

September 13, 2020 Sermon  
Matthew 18:21-35

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church<sup>[a]</sup> sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven<sup>[b]</sup> times.

<sup>23</sup> “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents<sup>[c]</sup> was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii;<sup>[d]</sup> and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister<sup>[e]</sup> from your heart.” Word of God. Word of life. Thanks be to God!

Peter: Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?

Jesus: Not *just seven* times, but *seventy-seven* times. (I read this to mean, *whatever it takes* to forgive.)

What a time for this particular piece of scripture to appear before us! I have *never*, in my lifetime, seen a time when feelings were as *fragile* as they are right now. Nor have I seen a time when there has been so much *division* among people...those who are *sure* they're right...those who *want* to be right, and are easily swayed...those who walk around with looks of *bewilderment* on their face (that would be me)...and I could probably come up with a bunch of *other* categories, but the *truth* of it is, we are *all* doing a lot of harm to one another and for the sake of our sanity, it *needs* to *stop*.

We will *not* have peace and understanding in this world until the finger-pointing stops and the *forgiveness*, as well as *asking* for forgiveness, starts to kick in. We have *all* had a time in our lives when we needed to forgive others as well as *accept* the forgiveness of others. And we really can't *call* ourselves *Christians* without being able to *forgive* one another, because *forgiveness* is one of the *qualities* of being a *Christian*. We forgive, because *God* forgives *us*.

Sometimes we make mistakes simply because we're human. Please indulge me as I share a couple instances where my acceptance of an apology was needed. One day this summer, I went to my annual, routine eye exam. Without going into detail, I will tell you that I came out with a corneal abrasion.

Yes, I was angry. First of all, I was angry because the eyesight in my right eye had been damaged (and it's probably going to be fine, but this is one of those "healing in God's time" kind of things, so it's taking forever), and secondly I was angry because the optician who was responsible apologized to the *doctor* rather than apologizing to *me*.

The apology from the optician happened a couple weeks later on the *phone* when I was called to come back in to see what kind of progress was being made with my eyesight. It took me a while, but I truly *have* forgiven her. I have *tried* to put myself in her shoes, and I know if I had her job and made the mistake she had made, I would be *terribly* upset with myself, and probably unable to forgive MYSELF for a very long time. Also, because we're all human, we will not do everything in life perfectly. We ALL make mistakes, so I am working through this.

The next incident occurred when I went to a shop for a simple pedicure. (This one is probably punishment for vanity) I had never gone into this shop before, so I wasn't sure what to expect, but the technician was very nice, and very good at what he was doing. I always feel a little odd about getting a pedicure because all I can think about is how terrible it is for ME to expect someone else to work on my nasty feet. I go barefoot...a LOT...and that does horrible things to one's feet, especially mine.

As the technician was working on my toes, he happened to grab a little skin that, on the surface, seemed harmless, but once he pulled on it, my toe began to bleed profusely. It seemed that no matter *what* he did, the bleeding would *not* stop. I was embarrassed, as he kept apologizing and I told him that it was just something that happened and all would be well.

The appointment ended with him *pleading* with me, (I am *not* exaggerating, here) saying, "Please forgive me!" He held out his arms, I forgave him and gave him a huge hug (hoping the Covid police were not watching) and told him I would be back. I've *never* seen such a look of relief on someone's face before. It felt REALLY GOOD to forgive him!

We need to live out forgiveness if we are to call ourselves Christians. Forgiveness means moving away from score-keeping. We should forgive others for what we see as wrong-doing to us, no matter *how* many times we feel we have been wronged, hence, the seventy-seven times that Jesus conveys to Peter.

Living out our forgiveness can also be letting go when someone has sinned against us, as in times of troubled relationships. Relationships between two people will not *always* be a bed of roses, so when one forgives and forgiveness is accepted, then thoughts of retribution should take a back seat.

Work with one another through the troubling times and come to an agreement, and then let go of the fault.

We, in our humanness, are prone to keeping tabs on how people have *harmed* us. Hanging on to anger makes us feel like we have some kind of power over the person who wronged us. But there are times, I'm sure, when we feel we have been wronged and deserve an apology when the other party didn't realize they were being hurtful, so we might need to forgive that person in our minds and move on, because being unforgiving can cause *us* physical *and* spiritual harm.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a woman in his congregation; a single, divorced, working mother of three young children came to speak to him. She said, "Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay the bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he's living it up in another state. How can I and why should I forgive him?" Rabbi Kushner said, "I'm not asking you to forgive 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. You're not hurting *him* by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting *yourself*."

Holding on to anger and not forgiving another is not good for our own well-being. We ask, in the Lord's prayer for forgiveness of our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. God's mercy and grace know no bounds. We are to *forgive* because *we* are *forgiven*! If we truly understand how big and how wide God's love and mercy can be, then we, *too*, must be forgiving of others! Luther said, "Faith in God naturally brings forth acts of love toward the neighbor."

The servant, in today's lesson, shows an unwillingness to forgive the way he has been forgiven, and ultimately ends up with bigger problems than when he started out. His debt had been forgiven, and because of that, he should have paid it forward and forgiven the debts of others. Forgiveness should be part of our daily life.

Forgiving others is making a *conscious* choice to let the other person know we will *not* be judging them. It tells them we are letting go of resentment and a need for retribution, and although I can't imagine being able to *sincerely* forgive someone for murder, or forgiving another in an *abusive* relationship, it *does* happen.

Last week Jesus taught about going to another person in private and speaking to them about being wronged, and then going up the chain, bringing two or more for another conversation, and then bringing it before the entire congregation if the conversation comes to a stalemate. Today's lesson is a continuation in dealing with the transgressions of those in the church/community.

Seven is a holy number, so having Jesus say to Peter that forgiveness is something that should happen seventy-seven times, conveys that forgiveness is something one should be doing over and over again...yes, even for the same person.

God forgives us, and because of this, we are *called*, as Christians, to forgive others. Each Sunday, during worship, we say the Lord's prayer together. Let us *never* forget the words that call us to forgive. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against *us*." As you go through your week, think about those who have asked for your forgiveness for some particular reason. If you have forgiven them, then good for you! If not, then write the many ways you have been wronged and pray to let go of them, then tear up the list and throw it away. God's mercy and grace are for all. Let's pay it forward as we may. Amen.