

## ***Sermon***

***14 September 2014***

***West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood***

***By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald***

***Text: Matthew 18:21-35***

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A friend of mine was driving somewhere the other day, and she had her 7 year old son in the car with her. It was raining like it can only rain in Scotland! Her son was quietly staring out the windscreen. Suddenly, he said: “Mum, I’m thinking of something.” Now, this kind of announcement usually meant he had been pondering some fact for a while and was now ready to expand on it. My friend was eager to hear. “What are you thinking?” she asked. “The rain,” he began, “is like sin and the windscreen wipers are like God, wiping our sins away.”

She was feeling really proud of him, and decided to test how far he would take this revelation. So she asked, “Do you notice how the rain keeps on coming? What does that tell you?” The wee boy, without any hesitation, answered, “We keep on sinning, and God just keeps on forgiving us.”

Wow – it kind of gives you goose bumps, doesn’t it?

And because God keeps on forgiving us, we should forgive each other too. That's what our Scripture reading was all about.

It's quite straight forward, really. Even a 7 year old child can understand it! So why then, do we adults struggle so much with it?!

Peter went up to Jesus and he asked: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to 7 times?" Peter was probably thinking that this question was quite clever, and that he would impress Jesus with it, because in those days the Rabbi's taught that if you have forgiven somebody 3 times, you've done everything you could. So from the 4<sup>th</sup> time onwards, you could retaliate.

So Peter was feeling quite generous here with his *7 times!* Which means that Jesus must have taken the wind out of his sails completely when he said – not 7 times my friend, but 77 times! Some texts say 7 x 7 times – which brings us to 490! But the principle stays the same: Jesus wanted to tell Peter that there is *no mathematical formula for grace.*

There is no mathematical formula for grace. It doesn't make sense, it's not easy to do, but that's how God expects us to treat others. Why? Because that is how he treats us – so in

reality, although it might sound unfair to have to forgive someone 77 times, it's not, because God forgives us again and again and again and again...

As he very often did, Jesus illustrated his answer to Peter with a story.

There was a king who wanted to settle his accounts with his servants. A man who owed him 10 000 talents was brought to him. This was a HUGE amount of money. A talent was the highest currency in that economy and 10 000 was the highest number in 1<sup>st</sup> century arithmetic. The highest number in the highest currency – like my boys would say: a million trillion thousand pounds!

It would have been impossible for this man to repay the king in one lifetime – so the king ordered that this man and his wife and children and everything he owed should be sold to repay this debt. It was common practice in those days to sell yourself as a slave if you couldn't repay your debt – but his wife and kids?! That was too much for him. So he fell on his knees and begged the king to have mercy on him.

And the king did. The king took pity on him straight away and cancelled all his debt. So the king gave him much more than he

asked for – he only wanted the opportunity to pay the king back over time, but the king knew that he was never going to manage to pay him back everything he owed him. So at great personal cost to himself, the king just *cancelled* all his debt.

So, it's very obvious what the man was supposed to do now – he was shown great kindness and mercy. The correct response to that would be to go out and show the same kindness to others. But did he?

Oh no. One of his fellow servants owed him 100 denarii. 1 Denarii was about 1 day's wage. 6 000 denarii made up one talent. This was not a lot of money – it could easily be paid off over a short period of time. But what did this man do? He had his fellow servant thrown into prison until he could repay the debt – which, come to think of it, wasn't all that clever – he would have been able to repay the debt much quicker he wasn't in jail! But that's beside the point.

When the king heard what happened, he was so hurt and angry that he threw this man in jail too, and ordered him to be tortured until he could pay back *all* the money he owed the king – which would mean that he would have to stay in prison for the rest of his life!

This story teaches us that forgiveness is always costly, no matter what the numbers, but that because God forgave us, we have no choice but to forgive others too. And just like God's forgiveness, our forgiveness should be unlimited too.

Being *forgiven* should lead to being *forgiving*. Very easy to understand. Very hard to do.

*Why* is it so hard to forgive people? We live in a world where wrongs are done, lies are told, trust is broken. It happens all the time. The only way in which we can move forward from these things, is by means of forgiveness. But there are hurdles in our way, hurdles that we put there ourselves, sadly. Hurdles like:

- Revenge – we rather want to get even than to forgive;
- Resentment – we rather want to stay angry than forgive;
- Remembering – we never want to forget how badly we were hurt, and then there's no room for forgiveness.

It's not natural to always forgive people, it's not fair either – but that's what God expects us to do. Dr Archibald Hart defines forgiveness as "Surrendering my right to hurt you for hurting me." Listen carefully: "Surrendering my right to hurt you for hurting me."

But if you come to think about it – not forgiving others is like putting *ourselves* in jail. And how ridiculous is that?!

Literally speaking: Who on earth would go to prison and physically lock themselves up? Nobody! People spend loads of money on lawyers to keep them *out* of prison!

If you don't forgive others, you are denying not only that other person his/her freedom, but you are denying yourself your own freedom too.

Because hatred and grudges and resentment do just as much damage to *you*, if not more, than to the people you hold it against.

So why would you want to hold somebody captive if that means that you hold yourself captive too?

God wants us to be free. In Jesus he set us free. Let's embrace our freedom, and in this process, set others that hurt us free too.

There's nothing like letting go and then literally feel a weight lifted off your own shoulders. And you'll only really understand what I mean if you've *done* this. It's liberating to set someone free. It's liberating to forgive.

Our sins are like rain pouring down – the windscreen wipers are like God forgiving us, clearing all our sins away.

André recently bought a new car, and in this car, when it starts raining, the windscreen wipers switch on automatically.

*That* is what we should be like. We shouldn't even have to think about it – when other people hurt us, we should just forgive them instantly, automatically.

Why? Because they apologised? No. Because they deserve it? No. *Because God forgave us.* And he keeps on forgiving us – for a million trillion thousand times.

There's no logic in grace. There's no mathematical formula for grace. We need to forgive others 77 times. 490 times. Forgiveness is an on-going process.

It's really hard. But then nobody's ever said that it's easy to be a Christian.

But it's not only hard, it's also clever – because if your windscreen wipers are on – even in a rainstorm you'll still be able to see where you are going.

Amen