

Seven Times?

Matthew 18:21-35

There is a danger that probably lurks in every one of us. It is a danger that lurks in the heart of fallen men, a common feature of the flesh, the old man. It is a danger that makes us vulnerable to a particularly skillful scheme of the devil. It is a danger that continues to confront us as Christians, even as it often comes alongside of good and faithful exhortations to do what is good in the sight of God, to honor and obey God by keeping his commandments. It is a danger that often lurks in the hearts of Christians who, to some degree or another, are seeking to live their lives in a manner worthy of the calling to which they have been called.

This same danger is also often the very stumbling block that would keep many non-Christians from coming to believe and trust in Jesus Christ through the promise of gospel. It is the danger of thinking of ourselves as good. Or, actually, I should put it this way, it is the danger of thinking that we can make ourselves look good! It is the danger of doing something, even something that is itself good, in an attempt to make yourself appear righteous, in and of yourself. Most simply put, it is the danger of self-righteousness.

For the unbeliever, the deception of self-righteousness is a stumbling block to the gospel, because the self-righteous unbeliever feels and senses no need for Christ at all! The unbeliever who convinces himself of his own righteousness will not understand the meaning of the gospel, for the gospel calls upon you to trust in Jesus Christ for your salvation, and not to trust in yourself. The gospel calls upon you to humble yourself, to plead your guilt before God and ask for the mercy of his forgiveness. And thankfully, we know that everyone who calls on

the name of the Lord will be saved. But only those who do so.

So it was the self-righteous Pharisees who generally received the harshest judgments and condemnation from Jesus. And Jesus' own willingness to minister the gospel to sinners was actually an offense to those Pharisees.

Mat. 9:10 "Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. 11 And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12 When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 But go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

That's really the backdrop for our study this afternoon. We studied the whole subject of forgiveness last week, the process of reconciliation and restoration when there are offenses and sins committed against one another. And even Peter, as one of Jesus' disciples, had a typical, self-justifying response. It was a response that demonstrated that he had thus far missed the whole point of Jesus' teaching, because he attempted to take Jesus' exhortation to pursue reconciliation with others as an occasion to boast about himself. This is clear an example as you will find anywhere of,

I. THE DANGER OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS.

If we can assume Peter is somewhat representative of all the disciples, they took Jesus' rather strenuous exhortation to seek reconciliation when you are sinned against, and they used it as an occasion to try to make themselves look good! So, rather than accept the responsibility to apply Jesus' teaching to their own lives in a way that would promote true repentance, forgiveness

and reconciliation, they reacted by asking a question that was so obviously designed to exalt themselves. It was a question that they believed would make themselves appear to be extremely advanced spiritually, extremely advanced in doing exactly what Jesus was urging them to do.

They would always see themselves as the ones sinned against, of course, so they missed the whole sense of humility that would come from realizing that others might actually come to them, to address their own sins. But that was out the question, the farthest thing from their mind. They thought only of the sins of others, and they thought themselves to be advanced by asking the question the way that they did.

v.21

Seven times! That's pretty good! That's probably more than most of us would be willing to do, or at least to do freely and easily. Seven times. And that's not an arbitrary number, since 7 is the number of fullness, the perfect number. Peter must have thought seven would represent more of a willingness to forgive than they would ever be called up to grant. "As many as seven times?" Wow! Amazing, isn't it, thinks Peter, that anyone would offer to forgive that much, that often. Seven times!

So what's wrong with that response? What's the danger I've been trying to describe so clearly? I think its really two dangers in one. First, there is an incredible sense of condescension there. A clear sense of spiritual superiority, in the willingness to forgive those terrible people as many as seven times. There is a sense of a proud and arrogant spirit that bestows forgiveness from the position of superiority, rather than humility. And I give that interpretation mainly because of the focus of Jesus' parable which we will look at in just a few minutes. I sense in that question the evidence of a great deal of spiritual superiority.

Along with self-justifying pride. In other words, to focus again on Peter's response, the willingness to grant forgiveness as many as seven times would seem to be sure to acquit Peter of any guilt or responsibility himself. It was to guard against any implication that he, himself, might also be guilty of any sin. So this question in response to Jesus shows forth,

A. The danger of a self-justifying sense of spiritual superiority.

The danger of wanting to make yourself look good in the sight of God, on the basis of your own good works. The danger of wanting to prove yourself righteous before God, by the demonstration of your own works. In other words, self-righteousness.

