

HOW OFTEN SHOULD WE FORGIVE?
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Text: Matthew 18:21-35

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.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Every week we acknowledge our sin and receive forgiveness as part of our worship.

We do this in a couple of ways. In the assurance of grace, we hear the words, "Know that we are forgiven, and be at peace," or something to that effect. And in the Lord's Prayer we ask God to "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

Well, today we're getting an extra heavy dose of forgiveness.

In the gospel reading, Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And Jesus replies, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Clearly Jesus thought forgiveness was pretty important, or he wouldn't have said that.

And clearly we think it's pretty important, too, or we wouldn't make it such a big part of our worship.

And yet sometimes there's nothing harder than saying those words, "I forgive you," especially when we're not talking about something trivial, like someone cutting us off in traffic, but something that caused us real harm; something that was done knowingly; or something that wasn't just a one-time thing but keeps happening over and over.

So, let's take a look at this reading and see if we can find something in here that might help us be a little more forgiving.

It's easy to misunderstand what Peter is saying when he asks Jesus how often we're

supposed to forgive. It sounds like he's trying to put a cap on forgiveness. It sounds like he's trying to limit his obligation.

But that's not exactly true.

Peter didn't just randomly pick the number seven. In the biblical world, seven was a special number that signified completeness or fullness—like in Genesis, when God wraps up creation in seven days. So, Peter isn't looking for a way to get out of having to forgive. He's not looking for some kind of loophole. He just wants to know when enough is enough. He just wants to be clear about what's expected of him.

Which is fair enough.

But when Jesus tells him, "Not seven times, but... seventy-seven times," it's like he's saying your forgiveness has to be more than complete. There is no magic number, there is no cut-off when you can stop forgiving and walk away and be done. To forgive means you keep forgiving as many times as you have to.

Now, I imagine Peter didn't like that answer very much, and I imagine most of us don't like it very much either. We think about the person who did us harm, and it just doesn't seem right to keep forgiving them over and over. If we keep telling them it's okay, aren't we just encouraging their bad behavior? Aren't we just letting them off the hook? Where's the justice in that?

To be honest, those seem like legitimate questions to me. But then again, I'm not Jesus. He comes at it from a totally different perspective. He places human forgiveness in the context of divine forgiveness, and he tells a story about it—the story of the unforgiving servant—the point of which is clear: We need to forgive one another without limit or condition just as God has forgiven us without limit or condition. And if we don't, then we're the ones who end up paying a price.

So what Jesus is doing is turning our usual way of thinking on its head. Instead of focusing on the offender and making this a conversation about justice, he focuses on the forgiver and makes this a conversation about... healing. And you might wonder, "What does forgiveness

have to do with healing?" Well, the answer is... everything. Forgiveness has everything to do with healing.

Marjorie Thompson is a pastor and writer, and she puts it like this:

"To forgive, is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem."

"Forgiveness," she continues, "involves excusing persons from the punitive consequences they deserve because of their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound's power to hold us trapped is broken."

So, forgiveness, from that perspective, is not a matter of letting the offender off the hook. It's a matter of letting ourselves off the hook. Because when we refuse to forgive, what we're really doing is holding on to the hurt we've suffered and allowing it to continue causing us pain.

Harold Kushner is a rabbi and writer, and he tells a story about this from his own ministry. He writes:

"A woman in my congregation comes to see me. She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She says to me, 'Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?'

“I answer her, ‘I’m not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn’t; it was mean and selfish. I’m asking you to forgive because he doesn’t deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I’d like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You’re not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you’re hurting yourself.’”

Forgiveness was indeed at the heart of Jesus’ ministry because his ministry was about setting the captives free. Along with Peter, we often think forgiveness is something that only benefits the one who needs to be forgiven. But Jesus knew better. He knew forgiveness is about helping the one who forgives to let go of their anger and bitterness and finally be at peace.

And we don’t have to look any further than our own lives to see that he was right. Think about someone in your past who hurt you, someone who betrayed you, someone who took advantage of you—someone you struggled to forgive. Did holding on to your resentment bring you even a single ounce of relief? Did it help you heal and move forward? Did it have any positive effect on you at all? Or did it leave you trapped in a kind of prison—a place where you re-lived your hurt over and over?

How often should we forgive? It’s a good question. The answer is: as often as it takes for us to become the people of grace and joy Jesus wants us to be. Amen.