

September 17, 2017
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

How Often Should I Forgive?

Well, there it is. Peter asked for it and he got it and so did we. The heavenly standard for how we treat one another. The standard for how we are to forgive each other. How often?, asks Peter. Jesus says, Forgive over and over, again and again.

Peter thought that his suggestion for forgiveness would be impressive. It would be magnanimous and super godly to forgive someone seven times. And by the world's standards, that's true. Forgiving someone not once or twice, but seven times goes above and beyond what is required of a decent person. When someone disappoints you or hurts you or shortchanges you in the friend department again and again. And by the seventh time you are still saying: "I forgive you. I know you didn't mean it. It happens to the best of us. No hard feelings."

Seven times is a lot of times to forgive someone. But apparently not for Jesus. And apparently not for the God of all creation, according to what Jesus tells us. And according to the story of this Book right here. God has had mercy on us from the very beginning. Since that fruit incident in

the Garden of Eden and then the wicked days of Noah and then the golden calf situation with the people of Israel. God has had to be patient and merciful. Over and over, again and again, God has forgiven us. We can expect it from God, Jesus says. We can expect that kind of grace when we turn to God. We can expect God to have crazy compassion. And if we can expect that from God, says Jesus; as often as we would expect it ourselves; that is how often WE must expect to forgive, too. You should forgive one another again and again, Jesus says. Not seven times. But seventy seven times. Over and over. Again and again. Repeatedly. It's like this, Jesus says. And he tells us a parable. Jesus is always telling parables. He's always giving us these stories to teach us about God and about what the Kingdom of God is like. He says, it's like this: it's like a king who has slaves and one of the slaves owes him ten thousand talents. And when the king calls the slave to pay his debt, he can't. Of course, he can't: it's ten thousand talents, a ridiculous amount of money. Just one talent was the equivalent of the average person's wages over 15 years. Let's just say, \$50,000. Now multiply that times 15. That's \$750,000. That's one talent. Now 10,000 talents; that's about

seven and a half billion dollars. It is excessive. It is ridiculous. It is a theatrical amount. Not in seven and a half billion years could the servant in our story repay that kind of debt.

One thing is clear from Jesus' parable. It's we can expect God to be ridiculously forgiving. God is excessively merciful. We've got someone with a horrendous debt, who probably made all kinds of terrible decisions to get there. And then the king just forgives it all. It is crazy, crazy forgiveness. And that's how God is. God loves more than we can calculate. God loves us with more grace than we can possibly repay.

And our God will always do that. Again and again. Over and over. God will always want to give us a second chance, a third chance, a billionth chance. And isn't it ridiculous that we have a God like that? Who would keep giving and forgiving? Who doesn't want to hold a balance sheet against us. Who doesn't want to keep a list of our sins. But who wants to love us. Because love doesn't keep score. Love is just love.

Love comes with forgiveness. It means we know that we can come to God and say, "God, I haven't been my best. I haven't been the best friend, or the best parent, or the best neighbor. I have not lived up to

what I'm supposed to be. I wasn't loving to my family. I wasn't kind in the grocery store. I lied about having spare change. I cheated my kids out of my time. I obsessed about things that weren't important in the grand scheme of things. I missed the mark. I fail to be the kind of person you made me to be. And I wish I could start over again with a clean slate." And God says, Ok, let's start over again.

What if God were saying that to you right now? What if God forgave all those mistakes in the past, all those things you hold against yourself?

Because God isn't interested in holding things against you. God isn't interested in counting your sins. God knows you were tired. You were stressed. You were angry. You were scared. It's OK, says God. I

understand. I forgive you. Because forgiveness is what comes with love.

And Love is not optional for me, says the Lord. Love is just love. And love does not keep score.

God forgives us over and over. Again and again. Seven and a half billion times, if need be. It isn't optional for God. And therefore it shouldn't be optional for God's people. Jesus says, if God is merciful, then we should be merciful too. If we are forgiven, then we should forgive others too.

