

Grace

September 13, 2026

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?”

²² Jesus said, “Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times. ²³ Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. ²⁵ Because the servant didn’t have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. ²⁶ But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ ²⁷ The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

²⁸ “When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, ‘Pay me back what you owe me.’

²⁹ “Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ ³⁰ But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.

³¹ “When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. ³² His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. ³³ Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt.

³⁵ “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Exodus 14:19-31

¹⁹ God's messenger, who had been in front of Israel's camp, moved and went behind them. The column of cloud moved from the front and took its place behind them. ²⁰ It stood between Egypt's camp and Israel's camp. The cloud remained there, and when darkness fell it lit up the night. They didn't come near each other all night.

²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord pushed the sea back by a strong east wind all night, turning the sea into dry land. The waters were split into two. ²² The Israelites walked into the sea on dry ground. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians chased them and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and cavalry.

²⁴ As morning approached, the Lord looked down on the Egyptian camp from the column of lightning and cloud and threw the Egyptian camp into a panic. ²⁵ The Lord jammed their chariot wheels so that they wouldn't turn easily. The Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites, because the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt!"

²⁶ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the water comes back and covers the Egyptians, their chariots, and their cavalry." ²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. At daybreak, the sea returned to its normal depth. The Egyptians were driving toward it, and the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the cavalry, Pharaoh's entire army that had followed them into the sea. Not one of them remained. ²⁹ The Israelites, however, walked on dry ground through the sea. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left.

³⁰ The Lord rescued Israel from the Egyptians that day. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel saw the amazing power of the Lord against the Egyptians. The people were in awe of the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.



As we conclude our series, Lessons in Leadership, we turn to grace today. In the context of our Matthew and Exodus passages, leading with grace is not about keeping your composure or aligning with societal expectations or pressures. It is not about being permissive so as to avoid conflict. No, leading with grace is about living as a conduit of God's grace – the grace that flows abundantly for us and through us, out to our neighbors. We are a people cleansed, redeemed, and shaped by grace – so that we can be agents of grace.

There are moments in our lived when we experience God's grace. These holy times are moments when our whole perspective on faith shifts. They are experiences that change us, that transform us. Have you ever had one of these moments? The first God moment that I can really remember happened in this balcony. It was many years before this recent picture was taken. Back then, in late 1981 or early 1982, the church was known as First Congregational Church.

It was during Christmas break during my junior year in high school. I had grown up in the church, knew the stories – Moses, Noah, Daniel, Jesus. I had gone through confirmation, joined the church, regularly attended youth group, and sang in the youth choir. But I compartmentalized my faith. It is easy to talk about that with youth that I have worked with because I lived it out very well during my high school and college years. I knew who Jesus was during this time, but I didn't know Jesus in my heart.



Our youth group was at what we call a lock-in today. It was called a rock-a-thon back then. We gathered pledges on a pledge sheet to raise money for some cause – someone in need, a youth trip, something else. We were in the parlor, rocking away in our rocking chairs, chatting, when there was a loud bang on the outside door to fellowship hall.

One of the adults – probably Gil, our youth leader – went to see what was happening and pretty soon he came back and called for me. A couple of my friends were there, well after midnight, to tell me that our good friend Keith had been in a horrific car accident. He might not make it, and they wanted me to come to the hospital with them. Gil would not let me go.

As a typical teenager, I was upset that he would not let me go. Looking back, I totally understand why he did not let me go. But at the moment, I was not happy. Gil graciously suggested that I go into the sanctuary with a friend or two to pray for Keith. We went and sat up there in the balcony. I was in the middle with one friend on each side of me. As we quieted ourselves and began to pray, I felt it. What I can only describe as a strong and real presence became evident there in the balcony. I could literally feel what I can only describe as arms around me as God's grace covered me. A sure sense that Keith would be okay came over me. I felt an undeniable peace that grew in my heart.

I was equal parts amazed and scared. We did not talk about it then or anytime afterwards, but I could tell that they felt what I felt. It was evident in their eyes and in their prayers. Now, I would like to say that my faith changed forever that day. It did for a little while. Then the world crept back in and my compartmentalizing began again. But my experience with God's grace that night has stayed with me. I began to understand that God's grace was for me and also for others – especially Keith that night. That tangible presence is a feeling that I can still feel when I think back to that night, when I retell the story of the night that God became real to me.



If last week was about conflict resolution, this week is about reconciliation. And without grace, reconciliation is not possible.

