

The Math of Forgiveness

September 17, 2023

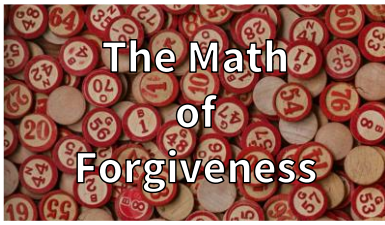
Matthew 18:21-35

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.

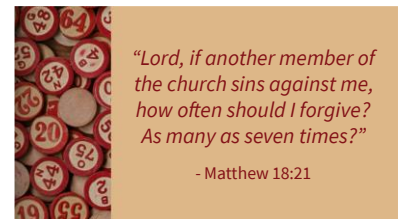
²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused; then he went 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.”



As we begin, we first look back to last Sunday. It is critical to do so to really understand the context of today's passage. In the verses leading into today's scripture, Jesus taught about conflict resolution in the church. He gave three "easy" steps to finding resolution. The core tenets of good Christian conflict resolution were kindness, love, grace, mercy, humility, understanding, and empathy. Using these well, one can come to a place of forgiveness. We learned that employing these qualities leads to bringing the relationship back to the point that it was at before the offense occurred. Jesus wraps up his teaching on fighting well as Christians and Peter then asks the question that begins today's passage. As we prepare to turn to that question and to Jesus' response, let us pray...

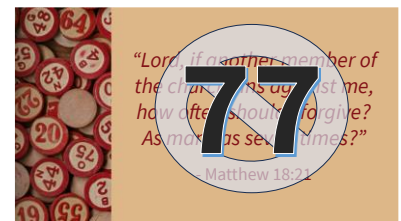
Here is the question that Peter asks: *"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"* Can you see Jesus shaking his head?



This is classic Peter. He is almost always direct with his words and actions. Today we would say that Peter does not have a filter. He thinks it – then he says it or does it. In our text today, maybe he is caught up in the directness that Jesus has used in his teaching about conflict resolution and forgiveness. Right? It was easy-easy. Step 1, go talk to the person who offended or hurt you. Step 2, if attempt 1 fails, bring a couple folks along to help find a solution. If that fails, step 3 was to bring the issue before the community of faith. Easy-peasy: 1, 2, 3. So, for Peter, it probably made perfect sense to want to draw a line in the sand to know exactly how forgiving he needed to be. Now, if I'm being honest, I too like things cut and dried, straight-forward, well-defined. I'm a doer. Explain what needs to be done in detail, and I'll get it done. Can anyone here relate?

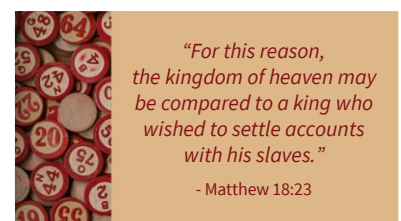
We are all probably a lot like Peter - we like clarity. We also need to give Peter a little credit. He has learned that Jesus sets the bar high. Often ridiculously high. So Peter goes well beyond the customary Jewish practice of forgiving someone three times for any given offense. Maybe Jesus would say six – be twice as good as the average person. Aiming just a bit higher, Peter offers seven as the number of times to forgive someone. In the Jewish culture, seven was the number of completion. That is maybe why Peter picked this number too. Now, before we look at Jesus’ response, imagine this happening in real life. Someone has sinned against you a couple of times and you managed to forgive and to mend the relationship. And then it happens again. And again. And again. And again. And then again. After seven times, how easy would it be to keep forgiving someone who keeps hurting or harming you?

Jesus says to Peter, *“Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.”* That is a pretty radical number, and it is definitely counter-cultural. It is at this point that Jesus begins



teaching about forgiveness, using a parable. Parables were stories told to explain a

concept or an issue or to illustrate how Christ’s followers are to live in this world. Jesus begins by saying, *“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.”* In this teaching, the



king is God, and we are the slaves or servants, depending on your translation. As the parable begins, the time comes to settle debts and the king first calls in a slave that owed him 10,000 talents. That is literally millions of dollars.

The slave cannot pay so the king decides to sell him and his family and all of their possessions to at least partially pay the debt. But the slave falls to his knees and begs for mercy. Out of pity, the king released him and forgave the debt. Imagine the relief felt by the slave? A multi-million dollar debt forgiven, just like that. Amazing, right?

