

SERMON: "READY AND WILLING TO FORGIVE—NO LIMITS"

(Matthew 18:21-35 Preached at MPC on September 17, 2017)

How many times should we forgive? Jesus said in today's text, "seventy-seven times." That's a tough number for us to process. But today, in our concern about an escalating crime rate, we say "Three strikes and you're out." That means that you were forgiven twice, not three times.

But Peter sensed that Jesus had a real soft spot in his heart for offenders. Besides, that, he was dealing here with church members, not criminals. He understood that Jesus was going to demand more than the usual, so he more than doubled the number. Peter asked, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Until seven times?" (v. 21).

Let me draw your attention to the passage that immediately precedes this. Our text this week starts with verse 21. In verses 15-20, Jesus taught the disciples how to resolve conflict within the church. Remember from last week the text says: "If a church member offends you, go to that church member and try to work it out. If that doesn't work, go back to that person with one or two church members and try to work it out. If that doesn't work, take it to the church at large. If the person who committed the offense absolutely refuses to cooperate, expel that person from the church."

So, on the heels of that, Peter asks, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Until seven times?" In other words, how many times am I obligated to go through that process? How soon can I take my revenge? Peter was being generous when he suggested forgiving seven times.

What's your standard? How many times would you have suggested? Would you be willing to forgive other people seven times? Would you be willing for Jesus to obligate you to forgive seven times? Think about it carefully. Seven times is a lot!

A friend of mine said to me, "Jesus tells us in the Bible to turn the other cheek. If someone strikes me, I'll turn the other cheek. But if he strikes me on that cheek, he had better watch out!" We can identify with that! Most of us may do the same. My friend was willing to forgive once. Or, perhaps it would be better to say, he was willing to turn

the other cheek once. I am not sure that he was willing to forgive at all. He sounded more like he was just waiting for an excuse to strike back.

Or how about the woman who finds out that her husband has been cheating on her? How many times should she forgive? Many of us would say, Never! There are some things that you don't forgive! Cut him loose! Find a decent man! But perhaps that's not the right answer! Or how about a man who becomes physically abusive to his wife. How many times should she forgive? Again, many of us would say, Never!

Or how about a woman who becomes an alcoholic. She becomes irresponsible. She neglects the kids. She spends her money on booze. How many times should her husband forgive her. Many of us would say, Never! Cut her loose! Find a decent woman.

Peter's suggestion begins to sound pretty generous, doesn't it? "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Until seven times?" Seven is a big number. Seven is a lot of times. But Jesus answered, "I don't tell you until seven times, but, until seventy times seven" (v. 22). Scholars disagree about the number. The Greek words can mean seventy-seven, but they can also mean seventy times seven— which means four hundred ninety times.

It really doesn't matter which Jesus meant. Both seventy-seven and four hundred ninety are beyond counting. How can you truly forgive a person seventy-seven times while keeping track? How can you forgive without forgetting? That presents us with a problem. Common sense tells us that forgiving an abusive or an alcoholic spouse just makes things worse. By forgiving the abuser or the drunk, we become an enabler. Jesus calls for unlimited forgiveness. What should we do?

To answer that question, we need to remember verses 15-20, the verses where Jesus calls his disciples to practice tough love in the context of the church. If another church member offends us, we are to take the initiative to go to that person and make every effort to work out the problem. If that fails, we are to get one or two other Christians and to go to the offender and make every effort to work out the problem. If that fails, we are to involve the whole church in an attempt to work out the problem. If that fails, we are to disassociate with the offender from the church.

Whoa! Now that's tough love! But tough love is not punitive. Tough love is redemptive. Tough love confronts the offender with the seriousness of his or her sin. Hopefully, it leads them to repent. Tough love is tough, but not uncaring.

Tough love gives an abuser an incentive to change. Tough love enables an abused spouse to get help and even call the police. Tough love encourages an abused spouse to press charges. Tough love permits the abused spouse to leave—if the abuse continues. But the purpose of tough love isn't to get rid of the offender. The purpose is redemption. The purpose is to force the offender to see the offense and to get help. With abusers or alcoholics or drug addicts, we can hardly be tough enough. But that doesn't mean shutting the door on forgiveness.

We need to continue our openness to forgive. Forgiveness doesn't mean accepting intolerable behavior—it means refusing to carry the poison inside of us. It does mean letting go of the bitterness—and to do that we must be knowledgeable about how God's mercy brings forgiveness into our lives—we must remind ourselves constantly to seek to live out our Christian lives grounded in God's standard of forgiveness— through His mercy and love—to be ready and willing to forgive like God with no limits!

But most of our problems with other people hopefully are not as serious as abuse or alcoholism. Perhaps a person said the wrong thing. Or they failed to carry out their responsibilities. Or they owe us money. Perhaps we just can't stand their personal habits. Or perhaps they just squeeze the toothpaste tube from the middle when we want them to roll it from the end. People get divorces over things like that.

