



## “How many times?”

A service sheet to guide reflections on and around Sunday  
13<sup>th</sup> September 2020

### Introduction

Welcome to worship as we continue learning more of the nature of God and of how to live in community as followers of Jesus. This week we will be learning what Jesus taught about forgiveness as told in Matthew’s gospel.

### Song “Come, now is the time to worship” – *Singing the Faith 24*

*Words to help us settle into worship*

Come, now is the time to worship.  
Come, now is the time to give your heart.  
Come, just as you are to worship.  
Come, just as you are before your God,  
come.

One day every tongue  
will confess you are God,  
one day every knee will bow.  
Still, the greatest treasure remains  
for those who gladly choose you now.

Come, now is the time to worship ...  
Brian Doerksen (b. 1965)

### Hymn “Come let us sing of a wonderful love” – *Singing the Faith 443*

- 1 Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,  
tender and true ;  
out of the heart of the Father above,  
streaming to me and to you :  
wonderful love  
dwells in the heart of the Father above.
- 2 Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,  
joyfully came ;  
came with the helpless and hopeless to  
dwell,  
sharing their sorrow and shame ;  
seeking the lost,  
saving, redeeming at measureless cost.
- 3 Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet ;

- why do they roam ?  
Love only waits to forgive and forget ;  
home, weary wanderer, home !  
Wonderful love  
dwells in the heart of the Father above.
- 4 Come to my heart, O thou wonderful  
love,  
come and abide,  
lifting my life, till it rises above  
envy and falsehood and pride ;  
seeking to be  
lowly and humble, a learner of thee.

Robert Walmsley (1831–1905)

### A way into Prayer – thinking about debts

Have you ever been in debt? If you can, think for a moment of a debt you have paid off. Car loan? Mortgage? Student loan? Credit card? Remember how it felt to be free of it.\* Then think of the debt of thanks owed to those who have helped us, nurtured us, worked for us and with us. And then think of God, giving us life and new life. What do you want to say to God? And how might you pass on God’s goodness?

*\*(If debt is an ongoing problem for you then CAP is here to help 07935 223663)*

### Prayer of thanks

God of love and grace beyond our telling,  
we bring our thankful hearts to you,  
acknowledging that without you we are nothing  
and with you we can be so much more...  
thankful you care for us, and love us beyond measure.  
You have endless patience with us;  
you teach us time and time again

what it is to be committed to you and your way...

You reveal yourself to us in myriad ways,

inspiring us and evoking within us a heartfelt response...

We are thankful that while all this is for everyone who will come to you and accept you, it is for me – for me! – and may I know it deep within.

With overflowing hearts, hear our prayer.

**Amen.**

### **Bible Reading Matthew 18: 21-31 "How many times?"**

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?" <sup>22</sup> "No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven," <sup>23</sup> because the Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who decided to check on his servants' accounts. <sup>24</sup> He had just begun to do so when one of them was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. <sup>25</sup> The servant did not have enough to pay his debt, so the king ordered him to be sold as a slave, with his wife and his children and all that he had, in order to pay the debt. <sup>26</sup> The servant fell on his knees before the king. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay you everything!' <sup>27</sup> The king felt sorry for him, so he forgave him the debt and let him go.

<sup>28</sup> "Then the man went out and met one of his fellow servants who owed him a few dollars. He grabbed him and started choking him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he said. <sup>29</sup> His fellow servant fell down and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!' <sup>30</sup> But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were very upset and went to the king and told him everything. <sup>32</sup> So he called the servant in. 'You worthless slave!' he said. 'I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. <sup>33</sup> You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you.' <sup>34</sup> The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount."

<sup>35</sup> And Jesus concluded, "That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

*Good News Bible © 1994, 2004 published by the Bible Societies/HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., UK Good News Bible © American Bible Society 1966, 1971, 1976, 1992. Used with permission.*

### **Interesting numbers in Matthew 18: 21-31**

**7** Peter suggests the new way of Jesus might mean he would forgive someone as many as seven times. The background to this is that the Jewish rabbis at the time taught that forgiving someone more than three times was unnecessary, citing Amos 1:3-13 where God forgave Israel's enemies three times, then punished them. By offering forgiveness more than double that of the Old Testament example, Peter perhaps expected extra commendation from the Lord.

**70 x7 or 77** Commentators suggest the Greek is ambiguous. Jesus says we should forgive either 70 x 7 or 77. Either way it is a hyperbolic or exaggerated reply suggesting an unlimited number. This answer is drawn from Genesis 4: 24 where the number is used to express the endless blood feuds that will continue to avenge Lamech. Is there a subtext here to indicate Jesus' way is going to be very different from that?

### **Comment**

How many times do I have to forgive someone? Is there a limit on forgiveness? These are the questions being addressed in our Bible passage today.

We often pray "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" as part of the Lord's prayer. But most of us struggle to forgive, especially when we have been hurt by others. In today's passage the disciple Peter asks whether he should just forgive someone seven times. Instead Jesus suggests he should forgive 70 times 7. This is, of course, an impossibly large number to keep an account of in terms of forgiving another person. And

Jesus tells a parable to illustrate just how much his disciples have been forgiven by God and how in turn they should pass this on and be equally forgiving.

