

The question for today is 'Do Christians have to forgive'? Perhaps a better phrasing would be 'Is forgiveness part of Christian discipleship?' The answer is a wonderfully woolly one of 'Yes, but...'

The bible is full to the brim of stories and teachings on forgiveness - two of which we heard this morning (Genesis 33:11-17 and Matthew 6:9-15). On the one hand we have some fairly clear commands to forgive and countless examples of God's forgiveness, but on the other hand we have other teachings on repentance and accountability and stories of people who don't quite kiss and make up.

And so I want to make clear at the beginning of this talk on the topic of forgiveness - which will touch some of us in some deep and raw places - that it is a complex subject and each of us will find ourselves in a different place in relation to it, and the responsibility lies with each one of us to discern how God is calling us individually to grow in forgiveness as part of our discipleship in the particular set of circumstances and stories that we each have.

So, that being said, this morning we will first explore the 'yes' and then we will move on to the 'but'.

Yes -how do we know forgiveness is asked of us as Christians and why it might be such a big deal for Christians?

Firstly, lets look at the big picture...

1) Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel.

Reconciliation is the restoration of full relationship between two or more parties who are estranged or in conflict. To be fully reconciled is to be able to relate to one another as if the conflict or injury never happened. One of the most famous stories that Jesus tells is the one of the prodigal son, who disrespects his Father, leaves home, squanders his inheritance and ends up living and eating with the pigs. Walking home with his tail between his legs he holds onto a hope that he could be a servant in his Father's house. Seeing him coming home, the Father runs towards him and restores him to full sonship - the sins of the past not erased from history or memory, but forgiven and no longer defining their relationship or their identities as Father and Son. In this way, reconciliation is where the sins of the past no longer stand in the way of this relationship. The primary story of the bible is God's reconciliation with human kind, after our prodigal-son-like rebellion from him. Genesis and Revelation- the beginning and the end of the bible tells us that God's desire for humanity is to share in a perfect, loving relationship with God

and with one another. But sin, our actions that are unloving towards God and each other gets in the way of this relationship. But the story of the bible is a story of God's continual forgiveness of his peoples' sins and him calling the people to repentance - in other words to turn back to him.

And ultimately we see in the actions of Jesus on the cross, God making a way to remove that barrier of sin between us and him once and for all. To forgive us for all of our rejection of him and sin towards him and his creations (which includes other human beings) and to be reconciled to him. To be invited into that loving relationship with him with nothing in the way. And the picture that the new testament points towards is of a community of people who live in love and unity with God and therefore with one another. And forgiveness therefore is a vital part of enabling that type of community. Forgiveness is part of enabling that thing between us to no longer be something that separates us. And what enables us to forgive? The knowledge of God's forgiveness for us and his reconciling work on the cross. If I am reconciled to God and the person I have a problem with is reconciled to God, then my faith compels me to seek reconciliation with them too. The apostle Paul writes that because we have been reconciled to God through christ, we have a ministry of reconciliation.

2) Therefore...it's easy to see *why* **forgiveness is undeniably seen as a part of Christian discipleship in the New Testament.**

In the Lords Prayer, which we heard read a moment ago, we pray the lines 'forgive us our sins (or debts or transgressions) as we forgive those who sin against us'. Here, Jesus lays out that pattern of life for his followers as one of granting forgiveness, linking it to the forgiveness we have first received from God. It's as fundamental as our daily bread which we also pray for. In Matthews gospel, Jesus does some teaching on forgiveness and Peter asks him 'How many times should I forgive someone - as many as seven?!' And Jesus says, 'not seven, but seventy seven times!' - here I don't think Jesus is giving a precise prescription, but rather making the point that to be a disciple of Jesus is to continually practice forgiveness without keeping a record of wrongs - as that would rather undermine the forgiveness. The Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Colossians that the members of the church are to 'bear with one another and if anyone has a complaint against each other to forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven you'. So the bible is clear in its command for us to forgive others, and that forgiveness of one another is a mark of what it means to be the church, but it also consistently makes the link between our capacity to forgive and God's forgiveness of us.

