

There is a verse that has stayed with me all of my Christian life as an encouragement, challenge and warning. Just as Martin Luther's life was transformed, as he read Romans 1:17, **"the righteous will live by faith"** so too was mine when I read Isaiah 7:9, **"If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."** My wonderful mother-in-law Jo once made a similar comment to me. She said, *"You know Colin all the big decisions of life are made in faith."* It really struck me at the time. Wise words. Applying faith in the real world to our everyday lives, our motivations, as a curb on our behaviour, as a challenge to do better, to be better, is the true application of religion; not as an institution, but as the appropriate worship response of our lives to the Loving God we serve. In his Romans epistle, as Jesus had done previously, Paul continues to consider the practical implications of what an applied faith looks like in practice. As we continue to consider this, the words of Isaiah should be close to our hearts: it is only by standing in faith can we stand at all. In this time, for this generation, this has never been truer. This is a season to apply faith, to grow faith and to live by faith.

We begin then with what Jesus taught in our reading from Matthew 18 and the warning inherent in the parable of the Unmerciful Servant. You have to love the context of the parable, why Jesus told it. Peter. Again. Surely one of our favourite disciples, so enthusiastic, so slow to comprehend, so loving of Jesus and loved by Him. Here Peter comes to Jesus and you can almost picture the setting without any effort. **"How many times shall I forgive a brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"** Maybe in our vernacular we might ask *"How long do I have to put up with this so and so?"* One wonders who it was who was getting under Peter's skin? Which of the disciples, the followers, was getting Peter's goat as they say? We all know people like that. People that can really bug us. Things they say, things they do, things they repeatedly do, just seem to be there just to annoy the living daylights out of us. Sometimes its people we know well, even family members or workmates who just seem to push all our buttons. How long Lord? How often Lord? Why Lord?! It could have been almost any one of us asking the question and we've probably asked it before already ... or maybe more than once. To such questions Jesus responds with the parable that's been titled "The Unmerciful Servant" ... and if you haven't guessed already that's a warning about us.

So, what does Jesus say? Forgiving others is about the perspective we have on our own sin and the Lord's forgiveness of us. As Paul had already written in Ephesians 4:32, **"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."** Matthew 6:12-15 records the prayer Jesus taught the disciples to pray, the prayer we prayed today at Communion, and notice what it says ... **"... forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"**. Then Matthew goes on, at the end of the prayer, to record the emphasis Jesus made on this particular aspect of the Lord's prayer saying, **"for if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."** In this context, the parable of the Unmerciful Servant records the actions of a man who has received the forgiveness of a great debt yet has failed to replicate this in his relationship with another who owed him a far smaller debt. The inherent hypocrisy is ultimately punished harshly. The hard-hearted man had his own burden re-imposed and he was thereafter responsible for the original massive debt and the consequences of his debt. In that case the consequence was being jailed until it was paid in full. Leniency was not provided so the man could go out and deal harshly with others. Jesus ends the parable with a very clear and unsubtle statement: **"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."** **Not just in lip service we might note but genuinely, from the heart.** This takes effort and sometimes isn't easy. This is the application of faith. The lesson

is clear and simple: as God has loved and forgiven us in Jesus, even when it wasn't merited, so too we are to act with love and forgiveness towards others.

We might note here that if you do not appreciate just what it is that Jesus has done for you. If you don't understand the real cost of your sin, then you probably need to spend more time in Bible study, prayer and meditation about the cost of your sin to Jesus before and on the Cross, as He took your penalty. There was no cheap grace on the Cross. As we appreciate what Jesus has done for us, we can begin to see others as He sees us.

Turning back then to Romans 14 Paul helpfully gives us some practical exemplars as principles and guidance for our action in daily life. These can be summed up under these broad categories: recognise we are all at different stages in our walk, don't judge, recognise the conviction of genuine faith choices even if they don't equate to yours and know that you will have to give an account to God for your actions. Paul uses the examples of people's food choices, choosing different days for worship, whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols as practical contemporary issues in his time that were dividing the church and yet shouldn't do. What is recognised is the respect for the primacy of conscience in decision making when people are genuinely doing their best to walk in faith. I gave a similar example a couple of weeks ago observing that different Christian people will come to different electoral and referendum decisions, even opposing ones, yet both sides can be acting in faith. We are told not to judge, that role is God's alone, but to love each other and be forgiving ... if there is anything to forgive. In other words, to act with love and grace. This also means that we would be acting humbly as it also pre-supposes the possibility that we may not be correct ourselves no matter how certain we might want to be. This hint of the possibility that, at the stage of growth we are at, we might be wrong should always be a temper to our pride and forthrightness.

A subtle technicality here: to walk with this humility is not to doubt or fear or to be weak. It is to acknowledge that we are on a journey. As Paul put it in Corinthians ... **“for now we see in a mirror, dimly, ... now I know in part ...”**. It's like a young driver on the road in their first year or starting a new job. They have their contract or licence, they have some skills and ability, but history, the wisdom of others' experience, TV and media all tell them there is a lot to learn, skills to hone, reactions to develop and practical experience needed before they will become good, safe and competent drivers. To think anything else would be foolishness in the extreme. It's isn't that they are not capable, competent or skilled but just the honest, sensible recognition there is so much more they don't know. Our humility in Christ recognises we have so much that we need to grow in, so much to learn. That recognition alone should make us ever forgiving of others. It calls for us to apply our faith in the way we see and interact with the world, with other people, in very real terms. Like us, each person is on a journey.

The text from Exodus reminds us that faith sometimes will take us to places that stretch us: test our hearing, our understanding, our courage, our trust in God. Sometimes God takes us into an unknown that looks incredibly frightening. All we know is that He has led us there and He is ahead of us and behind us and is calling us to trust Him. We all can experience Red Sea experiences where the Promised Land is on the other side but we cannot see it yet and we may have some more to deal with before we get there. Yet God is calling us to step forward in faith. Those Red Sea pedestrians must have been terrified as the waters piled up and the land appeared at their feet. If the water returned to its place while they were in the middle, they were goners. Yet, looking back, what they could see wasn't so pleasant either ... Pharaoh's army coming to drag them back into physical, hard-labour slavery. Stepping out in faith into the unknown, holding closely to the Lord, when He is calling, is the only appropriate response.

To conclude then: the Christian walk is a walk of faith. I walk by faith, each step by faith, as the song goes. It is the only way a Christian can live. It calls for us to love and forgive, to be brave and trusting, to be humble and courageous. Over and over and over again. Walking in the knowledge that in Jesus we have been forgiven and that by the Spirit He walks with us into the unknown on the greatest journey. What can we say and do but trust and obey? Amen.