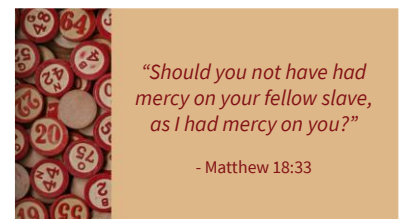
Well, leaving that narrow escape, this slave runs into a fellow slave that owes him 100 denarii. Seizing him by the throat, he demands, “*Pay what you owe.*” This fellow slave falls to the ground and begs for mercy. He pleads for patience. We should note that 100 denarii would be worth a few month’s wages. Not a huge sum of money, especially when compared to the amount that he once owed to the king. But the forgiven slave refuses and has the man thrown into prison until the debt can be repaid.

I love the reaction of their fellow slaves. They knew what had happened to the first slave. They saw the grace extended by the king. They witnessed how this forgiven man treated the second. We read that they were “*greatly distressed.*” Because of this, they went and reported all of this to the king. Instantly they knew how wrong all of this was.

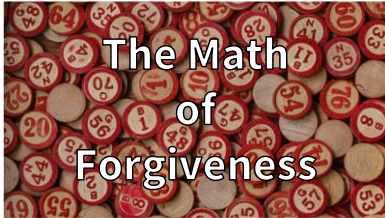
The king calls in the forgiven slave, reminds him of how he extended mercy because he pleaded with the king. He then asks, “*Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?*”

Shouldn’t you have done what I did for you? In anger the king hands over the slave to be tortured in prison until he can

repay the debt. This is a lifetime sentence. Bringing it back home, Jesus states that this is what God will do with us if we do not forgive our brothers or sisters from the heart.



That's what we pray for every Sunday: "Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

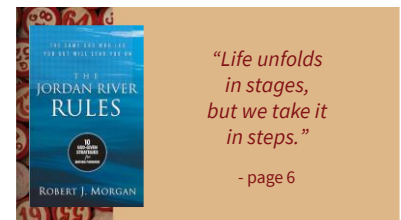


The math of forgiveness is not a math that we easily get. It is not like $1+1=2$. It is more like calculus or advanced trigonometry. It is not as easy as counting – one, two, three, now I can be done forgiving. It's not that simple because there is an inherent problem that we run into when we count how many times we've forgiven someone.

You see, if we are counting, then we are not really practicing forgiveness. If we are keeping track, then we are not practicing grace. We are just extending our patience, pretending to be kind, and loving and all – until we can be done with that person. In fact, keeping a count of another's wrongs is really a form of unforgiveness. When we keep track of wrongs, we are often archiving them for later use. Have you ever done that? Have you ever saved up wrongs against you as ammunition for the next conflict?

Another similar thing that happens when we don't really forgive is that when something else bad happens in that relationship, all of the old wounds get torn open. We find ourselves right back at ground zero, locked into our old ways of being in the world. So, in order to be ready to forgive, we must first be ready to stop rehearsing and rehashing and holding onto the moment or moments of pain. Why is this a necessary step? We cannot live in the past. That just does not work.

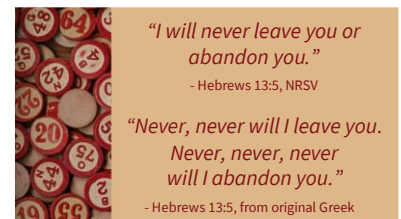
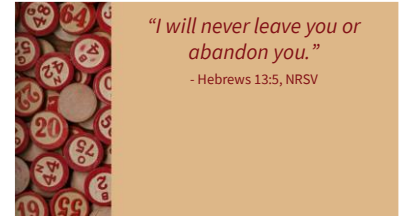
Moving forward after we have been hurt or harmed is not easy. It usually requires some help from God. Chapter 1 in The Jordan River Rules is called “Realize That God Means for You to Move Forward.” Author Robert Morgan puts forward the idea that God leads us in stages and in steps and in person. We all have passed through the stages of a difficult situation, whether it was an unwanted change, a sudden loss, or an unforeseen misfortune. We are often bewildered at first. But then God strengthens us. From there we usually experience different transitions – some stressful, some emotional, some painful. And after God has walked us through all of this “stuff,” then we are ready to move forward in steps. One leads into the other. Morgan describes the process this way: “Life unfolds in stages, but we take it in steps” (page 6). To illustrate what this looks like, he shared the story of Nolan and Dorothy Lee.



