

## Matthew 18:21-35

### Seventy-Seven Times

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God the Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

So, dear friends in Christ,

Jesus says in today's text that we ought to forgive each other seventy-times seven. An easily sorted predicament. I've got an app on my phone, a calculator. Actually I can do the arithmetic in my head just like the rest of you but these are the words of Jesus so we should just double-check to be certain. Seven times seventy equals . . . . *four hundred ninety times*. That's what I thought. So I'll need to keep a log of all this forgiving activity obviously since I take Jesus' word very seriously. A Forgiveness app – I'm sure there's an iPhone version out there but I use an Android which can lag behind a bit when it comes to apps. Wouldn't that be the perfect app? Complete with a alert feature for those people push past the 600 times forgiven threshold so that you can warn them to slow down with their trespasses against you.

Of course this is a crazy idea, and this literalistic reading of what Jesus has said in the Gospel is of course not the point he is trying to make. I'm sure you've all heard enough homilies on this text to drive the point home that what Jesus is saying is "Don't download that app." "Don't count your soldiers" as the saying goes in our family, keeping track of how much you are forgiven and therefore ought to be forgiven back. The number seventy-seven is not literal but means beyond counting. We don't keep track. Is this true for us also? Do we all live in forgiveness? Immediately our text becomes problematic for us. Is this not indeed a very difficult, seeminly impossible, saying to live out in our actually lives? Can Jesus actually mean that unless we forgive unconditionally we have no forgiveness for ourselves? If so then we are in a conundrum. And so we need to slow down and consider this text and the conundrum it poses.

Let us begin with the text itself and its context: *Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. (v. 21)* This question of Peter's and the teaching of Jesus which follows does not come out of the blue. It is of vital interpretive importance to recognise that this entire section of the Gospel of Matthew must be read in the light of a very important proclamation which Jesus has made in the previous chapter: *As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of*

*men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.” And they were greatly distressed. (Matthew 17:22-23)* At this point in the Gospel narrative we must remember that the disciples are extremely upset. They are anxious, nervous, perhaps a bit fearful. And very confused. Their questions, their words and actions are all born from this anxiety. They are hearing repeatedly from their master that he believes he is journeying to his own death and martyrdom and this greatly distresses them. As you know, this is not their understanding of what it means to be the Messiah sent from God, the Saviour. Being slaughtered by one's enemies is hardly a means of securing a victory over them. And all this talk about being raised on the third day is utterly incomprehensible.

The series of events that now unfold in Matthew's Gospel are all in this context of Jesus disciples' inability and refusal to hear and understand what Jesus is telling them about his impending death. And what is more, their inability and refusal is linked to their own pride-filled ideas about what the coming Kingdom of God *ought* to look like, and *especially* their own place in it. Consider for example, the occasion when Jesus is asked about who will be the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus responds by a child in the midst of them and telling them that unless they become like little children, *they themselves* will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Instead whoever becomes humble like the little child standing in front of them *is* the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. This is not the answer they were expecting. More to the point, it is not the answer they were wanting to hear.

And so, when Peter asks the question how many times must we forgive one who sins his perspective is once again completely wrong, back-to-front. Peter does not see nor understand that it is he and the other disciples who are the ones who have sinned and stand in need of forgiveness. The question he puts to Jesus assumes that he, naturally, chief of the disciples and a follower of the Messiah, would be the one in the position of being sinned against. How often do we also stand so wrong-headed with respect to our Lord and to others. Especially those of us who are leaders, church-workers, seminarians, deacons and deaconesses? Surely the rest of the world stands in need of forgiveness on account of its trespasses against us. It is not *we* who are the transgressors, doing wrong to others. Right? Wrong! We are, sadly, all-too often as blind as Peter. And yet, at that moment Jesus is already forgiving Peter. Not seven times. Not seventy-seven times. But unconditionally.

We are now ready return to our text and to the parable which Jesus tells Peter and the disciples, the parable of the unforgiving servant. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. “When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.” (v. 24) Do you think you have a debt problem or financial

troubles. This amount ten thousand talents is equal to the wages of a working man for sixty million days of labour. This is an insanely huge sum of money. The servant could not even hope to pay back the tiniest fraction of this amount. “And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’” (v. 25-26) Perhaps the servant is hoping he will live to be 1000 years old. But then the mercy of his lord intervenes. “And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.” (v. 27)

Now let's pause here for a moment to recall that these parables are not presented to us in the Gospels as decontextualised lessons for life. We are given a narrative in which to read them and truly understand them. This parable is being told to pride-filled Peter. Peter is not a master in a position to forgive others at his leisure and keep an account while doing so. Peter is the forgiven servant. He owes much more than he can ever repay, much more in fact than he can even conceive of. “But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, (which is to say, a hundred days wages – is there anyone here today less indebted to the moneylenders than that? If the answer is 'No' this is hardly surprising.) and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. (v. 28-30) Think about this for a moment? Did that fellow servant have a reasonable chance of paying off a debt of four months' wages? Of course he did! Yet how is he treated? By being thrown into *debtors prison*. His situation was made horribly worse! He is no longer able to pay off his debt now that he languishes in prison!

But his fellow servants see what has just happened and they become *greatly distressed*. And so “they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (v. 31-35) What Peter doesn't see is that he is the forgiven servant. But rather than living in that forgiveness he now turns towards his brother and demands to know how many times he has to forgive him. Peter acts as though there is a limit, when he has been forgiven everything, unconditionally. What is more, he has ceased to live in that forgiveness, that word of unconditional freedom. To suggest there is a limit to what one needs to forgive in others is tantamount to saying there no need for unconditional forgiveness on one's own part. It is to deny the reality and sheer extent of one's own indebtedness.

In the story, the other servants report on the actions of the unforgiving servant. And there is a reckoning. Do these words of Jesus include us? What are we to do with the sharp ending of this parable? But then what do we do with the stories dramatic ending? “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” Does this not contradict forgiveness and imply some sort of limit on God's own forgiveness? Some manner of payback and retribution?

Jesus tells these parables to wake us up and provoke us to see things from a new perspective. What prevents Peter from understanding that there are no limits placed on forgiveness is the lack of awareness of the depths of his own sin, and therefore – the infinite greatness of the forgiveness of God. But Jesus does forgive Peter unconditionally. He goes to the cross for his disciple. He dies an inglorious death. The very death which so scandalised Peter. Yet thereby he won forgiveness, life and salvation for Peter, for the disciples, for the ungodly, for all of us.

*For God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.  
(Romans 5:8-10)*

It is Christ's death and resurrection, and the proclamation of the forgiveness of the sins of the world which empowers us to die to our old selves and live in the life of unconditional forgiveness that God freely gives us. It is a whole new world to live in the light of this forgiveness. It is not about being merciful – forgiving others seven times, or seventy times seven, or any multiple of that such that God will, in turn, show mercy to us. God has already shown us mercy and grace, he has forgiven us unconditionally. And He continues to do so today as eternal life is poured out for us and for all from the chalice of his atoning blood. This reality of God's grace and mercy we take hold of and life by. As we continue to grow in the knowledge of this immeasurable gift of unconditional forgiveness which has been given us we grow also in our own capacity for forgiveness and mercy. We forgive as we've been forgiven. We show mercy because God's mercy has already been poured out for us. If we don't forgive it is because we have forgotten the depths of our own need and have ceased to live by the Gospel and what God has given us. But called again to faith our own mercy is kindled, as an inevitable and faithful response to God's own mercy, revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, our Lord. Let this faith once more be kindled for us all.

Amen.