

The Sixth Sunday in Martyrs' Tide, September 17, 2023

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How Much Forgiveness?!

Matthew 18:21–35

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I don’t say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” . . . Forgive your brother from your heart. (vv 21–22, 35b)

INTRO

“If your brother sins against you,” Jesus said, **“go and tell him his fault. . . . If he listens to you, you have gained your brother”** (Mt 18:15). That is, when he turns, you set your brother free. You release him from his sin against you.

So also Jesus teaches us to pray: **“Forgive us our trespasses, our debts, as we forgive those who trespass against us, who owe us a debt”** (Mt 6:12).

Forgiveness is the beating heart of the Christian faith.

Hold on, there’s a hand raised. Peter has a question. He wants to go deeper. He wants to know better how to apply what Jesus says, how to live as one who forgives his brother.

I. HOW MUCH?

So he asks, **“How many times will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”** (v 21) How much forgiveness? How far does forgiveness extend? What are its limits? Where does it stop?

I wonder what his brother, Andrew, thought about that question. Or the other apostles who were his brothers in the faith. “Is he talking about *me*? What did I do this time? Why is he asking that?”

What would you think if your brother said, “But really, Jesus, how many times do I have to forgive him?” Or if your wife said it? Or if your son, daughter, or friend said with a sigh, “Do I have to forgive her again?”

How much forgiveness? How much indeed! Not seven times, as generous as that may seem. But—and this is from the Lord Himself—**seventy times seven** (v 22). **Forgive your brother from your heart** (v 35). Now. Yes, again. This time. And your sister, too.

From your heart. Not superficial forgiveness but cardiac forgiveness. Forgiveness that flows from the very center of our being, from our innermost self, from the deepest part of us. And Peter thought seven sounded like a lot! He wasn't even close to the heart of the matter.

II. THE OLD HEART: NOT MUCH

Speaking of the heart . . . “How many times?” is the kind of question the old, sinful heart asks. The kind of heart that knows it can't take another hit without seizing up. It only has so many beats, only has so much forgiveness to extend before it breaks. It would rather shrivel up and die than forgive again—for the eighth time!

That's why it asks, “How much?”—because it knows it doesn't have that much. You can fault Peter for not wanting to be more forgiving, but he's just being honest. “But, Jesus, I don't have that much forgiveness in me! You're pushing me to the limits!” He says, “I know. I know your forgiveness is limited. That's why I'm here.”

Listen. **The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants** (v 23). You heard how that went. That first servant owed about as much as the national debt. You don't even want to know how much or what or how or why. You'd turn green and pass out if we went into all the details of his debt. It wasn't pretty. He's going to lose everything—family included. So he begs and pleads and whines and promises, “Look, I'll pay it all back.” Sure you will! But the king isn't heartless. He has pity. He sets the guy free.

Free . . . to do what? Why, to turn around start ringing his neighbor's neck over the five bucks he's owed. Seriously! And not to let up even when the guy begs and pleads and whines and promises to pay it all back. It's like he totally forgot what just happened. He'd seen forgiveness mirrored in the face of the king and then walked off like he hadn't seen it at all.

How much? That first servant's the living embodiment of “not much!” Forgiveness that's not full, complete, unending, but partial, always counting, always holding on and adding up so that the brother's sin is never really gone. His heart just isn't into forgiveness. It isn't in his blood. He's got an autoimmune reaction to forgiveness, and that's a problem . . . a big problem.

And don't act like it's not a problem for you, too. You know what I'm talking about. The impatience. The anger. The resentment. The grudges. The counting. The demand for repayment. The way you latch on to that speck in your brother's eye and won't give it up and any attempt to point out the log in your own eye just makes you madder. When you've been playing in the muck, the first thing you see is how dirty the other person's face is. But look in the mirror before you start pointing it out!

When it comes to forgiveness, are we any better than that wicked servant?

