

Sunday service

from the United Reformed Church



Sunday 13 September 2026
Proper 19 | Ordinary 24
The Revd Geoffrey Clarke



Brett Jordan | pexels.com

Opening Music *Ach Gott Von Himmel Sieh Darein ("O God from heaven see this")*

by Johann Pachelbel (organ of The Spire Church, Farnham – 2020)

Welcome and Introduction

Hello and welcome to worship. We think today about the calling to forgive others and the challenge that comes with the invitation to do so. In our Old Testament reading we will listen in on Joseph's brothers as they seek reconciliation with him after wronging him greatly and stand in awe of his response to them; our Psalm affirms the steadfast love of God, broad and deep in its scope of forgiveness; and in the gospel Peter asks searching questions regarding forgiveness. My name is Geoffrey Clarke; I am Moderator of the East Midlands Synod which embraces some 100

churches within the counties of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes. I am recording this in Nottingham. We begin our worship with a Call to Worship.

Call to Worship

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits-

who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

who redeems your life from the Pit,

who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

who satisfies you with good as long as you live

so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Hymn *Praise, My Soul, The King of Heaven*

Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847) Public Domain

Courtesy of St Andrew's Cathedral & Choir, Sydney, Australia

Praise, my soul,
the King of heaven;
to his feet thy tribute bring;
ransomed, healed,
restored, forgiven
who like me
his praise should sing?
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise the everlasting King!

2 Praise him for
his grace and favour
to our fathers in distress;
praise him still the same as ever,
slow to chide, and swift to bless:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Glorious in his faithfulness!

3 Father-like
he tends and spares us;
well our feeble frame he knows;
in his hands
he gently bears us,
rescues us
from all our foes:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Widely as his mercy flows!

4 Angels, help us to adore him,
ye behold him face to face;
sun and moon,
bow down before him
dwellers all in time and space:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise with us the God of grace!

Prayers of Approach & Confession

Praise be to you, our God, for your steadfast love and mercy,
poured out upon us...beyond our deserving, beyond our imagining,
beyond our capacity to reciprocate to you or to those around us.

Praise be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, in whose life and death
we see most clearly steadfast love and mercy...
reaching out to those we might avoid, embracing the untouchable
and feasting with those beyond the bounds of acceptance ...

Praise be to you, O Holy Spirit,
enabling us to inhale steadfast love and mercy
wherever hatred and revenge seek to suffocate us with their poison.
Without your aid we neither know ourselves forgiven
or find ourselves able to forgive.

Praise be to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

Yet...though we praise you for your steadfast love and mercy
we also confess that we have not always embodied a willingness
to extend that same love and mercy to others.
When others have hurt us all too often we have resorted to revenge.
We have found refuge in resentment and bitterness,
drawn the attention of others to our wounds,
delighted in defaming those who have wronged us
and have allowed all of this to infect and consume us.
Cleanse the depths of our souls, we pray; expel resentment from us;
and enable us to know ourselves set free by forgiveness
and renewed in our willingness to forgive others.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Here are words we may trust – words that merit full acceptance:
God is a God of steadfast love and mercy.
Your sins are forgiven. **Thanks be to God.**

The Lord's Prayer

Prayer for Illumination

Grant that as we listen to words of scripture
and ponder their meaning for us
we may be both inspired and equipped
to be living embodiments of the Word. **Amen.**

Reading *Genesis 50: 15-21*

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Reading *Psalms 103: 8-13*

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord will not always accuse, nor keep angry for ever.
The Lord does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is God's steadfast love towards those who fear God's own self;
as far as the east is from the west,

so far the Lord removes our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear the Most High.

Hymn *Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive*

Rosamond E. Herklots (1905–1987) © Oxford University Press CCLI Licence No. # A-734713

Sung by Becky Messer and used with her kind permission.

'Forgive our sins as we forgive',
You taught us, Lord, to pray,
but you alone can grant us grace
to live the words we say.

3 In blazing light your cross reveals
the truth we dimly knew,
what trivial debts are owed to us,
how great our debt to you!

2 How can your pardon
reach and bless
the unforgiving heart
that broods on wrongs,
and will not let
old bitterness depart?

4 Lord, cleanse the depths
within our souls,
and bid resentment cease;
then, by your mercy reconciled,
Our lives will spread your peace.