3) Jesus doesn't ask us to do something that he hasn't done himself

We've just spoken about God's forgiveness of us, and in a way we might think 'yeah well it's easy for God to forgive because God is God' and so on. But its worth contemplating for a moment Jesus' very real and very human experiences of being sinned against. When Jesus was on the cross, after having been betrayed and abandoned by friends, unjustly accused and sentenced in a sham trial, having been stripped, mocked, tortured and is finally having nails hammered into his hands and feet, what are the words that come out of his mouth? Are they promises of revenge? Are they anger and insults? Threats? That's almost certainly what would be coming out of my mouth. No instead it's these unbelievable words 'Father forgive because they do not know what they are doing'. The compassion and love for the men enacting this violence against him is staggering. Instead of seeing them as violent brutes, he sees them as precious children who have been influenced by sin both within and outside of them. To pronounce forgiveness is to see someone's humanity and honour them, rather than to see them as an inhuman monster - even if their actions are anything other than humane. To forgive rather than exact revenge or return in kind is to break the cycle of sin and violence.

So those are some of the things the bible says about forgiveness. It's clear that yes, as Christians we should work towards forgiveness (and as a quick aside, we should be quick to confess and seek forgiveness when we have wronged someone else). We are given a beautiful picture of christian communities marked by love and forgiveness and unity. BUT. Life is complicated and while the bible gives us ideals to aim for with God's help, it also gives us realities. Paul in one of his letters to the Philippians writes 'I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord' - clearly there is a rift or a feud that has been going on for some time unresolved. The story of Esau and Jacob that we had read from our Old Testament on the face of it is a beautiful story of reconciliation between two brothers who had been at odds for years. The background to this story is that Jacob stole Esau's birthright from their Father and then ran away. Years later Jacob returns to his homeland and knows he will see Esau. Fearing - quite reasonably - that Esau, who is coming toward him with 400 men, is coming to take revenge, Jacob divides his party to protect some of his wealth and family. But rather than with fists, Esau greets Jacob with an embrace and an emotional reunion. Jacob offers Esau lots of material gifts but Esau doesn't want it, he just seems to want to reconnect with his brother. But still, Jacob insists he accepts the gift. Maybe he fears the forgiveness isn't genuine, that Esau will still hold the debt over him if he doesn't accept the gifts. Esau asks Jacob to journey with him, to spend time together, but Jacob stalls and says he will keep up and then goes off in a different direction. So it seems that Esau has forgiven Jacob, before Jacob has even said anything, and wants full reconciliation and restoration of relationship, but for whatever reason Jacob doesn't enter into it. We see repayment of debt but not much

of an apology and he keeps his relational distance calling Esau 'Lord' and not journeying with him. Even in the bible with one of the great patriarchs of the faith, forgiveness is messy and imperfect and the reconciliation is incomplete.

And so it is with us...it's time for us to dig into some of the nuances a bit. To consider those 'buts'

'But what about someone who hasn't or can't say sorry?'

To forgive does not mean you need to receive an apology. Here's where I think considering forgiveness and reconciliation as two separate things are important. Reconciliation is the restoration of relationship. And forgiveness is only one part of it. Forgiveness is all on the part of the person who has been wronged. Forgiveness is saying that you choose to let go of anger and bitterness and desire for revenge or ill will towards that person. It says that you choose to see the other person's humanity and brokenness and not hold their sin against them. For that you do not need an apology as it is with you. An apology may of course make it much easier, and an apology is absolutely necessary if we want to journey towards reconciliation but it is not necessary in order to forgive. Jesus' 'Father Forgive' on the cross was spoken without any apology, repentance or recognition of wrong. It's also important that we are able to forgive without an apology because sometimes we may need to forgive someone who has died before we have been able to reconcile or before we recognise the need to forgive. I also know there have been instances in my life where I have had to forgive people without them knowing they have wronged me because to bring it up with them would actually be more damaging to me and our relationship and an apology wouldn't have helped the situation because the wrong they did me was not deliberate or conscious.

'But what about justice?'

It's important to be clear that Christian forgiveness does not mean there should be no recognition of wrong or consequences. Forgiveness means you don't wish a person ill or to exact revenge, but it does not mean that you pretend nothing happened or let them 'get away with it'. In order to forgive we actually need to recognise and name the wrong, else there is nothing to forgive. Part of our journey towards forgiveness may mean allowing ourselves to feel the hurt and anger at what someone has done first.

