

Forgiveness Math: How much? How Often?

(Matthew 18:21-35)

Good morning all you wonderful people! Please turn to Matthew 18. I call this sermon “forgiveness math: how much? how often?” How often do we forgive each other? How often does God forgive us? How much do we forgive each other? How much does God forgive us? Jesus uses numbers, although he makes clear that it is not about the numbers.

Forgive: How Many Times? Matthew 18:21–22

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Peter’s question is probably an honest question – how many times, Lord, would be enough? I’m willing to set the number high – seven times – I will forgive my brother or sister seven times. Would seven be enough?

Peter does want to put a limit on it, though. He wants forgiving another person to come to an end. “I’ve forgiven you this many times, and from now on no more.” What he really asking is, “Lord, where can I draw the line?”

Jesus begins, “I tell you.” That’s for emphasis, like an exclamation mark. Jesus puts it at the beginning of the sentence, so every knows this will be important. “I tell you, seventy-seven times,” says Jesus. Not seven, but seventy-seven. think Peter thought forgiving another person seven times was pretty good. Actually, it is pretty good. But Jesus said, not nearly enough.

But people, don’t be counting 77 times. In family life, over the years, we do get to 77, I’m sure, though I’ve not kept track. Maybe someone keeps track of how many times they’ve forgiven me. Could well be up to 77.

When Jesus says, “Peter, not seven but seventy-seven,” what he’s really saying is, “Peter, it does not end. You don’t get to draw a line. You keep on forgiving. Here’s a story to explain why you keep on forgiving.” And Jesus tells a story we’ll get to in a few minutes.

But the forgiving does not end. The whole of Matthew 18 is Jesus’ teaching on life among his followers. How will his disciples treat each other? Jesus taught them how to treat each other. This is church life, it is also certainly family life.

Jesus assumed that among his followers, among his disciples, there would be a lot of people doing things to each other that they should not do, sinning against each other.

I will say it again: the way Jesus talks about his followers forgiving each other, there is no way he was or is surprised that there are a lot of offences in the church, believers mistreating each other. No surprise to Jesus. Paul writes in just the same way.

We are still surprised, indignant. “This should never happen in church,” which is true of course. Jesus did not like it, but he expected it. So he taught us to forgive.

Will you turn to Luke 17? Jesus told Peter a story to help people understand why forgiving never ends, but first we’ll look at two verses in Luke that are like what Jesus told Peter, but they are also a bit different. Luke 17:3–4. Jesus is not answering a question from Peter, he’s just teaching.

Forgive your Brother or Sister: How Many Times a Day? Luke 17:3–4

If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying “I repent,” you must forgive them.

Here Jesus says to forgive our brother or sister seven times *a day*. Every day, seven times. Don’t count, people, that’s not what this is about. The point is lots of forgiveness, every day.

Let’s do some forgiveness math. If Jesus said we should forgive each other seven times a day, how many times do you think God will forgive you in a day? I don’t know, but seven would just be the start.

It is common for believers to have sins they struggle with. We get a lot of things right, but in one or two matters we stumble often, we do the same thing again and again. Seven times a day might actually be right. And we fear that God has lost patience, that he no longer forgives us. We fear that he has turned away from us, because we’ve done it so often.

So I say again: If Jesus said we should forgive each other seven times a day, how many times do you think God will forgive you in a day? Seven would just be the start.

In Luke Jesus said that if they sin seven times and if they come to you saying “I repent” seven times, then you must forgive them. In Matthew Jesus does not give us that out, he just says: “forgive them.”

About “Apologizing”

Let’s talk about this process we call “apologize.” The biblical words are confess and repent. Confess means we name the sin, we say what we’ve done. The problem with “I’m sorry” is that there’s no confession, and sometimes it is not clear what I’m sorry for. So confess, name the thing you did wrong. Repent means agree it was wrong, and say you wish you had not done it.

“I did this [say what you did]. It was wrong, and I wish I had not done it.” We need to talk like this to God, and we need to talk like this to each other, especially in our families, but also in the church, and everywhere. “I did this. It was wrong. I wish I had not done it.”

You can ask for forgiveness, but you don’t actually need to. And perhaps it took you a few hours, or a few days, before you were ready to say “I did this. It was wrong. I wish I had not done it.”

If it took you hours or days before you could say that, you give the person you offended just as long to get to the place where they forgive you. They don't have to forgive immediately. That's not your job. You confess and repent. If and when they forgive is their business. Let them sort out the forgiving.