Reading St Matthew 18: 9-13, 18-26

Jesus said: "And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.

"Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell

you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’”

Sermon *Practising the seventy seven times table*

Peter asks a question that recognises a challenge faced by each of us – the challenge to forgive those who make our lives harder through how they treat us. At first glance, his is a question that appears to be set within the confines of church life:

Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?

Yet the Lord’s Prayer refers to those who sin against us. In this sermon I will apply the challenge of forgiveness beyond the confines of church – to include anyone we consider has ‘sinned against us.’ And at no point will I claim that forgiveness is ‘easy’. And I concede that I am but scratching the surface when it comes to what could be said.

Three points...

Firstly: We are invited to practise Forgiveness that stops counting...Matthew 18: 21-22: Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times". I suspect that most of us would regard Peter's suggestion of forgiving seven times as generous to the point of extravagance. When it comes to generosity, however, Jesus always goes further. Eleven times further. Not seven times, says Jesus, but...seventy-seven times. Had Jesus accepted Peter's suggestion most of us would have needed some form of note-taking or record. The record of when and where we had forgiven...first time, second time, third time...up to seventh. Keeping such a record would itself be a form of not forgetting. (And, yes, all too often forgiving comes with not forgetting.) Being willing to forgive as many times as Jesus instructs Peter amounts to not keeping such a record. Forgetting, rather than constant remembering. Stop counting.

Losing count. Note that neither Peter or Jesus refer to there being instances where we are exempt from forgiving. Peter asks about how often and maybe hopes that forgiveness might 'run out'; what isn't on the table at all is the option of refusing to forgive in the first place. Accompanying the act of forgiving with a record-sheet risks reducing it to a transactional exercise. And if we're honest that is where all too often we get 'stuck' as and when we feel wronged by someone else. We recall the extent of the hurt they cause us...the wrong they have done to us...a score of wrongs becomes a debt we feel they should repay. In her hymn, *Forgive our sins as we forgive*, Rosamond Herklots puts it memorably and vividly as she refers to the unforgiving heart that broods on wrong and will not let old bitterness depart. She goes on to offer the prayer, Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls and bid resentment cease. Then, bound to all in bonds of love, our lives will spread your peace. (Rejoice and Sing: 84: 2, 4)

Keeping a record. Counting and scoring. Activities for which a calculator could be offered as the symbol. Peter learns that we need to put down the calculator. Rather, as Fred Kaan puts it: we are to practise [Christ's]

acceptance until we know by heart the table of forgiveness and laughter's healing art. (Rejoice and Sing 646: 3) In place of a calculator with a limit of seven, Kaan encourages us to practise the 77 times table. Practise a forgiveness that stops counting.

Secondly, we need to recognise that the absence of Forgiveness undermines our Christian witness (Matthew 18: 31) When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their Lord all that had taken place. Jesus follows his answer to Peter with a parable to illustrate the damaging impact of being unwilling to practise the 77 times table. A slave falls on his knees and begs his master to give him time to settle his account. His was a massive debt – ten thousand talents. In his commentary on Matthew John Proctor observes that, A talent represented about twenty or thirty years' wages, the equivalent of a large mortgage. So the...servant's debt was astronomical. No normal sum would be as large as this. The debt is utterly unpayable and the situation has gone far beyond recovery. (Matthew, John Proctor, BRF, 2001, page 156)

Amazingly, out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. (Mt. 18: 27) Yet, to his shame, this slave when encountering another who owed him money fails to embody the generosity of forgiveness that had been shown to him. His debtor owed him a hundred denarii – the equivalent of a day's wage – but he seizes his debtor by the throat and demands payment, throwing him into prison when he fails to pay. Despite being forgiven himself he doesn't practise his 70 times table and even fails to begin Peter's count to seven. I am struck by the impact of this ungracious behaviour on others who see it. Fellow slaves see what happens and were greatly distressed. In short, they could not ignore the massive contradiction between the gracious treatment he had received and the total absence of grace in how he treated someone else.

Forgiveness – or the lack of it – has a wider 'audience' than merely those causing hurt and those directly hurt. Forgiveness – or the lack of – ripples

out impacting others. We need look no further, as Christians, to Jesus who, on the cross, said, Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. (Luke 23: 34) The One who taught us to pray, Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us, practised what he preached. Sadly, all too often, even though we have been forgiven on an astronomical scale, we do not always exercise that same grace and our Christian witness is impaired as a result. Others, like the slaves in Jesus' parable, are greatly distressed.