Through grace, God tells us to always keep the door open for reconciliation and forgiveness. We do not write people off or throw them out of our lives or out of our churches because they are irredeemable or because they keep making the same mistakes. We do not give up on people because they don't learn or change as fast as we think they should or because the change is not in ways that we expect or desire. But grace is not all hugs and puppy dogs either.

Grace holds boundaries while extending forgiveness when boundaries are crossed. Grace tells the truth without shaming or judgment. Grace recognizes that we are all uniquely made, each with our own gifts and strengths, all for the benefit of the community and the world in which we live. Grace leads us to find ways to use our uniqueness as a blessing, working together as we seek to grow in Christ and to bring others to Christ. As we prepare to enter into this time exploring grace and forgiveness, let us begin with this centering prayer...

Gracious God, you have set us free from all that enslaves us and brought us through the Red Sea to freedom. Your Christ forgave those who harmed him, and taught us to forgive. You forgive us and call us continually to live new lives. O God, call us out of Egypt once again, into a land of freedom and forgiveness. Speak your Word to us lead us into the Promised Land of your grace. And now, O God, I ask that you would bless the words of my mouth and that the meditation of all of our hearts would be pleasing in your sight. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

Please turn with me to Matthew 18 as we begin this time together. Today's passage immediately follows Jesus' three steps for reconciliation. Just to refresh our memories, step one was to go one-on-one to the person who hurt you. If that did not resolve the conflict, step two was to bring along a third party to help mediate resolution.

And if that failed, the matter was to be brought to the church, where there was a host of folks to mediate and/or resolve the hurt, restoring a broken relationship, bringing healing to the community of faith.

With Jesus' teaching fresh in his mind, here comes Peter. He wants to show Jesus that he has been paying attention. Maybe he wants another gold star, like the one that he recently earned for declaring Jesus the Son of the living God. Jesus has been teaching on forgiveness. Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive, saying,

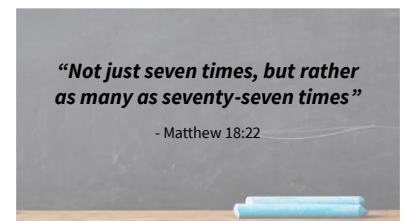
"Should I forgive as many as seven times?" In that time, standard rabbinic teaching was that one should forgive four times to follow the law of mercy. Four. It is likely that Peter expected Jesus to tell

him to slow down, to tap the breaks a bit. Forgiving someone four times – that is pretty lenient. Just think for a minute – Could you honestly say that you could forgive everyone who hurt or sinned against you four times? Maybe a spouse or a child, but everyone?



But instead of pumping the breaks on Peter's extravagant offer of forgiveness, Jesus steps on the gas. Four? Harldy. How about seventy-seven times? Other translations read, "Seven times

seventy." That would be 490 times. You get the extravagance. Jesus is saying to Peter, "Quit counting. Just forgive." Don't you think that Jesus would tell us the same if he were here today? Quit counting. Just forgive. That should be our default mode. We should be people of forgiveness, led and guided by grace and love and mercy. That's Jesus' model.



There are some in the church world today who would say things like *"Blessed are the peacemakers"* just does not work today. And, *"blessed are the meek"* doesn't really work anymore Jesus. So, this whole "quit counting, just forgive" thing?

Well, some would say that this does not work in our current world either. My friends, if the good news of Jesus Christ does not work anymore, then our world needs to change. We need to be the people of God bearing God's truth and good news to the world. Doing so, we will change the world.



Jesus teaches about grace and illustrates his instruction to quit counting and to keep forgiving with a story that verges on the absurd. He tells of a servant who owes the king 10,000 bags of gold or 10,000 talents. One talent would be worth about 20 years of labor. So, this enormous amount of debt would be equivalent to 200,000 years' worth of labor. This is a huge sum of money owed to the king. As the king is demanding payment from this servant, we read, *"But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, 'Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.'"* He is begging for a lot of patience – 200,000 years' worth to be specific. That is a lot to be asking for.

Instead of patience, though, the king has compassion. His heart goes out to this servant. He has empathy for his situation. And rather than holding him accountable for such a huge, unimaginable debt, the master simply forgives him. He wipes away the debt. It is as if the debt never was incurred.

