

How many times, Lord?

Welcome to the Nidd Valley worship at home service. Although we are physically apart and worshipping separately at home, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit unite us together as one church family. In this act of worship we will reflect on the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, and what it means for us today.

Call to worship

Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.

Psalm 103, verses 1, 8 and 11

Amazing grace – Singing the Faith 440

1. Amazing grace – how sweet the sound –
that saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

2. God's grace has taught my heart to fear,
his grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!

3. Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
God's grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

4. The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.

5. And, when this heart and flesh shall fail
and mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil
a life of joy and peace.

6. When we've been there ten thousand years
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise
that when we first begun.

John Newton (1725-1807)

Prayers of praise and thanksgiving

Loving God, we bring you our thanks for your amazing grace and abounding love. Even though we may be physically distant from each other, you are never far from us wherever we are and for that we are truly grateful. We come before you, after what may have been a busy week for some and a quieter week for others, with the assurance that you know each of our individual circumstances, what we are facing and how we are feeling. Thank you that you understand each one of us and you hold us in your everlasting arms. We give you thanks for all you have done for us, for your love which constantly surrounds us and for the grace you have shown through the amazing sacrifice of Jesus. Our words and songs of praise will never be able to fully express how much we love and adore you. As we worship you now would you inspire us, encourage us, challenge us and change us. In the week ahead may we live each day in the light of your love, with the knowledge of your presence and in the power of your Holy Spirit for your praise and your glory. Amen.

Today's gospel reading - Matthew 18: 21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Reflection part 1

There's a story of a father and son in Spain who had become estranged. The son ran away and the father set off to find him. He searched for months without finding his son. Finally, in a desperate attempt to find him, the father put an advert in a Madrid newspaper. It read: Dear Paco, meet me at noon on Saturday in front of this newspaper office. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father. On Saturday 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.

In order to understand the context of our passage and the reason for Peter's question, we need to look back at what preceded these verses. Jesus had been teaching the disciples about dealing with disagreements and reconciliation. So, for clarity on what Jesus had said, Peter wanted to double check how many times he should forgive someone. Bearing in mind that the rabbis of the day thought that forgiveness should have been offered three times, Peter's seven seems quite generous.

Although Peter's reaction is not recorded here, can you imagine his surprise when Jesus says that he is way off the mark? Oh no, not seven times, says Jesus, but seventy-seven times! I can imagine Peter almost stuttering in disbelief "How many times, Lord?!?" In focussing on a number Peter is missing Jesus' point, that forgiveness is not a question of calculation but a question of attitude, a way of life. Jesus is saying that we should keep on forgiving others - just as God keeps on forgiving us.

Jesus then goes on to tell a parable about a king who was settling some accounts and one of his servants owed him a lot of money, and I mean a LOT of money. He owed ten thousand talents, the equivalent of over 200,000 days' pay. This was an enormous debt and the servant would never have been able to earn this amount and repay the debt. We hear that in his compassion the king wrote off the debt. A talent was the largest unit of currency and ten thousand was the highest Greek numeral so the enormity of the servant's debt and the extent of the king's forgiveness would not have been lost on Jesus' listeners.

Just as the king shows extravagant grace and forgiveness to the servant, so God shows infinite mercy and goodness to us. Ten thousand in Greek is Myria, from where we get the word myriad. As the king was willing to cancel a debit of ten thousand talents, so God is willing to forgive, not just seven, or even seventy seven but a myriad of our wrongdoings. Of course God's ultimate act of forgiveness was the cross. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus we have been reconciled to God and all of our sins – past, present and future – have been forgiven. What a wonderful message for us today! Let's take a moment now to think about the extent of God's forgiveness towards us in our prayers of confession.

Prayers of confession

Think back through the past 24 hours, the things you have done, the people you may have encountered.

Ask the Holy Spirit to highlight anything you have done wrong, the times when you should have acted but did not, anything you could or should have done differently and say sorry for these things.

We are reminded that “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1: 9. Let these words sink in.

Take a few moments now to thank God for his forgiveness.