Rutger Bregman in his wonderful book, *Humankind*, shares what he describes as a parable of unknown origin: An old man says to his grandson: 'There's a fight going on inside me. It's a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil – angry, greedy, jealous, arrogant, and cowardly. The other is good – peaceful, loving, modest, generous, honest, and trustworthy. These two wolves are also fighting within you, and inside every other person too.' After a moment the boy asks, 'Which wolf will win?' The old man smiles, 'The one you feed.'

(*Humankind: A Hopeful History* by Rutger Bregman, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020; page 10)

Jesus urges us to feed the inner wolf – the one that is peaceful, loving, modest, generous, honest, and trustworthy. Doing so will make our Christian witness credible; feeding the other wolf impairs our witness.

Thirdly, we concede that Forgiveness is beyond us ... yet we should feed the right 'wolf'. The king in Jesus' parable says to the unforgiving slave: Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you? And Jesus concludes by urging his hearers to forgive your brother or sister from your heart. (Mt. 18: 33, 35) Just as we have conceded that Peter's suggestion of sevenfold forgiveness is more generous than many of us would contemplate so, too, we need to be honest enough to admit that the unforgiving slave in the parable is sometimes not dissimilar to how we feel about those who inflict hurts on us. Practising Peter's seven times table is tough ... let alone the 77 times table! It is not within our own power or capability to forgive yet refusing to do so can eat away at us. Choosing

the costly and difficult option of forgiving – even without any sign of remorse from the other – can free us from the prison of resentment. And resentment is a toxic force which poisons and can destroy us. By contrast, feeding the wolf of forgiveness, seeking God’s help to do so, heals the hurt. Margaret Silf retells a true story by Yevgeny Yevtushenko: It was a bleak day in the bleak year of 1944 in Moscow. Some 20,000 German prisoners-of-war were being marched across Red Square. The mood was grim and angry. Most people present had had a husband, a brother, a son, a father, a lover killed in the conflict. The police were having trouble holding them back behind the cordons. Some spectators were ready to tear the now-vanquished enemy limb from limb. The captured officers led the parade. Heads still held high, in an attitude perceived by the crowd as arrogance, they were jeered and spat upon as they passed. And then came the ordinary soldiers – a very different picture. Men on crutches, barely able to hobble across the Square; men wrapped in blood-soaked bandages; men wracked by exhaustion, starvation, and abject humiliation. Silence fell over Red Square. The people who had suffered so much at the hands of this enemy now looked into the eyes and faces of thousands of fellow human beings teetering on the very edge of desperation. And then one woman broke through the cordon. In her hand she held a piece of black bread from her own kitchen, bread she could ill afford to give away. Before anyone could stop her she thrust it into the hand of a German prisoner. Others saw her gesture. Others also had bread in their homes. Others also recognised the human being behind the enemy uniform and broke through the cordons to give what bread they could. Soon the scene of triumphalist scorn turned to one of human compassion. A bleak moment in human history became a moment of transformation. (One Hundred More Wisdom Stories, Margaret Silf, Lion Books, 2013)

Forgiveness is anything but easy. We can feel so justified in our wish for revenge. In our Old Testament reading Joseph’s brothers had good cause to feel anxious as they approached him given their treacherous treatment of him. Little wonder they ponder, What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong we did to him? (Gen. 50: 21) Joseph’s response spotlights where the ability to forgive is sourced

– in the God of steadfast love and mercy: Joseph knows his 77 times table! Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? (Gen 50: 19) What he goes on to say, to the brothers who had wanted him dead, shows that if we draw upon God's steadfast love and mercy and are willing to practise forgiveness we are enabled to see good even through hurt: Even though you intended to do harm to me, says Joseph, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. (Gen. 50: 20)

Martin Luther King once said, We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. (The one) who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. (cited by John Pridmore in *The Word is Very Near You*, Canterbury Press, 2000, page 268) I am not pretending for one moment that it is 'easy' but rather than being consumed by resentment, bitterness and a desire for revenge, if we can feed the wolf of Christ-like forgiveness and, like Joseph, seek to discern where God's purposes are to be served, we will be able to sing Herklot's words: In blazing light your Cross reveals the truth we dimly knew: what trivial debts are owed to us, how great our debt to you! (Rejoice and Sing 84: 3)

Let us pray.

