as God loves us. It can take a lot of prayerful spirit-filled work to reach such a point, where we feel God's grace enabling us to absorb the cost of the wrong we have suffered, and also to have no residual hard feelings for the perpetrator of the wrong.

The Bible is a source of help and inspiration for us. Throughout it there are texts that can speak to us.

The Bible. A Book of Forgiveness

In the Pentateuch we find the first examples of forgiveness.

Adam and Eve told they would die if they ate from the true of good and evil. But they lived. God's grace and mercy applied. The basics of forgiveness.

Cain murdered his brother Abel, and yet God put a mark on him to protect him from a revenge killing. Cain wasn't even repentant.

Do we say to ourselves that we must change our lives and our habits? Is our motivation because it will get us into trouble (sorry for the consequence to ourselves of the sin, not for the sin itself). If, however, we acknowledge what the sin does to God and our relationship with God we will have a deeper and more permanent motivation to turn away from sin.

The 'fear of the Lord' is one of the most basic concepts of that the OT uses to describe godly character. The term 'fear' refers to a sense of being humbled and overwhelmed by something, but it also refers to a sense of relationship, 'i.e. a joyful awe and wonder before God, to be deeply affected by who God is and what he did'. The result of God's forgiveness is a paradoxical mix of confidence and humility.

The Gospels do have examples of forgiveness, but we need to be aware what that forgiveness really means. Not just divine (vertical) forgiveness, but instruction on human forgiveness and how it can bring reconciliation and the healing of community, and how God forgives outside of animal sacrifices.

In Greek two words used to convey forgiveness. ‘Charizomai’ – includes charis or ‘grace’ and means to deal with someone in a gifting, gracious manner rather than a strictly calculating way, so forgiveness is not earned or merited. It is all about giving or granting something and implies undeserved kindness. It is a gift given out of grace and love at the expense of the giver. Paul used this word.

‘Aphesis’ means ‘remission’, to release someone from a legal obligation or debt. Used most often in the NT (c. 40 times). It is the most common word for forgiveness used in the gospels as well as in James and the epistles of John. It acknowledges that forgiveness always has a cost. When a debt is cancelled the creditor meets the cost; punishment or debt absorbed by another.

Desmon Tutu and his daughter Mpho[1]’s book on Forgiveness talks about four stages of forgiveness:

- The perpetrator admits the wrong and acknowledges the harm of the action taken
- Telling the story and witnessing the anguish of those wronged
- The perpetrator asks for forgiveness and is granted forgiveness
- The person wronged can then choose to renew the relationship (fully reconciled or with new boundaries in place) or release themselves from the relationship.

This is quite different from the model we are taught that is given in scripture where there is full reconciliation and where the community is healed by the reconciliation. The Biblical model is God’s desire for us, and may be achieved in God’s time, but not in ours. This model is more cognisant of the agency of the person wronged and gives them the freedom in how they manage the relationship after forgiveness has been granted.

Personally, I find this ‘Tutu’ model reflects humans where we are, working in our timescale, our frailties, our imperfections. There is far less likelihood that the person wronged will be harmed by feeling pressured into re-entering into a supposedly fully reconciled relationship. For some, where reconciliation of any sort would be harmful, they can forgive and release the person from their mind, but the relationship cannot be reconciled at that time, or may be during their lifetime.

[1] from languages like Sesotho and Setswana meaning "gift".

I invite you to consider these models in tension with each other, and reflect on them, and come to your own conclusion.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, ‘forgiveness is complex’. We are complex beings, full of feelings in tension with what God desires for us, and the light of God we all carry. May God’s light shine in each one of us, as we journey through life and our relationships.