

The Math of Forgiveness

September 17, 2017

Matthew 18: 21-35

²¹ Peter came up to the Lord and asked, "How many times should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me? Is seven times enough?"

²² Jesus answered: Not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!

²³ This story will show you what the kingdom of heaven is like: One day a king decided to call in his officials and ask them to give an account of what they owed him. ²⁴ As he was doing this, one official was brought in who owed him fifty million silver coins. ²⁵ But he didn't have any money to pay what he owed. The king ordered him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all he owned, in order to pay the debt. ²⁶ The official got down on his knees and began begging, "Have pity on me, and I will pay you every cent I owe!" ²⁷ The king felt sorry for him and let him go free. He even told the official that he did not have to pay back the money.

²⁸ As the official was leaving, he happened to meet another official, who owed him a hundred silver coins. So he grabbed the man by the throat. He started choking him and said, "Pay me what you owe!" ²⁹ The man got down on his knees and began begging, "Have pity on me, and I will pay you back." ³⁰ But the first official refused to have pity. Instead, he went and had the other official put in jail until he could pay what he owed.

³¹ When some other officials found out what had happened, they felt sorry for the man who had been put in jail. Then they told the king what had happened. ³² The

king called the first official back in and said, "You're an evil man! When you begged for mercy, I said you did not have to pay back a cent. ³³ Don't you think you should show pity to someone else, as I did to you?" ³⁴ The king was so angry that he ordered the official to be tortured until he could pay back everything he owed. ³⁵ That is how my Father in heaven will treat you, if you don't forgive each of my followers with all your heart.



Last week we began our "No Fair" series by looking at Jesus' instructions on how to fight like a Christian. Jesus offered some practical steps for when a Christian brother or sister has sinned against us. We are to go to them in private and then, if that fails, to bring along another Christian to act as a mediator. Then Jesus said if these first two steps cannot resolve the sin and bring forgiveness and reconciliation, then we should bring the matter before the whole church. Today we continue the conversation with "The Math of Forgiveness". Peter extends the conversation by asking how many times he should forgive someone who wrongs him? How many times should we go to a brother or sister in Christ to address their sinning against us? Should we have to do it more than once? Maybe twice? This is the crux of what we will look at today. It is what Peter wants defined. Let us pray.

Peter has just heard these instructions on how to forgive a Christian brother or sister when they have sinned against you and he asks if forgiving them seven times is enough. Almost everyone can offer forgiveness at least once, even to someone we really do not like much. And almost everyone may even forgive

someone else a second time as well. Most of us would forgive a good friend maybe three times. And I think most of us would forgive our children or spouses four times, maybe five if we are feeling really loving. But we struggle when someone does the same thing over and over again. If someone lies to us once we can forgive. If they lie to us again, it's a bit harder to forgive. When it happens a third time... Pretty soon we say "Enough already!"



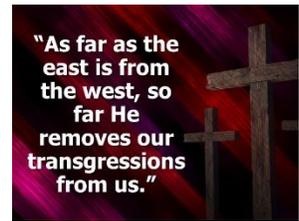
Peter has been around Jesus for a while. He knows that Jesus sets the bar pretty high. He asks, "*Is seven times enough*"? Imagine someone lying to you seven times. Imagine someone stealing from you seven times. Imagine someone gossiping about you seven times. Would you easily be able to forgive them on that seventh time? So what Peter is suggesting is pretty radical. But Jesus says that even seven is not enough. Jesus responds to Peter: "*Not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!*" And you thought seven was radical.



In the Psalms, David writes of God's forgiveness. He was a man who knew about forgiveness. In Psalm 103, verses eight through twelve, hear how God looks at sin and forgiveness:

⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹ He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as the heavens are high above the

earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.



These verses speak of the depth of God's love for us. Because of that love, God will not hold onto His anger against us. Because of that love, God will not repay us according to our sins. Because of that love, God removes our sin from us "as far as the east is from the west". That is a long way away. Forever.



When we look at this passage from the Psalms or when we look at anywhere else in the Bible where it talks about forgiveness, there is never a number attached to the limits of God's forgiveness. But Peter, being human, wants a number. I believe you and I would like a number too. A part of me certainly would like a number. Seven seems kind of high, but I think I could get there most of the time. If you had to, could you live with seven as the number of times you had to forgive someone?

But here is the problem with setting a number. Whether it is two or seven or even seventy-seven, when we count we are only practicing patience. When we count how many times we have forgiven someone, we are not really forgiving them. We are just extending our patience.

