

We have today read the familiar parable of the prodigal son, and so I'd like us to take a few minutes to consider what true forgiveness looks like.

When I was about 10, I used to steal regularly from a friend of mine. Now that might seem very bad coming from the mouth of a minister but I must reiterate that I was 10 years old, that's over 40 years ago. I often went round to my friend's house. The family owned a restaurant and they would often be counting money at the end of the night. The following day there would be 10p's lying all over the place. The temptation was too much for me, so I would slip a 10p in my pocket any time I was there. When I eventually confessed about this to my friend, to my surprise I received complete forgiveness and grace. It was incredible to think that someone would be willing to forgive when I had been doing this for weeks.

Maybe in one of the most shocking stories of the New Testament Jesus gives us a picture of total forgiveness. It is here that Jesus reveals the vastness of forgiveness that our Father in heaven has for us.

The story begins with a son who wants his father to be dead so he can have his money now and live the life he wants to live. For some reason the father gives him what he wants; his portion of the inheritance right up front. The kid predictably goes off binging on whatever the world could offer him; Wild living, wild parties, lots of drinking, lots of women. But then the money runs out. He's broke and doesn't know what to do.

And then the story turns...

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'

So he decides to head back home and it's very risky because he doesn't really know how his Father will respond. He feels worthless, wasted, he's ashamed of himself, he's embarrassed. He realizes that his sin against his father has completely wrecked the relationship. He's full of guilt, he's ruined his life and he has nothing left to offer.

And this is where Jesus shocked them all, and this is one of the most incredible verses I believe in the Bible. Verse 20

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate'".

What an incredible father. Do you think a father today would be so full of grace and forgiveness? And yet, Jesus is saying this is what our Father in Heaven is like with us. In light of that, the issue we want to think about is how significant the idea of total forgiveness is.

The Father resets the relationship. He doesn't pretend that the sin didn't happen, but he covers it, he removes the shame, the embarrassment is gone, he makes the relationship what it ought to have been all along.

Forgiveness is not just erasing the past so that you can go back and do it again in the future. God's forgiveness removes the negative but it offers you a brand-new standing with himself. Forgiveness is God's promise not to bring up the offence again. Not to discuss it again. Never to hold that sin against us again. And yet I think that's where we fall down in our appreciation of our Father God, because I know and I'm sure you are the same, the past creeps back in, doesn't it? That's Satan however. God cannot drag up the past if he has forgiven you. It's not in his nature, but Satan wants you to keep going back to the pain of the past.

Do you know that it is God's will that you would stand before him today with a clean conscience, without any condemnation, blameless before him, without anything hidden, without shame. He wants us to know freedom from our pasts.

1 John 1:9 says this, 'But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness'.

Four things happened in this story to bring about complete forgiveness and a release from the old life...

1. He realized he had sinned.

Let me say this; you are never going to feel and understand complete forgiveness of sin until you understand how devastating sin is, how selfish it is, how destructive it is, how it devalues you and God. We therefore need to start by seeing our sin for what it is – it's the thing that separates us from that relationship with God, and without dealing with it, it leads to death.

2. He took responsibility for his sin.

There is no forgiveness and restoration with the father and a restoring of what our life was meant for as long as we keep blaming others. I often make mistakes, but I hate it when I try to pass the blame on to someone else. We must take the responsibility, but that also means that we cannot raise up the past about other's mistakes. We have enough of our own to deal with.

3. He repented of his sin.

This is where confession comes in. I value the need for confession in our services, but I worry if it becomes just part of the thing we do every Sunday. If we confess, we must truly be repentant. It's completely different from saying sorry. Repentance is a leaving behind everything to seek God's mercy and God's intervention in his grace in

our life. That sin should not therefore be revisited, otherwise it blurs what repentance is meant to be.

4. He was forgiven of his sin.

1 John 1:9 says 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'.

The father in the story knows what his son has done, but he responds with forgiveness, with cleansing, and the desire to start again in their relationship with each other.

You see when we are forgiven, this is what happens.

Micah 7:19 says 'Once again you will have compassion on us. You will trample our sins under your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean!'. God destroys the power of the sin that is over us and then throws it away so that it cannot torment you again.

Isaiah 43:25 says "I—yes, I alone—will blot out your sins for my own sake and will never think of them again".

This means that God erases every record of every trace of every sin – forever - and he will not remember it. Therefore if that is what God does, why should we try to raise it again in our minds?

Hebrews 8:12 says, "And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins."

Those sins will never be brought up against you again – it's no longer there.

At the cross Jesus said "it is finished." I suggest to all of us today, let it be finished.

And why? Romans 5 'Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. 2 Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory'.

That's what should bring us the most joy today. We have been made right with God, and we are at complete and total peace with him. We can share in his Glory.

That's what forgiveness brings. I wonder why we are not dancing in the aisles at the freedom of this. Our story today provides that wonderful picture of the party that began as the son returned home. The party was a celebration where the Father and Son were celebrating. May we be people who in our daily lives amongst our friends and family display the joy that comes in knowing what God's forgiveness truly means to us.