As well as forgiveness, the bible also talks about repentance and accountability. Just before Jesus' teaching to forgive seventy times seven, he lays out a process in which someone who has sinned against someone else is appropriately confronted and given opportunity to change and be restored to right relationship with whoever they have wronged. And so sometimes part of this is facing the very human consequences of our

sin. In one of the churches I was part of in Cambridge I met a woman in her 50s who was, for the first time, telling the police about the most horrendous historical abuse she suffered from her dad. Other things about him had come to light and so the police had sought her out. She was then wracked with guilt because she thought as a Christian she should forgive and not wish her dad evil and so had she done the wrong thing by telling the police because he could obviously get put in prison. However, forgiveness and seeking justice through the legal system are not mutually exclusive. It was extremely appropriate that this man be put in prison for what he had done for all sorts of reasons. And it was possible for her to work towards his conviction whilst still working towards forgiving him. Working towards a criminal conviction is entirely different from seeking revenge or wishing someone ill.

When Jesus befriends Zaccheus the tax collector, his response is to repay 4 times as much to anyone he has defrauded. Forgiveness and justice here organically flow from one to the other. And Zaccheus shows us that a sign of true repentance is the *offering* of some form of reparations before it is demanded.

'But what about someone who says sorry but still treats me badly?'

The Christian teaching of forgiveness has been badly applied and mis-used to keep oppressed or abused people being oppressed and abused. To forgive someone does not mean you have to allow someone to keep treating you badly. Often the safest thing for a victim of abuse to do is to completely cut, or seriously limit contact, with their abuser and this would not be contradictory to forgiveness or to the way of Christ.

Again, this is where the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation is particularly helpful. We have covered the fact that forgiveness is an action that is taken by the injured party -irrespective of the actions of the person in the wrong. But reconciliation - the restoration of relationship - absolutely requires acknowledgement of wrong, repentance, change and where appropriate reparations to be made by the person in the wrong. They need to accept and own their sin, to say sorry, to change their behaviour and to do what they are humanly able to do to make up for the harm they have caused. Only then is there the possibility of a restored relationship. Whilst not a story about abuse, the prodigal son is helpful here. The Father may well have forgiven the son years ago, but the son needed to realise the error of his ways and turn back towards the Father and seek forgiveness. His change of heart is evidenced by his willingness to offer himself as a servant to his Father. Both parties need to be involved if reconciliation not just forgiveness is to happen. And so the person that keeps saying they are sorry and then keeps perpetrating the same behaviour, or who evades justice, is not actually properly

engaging in the process of repentance required for reconciliation. They can be granted forgiveness, yes, but not a restoration of relationship.

'But what if I'm not ready?'

That's ok. Forgiveness is sometimes a process and also may not be a one-time thing. We may need to keep forgiving someone for the same thing over and over again. We may as I said before need to really accept and grieve the wrong done to us before we can forgive. And we may need time for wounds to heal before we are ready to even think about forgiveness. And if we don't want to forgive someone, wanting to want to forgive is also a good place to start. For Jesus, it's all about our internal motives and our heart. There is plenty of mercy and compassion for us if we can't quite bring ourselves to forgive yet. And crucially, we can pray to the Holy Spirit for help with all of this, asking God to enable us to forgive when the time is right. But if we are just holding onto bitterness and resentment and holding things over others when they have apologised and haven't done it again but we like the feeling of power or self righteousness, then it probably is time to let go because Jesus calls us to so much more. The author Max Lucado says of forgiveness that it's like unlocking a door to set someone free only to discover you were the prisoner. Unforgiveness means that we are held captive by what a person has done and by our anger and resentment, not them. If we think back to Esau, who forgave his brother much, he is the one in the story who seems the most free from the past in order to offer love and welcome to his estranged brother. He's the one who seems the most peace.

So, 'Do Christians have to forgive?' Yes, but...there's no one-size fits all approach. The application of this topic will be different for each of us depending on our specific circumstances and situations. Wherever you sit with this, we all need God's help, compassion, mercy and love which is offered to us in abundance. Lets pray...

Lord we thank you for your great love and mercy for us

We offer to you those people and situations in our lives that need forgiveness

And we ask for your help to forgive - or for your help to want to forgive.

We ask for your healing for our hurts, for courage to have difficult conversations and for grace for the one who has hurt us.

Give us wisdom to know when it is ok to forgive but not to be in relationship with someone for our own safety.

And we also ask for the humility and courage to admit our faults and ask for forgiveness when we are in the wrong.

Thank you that we do all this safe in the knowledge of your unfailing grace and love.

Amen