

## Seventy Times Seven

A few years ago, “the Templeton Foundation funded a major nationwide study on people’s attitudes toward forgiveness. The study found that seventy-five percent of Americans are ‘very confident’ that they have been forgiven by God for their past offenses. The lead researcher expressed great surprise at such high confidence, especially since many of these same people are not regular church attenders.” But, interestingly enough, “Only about half of the people surveyed claimed that they were certain that *they* had forgiven others.”

According to this study, lots of folks feel sure of God’s forgiveness. But when it comes to forgiving others, we really struggle.

Maybe that struggle is going on inside Peter when he asks Jesus a question in today’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel. *Lord, how many times do I have to forgive another church member who hurts me? Seven times?*

Now, Peter is a Jew. And the law of Moses compels Jews to forgive three times—but not four. So Peter has the assurance that

he's exceeding the law's requirement when he suggests forgiving *seven* times. In Peter's day, the number seven symbolizes fullness and completion. So in his mind—and maybe in our own minds, too—forgiving someone seven times would be going above and beyond the call of duty. If we forgave someone seven times, we'd be feeling pretty doggone good about ourselves, wouldn't we? So—with Peter—we're taken aback when Jesus says *No. Not seven times. Seventy times seven.*

*Do what?* we imagine Peter responding. It might be our response, too. *Jesus, we must not have heard you right. It sounded like you said seventy times seven.*

Okay. Let's do the math. In elementary school, we learned our multiplication tables. Seven times seven is forty-nine, and then you have to put a zero on the end of that. *Jesus, that can't be right. Can it? You're telling us that we have to forgive four hundred and ninety times? That's more times than we can wrap our minds around.*

Now Jesus wants to help Peter—and help *all* his followers, including us—understand what he means. So he illustrates his point with a story. A parable about a Gentile king or master and

his Gentile servants. If they were Jews, the master would not have the option of selling a debtor's family members to pay off the debt. So we know that they're Gentiles. And Jesus doesn't state or even suggest that this king represents God, so we need to not make that assumption. This parable is actually about servants. About you and me.

In this parable of Jesus, a king wants to square accounts with his servants. He starts at the top of the ledger, with the servant who owes him the most—probably through mismanagement of the king's resources and tax revenues payable to the king. The amount owed is ten thousand talents. Now a talent is the largest monetary unit. One talent is worth about fifteen years' wages.

So let's see. (We're doing a lot of math today. My teacher *told* me that arithmetic would come in handy someday!) It would take about three thousand *lifetimes* to earn ten thousand talents. It might as well be a trillion dollars. An astronomical sum. An amount beyond all comprehension.

But this first servant—the one who owed the king all that money—has a debtor of his own, a second servant. Who owes him a much smaller sum. One hundred denarii. A denarius is a

laborer's daily wage. So the hundred denarii owned to the first servant is a miniscule amount compared to the ten thousand talents that he himself had owed his master.

The great contrast between these two quantities reveals how much this first servant has been forgiven, compared with what he was asked to forgive.

So we expect that the servant who's been forgiven so much will also be forgiving. Right?

Wrong! As is so often the case in Jesus' stories, the unexpected happens. Servant number one was forgiven a debt far too great to ever be repaid. Yet he shows no mercy to servant number two.

Jesus asks you and me, who have been forgiven so much, to forgive far less. Some hurts are small. Some hurts are not hard to forgive. Some are not even one hundred denarii offenses. But some offenses are more significant.

Sixteen years ago last Monday, we watched in disbelief as surreal images appeared on our TV screens. Images of New York towers. Of an iconic building on the Potomac. Of a Pennsylvania field. Painful images that haunt the pathways of memory.

Images from a horrific day on which thousands lost their lives. We continue to hold their families close in prayer.

And violence continues in our world, throughout the time that has passed since that tragic September morning. Lives continue to be lost.