Reflection part 2

Going back to the parable, after being let off such an enormous debt, how would we have expected the first servant to react? I imagine him sobbing with relief, flinging himself at the feet of the king and promising to be eternally grateful. But no, not at all! He then goes to a fellow servant who owed him a small amount of money, tiny in comparison, and “began to choke him” (verse 28) as he demanded repayment.

The second servant owed 100 denarii - the equivalent of 100 days’ pay. After having been relieved of an unimaginable debt, the first servant was unwilling to cancel his fellow servant’s much smaller debt. I wonder whether we’re like that at all? Having been forgiven a myriad of sins through Jesus’ enormous sacrifice on the cross, are the wrongs we sometimes perceive and are unwilling to forgive minor in comparison?

Hearing about the servant’s treatment of his debtor the king is outraged and “turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed” (verse 34). Jesus says that this is how we will be treated if we don’t forgive from the heart. I think these last three words are crucial – “from your heart” (verse 35). Jesus is saying that forgiveness is a matter for your heart, not a matter of numbers. Forgiveness does not keep a tally. Martin Luther King Jr. said “Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude.” This does not mean that the things that have hurt us do not matter or did not happen but a lack of forgiveness will also hurt us and hurt God too. A lack of forgiveness can affect our relationship with God, as Jesus points out.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son (see Luke 15), the father was waiting to forgive his son before the son even had the chance to apologise. The return of the son to his father made way for a restored relationship and a new start for them both, just as for Paco and his father. When God forgives us he offers us another chance, a restored relationship and a new start. So forgiveness is transformative. Having been the recipients of God’s forgiveness, his grace and his mercy, imagine how many people, relationships and communities could be transformed if we were to pass that on.

Response



Take a look at this jar of sweets.

How many sweets do you think are in the jar?

Is your “jar of forgiveness” always overflowing like this one?

Is there someone you need to forgive today? Ask God to show you who and spend a few moments asking the Holy Spirit to help you to forgive.

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Purify my heart – Singing the Faith 508

1. Purify my heart,
let me be as gold and precious silver.
Purify my heart,
let me be as gold, pure gold.

*Refiner's fire, my heart's one desire,
is to be holy, set apart for you, Lord.
I choose to be holy,
set apart for you my master,
ready to do your will.*

2. Purify my heart,
cleanse me from within and make me holy.
Purify my heart,
cleanse me from my sin, deep within.

*Refiner's fire, my heart's one desire,
is to be holy, set apart for you, Lord.
I choose to be holy,
set apart for you my master,
ready to do your will.*

Brian Doerkson (b.1965)

Prayers for others

Loving God, in the ever changing world we live in, we thank you that you are the same yesterday, today and forever.

We pray for those who are facing change at this time:

Ministers who have recently moved to new circuits, including Rev Lesley Taylor as she ministers among us.

Churches as they face important decisions about when to reopen.

Pupils and teachers who are back in school as they try to adjust to new routines.

Those who have lost their job and look for work at a time of economic uncertainty.

We lift up to you situations where forgiveness, peace and reconciliation are needed:

Families where relationships have broken down and family members are estranged.

War torn countries and those experiencing unrest.

Refugees who have had to flee their homes and are looking for safety.

Those who need to give or receive forgiveness.

We pray for the people and situations on our heart today and for ourselves.

We say **The Lord's Prayer** in whichever form you prefer, Our Father....

Make me a channel of your peace – Singing the Faith 707

1. Make me a channel of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring your love;
where there is injury, your pardon, Lord;
and where there's doubt, true faith in you:

*O Master, grant that I may never seek
so much to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved, as to love with all my soul.*

*O Master, grant that I may never seek
so much to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved, as to love with all my soul.*

3. Make me a channel of your peace.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
in giving unto all that we receive,
and in dying that we're born to eternal life.

2. Make me a channel of your peace.
Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope;
where there is darkness, only light;
and where there's sadness, ever joy:

*O Master, grant that I may never seek
so much to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved, as to love with all my soul.*

Sebastian Temple (1928-1997),
from The Prayer of St. Francis

A Personal Prayer

I am not worthy, yet you love me, God.
I do not deserve so much and yet I have it.
I have many needs and before you I acknowledge them;
fill my life with your presence,
that others may come to know your healing balm.
Amen.

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