Forgiveness can be a terribly difficult. This summer the BBC showed a film called "Anthony". This portrayed what might have been the life of Anthony Walker. Anthony was eighteen and an aspiring lawyer, living in Huyton, Liverpool when, in 2005, he was attacked in a racially motivated incident. He died a few hours later. At the time Anthony's sister, quoting from the bible, said: "Seventy times seven we have to forgive; that's what Jesus said. So we have to, we have to forgive. Then she added, "The only thing left to do now is to catch them." And they did indeed catch the perpetrators who were brought to justice.

Time and time again I have been deeply moved and challenged by the way people of faith are able to speak words of forgiveness to those who have wronged them terribly. For it is difficult to forgive. It is much easier to bear a grudge even about little things. But that is not the way to which God calls us.

Today's passage follows on from some teaching earlier in Matthew chapter 18 about what to do if someone at church has done something wrong. Last week we looked at the process which Jesus suggests for sorting out problems within the Christian community. This ended with suggesting that if a person did not repent then they were to be banished. The question behind today's passage might be, 'Should individuals also cut off others by refusing to forgive those who persistently do them wrong.' Jesus' reply was that they were to place no such limitation.

Jesus then tells the parable about the two debtors in order to illustrate and push home the point that we should not place limits on the amount which we are prepared to forgive others.

In the story the king obviously represents God. The servant who owes the king money is in an immense amount of debt – a sum equivalent to billions of pounds today. It is simply and quite clearly an impossible debt to pay. But the king mercifully lets him off the hook and wipes off his debt. By comparison this servant's attitude to his own debtor is appalling. The amount actually owed to him is really insignificant compared with that which he owed the king - it was the equivalent to us today of just a few pounds. But the servant is hard-hearted and threatens to throw his debtor into prison. In the end Jesus tells us this man is caught out and his hard-heartedness is thoroughly punished.

The meaning of the parable is clear. Those in the church serve a hugely merciful God who has invariably forgiven far more than any of his people are ever called upon to forgive one another. Just like the king in the parable, the Lord God takes a very dim view of those in his kingdom who do not themselves show mercy.

Offering forgiveness can sometimes take super human strength. It may also come as part of a process for seeking justice and repentance. It is often something at which we need to work with God's help and through prayer.

John and Diane Foley, whose journalist son James was tortured and brutally murdered in Syria, were asked about forgiveness. They are people of Christian faith and commitment. In a long interview with Jon Snow on Channel 4 in 2014, James' dad replied about forgiveness for his son's killers, "I am working on it". Perhaps that is a good place to start: to work on forgiving others as we learn more of the forgiveness of God.

### **Questions to ponder**

1. What does God's forgiveness mean to you?
2. How valuable to you is the forgiveness God offers you in Christ?
3. How does this affect the way you treat others who upset or wrong you from day-to-day?
4. In what related ways does this passage challenge or encourage you?

### **A funny story about forgiveness**

There's a good little story which comes from a church where someone asked a Christian woman about an incident which had wounded her very deeply. She looked blank. Her friend was astonished. "But you were terribly hurt." "Well, I can't recall it". "But you must remember that!" "No," said the Christian firmly, "I distinctly remember forgetting it".

### **A way into prayer around forgiveness**

Jesus' parables inspire us to pray for those who forgive us,  
for big things and small...  
for those who do not forgive, no matter what...  
for those who do not know how to forgive...  
for those who do not want to forgive...  
for those who have not been forgiven.  
God of forgiveness, for them all, we pray.  
**Amen.**

### **Prayers for others**

Father, we pray for all who are trapped by the burdens of debt from which they can see no escape:  
give them courage, and grant them wisdom;  
assure them of your presence and your love.  
We thank you for the work of debt counsellors  
and all who provide help and guidance to those in need;  
grant them your strength and blessing.

Father, we pray for families:  
wherever there is discord or division, anger or bitterness,  
may there be forgiveness and reconciliation.  
We thank you for those who work to bring reconciliation,  
for family counsellors and mediators;  
grant them wisdom and discernment.  
In the name of Jesus, we pray.  
**Amen.**

### **Hymn "Let love be real" – *Singing the Faith 615* (tune of *The Londonderry Air*)**

1 Let love be real, in giving and receiving,  
without the need to manage and to own ;  
a haven free from posing and pretending,  
where every weakness may be safely known.  
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,  
give me your love wherever we may go.  
*As God loves us, so let us love each other :*  
*with no demands, just open hands and space to grow.*

2 Let love be real, not grasping or confining,  
that strange embrace that holds yet sets us free ;  
that helps us face the risk of truly living,  
and makes us brave to be what we

might be.

Give me your strength when all my words are weakness ;  
give me your love in spite of all you know.

3 Let love be real, with no manipulation,  
no secret wish to harness or control ;  
let us accept each other's incompleteness,  
and share the joy of learning to be whole.

Give me your hope through dreams and disappointments ;  
give me your trust when all my failings show.

Michael Forster (*b.* 1946)

### **Blessing**

Eternal God, slow to anger and swift to forgive, fill our lives with the loving energy of your compassionate Spirit, that we may do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with you, our God.  
**Amen.**

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