But like the servant in our parable, we go out and throttle people for the debts they owe us. We grouse about our selfish neighbors. We carry grudges about old arguments. And we complain to God like child complaining about having to pick up their socks when God cleans up the house every day. It's what you do when you love. It's what you learn when you love. That love doesn't run a tab or worry about who owes what. Love is just love. Over and over. Again and again.

That's how God is. But that's not how the world is. The world is all calculating and measuring. It's all exchange rates and profits and losses. It's tit for tat. And quid pro quo. And our spirits get accustomed to that. Our hearts start to resemble that. But God's heart is different. God's standard for love puts numbers aside. God's kingdom is not two or three or seven strikes and you're out. But seven and half bazillion strikes and you are still forgiven. And I know, I know. It is ridiculous and excessive by the world's standards and totally unreasonable. But it's not optional for God. Forgiveness is not optional. And it's not optional for us. Forgiveness is not easy. So we need to practice it. First of all, for our own sake. For the sake of our own spirits and our own growth in the

Kingdom. We practice letting go of things. We let go of that running tally in our heads. We stop holding grudges. We stop telling the stories about how that person did us wrong. We stop rehearsing all the ways that someone hurt us and how they owe us. Because that resentment and that bitterness, it doesn't hurt the other person, it just hurts us.

Nelson Mandela spent years working on reconciliation following the apartheid and racism in South Africa. He said: "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies." We must practice letting go. We must stop cultivating toxic anger and hoping that we can change the past. We must let go of what someone 'owes' us. And simply let everything belong to the Lord. As Paul says, whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord. And for the Lord, love is not optional. Grace is not optional.

We practice forgiveness for our own sake. And we must forgive, second of all, for the sake of the world. Because it's how God works in Jesus Christ. And that's how the Spirit of Christ works in us. That's what being part of the body of Christ means. That instead of hating our neighbors, we love them. Instead of seeking an eye for an eye, we turn

the other cheek. Instead of hoping for revenge, we hope for healing for everyone. God would rather lose God's life, than have us lose ours. And that's the way God is according to Jesus. And that's the way we should be if we want to follow Jesus.

For the sake of the world, we must practice forgiveness. And it will take practice. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude." We must work on it as God has had to work on it over the ages. Because forgiveness is not easy. Letting go of sins is not easy because there are things that are not OK. And they won't be OK without lots of conversations and apologies and working to make amends. Sometimes we aren't ready to forgive. But we have to keep trying. And working toward it. And holding ourselves to that standard. For the sake of a world where letting it go is not an option and grace is a joke and love is not love. For the sake of the world, we must repeatedly and visibly practice forgiveness. Like a basketball player running drills. Or a musician practicing scales over and over again. We must practice in front of the world this example of another way. A way to life and freedom. A way that belongs to peace and joy. Instead of

letting our lives belong to the useless ruminations about coulda, woulda, shoulda, we let our lives belong to God. To something good. Something kind. Something that makes room for life, instead of choking it out. We must practice forgiveness, because we won't always get it right. We will have to try and try again. But we keep trying because forgiveness is not optional for God. Love is not optional.

So we will have to keep practicing. We will have to keep working on that goal of letting go of what others owe us. We will have to keep refusing the way of the world that keeps score of others need to repay.

And that's why we are here as the church, to help one another belong to God's way. Priest and author Henri Nouwen wrote that "Forgiveness is the name of love. And it is practiced among people who love poorly.

And the hard truth" he writes, "is that all people love poorly. [And] we need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family."¹

¹ Nouwen, Henri, The Return of the Prodigal Son

Forgiveness is our great work that we do, for our own sake, for the sake of the world; for the sake of the God we belong to. Because love is not optional for God. And it is not optional for this creation. So we must keep at it. We must keep practicing and working to forgive as God has forgiven us. For as often as God's grace to fill the world. As often as we need love to be love. As often as we need to start over and being again, God is ready to do so. Again and again.