God of steadfast love and mercy,
you call us to practise our 70 times table of forgiveness.
When we are tempted to return hurt for hurt
grant us the strength to forgive
as in Christ we have been forgiven. Amen!

Hymn *Help Us Accept Each Other*

Fred Kaan (1929-2009) © 1975 Stainer & Bell Ltd CCLI Licence No. # A-734713 Sung by the Kirk
Virtual Choir, St Andrew's Kirk, Chennai

Help us accept each other
as Christ accepted us;
teach us as sister, brother,
each person to embrace.
Be present, Lord, among us
and bring us to believe:
we are ourselves accepted
and meant to love and live.

2 Teach us, O Lord, your lessons,
as in our daily life
we struggle to be human
and search for hope and faith.
Teach us to care for people,
for all - not just for some,
to love them as we find them
or as they may become.

3 Let your acceptance change us
so that we may be moved
in living situations
to do the truth in love;
to practise your acceptance
until we know by heart
the table of forgiveness
and laughter's healing art.

4 Lord, for today's encounters
with all who are in need,
who hunger for acceptance,
for righteousness and bread,
we need new eyes for seeing,
new hands for holding on:
renew us with your Spirit;
Lord, free us, make us one!

Prayers of Intercession

God of Joseph, source of steadfast love and mercy,
we pray for all who, like Peter, have cause to ask,
'How often should I forgive?'

We pray for all for whom retaliation and revenge feel justified:
the victims of the injustice of power...
those who live in war-torn territories...
the displaced and the desperate...
those abused and wrongly-treated by forces set against them.

Silence

God of Joseph: **may your steadfast love and mercy inspire us.**

We pray for the Church:

that we may more truly practise what we preach

For all who have been hurt by the words and actions

of those claiming to be followers of Jesus...

For all who are wracked by the guilt of regret...

those haunted by memories of hurt they have caused others...

and those who are unable to believe and trust that they are forgiven.

Silence

God of Joseph: **may your steadfast love and mercy inspire us.**

We pray for any known to us who struggle with their 70 times table:

those who can pray the Lord's Prayer yet find it hard to pray the words,

'Forgive those who sin against us'

when particular people and particular hurts

continue to hold them captive...

for those whose health is impaired by bitterness and resentment...

those whose relationships continue to be affected by past hurts...

Silence

God of Joseph: **may your steadfast love and mercy inspire us.**

Enable us, God of Joseph, to offer the bread of kindness,

even to those we see as our enemies

and make us willing to see your goodness

even in the most challenging of circumstances.

We offer these prayers in the name of the One

through whom we know your loving acceptance of us,

Christ Jesus. Amen.

Offering

We offer all that we have and all that we are
with the prayer and pledge that your name be glorified
and your steadfast love and mercy are known and shared. Amen.

Hymn *Morning glory, starlit sky*

William Hubert Vanstone (1923-1999) © Mrs I Shore CCLI Licence No. # A-734713
Sung by the Harvard University Choir.

Morning glory, starlit sky, soaring music, scholars' truth, flight of swallows, autumn leaves, memory's treasure, grace of youth: open are the gifts of God, gifts of love to mind and sense; hidden is love's agony, love's endeavour, love's expense.	2 Love that gives, gives evermore, gives with zeal, with eager hands; spares not, keeps not, all outpours, ventures all, its all expends. Drained is love in making full, bound in setting others free, poor in making many rich, weak in giving power to be.
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3 Therefore He who shows us God helpless hangs upon the tree,
and the nails and crown of thorns tell of what God's love must be.

Here is God: no monarch He, throned in easy state to reign;
here is God, whose arms of love, aching, spent, the world sustain.

Benediction

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

**He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.**

He does not deal with us according to our sins
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

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

Go, as forgiven people, and practise forgiveness and

may the blessing of
God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
rest upon you now and always! **Amen.**

Closing Music

O love all love transcending

by J S Bach, performed by Kingston upon Thames URC 2022

Sources

Prayers of Approach and Confession inspired in part by Rosamond Herklots' hymn, *Forgive our sins as we forgive*, all other liturgical work by Geoffrey Clarke.

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