Jesus says that we are to forgive, unlimited times beyond measure and beyond counting! If we have suffered serious injury at the hands of another person, we may have to forgive them every day. But we will be tempted every day to wallow in our bitterness. We will be tempted every day to let bad memories of old injuries poison us. The injury may have been yesterday, but the forgiveness must be today and tomorrow and the day after that.

The church is supposed to be a symbol of a community of forgiveness. Jesus died on the cross for our sins to be forgiven by God our Father. Thank God, he only had to do it once! The church is a place where we come seeking forgiveness through Christ our Lord—the church it is a place where we are called to forgive. That doesn't mean tolerating intolerable behavior. It doesn't mean being soft-headed or living with abuse. It does mean refusing to carry the poison inside us and letting go of the bitterness.

But not all forgiveness takes place within the context of the church. For some of our baseball fans, I'm thinking about the Chicago Cubs. The Cubs hadn't won the World Series since 1908—that's more than a hundred years earlier—but the Cub fans had forgiven them a hundred years in a row! Jack Brickhouse, a sportscaster known for his play-by-play coverage of the Cubs, covered Cubs games from 1948 to 1981—that's thirty-three years—the prime of Brickhouse's life. During that time, the Cubs not only never won a World Series, they never even got to play in a World Series. But Brickhouse forgave them thirty-three years—He used to say, "Everyone is entitled to a bad century."

Then in 2003, the Cubs had a chance—a very good chance. They were ahead 3-0 in Game 6 when Luis Castillo of the Florida Marlins hit a foul ball that barely cleared the short wall. Moises Rojas Alou stretched to catch it and end the game and cinch the Series. But a fan, Steve Bartman sitting in the front row, reached out at that same moment to catch the ball instead—thus making it impossible for Alou to make the catch and win the Series. Alou made angry gestures on the field, and Bartman became the most hated man in Chicago when the Marlins went on to win that game and the next to win the Series.

Then in 2016, as some of you may know, the Cubs finally won the World Series. When that happened, the team did the most wonderful thing they forgave Steve Bartman publicly. When the gold rings were being cast for team members, they had one cast for Steve Bartman. The Cubs issued this statement to the press: "While no gesture can fully lift the public burden he has endured for more than a decade, we felt it was important that Steve knows he has been and continues to be fully embraced by this organization. After all he has sacrificed with his patience and faithfulness, we are proud to recognize Steve Bartman with this gift today."

Friends we need to know the truth about experiencing God's incredible gift of mercy which brings us underserved forgiveness and unearned kindness. We say every Sunday in our assurance of pardon "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." How can we apply the truth of God's mercy through forgiveness to help us really feel forgiven? In a purpose driven church, God's purposes take priority over everything else—this includes our being willing to reach out and forgive the crowd and community outside our church. Here are several ways that may help us feel and experience the forgiveness of God!

First, know that God wants to forgive you—as I said earlier, God is always ready and willing to forgive—unlimited number of times! The problem is people who come to church regularly get used to hearing the good news—they may even take it for granted after a while. And then there are those folks in the crowd and community who first begin coming to church—they may respond to this incredible gift of God’s mercy by saying, “I just feel so guilty”—I’m sitting here in church with all these good people—and knowing all the stuff of my past, I feel so guilty and unworthy.” Well friend, if you really feel that way, let some of those good people you’re sitting next to you share some of the stuff of their sordid past—silence of the lambs. Romans 3:23 says, “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” But you don’t hear too many church people say too often, “I feel so forgiven!” Forgiveness is a theological fact and personal gift from God to you! Christ died on the cross for our sins to seal God’s mercy and love for all eternity on our souls— to stamp our sin debt “paid in full.”

Micah 7:18 says, “Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity, and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights *in* mercy.” What delights you? Is it a place you go to? Is it something your spouse or children do for you? If God had the new iPhone 8, God would delight in looking at all the pics of the days and times when God extended his unlimited mercy and forgiveness to you and me.

The second way to feel God’s forgiveness is knowing that God immediately forgives you. God doesn’t say because of that sin I’ll have to get back to you next week. Isaiah 55: 7 says, “Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.” Guilt is like a warning light that comes on in your car. We don’t just sit and stare at the warning light when it comes on—we get out of the car and do something about it—get it fixed. Instead of feeling guilty for our sins, we need to focus our eyes on the cross of Christ, knowing God immediately and freely forgives us for all our sin.

And lastly, God completely forgives me! Micah 7:19 says, “He will again have compassion on us and will subdue our iniquities. God will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. Friends when we receive Christ as our Lord and Savior, God completely cancels any record of our sin, destroys it, shreds it, doesn’t keep record of it filed away in some heavenly hard drive waiting to use it against us. Do you feel forgiven today? If God is ready and willing to impart unconditional forgiveness to us, doesn’t it

make sense, seem right and judicious on our part to be ready and willing to forgive with unlimited mercy and grace to all people? We know it isn't easy—but we can forgive through God's mercy and in doing so, we bring honor and glory to God's kingdom and in his holy name! Amen!

