

Forgiveness has no limit.

Text: Matthew 18:21-35 for 10/01/2017 by Pastor Bolwerk

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. 23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. 26 "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. 28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' 30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. 32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Imagine that someone owes you \$7000, and they have not done anything to try and pay the money back. Do you think you would be upset with them? This was the situation that the unmerciful servant in Jesus parable was faced with. Jesus said that a fellow servant owed this man one hundred denarii. While that may not sound like very much, in today's U.S. currency one hundred denarii would be worth just over \$7000. I don't know about you, but for me that would be a large sum of money. Perhaps, we can understand why this man was so upset; why he was unwilling to forgive that debt.

Yet, in his parable Jesus said that the king had forgiven this servant a debt of 10,000 talents. So how much is 10,000 talents worth in today's currency? It would be worth over \$14 billion. Could you pay back \$14 billion? Well, Jesus parable is not about paying back money. It is about forgiveness. So, as Jesus speaks this parable to Peter and the other disciples his words are teaching us something very important. Jesus is teaching us that ...

Theme: Forgiveness has no limit.

I. So forgive from your heart

II. Then do it again

To understand what led Jesus to tell this parable we have to look back at what comes before this text. Just before this parable Jesus had been talking about forgiveness. He was describing the steps that should be taken when one Christian sins against another. Jesus spoke of how to address a person's sin so that the person could be led to repentance and receive forgiveness.

That discussion prompts Peter to ask Jesus, "How many times should I forgive someone who sinned against me? Seven times?" Peter is wondering what the limit is. In response Jesus answers, "**I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times**" (v.22). Jesus words "seventy-seven times" can also be translated as "seventy times seven times", which when multiplied equals 490. Yet whether it's 77 times or 490 times, either way it is a number far greater than what Peter was expecting. What Jesus is really telling Peter is that forgiveness has no limit. By wanting to keep count Peter is really asking at what point he can he stop forgiving. Jesus uses this "teaching moment" to show Peter that by keeping count Peter is trying to limit forgiveness in a way God never intended.

Jesus uses a parable to teach this lesson about forgiveness. Remember, a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly, or spiritual, meaning. A king forgives a person's tremendous debt; an amount

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they could never repay. God has forgiven our tremendous debt of sin. The servant who was shown mercy is unmerciful to his fellow servant. This makes the king angry because he freely forgave the servant's debt and expected him to show his thankfulness by doing the same. The king's mercy clearly had no effect on the unmerciful servant's heart. So, the king treated that unmerciful servant the same way that servant treated others – without mercy. God has shown us mercy, and he expects us to show that same mercy to our Christian brothers and sisters. When we refuse to forgive those who are repentant we bring God's wrath upon ourselves.

All of this is clear enough from the parable, and Jesus could have left it at that. But Jesus does not want Peter, or us, to miss the point, so he concludes by saying, **“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart”** (v.35). Jesus' words should stop us dead in our tracks. They should cause us to squirm with discomfort. First, because we know we have not always forgiven from our hearts. We know the anger we have allowed to linger in our minds. We know the grudges we have held even though a person said they were sorry. And second, these words make us squirm because we know that we can never forgive as perfectly as God demands. Our sinful nature is always going to be trying to mess us up, getting us to think, “Why should I forgive them after what they have done to me?” And if that is not bad enough Satan is constantly hounding us, whispering in our ears, “They don't deserve your forgiveness. You have a right to be angry after what they did!”

We know this happens more often than we care to admit, that we do not forgive someone from our heart. Those time when in anger we forget about God's mercy to us, and we refuse to show mercy to another. That's when we hear the voice of the King speaking to us from Jesus' parable: **“Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you”** (v.33)? We know he's right. All we can do is fall on our knees and hang our heads before God's righteous anger. We know we will deserve the punishment we get.

And that is where Jesus steps in. He gently lifts your chin, looks you straight in the eye and says: “I am your Lord and Master. I am your King. I am the one who has had pity on you. There is no limit to my forgiveness because I am the one who has canceled that tremendous debt of your sin by washing it away with my blood. Trust me, you will not face the torture of hell, because I have faced it for you.” And then Jesus says to you, “Your sins are forgiven; go in peace.”