If you have never talked to a person like that, why not? Have you never offended another person? Are they just supposed to get over it? In Luke's version of this teaching of Jesus, the sinner goes to the person they sinned against seven times in a day and says, "I sinned against you, it was wrong, I wish I had not done it."

It is quite possible that the person you confess to also hurt you, did things that hurt you. Do not bring that up in the same conversation. Do not tell them in the same conversation that it was really their fault. Do not tell them what they did was just as bad. If they volunteer this, fine, but in that conversation, let it go. If you need to bring up what they did, do that at a different time.

I will say that in the biggest things I have had to forgive in other people, there was no confession, no repentance, no "I'm sorry," no apology. In Matthew 18, we just forgive.

I forgave someone because I was so hurt and angry that it was twisting me. The hurt and anger filled me. I forgave in self defense, because if I did not, I felt like the resentment that came up again and again would destroy me. My mind was a dark place. I was becoming an angry man, and I really did not want that. God helped me, again and again.

Now we'll go back to Matthew 18, and read the story Jesus told Peter to explain why Peter needed to forgive seventy seven times, not just seven times.

Why Do We Forgive Seventy-Seven Times? Matthew 18:23–35

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Let's go over this more carefully. *The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.*

In Greek “bag of gold” is a “talent.” 10,000 talents. That's a lot of money, a huge amount. In our day, billions and billions of dollars. Jesus deliberately used an extreme number. Peter wanted the math, he wanted to know how many times would be enough. So Jesus lays out the math for Peter – this man owes the king 85 billion dollars.

Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything. This is ridiculous, and we are supposed to get that. The man has a wife and children. In a whole lifetime he cannot feed and clothe his family and pay off even one talent. It would take him several life times to pay back one talent.

He owes 10,000 talents. It would take him thousands and thousands of lifetimes to pay off that debt. Can you feel this? I am not exaggerating the numbers. How long would it take me to pay off 85 billion dollars. Jesus wants us to understand how much God has forgiven us. This is a picture of our debt to God.

The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. The servant did not even ask for forgiveness, he just asked for patience. But the king forgave him the whole thing, cancelled it, let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. The unit here is a denarius, which was one day's pay for a minimum wage worker. It is four or five month's wage for a minimum wage worker. It's big enough to matter, it is not nothing. It is a lot smaller than eighty billion dollars.

He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

The fellow servant used exactly the same words as the first servant used with the king: *be patient with me, and I will pay it back.*

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'

I do not know if I could forgive the things that hurt badly, if not for this, that God has forgiven me far more. In my mind, I speak to those that hurt me this way: you sinned against me, it is not okay, what you did was evil. But I forgive you, I will not hold it against you, because I sinned much more against God, what I did was not okay, I was evil, and he forgave me.

You do not deserve my forgiveness, you have no right to it, but I forgive you, because I did not deserve God's forgiveness, I had no right to it, but he forgave me much more than I need to forgive you. He forgave me, though I did was sinful, and I forgive you your sin in the same way.

I talk to myself like that until the rage goes away, and I do it as often as the rage comes back. But I don't know how I would do that if God had not forgiven me much more than I've ever had to forgive anyone else. This helps me more than I can say.

This story has a sober ending. *In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*

In Matthew, several times Jesus gives a brief but graphic picture of future judgment. This is the most severe picture in Matthew. There is a fair amount this in the New Testament.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart. Jesus was satisfied to let this be the end of the story. This is about Peter, if he stops forgiving after seven times.

In the Lord's Prayer we say, "Father in heaven, forgive us our sins as we forgive people their sins." We ask God to use us as his model. That's quite a way to get God's forgiveness, isn't it? "Father, be like me, be forgiving the way I'm forgiving. Please treat me as well as I treat others." Jesus put that in his prayer. It can be a hard line to pray.

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of forgiveness. It is a kingdom where God, our Father in heaven, forgives all of us our impossible debt, our overwhelming debt, God our Father forgives us many times every day, and we also all forgive each other, from the heart, again and again, every day.

And Jesus said that if we will not forgive people, we lose the Father's forgiveness and we take ourselves out of the kingdom. We cannot afford to nurture anger in our hearts, or go around getting even, because the kingdom of God is a kingdom of forgiveness. Getting in requires God's forgiveness and staying in requires our forgiveness. Amen.

PRAYER: God, you have been so good to us. We had no idea that we owed you that much, that we were so far into hole with you. You really have given the kingdom to the poor in spirit. Fill us again with this amazing truth, and we want it to steer us with each other. Help us bask in the sunshine of your huge forgiveness, and to live that out with others. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.