I know you probably want to pause and raise some objections. But what if my brother isn't really repentant? What about the consequences of his sin? What about it? The state of his heart is his business. That's for him and God. You've got enough on your hands with your own heart. And as for consequences—yes, sin has consequences. But Jesus isn't dealing with that here. He's dealing with the consequences of not forgiving others from the heart, and those are pretty serious, too. You can't get out of what he says by changing the topic!

III. HOW MUCH! THE NEW HEART

So my heart's about out of forgiveness. Yours too? Clearly this old heart isn't going to cut it. I'd like to be rid of it, get a transplant, a clean heart, a new heart. So if it feels like Jesus is doing surgery on you, great! If it's like you've been dragged before the king and he's calling you to account, well, that's because he is.

And what can we say to the charges against us? I mean, if the king really wanted to go over our rap sheet, what would it look like? Not just the lack of forgiveness but all the rest of it, too? How much time do you have? How big *is* my debt? Is it enough to put you on your knees? To make you beg and plead for mercy and promise never to do it again and that you'll pay it all back and . . . ?

And out of pity for you, the master releases you and forgives you the debt. Every single penny. But forget about pennies, because he's not counting! The king doesn't have a heart like yours or mine. His forgiveness knows no limit. The only one who stands outside of His forgiveness is the one who refuses it. The one who says, "No thanks. I'll pay my own debt, and I'll make everyone else pay theirs too."

How absurd is that? I mean, my heart goes out to that poor second servant every time I hear this parable. I don't want his neck to get rung. Not again. Not this time. Not any time. I want him to be forgiven just like the first guy, just like me.

Just like me. Yes, my sins are great. Yours are, too. But that's not the point. The point isn't our sin. It's His forgiveness. It's the size of His debt cancellation. It's His generosity! You're telling me that He burned my sin-mortgage, canceled my student sin-debt, and wiped out all my sin-credit? Yes!

But . . . but that's not easy. It's not easy to forgive like that. No, it's not. When your God looked at your debt, when He considered us poor, pitiful servants, He knew what it would cost to forgive it. The Son said to His Father, "Father, count it as my debt. Put it all on my account. I will repay. I'll put My heart into it." And then He did. He put His heart into forgiveness, pounding, throbbing, pumping with forgiveness. You hear it on the cross: "Father, forgive them. Forgive them!" See His atoning sacrifice. Forgiveness streaming from His head, His hands, His feet, until His heart finally exploded with it. For you. God is merciful. He isn't holding your sins against you. He's not counting. Would you?

And this is the forgiveness you receive from others, too, for Jesus lives and He lives so that repentance and forgiveness of sins might be proclaimed and given in His name. For you have sinned against your brothers and sisters, and they have forgiven you. How many times? Seven? Seventy-seven?

You have permission, dear Christian, to forgive the sins of others in Jesus' name, for His sake, on account of His blood, with His heart.

IV. AND MORE

So use it. Don't be stingy. You can afford to forgive and forgive again because your source of forgiveness isn't the old heart but the new heart, the very heart of Jesus.

Let me be practical for a minute. I know that we're tempted to jump to the hard cases, to the most terrible ways we've been sinned against, to the things that are hardest to forgive. That's not the place to start. Start with the little ones, the small sins against you, the daily debts that others rack up at home, at church, at work. Try out that new heart with those things. Work the forgiveness muscle with easy weights first. As you do, you'll find that you're able to lift more and forgive bigger things. How do we grow stronger in forgiveness? Simply by doing it. When your brother or sister or your father or mother or your son or daughter or your husband or wife or friend sins against you today, don't brush it off, don't say it's no big deal, don't add it to the list. Forgive it. Say, "In Jesus' name, I forgive you."

In Jesus' name. From His heart. With His blood. It all depends on Him. He's not waiting for you to find your own source of forgiveness before He shares His. He's got more than

enough for you and for your brother. Why, He's already filled the font with it and the chalice and put the absolution into your ears. He never tires of forgiving you. Why even now, He's restarting your heart—yes, again! how many times is that!—with His forgiveness.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