Now, what's so wrong with that? Well, as soon as you try to approach God on that basis, on the basis of your own self-righteousness, he might well look at some particular sin in your life and ask you, "But what about that?" In other words, if you are going to depend upon your own works of self-righteousness, you have put yourself back under the law and are under the curse of having to fulfill the whole of that law.

At a certain point we need to confess with the nation of Israel, Is. 64:6 "But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away."

We need to be reminded from Paul that,

Rom. 3:10 "As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; 11 There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. 12 They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one."

Paul's conclusion to that description of sinful man is this, Rom. 3:19 "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. 20 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin."

So we ought not to respond to Jesus' exhortations in a way that would seem to imply that we are OK; that we have managed to keep his requirements fully and completely. That was Peter's error, thinking that he could justify himself by proclaiming a willingness to forgive the incredible amount of seven times!

There is in that also, an obvious example of,

B. The danger of a superficial legalism.

In other words, putting an external limit or definition upon spiritual issue. Namely, forgiveness. The superficial legalism was to affirm the duty and responsibility of forgiveness, and then to define a limit of seven times. As if the duty of our obedience to God would expire after those seven times.

Superficial means "on the surface." It refers to the outward performance of some sort of duty, with no deeper reflection upon the heart. Legalism is to use the definitions of law to express what ought to be the fullness of heart. So when Jesus was asked that trick question about which law was most important, he refused to answer with any superficial or legalistic definition. He didn't specify one law, thus creating a debate or argument for others to join. Rather, he joined the whole of the law together into its fullest and deepest sense.

Mat. 22:37 Jesus said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is

like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

The commandment is to love God. And the spiritual reality of that commandment is that you are love God with all your heart, with all your strength. So you can't measure it outwardly. You can't put a limit upon it, superficially. You can't express it in terms of mere objective legalism. That's what is so wrong with Peter's question of Jesus. "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

There is in that question also, of course,

C. The danger of the failure to understand that the grace of forgiveness is not limited.

And Jesus' answer surely puts to rest that misunderstanding. v.22

Numbers have a lot of symbolic importance in the Bible, and seven is the number of fullness and perfection. That's why Peter chose that number, but Jesus uses a little mathematical illustration to make his point. Not seven times, as seemingly full and perfect as that would imply. And, by the way, how few of us would be immediately and fully ready to forgive that often? Seven times. That is a lot. Perhaps an analogy for us would be "a thousand times." The idea is, a lot!

But Jesus takes that seven and makes it "seven-sevens." The Greek word is a compound word, and I think seventy times seven is a more accurate definition than simply seventy plus seven, or seventy-seven. But, of course, even that distinction misses the point. The point is not whether Jesus is specifying 77 times or 490 times, seventy times seven. As if either on the 78th or the 491st first offense, the obligation to forgive somehow disappears.

The point is not the mathematical formula, but upon the unlimited nature of the symbolic number. It might as well be a million. Or in mathematical language, infinity! The number is infinity, which, if you really understand anything about math above algebra, is not a number at all. It is a limit, a limit by definition which is never achieved, never reached. And if you grasp that, you are really well on your way to understanding calculus!

So seventy-sevens means that there is never a time at which the responsibility Jesus identifies to forgive your brother would expire. There is never a limit that you can meet, such that one more time cancels the duty and obligation he addresses.

v.21-22

Now, a parable to illustrate the point.

II. THE LESSON OF THE PARABLE.

The starting point of the parable is so personal, isn't it? And easy to understand. It is an encouraging account that describes the kingdom of heaven. And it certainly is a parable that gives us a proper picture of God's mercy.

v.23-27

Why forgiveness? Because of God's compassion, pity. Because of God's mercy.

v.27

With this parable, it is good to see the image of sin as a debt. If you think about the two versions of the Lord's Prayer in the two gospels of Matthew and Luke, you might remember that one version uses the word for "trespass" or "sin," and the other uses the word for "debts." And there is not contradiction, because the meaning and the idea of the two words are exactly the same.