Even as we recall the words of a committed pastor who died a violent death, yet is remembered for following One who walked in the way of non-violence. That pastor wrote: *The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy...Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.*

Sometimes it seems as though human creatures are caught in a web of retaliation. When the apostle Paul writes to believers in Rome, he writes with the awareness that the world repays evil with evil. And he urges Christians of all times and places to refrain from doing as the world does.

But does the desire for vengeance still bind us? If so, can we be released from bondage by the words of Paul, by these words of sacred Scripture? *Beloved, never avenge yourselves.* For vengeance is not yours but God's. Can we be released from

bondage by the words of Jesus that echo in our ears today? The words that call us to forgive not seven times but seventy *times* seven? The words that call us to forgive from our hearts?

My sisters and brothers, the One who searches you and knows your heart also knows that hostility and anger originate in the heart. So, too, from the heart flows forgiveness. Forgiveness is a gift that blesses the forgiven one even as it unbinds and delivers the forgiver. It's been said that "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you." Forgiveness is choosing to be liberated from evil. Forgiveness means letting go, letting go of bitterness that poisons. Forgiveness is actually good for your emotional and physical health. Research shows that "The more a prone a person is to grant forgiveness, the less likely he or she will suffer from any stress-related illnesses."

The One whose desire is for you and me to be whole is the very One who speaks to us today in Matthew's Gospel. The teaching of Jesus shapes our thoughts and our perspective. His good intention for us is to understand something about the nature of forgiveness. To understand what forgiveness is *not*. Forgiveness is not condoning wrong or pain. Forgiveness is not

justifying injustice or cruelty. Forgiveness most assuredly is not submitting to continuing abuse.

And authentic forgiveness doesn't come with contingencies. Forgiveness is not contingent on the repentance of the offender. Some think that Christians are obliged to forgive only if there is repentance. But notice that when Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who has hurt him, neither he nor Jesus mentions repentance as a requirement. I need to remember that through prevenient grace, God forgave me *before* I turned to God. Before I repented, I was the undeserving recipient of forgiving grace.

The grace of God comes first. The gracious initiative always belongs to God. Whose forgiveness does not hinge on our first forgiving others. We don't worship and serve a vindictive God who—like the king in Jesus' parable—takes back his forgiveness when the servant falls short. What a lot of trouble we would be in if that were the case! Instead, God, who first loved us and whose forgiveness is unconditional, pours out grace and invites you and me to respond by offering grace and forgiveness to others.

As Joanna Adams puts it, “you can make the intellectual connection between your own dependence on God’s acceptance of you and all your brokenness and inadequacies, and your reaction to those who have injured you.”

For God forgives without measure. And Jesus asks you and me to pattern our forgiveness of others after this measureless forgiveness we have received. Forgiveness does not keep score or count wrongs. If I’m counting, I haven’t truly forgiven. If I’m counting, I’m just biding my time, waiting till I can finally write that person off. If I’m counting, I’m making it be all about the math.

And whether your version of the Bible translates the Gospel Greek as forgiving seven-seven times or seventy *times* seven times, Jesus’ point is that it’s *not* all about the math. Jesus’ point is that forgiveness is something with which you and I are never finished. Jesus’ point is that genuine forgiveness has no limits. Seventy times seven forgiveness has no limits.

Beloved, we know that this kind of forgiveness isn’t easy. It’s exceedingly difficult, particularly when the hurt has cut deep and the pain has been profound. More often than not, forgiveness isn’t something we’re able to accomplish alone. In



order to forgive, we need the grace of the One we pray to. The One we ask to bring us to a place where we can forgive those who have wronged us, those who have hurt us. We ask in the sure and certain hope of being given the grace to forgive. Because forgiveness defines us as followers of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness is at the very center of our lives as followers of Jesus Christ.

Who at Golgotha erased our debt. A debt beyond all calculation. A debt we could never, ever, in three thousand lifetimes, repay. The debt of you and me and every servant who stands in desperate need of forgiveness by the One who charges us with forgiving one another. Not seven times, but seventy times seven.

Will you pray with me?

Lord, in blazing light your cross reveals the truth we dimly knew: what trivial debts are owed to us, how great our debt to you!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.