

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 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.

So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 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.

Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

How Often is Enough? - September 13, 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

This is one of the most significant questions we can ask ourselves — not just once, but many times throughout our lives: how often shall I forgive my neighbor?

It's an important question because there is not one of us who cannot vividly recall at least one time in our lives when we have been badly hurt by someone. When I say, "hurt," I mean every way we can be hurt: physically, verbally, mentally, even spiritually. Hurt can take the form of being lied to by people you trust. Hurt can take the form of being cheated out of money or possessions. Hurt can take the form of being betrayed by someone you loved and thought loved you. I don't need to go on. I expect just raising the subject of being hurt has caused you to recall some painful memories, memories you wish would go away, but refuse to go away.

It is certainly not my intention to cause you pain this day. Yet the pain is real and can return at any moment at the least expected times. I'm very sorry for whatever way you've been hurt in your life or may be getting hurt right now. The pain is there and it takes a long time to go away — if ever.

Now I expect many of you who are in pain have thought and prayed and longed for the pain to go away. It is quite hard to forget how we have been hurt in life and I doubt any of us can forget our hurts completely. Just as our bodies carry scars, large and small, from the various injuries, cuts, and illnesses we have suffered — scars which we might be able to cover with cosmetics, but return as soon as we wash ourselves — our minds and our spirits have their own scars which we can deny having to ourselves or others but are still very much there.

Physical scars never completely leave our bodies. Mental and spiritual scars never completely leave our souls. Scars of all kinds accompany us every day throughout our journey of life. We can't look at our bodies without seeing the scars. We can't look inside ourselves without remembering the scars. They are always with us.

Now the Christian solution to dealing with the scars of all kinds is called forgiveness. But forgiveness is a very misunderstood thing. When we hear the word "forgiveness" we often associate it with the word, "excusing." In other words, we equate forgiveness with saying that our hurts are OK. However we have been injured by others in our lives, it just doesn't matter. Forget it. Pretend it didn't happen.

Needless to say, the idea of pretending our hurts didn't happen makes us uncomfortable. If forgiveness is essentially an exercise in pretending, then frankly you would be very justified in never

wanting to forgive. We should never lie to anyone — especially to ourselves. No, it's never helpful to simply pretend and ignore the many ways and times we have been hurt throughout our lives.

Helping people deal with their past denial and pretending are at the heart of what pastors, psychologists, and therapists do. Whenever I deal with people who are suffering some form of mental or spiritual pain, I spend a great deal of time at the beginning just helping them “dig up” the past. So many people have been damaged by strange religion, bad spirituality, and weird notions about God, that I need to unpack their ideas then de-program them. But deprogramming means asking people to recall painful memories about how, when, and why they were hurt and that, frankly, is not a place many like to go. Many people, once they realize that they can't be helped without having to relive the past, simply quit therapy because recalling the pain is just too unbearable.

At the same time, there are those who are so enmeshed in the hurts and pains of the past that they use them to justify why their lives aren't what they could or should be. Many situations are very understandable. Victims of sexual abuse, children who were beaten by their caregivers, persons betrayed by their spouses. Others who were fired because someone lied about them. I think we all know people, maybe even ourselves, who have been hurt so badly that they never fully recover.

Is it any wonder that Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive? Human beings have been hurting each other in all kinds of ways for thousands of years. The feelings we experience in our time would be very familiar to our ancestors, no matter how far back you would like to go.

According to Jewish law, the recommended number of times a person should forgive another is three. Peter thought he was being generous by upping the number to seven. After all, seven is twice three plus one.

But Jesus tells Peter that seven is not nearly enough. Seventy-seven or even seven hundred plus times is not enough for Jesus. As far as Jesus is concerned, forgiveness has no limits.

Friends, if we live our lives keeping track of all the times and all the ways we have been wronged, we will quickly lose count. From the time we were born, we can easily compile a list of all the ways people and life have failed us, have wronged us. No doubt that list would stretch into the thousands, if not tens of thousands. How can we possibly forgive all the ways we have been injured in the past? In this very stressful year of 2020, so many things have gone wrong. Abuse rates are up, divorce rates are up, job losses are up, drug and alcohol use is up, murder rates are up, hate crimes are up. So much is going wrong in the world and we often feel powerless to stop it.

