

"The Uniqueness of Forgiveness" **Matthew 18:21-35**

21 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?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 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. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the Lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 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.' 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 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. 32 Then his Lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his Lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Prayer for Illumination:

Let us pray,

Holy God, your Word is strong and lead our feet to your holy dwelling place, strengthen and guide us with your Word through the power of your Holy Spirit.

A young woman gets assaulted and physically abused by her uncle. You know, the uncle that everyone loves and adores. A young man is accused and convicted of a crime he never committed. Both young woman and young man shared their stories of sleepless nights, anger, fear, depression, and shame, but as the years went by, they both articulated the beauty and goodness they had found in being able to forgive. They both communicated what it meant not be defined by their past. But to be set free from a burden, they had not chosen. Moreover, how the life-giving practices of forgiveness have made a difference in their lives. Furthermore, the uniqueness and the redemptive power of forgiveness in their lives.

Today's text from Matthew moves us to consider one of the most challenging practices of Christian disciples-forgiveness.

Let us be honest with each other, forgiving someone who has hurt you in the past or continues to hurt you, a person who bears false witness against you is difficult to pardon.

In the New Testament, the words forgive means to open your hand and drop what he or she is holding; in other words, letting go or let go. Matthew, the gospel writer, reminds the early church of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness.

Matthew wants the early followers of Jesus, the "People of the Way," that revenge is no way to be a disciple of Jesus. Forgiveness is the way of Jesus. While revenge may seem much more comfortable and more desirable, it leads to personal, emotional, and spiritual bondage; it enslaves us! Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus practices and taught forgiveness; he points us to the way that leads to renewed life. At the core of discipleship is the practice of forgiveness.

In our Gospel text today, Peter quizzes Jesus on the limits of forgiveness within the community. What is required? Seven times? Peter is trying to impress Jesus.

Why, well, the rabbinical standard in the days of Jesus was three based on Amos 1-2, in the Hebrew Scriptures. The idea was that God forgives three sins and punishes the fourth.

Peter senses that Jesus wants the disciples to extend themselves even further, so he doubles the standard and then adds one for good measure, bringing him to the number seven, the number for perfection. The number seven is a holy number to the Jewish people, symbolizing" **perfection, fullness, abundance, rest and completion.**

Jesus tells Peter, "**I don't tell you until seven times, but, until seventy times seven.** Jesus' answer demolishes Peter's careful construct; 7×70 , which equal's 490.

Jesus is not inviting our good brother Peter to keep careful records but is sitting a standard that makes record keeping impractical. Jesus is teaching Peter, his disciples, and us that we ought not to keep count, keep scores, deep track. Jesus is trying to teach Peter what we call Celestial or Heavens Arithmetic. It, not mental arithmetic its arithmetic from the heart.

Jesus is not inviting Peter, nor the disciples and us to keep careful records but is setting a standard that makes record keeping impractical. He does not give us a math-lesson, but a grace-lesson on the uniqueness of forgiveness.

Jesus is altering his followers to embrace forgiveness, as God has forgiven us. We love to sing the well-known hymn "Amazing Grace," **but we do not really think** "we are wretched," and we are sure we're not nearly so bad as those others singing the same lyrics in the congregation down the street. And yet, where would we be without the grace and forgiveness of God? The forgiveness that makes us a new creation in Christ. The mercy that means we are more than our past mistakes.

With that realization, how can we not believe Jesus when he says to forgive one another, forgive those who have caused you pain, and your siblings 77 times-in other words, stop counting. Set yourself free from the past.

Let us remember the words that Jesus taught his followers and us: **Do not judge, and you will not be a judge; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.** Week after week, we pray "The Lord's Prayer" and pronounce the famous words "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Not to mention the words of Jesus, about specks in others' eyes and logs in our own.

I hope we can all say the goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives, right?

What I hear Jesus saying to us today is do not be like the servant that received mercy, grace, and forgiveness of debt he could never repay but yet he received mercy as well as forgiveness of the debt. However, in return, when a fellow servant needed his forgiveness for a debt he could repay, he did not forgive the servant. He could not internalize the principle of mercy and forgiveness. It was okay for him to receive forgiveness, but he could not dismiss a fellow worker's debt.

Sisters and brothers, if 77 feels like too big a number to reach, we could start with forgiving one person, one thing, one time, and then keep going until we get to the point that we lose count.

There is a story of a man with a large bag he carried on his back year after year; he kept filling it up with resentment, anger, hate, bitterness, and the pains of the past. He wanted to hop on the Happy Bus; as he starts climbing up the bus steps, The gentleman noticed he could not get through the bus doors. He tried and

tried. The bus operator tells him if you want to get through you and join the happy bus, you need to let go of your bag. Poor man, he could not let go of his large colossal bag. If we want to move forward in our lives, we need to embrace forgiveness; we need to let go of the past and embrace God's forgiveness for ourselves and others.

The uniqueness of forgiveness is this: when we forgive others for their hurt and harm against us, we find restoration for our spirits or the inside of us our hearts.

An excellent example of forgiveness is Joseph from the Hebrew Scriptures who forgave his brothers, who sold him into slavery. Additionally, they made up a story told their father that Joseph, their brother, was killed. As the years went by, Joseph becomes a great leader in Egypt. There is global famine, Joseph's brothers come to Egypt, and Joseph forgives them.

Sisters and brothers, I know that many have had difficult challenges in your lives. Perhaps you were mistreated by someone to whom you were close too. Maybe you have or had parents who were unable to provide the care, guidance, or love you needed; perhaps you had a friend or even a pastor or priest who disappointed you. Many have had been victims of random acts of cruelty.

Beloved in the Lord, today, the Good News of the Gospel is "our blessed Lord Jesus has forgiven us. Beloved in the Lord, we have received forgiveness by a gracious God. At times I believe that we do not forgive ourselves for past mistakes in our lives." Christ is calling us today to forgive ourselves coupled with pardoning others, regardless if they are alive or dead.

When forgiveness is not part of our daily discipleship, we carry a burden on top of our shoulders. My good friends, it time to let go of the bag; join the "Happy Bus." Today is your day of embracing new possibilities; possibilities of forgiving self and others.

I end my message with the following thoughts regarding forgiveness:

Forgiveness is for you and not the offender.

Forgiveness is taking back your power.

Forgiveness is taking responsibility for how you feel.

Forgiveness is about your healing; moreover, it is not about the individuals who have hurt you in the past.

Forgiveness is becoming a hero instead of a victim.

Forgiveness is a choice we embrace.

We can all learn to forgive.

By the way, forgiveness is not condoning unkindness.

Forgiveness is not excusing people who have abused you.

Forgiveness is not denying or minimizing your hurt; your hurt is real.

Forgiveness does not mean you give up having feelings.

Forgiveness is a process to move forward in our lives as we find restoration for our souls, s equally essential as we find restoration for our hearts.

May the forgiving Jesus bring forgiveness to you as you forgive others.

Moments for Reflection:

Response to the Word:

Let us pray:

As we have heard, so may we respond. Transform our thinking and our doing, O God. May our actions speak Your mercy, and may our lives speak your generous love.
Amen.