When we remember the hurts or the sins or when we count up the wrongs, we are really practicing UN-forgiveness. We are storing that hurt away to bring it up later, to reopen the wound when it best



suits our needs. I hate to admit this, but I have been guilty of this. There have been times when it has been really hard to forgive and when I have kept that hurt close to my heart until I can use it to even the score or to “win” some argument. Does this sound familiar? Have you ever done this?



When we are able to offer forgiveness, we have come to the point of being willing to let go of the hurt and to stop reliving the moment of pain. When we are able to offer forgiveness, we are restoring the relationship back to the point where it was before we were hurt. And when we are able to offer true forgiveness, we are saying that we are willing to take the risk of being hurt all over again.

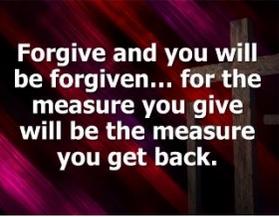
In the Psalm, we have an accounting of what this looks like with God and our sin. God takes our sin and places it forever away – “*as far as the east is from the west*”. With God, once we repent we find grace and forgiveness and our sin is no more. This is what we see on the cross as well, where Jesus takes our sins and washes them away with His blood, making us clean as snow, holy and pure in His sight. This too is not once or twice or even seventy-seven times. It is a mercy and grace and forgiveness that never ends, a forgiveness that always makes us new again. This is the math of God’s forgiveness. This is the math we are called to practice as well. Are you good at math?

In our passage today, we have another example of what forgiveness should look like. An official owes the king a lot of money. In Matthew, we read that the official owed the king "fifty million silver coins". That is a LOT of coin. It has apparently been a while – the time to collect the debts has come. The man cannot repay the king and the king is ready to sell the man and his family into slavery to repay the debt. But the man begs the king, saying, "*Have pity on me, and I will pay you every cent I owe!*" The king is overcome with mercy and he even cancels the debt. This is the model set by God and then by Jesus. This is the model of forgiveness we are called to follow. We are to offer forgiveness and to forget the sin – to put it "*as far as the east is from the west*".

As our passage continues, the man who received mercy and forgiveness goes out and runs into a fellow official. Turns out this other official owes him about one hundred silver coins. The payment is harshly demanded and he too falls to his knees and begs for pity. But the first official refuses to have pity. Instead, he has the man thrown into debtor's prison to work off the debt. The second official had to go to prison to earn his way out of debt.

Thankfully the story does not end here. Other officials know what happened and they go to the king with the story. The king is of course irate. He calls the first official back in, tells him he is an 'evil man', and has him tortured and thrown into debtor's prison as well. So why did the king take back his forgiveness? The man was not able to extend the same forgiveness that he had received.

In the prayer we pray every Sunday, we pray these words: *"and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"*. In Luke 11, Jesus also speaks of our need to forgive if we expect to be forgiven. In verses 37 and 38 Jesus says, *"Forgive, and you will be forgiven... for the measure you give will be the measure you get back"*. We are called to be like the king in the passage today – to have mercy and to cancel the debt. This too is the math of forgiveness that Jesus models and that God expects.



Forgive and you will be forgiven... for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

In God's economy, forgiveness is free. There is nothing we have to do or even that we can do to earn God's mercy and grace and forgiveness. This math does not add up easily for us. But if we are going to be people of forgiveness, then we must offer forgiveness to others just as God offers forgiveness to us. Nor can we wait until someone earns our forgiveness. It must be freely given.

To receive God's forgiveness, all we need to do is repent of our sins and ask for forgiveness. In the same manner, when others seek our forgiveness there must be repentance as well. The same is true for us. There must be a commitment to change our behavior if we expect to receive forgiveness from God or from a person in our lives. If we return to the same sin over and over, then we are not really repenting and seeking to grow in our relationship with God or with that person. If we continue to practice the sinful behavior, then we are offering hollow or cheap repentance. True repentance leads to new behavior. Our

response to a forgiveness that never ends is to live out that unfair grace that is shown to us by our Redeemer as we seek to be His light and love in our world.

We need forgiveness as much as we need to offer forgiveness. This is true in our relationship with God and with others. Forgiveness restores and returns our relationships to whole and new again. To illustrate this, we close with a video. Please turn your attentions to the screens.



We need it. We need to give it. Forgiveness. Let us pray.

GPS – Grow, Pray Serve

- 1) What is the hardest thing about repeatedly offering forgiveness to someone else? What helps you to offer forgiveness over and over?
- 2) The forgiveness of our sins is undeserved and it comes without a cost. How do we model this forgiveness in our lives?
- 3) What does it mean to you that Jesus forgives our sins when we repent no matter the sin? How does this affect how you forgive others?