

RESTORE
FORGIVENESS COUNTS

Monday, June 1

Reading: Matthew 18:15-35

Matthew 18:21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" **22** Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Joe was dying, and he wanted to make everything right. He was at odds with Bill, who had been one of his best friends. They hadn't spoken to each other in years. Wanting to resolve the problem, he asked Bill to visit him. When Bill arrived, Joe told him that he was afraid to go into eternity with bad feelings between them, and he wanted to make things right. Then he reached out for Bill's hand and said, "I forgive you. Will you forgive me?" Bill said he would, but just as he was leaving, Joe shouted, "But remember, if I get better, this doesn't count!"¹

We may laugh at this little story, but sadly it is the real experience for many Christians. They claim to forgive but in the corner of their mind they will always hold that failure against the other person. In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus gives us clear instructions about forgiveness. He tells us that we need to take the initiative in mending our broken relationships whether we are at fault or not. The whole process of church discipline described in Matthew is to bring reconciliation. A bitter, unforgiving spirit will drag a church down with it! The only reason a person should be barred from fellowship in the church is because they refuse to repent and forgive. This is also the topic of Peter's follow-up question. Peter thought he was going 'above and beyond' by forgiving seven times. Jesus told him to stop keeping count. Forgiveness keeps no record of wrongs.

Jesus drives His point home with a parable (18:21-35). He tells of a man who owed the king the equivalent of millions of dollars. He begged for patience and the king showed him mercy and forgave the debt. This man then turns around and abuses a fellow servant who only owed him 3 months' pay. The servant in debt begged for patience using the same words the man had said to the king. But instead of showing the mercy he had received, the man threw his fellow servant in prison until he could pay off the debt. The king became angry and rebuked the unforgiving man. He had him thrown into prison and tortured until he could pay back all that he owed.

This parable is talking to believers! How terrible it is for a Christian, who has been forgiven their lifetime of sin, yet refuses to forgive others. Jesus' warning is that an unforgiving spirit will bring misery and consequences in this life and loss of rewards in the next.

So how do we forgive? First, stop keeping score (18:21-22). When we keep track of wrongs and hold grudges, we are only hurting ourselves. Second, get a good mirror. When we see how much God has forgiven us, it will help us forgive others. Third, leave the matter in God's hands.

Romans 12:19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

Forgiveness cannot be a superficial attitude that "doesn't count" if things change. It must come "from your heart" (18:35).²

¹ Richard DeHann. Our Daily Bread, "Forgive - and Forget" January 28, 2002

² For a great discussion on the myths and meaning of forgiveness see Larry Osborne's book 10 Dumb Things Smart Christians Believe, published by Multnomah Press