But then the plot thickens. Right after experiencing grace and being forgiven such an extraordinary debt, the servant leaves and runs into a fellow servant who owes him 100 coins or denarii. A denarius was the pay for one day's labor. So, the debt owed is worth one hundred days of hard labor. That amount of labor is a pretty significant amount – until you lay it up alongside 10,000 talents – 200,000 years of labor. Then 100 denarii is insignificant, microscopic, almost nothing in comparison.

You would think that the first servant would be generous, but he is not. You think that he would now forgive this small debt. He does not. He ignores the other's pleas for patience. He has the man prosecuted to the full extent of the Law.

The one who was forgiven much had every legal right to do what he did. And some might argue that he should have done exactly what he did. After all, how else can people learn that borrowing has consequences? To forgive such a great debt is to benefit one individual while risking the whole economic system. That crowd? Maybe they are right. Maybe forgiveness does not work anymore in our world today. But Jesus, he has a different set of priorities.

In our Exodus passage, following the death of the firstborn, the Israelites are set free. But soon thereafter Pharaoh changes his mind and pursues the Israelites with his army, intent on returning them to slavery in Egypt. Camped alongside the sea, the Israelites see the army coming. They are terrified. They ask Moses why he brought them into the desert to die. But God has a plan. As we read earlier, the cloud of fire stands guard between the Israelites and the Egyptian army. God parts the sea and God's people pass through on dry ground. During their pursuit, God begins to fight for Israel, jamming up the Egyptian army's chariot wheels. And then Moses stretches out his hand over the sea. The waters close in on the Egyptians. Not one survives.

Some read this story and see this God as the God who destroys and punishes. They would use this story as a sword, as a weapon against enemies and oppressors. Pointing to this story, they would argue that forgiveness doesn't always work, that sometimes reconciliation is not the solution. But I would point them to the rabbinical stories that accompany and add depth to the Biblical account. These stories tell of a God who weeps.

While the Israelites were celebrating their rescue on the far side of the sea, the rabbis write of God mourning the death of the Egyptians, declaring, “Are these not my children too?” Like last week, with the Gentile and the tax collector, they too are the beloved of God.

Jesus came to be the face of God, to be God’s love revealed to the world. God’s love does love us four times more than we sin but loves us far beyond even seventy times seven. When Jesus told Peter and the other disciples to quit counting and to keep forgiving, he was inviting them to practice God’s unconditional love. At the end of the story in Matthew 18, Jesus tells the disciples that in the end, forgiving and being forgiven are connected. Once we know how much we are forgiven, Jesus asks, how can we not forgive others?

In telling Peter and the disciples to forgive again and again – quit counting – Jesus was also driving home the point that forgiveness is not a one-time thing. This too is our reality. And not just when someone hurts us again or sins against us again. Sometimes our sense of loss or betrayal or hurt lingers or it re-surfaces and we have to forgive the other again in our hearts. In these cases, we have to sustain forgiveness, to allow it to be an ongoing thing. You see, to forgive is not always to forget. Or even to excuse or tolerate.

To forgive someone does not mean that they didn’t hurt you. To forgive someone does not mean that you trust them. To forgive means that you accept the hurt as part of “what is.” It means letting go of feeling that something needs to happen – an apology, repentance, something – for you to be OK. In this sense, “Forgiveness means that you carry no unfinished business.”

I love how author Steve Garnaas-Holmes unpacks this profound idea. Yes, the other person might need to learn, to repent, to even suffer consequences for their actions, but you do not need them to.

**“Forgiveness means
that you carry no
unfinished business.”**

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He reminds us that when we refuse to forgive someone, we still carry that hurt with us, we still hurt, and they are still hurting us. When you forgive, you accept yourself as hurt but still whole. From this place of forgiveness in your heart, you trust that you are both wounded and whole at the same time. This is how God forgives. With God's forgiveness there is no "deserving," no prerequisites, no payback. It is forgiveness driven by love and by grace. It is a free gift that makes us whole. It is a gift that we can give to ourselves and to one another. May it be so for you and for me this week. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. God is abundant in grace. How has (or how could) your experience with God's grace led you to grow in how you practice grace and forgiveness?
- 2) *Pray*. Forgiveness is more important for our heart than it is for the person who hurt us. What situation in your life needs prayer concerning this idea?
- 3) *Study*. Read Romans 14:1-12. Paul argues against judging and for acceptance of our differences. How can you apply the lessons found in this reading to your practice of and understanding of forgiveness for others?