A trespass, or sin, is a debt because it incurs an obligation. A debt means you owe someone a payback. And sin has that same idea. "The wages of sin is death." That's the debt, the obligation. Sin incurs the debt of God's wrath and justice, and the only appropriate compensation for sin is the shedding of blood. In other words, death. It is a clear and consistent biblical principle, embodied in the very external form of the worship of God's people in the Old Testament. And the principle is established as well in the spiritual realities of New Testament worship. "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness."

This is the very heart and substance of the whole of the gospel message. Consider,

Heb. 9:18 "Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood. 19 For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, 20 saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you." 21 Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry. 22 And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission. 23 Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; 25 not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another— 26 He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself."

The debt of sin is obvious. The blood of the covenant. Death. And the key to understanding this parable in Matthew 18 is to understand that,

A. You must always remember the forgiveness of your own debts.

You and I need to see ourselves in this parable as this servant who owed ten thousand talents. You and I need to see ourselves as the one who falls on his knees and pleads for mercy. And you and I need to see ourselves as the one who receives the forgiveness of God! That is the promise of the gospel, never more clearly stated than in David's words in,

Ps. 103:8 "The LORD is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. 9 He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. 10 He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; 12 As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. 13 As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him. 14 For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust."

You and I must never get far away from the personal reality in our own experiences of what Paul is able to say of himself,

1 Tim. 1:15 "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. 16 However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life."

Similarly,

1 Cor. 15:9 "For I am the least of the apostles, who am not

worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."

Paul never lost a sense of his own sin, and he always allowed that sense of sin to drive him to the humility of trusting in Jesus, looking to the grace of God and the mercy of God as his one and only hope. Paul never lost the sense of the fact that he had been forgiven his sins, and his sins were great!

That's why Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6 are actually encouraging and edifying, when he writes,

1 Cor. 6:9 "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, 10 nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God."

For he then goes on to say,

1 Cor. 6:11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."

Beloved, we don't need to hide from the reality of our sins, as if God requires of us to be rid of sin before he finds us acceptable to him. Rather, the great blessing of the gospel is that accepts us as righteous in his sight by faith in Jesus Christ. And those debts we have incurred, the debt of our sins, is cancelled! "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

That's the foundation for what Jesus teaches about forgiveness, such that...

B. The forgiveness of your own debts should always stimulate your mercy toward others.

So the bad example of this first servant in the parable is quite a challenge to us, isn't it?

v.28-30

The man who had been forgiven his debt was without mercy upon the one indebted to him, even for a much lesser amount. The man who had been forgiven his debt became harsh and overbearing, hard-hearted toward his fellow servant, his fellow debtor! And the judgment pronounced was severe, but very, very appropriate.

v.31-34

Beloved, the humility that comes to your own heart with the full realization of the gift of forgiveness you have received should shape your heart and mind as you relate to others! Even as Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." You are not earning your own forgiveness by forgiving others, but you are certainly showing your awareness and understanding of what God, by his grace, has done for you!

Don't ever lost sight of the reality that Jesus died for your sins. Your particular, personal specific sins. I don't want you to wallow in those sins. Nor do I want you to feel any longer the weight of the guilt of those sins. But I do want you to ever and always preserve the sense that those sins you committed were the cause of Jesus' death. Jesus died to atone for your sins. "Jesus came into the world to save sinners." And because you know your own heart, you ought to consider yourself, the foremost of those sinners. The chief. Thus sing with thankful praise, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

Then, in that context, when others sin against you, forgive

him, and not just seven times, but seventy-sevens. Even 490 times. And, I might add, the 491st time. After all,

C. Forgiveness is built on mercy.

Not merit!

Let me read verse 35 in a positive context. That is, not in the context merely of the warning of God's judgment, but also of the call to forgive "from your heart," with compassion.

v.33-35

So, beloved, have mercy upon one another! From your heart. Have mercy upon those who sin against you when they come to you with the godly sorrow of repentance. Have mercy upon other, for God himself has had mercy upon your soul to forgive you your sins.

Seven times? Yes, of course. Seventy times seven as well.