As the story picks up, this couple had entered the next stage in life. They were newly married and went off together to Beulah Heights University. They didn't have much; they barely scraped by. Most of the time they survived on scraps from the school dining hall. Nolan milked cows and Dorothy cleaned bathrooms on the side to earn a little money. Then one day, when there was nothing left to eat and they were dead broke, Dorothy put her Bible on the floor, carefully stepped on it, and prayed, “Lord, I am standing on your Word and your promises to provide for us.” Finishing her prayer, she heard a rustle at the door and found two grocery bags of food outside the door. Dorothy was faithful in her steps. God was faithful in the response.

I share this story because at times we may feel like we cannot move forward, that we cannot take the next step. When we have been hurt or harmed, sometimes we do not know where to begin to take the next step. Like Dorothy Lee, we too need to trust God.

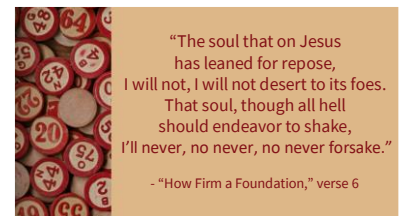
The promise that we find in Hebrews 13 is that God will lead us in person. Over the years we've cleaned verse 5 up a bit. In our Bibles today it reads, *"I will never leave you or abandon you."* Now that's a nice-sounding promise. And it is true. But here's what the original Greek would have been translated to: *"Never, never will I leave you. Never, never, never will I abandon you."* I like the original better, don't you? The



emphasis is greater. The promise is more powerful. This speaks of a God that we can trust. It is an "under no circumstances" will I leave you feeling the original translation.

Perhaps you recognize this phrasing, these words. This belief is found in the last verse of the hymn, "How Firm a Foundation." Here are the words:

"The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes. That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake."



There is some really good theology in the old hymns. When we lean into our faith, when we trust our souls to the Lord, then the Lord will never, never leave us. God will never, no never, no never forsake. What a promise. In those times when our Lord calls us to forgive not a handful of times, but 77 times, then we need this promise. That is the math of forgiveness according to the Lord. It is a promise to guide us through 7 or 77 times of offering forgiveness and finding reconciliation.



Just as there is risk when we go to speak to the one who has hurt us, there is risk involved when we choose to forgive others. The first risk we take is that of restoring the relationship back to what it was before the offense occurred. Forgiveness commits us to go at least that far. Maybe the relationship never grows beyond that. Maybe it does. The second risk is that of being hurt all over again. There is no guarantee that the offense won't happen again. Yet we have to risk that because God takes that risk with me and with you again and again and again. For me, I think that number extends way beyond 77. Is the same true for you?

There is also what I'm calling an "inward focused risk." When we forgive the other, when we commit to sitting at the table and having those honest conversations, in that process we often come to understand that we are more like the offender than we are different. It can lead to a hard but healthy look into the state of our own soul. It is good because then we can no longer reduce the other to our enemy or to someone that is "less than." And as was the case with conflict resolution last week, we cannot wait until someone earns our forgiveness. That is just as impossible as trying to earn the love or forgiveness of God. And it is just as unfaithful.

The forgiveness that Jesus calls us to is not reckless and void of responsibility either. That kind of forgiveness could lead to abusive and imbalanced relationships. Jesus is not asking us to be doormats. First, for those that hurt or harm us, there will sometimes be consequences that come from the real world. Someone, for example, could end up having to relocate or they could be incarcerated. These things can be a barrier to reconciliation, yes. But they are not insurmountable.

In these and in other cases we should not forgive serious wrongs unless we believe that there has been true repentance. Once this happens, then we must work on letting go of those obstacles that keep us distant or separated from that person.

In closing, we are called to be people who work towards forgiveness and reconciliation. I say 'work' because it is work. We are to treat one another in love, not as the forgiven slave treated his fellow slave, but as the Lord God treats us. In grace we are to offer forgiveness freely and generously, just as God offers it to us. In the end, perhaps the true measure of our salvation will be whether or not we live out the kind of unfair grace that has been shown to us over and over and over again by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. May this be the math of forgiveness that we practice. May it be so for you and for me. Allelulia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. How do you recognize your wounds (or those you've inflicted) in today's parable from Jesus? What are some steps forward that you can take?
- 2) *Pray*. How can today's parable and teaching guide you in finding healing and reconciliation in your broken relationships? Ask God for direction and guidance.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 19:16-30. How has mercy sometimes been a stumbling block to you or a hindrance to your faith?