Yet there is Jesus, telling us to forgive, forgive, forgive.

So what is this forgiveness that Jesus keeps recommending to us? For many, forgiveness is quite impossible. It's like the Bobby McFerrin song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy!" In other words, no matter how badly the world has treated you, from people you know to the many you don't, just forget about it. Just let it all go. Be happy!

The question is, how can we let it all go? The hurt is real. The pain is real. The impact on our lives is real. The fact that certain individuals and other situations have deliberately changed the direction of our lives is real.

Forgiveness, in Jesus' view, is a free-will choice we all have. There is no doubt that we can choose not to forgive. Or, as Peter thought, keep track of the number of times we forgive and then stop forgiving. We can choose to allow the hurts of the past to continue floating around in our minds and souls. We can choose to dwell on what could have been. We can choose to live and re-live the broken dreams and shattered possibilities caused by the many, many ways we have been wronged.

We also know many people, who having chosen not to forgive, live their lives in endless bitterness and hatred. I ask you, if you know such people, do you like being around them? Do you like hearing their tales of woe repeated again and again and again? More importantly, do you not think to yourselves, "Yes, friend, this and this and that did go wrong for you, and that is terrible. But, what about the things in life which have gone right for you? What about the other people in your life who haven't hurt you but actually helped you? What about the life you have now instead of the one you imagined having, is this life so horrible, just because it is different?" There are many of us who listen to those living in the hurts of the past and really wonder what they are complaining about.

I ask you, in all sincerity, might you be one of those people, at least a little bit?

Friends, forgiveness is not about forgetting the actions of others toward us or how life has treated us. I'll repeat that. Forgiveness is not about forgetting the actions of others toward us or how life has treated us. The fact is that what has happened to us has indeed happened and we cannot change the past. Forgiveness is not about excusing or forgetting the past.

Rather, forgiveness is really about creating and maintaining a new attitude toward the present and especially, the future. We do ourselves a great disservice when we believe our present and our futures are cast in stone and cannot be changed. We are sadly mistaken and we end up hurting ourselves when we let our past dictate the future course of our lives because it is us, you and me, and only you and me, who have the power to reject the past and therefore summon a new future.

So, yes, one aspect of forgiveness is indeed, “Don’t worry, be happy!” — as trite as that might seem. When we choose to live without forgiveness, we essentially lock ourselves into a prison of our own making. We make the choice that our lives going forward are pre-determined by what has happened in the past and therefore cannot be changed. In other words, when we choose not to forgive, we have put blinders on ourselves and are unable to see all the other possibilities life can offer us.

Have you not heard the testimony of many, many people who will tell of the most horrible things happening to them — abuse, divorce, job loss, illness, accidents — but then say with all seriousness that what happened to them was the in truth the best thing that could have happened to them in their lives? We listen to such accounts and may well ask, “How can this be? How can such people take their hurt and pain and use it as a foundation for progress instead of an excuse for retreating?”

The point is, friends, is that every day we live on this earth really does offer us new possibilities and new choices about what we can do with this gift called life. God has handed us a key, a key called forgiveness. This key can enable us to escape our self-imposed prisons of the past and move in new directions. However, this key can also sit unused in a prison cell of our own creation while we ceaselessly bemoan our fate.

Please do not think for one moment that I am belittling the tragedies many of us have faced in life. They are real and they are painful. But Jesus himself sets the example for all of us by forgiving the very people who demanded that he be hung on a cross to die. Jesus’ forgiveness empowered him to go back to the very same people: the ones who ran away, the ones who pretended not to know him, and renew his relationship with them. Jesus forgave and because Jesus forgave, we have new life.

Do we forget that in the Lord’s Prayer we ask God every week, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors?” Some churches say, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” My question is whether we really mean it. Are we willing to forgive? Are we willing to let go? Are we willing to truly believe the promise of Jesus Christ who does forgive all those who ask not one time, not three times, not seven times, not seventy-seven times, but over and over and over again?

Hear the good news. When we can truly believe Jesus’ attitude of forgiveness, an attitude rooted in the endless and bountiful love He has for all of us, then we are free! We are free to begin life again. We are free to explore and embrace new possibilities. We are free to grow and change and reinvent ourselves into new people with God guiding us every step of the way.

How often is enough? We can never forgive enough because Jesus never, ever, stops forgiving us.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.