Amazing, isn't it? For all our fumbling and stumbling, Jesus still forgives us. Whether we unintentionally trip and fall into sin, or blatantly break his commandments, when we ask for forgiveness he forgives. And then he forgives again, and again. Jesus is our perfect example of how to forgive. In Christ we see that forgiveness has no limit. Seeing that forgiveness we are moved to forgive from our hearts. And when we have forgiven, we do it again.

That is what Jesus is telling Peter when he says that Peter should forgive not seven times, but seventy-seven times. He's telling Peter to keep on forgiving. But why would Jesus emphasize repeatedly forgiving? Because the hardest part about forgiveness is not the forgiving, it is the forgetting. This is why Jesus reminds us that forgiveness has no limit, because our sinful nature wants us to keep holding onto people past sins.

We know how often God has forgiven us, yet God does not keep counting our past sins against us. In fact, one of the psalm writers points out that if God did keep a record of our sins we would all be lost, for he writes: **If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand** (Psalm 130:3)? The answer: no one. But God does not keep a record of sins. He does just the opposite. King David tells us: **As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us** (Psalm 103:12). God purposely puts our sins out of his sight so that he will not remember them. God wants us to forgive other as he forgives us; to forgive and forget.

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So, what does that look like? Just think back to our Old Testament lesson this morning from Genesis 50. Joseph and his brothers were all living in Egypt when their father Jacob finally dies. **When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him"** (Genesis 50:15)? Even though Joseph had forgiven them they are still asking a legitimate question. Think of how you would feel if you had gone through what Joseph had: Being thrown into a dried up well and left for dead, then dragged out of the well only to be sold as a slave. Then while you're serving as a slave you are wrongly accused of a crime and thrown into prison for years for something you didn't do. Don't you think that you might be just a little bitter toward your brothers for what they did? That is what Joseph's brothers are worried about. So they say to Joseph, **"Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father"** (Genesis 50:17). Did Joseph say, "I forgave you once, but not this time?" Did he make his brothers suffer for a while like he had to suffer? No, Joseph said to them, **"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God"** (Genesis 50:19)? Even though Joseph was second in command over all of Egypt, he did not use his position of power to try to take God's place. Instead, we are told that Joseph **"reassured [his brothers] and spoke kindly to them"** (Genesis 50:21).

God wants you and me to do the same thing. He wants us to forgive, and then reassure those we forgive. God wants us to be kind, and to forget their sin. Now we may wonder: What if person tries to take advantage of our kindness, like the unmerciful servant in the parable? If a person says they are sorry so they can take advantage of our forgiveness, then that person is sinning. *If* that happens then we need to go back to what Jesus was talking about before this parable. We follow what Jesus said in Matthew 18:15-17 so that we can address that person's sin. We point out their sin and work to lead that person to repentance.

In the end we don't know how a person will react to our forgiveness, so the "what ifs" cannot be a part of our forgiveness. Now, Jesus, he actually knows what is in our hearts, yet he still forgives us. We don't know what is in another person's heart. We can only judge a person by their words and actions, so if their words and actions speak repentance, we simply forgive.

But we do not just forgive, we forgive from the heart. We reassure that person that our relationship has been restored. We are kind to that person, showing them that there are no hard feelings toward them. Then we forget. We forget the person's past sins; we leave them behind and start with a clean slate.

None of this is easy. Which is why this kind of forgiveness, forgiving from the heart, is only possible if Jesus is living and ruling in our hearts. The only way Jesus can rule our hearts is if our hearts are connected to Jesus by faith. Faith only comes to us through God's Word. When we hear and read the words of Scripture, the Holy Spirit connects our hearts to Christ. With Christ as the King of our hearts, his love motivates us to forgive from the heart. Jesus' love moves us to forgive over and over and over again. His love moves us to forgive and forget, just as Jesus himself forgives us and then forgets.

If you thought that the unmerciful servant in the parable had a huge debt to repay then just remember: God has forgiven us a debt that we could never repay to him. Now, God wants us to forgive others just as he has forgiven us, fully and freely. God doesn't keep track of each time he forgives us. He does not keep a record of all our past sins. He simply forgives and forgets. As far as God is concerned those sins were paid for on the cross and buried with Jesus in his tomb. So, let us show mercy to others as we have been shown mercy by our loving and living God and King, Jesus Christ. Amen.