

Dartmouth

Bible Notes



Notes From the Pulpit Ministry of Dartmouth Bible Church

Series: Forgiveness (lesson 5)

Scripture: Matthew 18:21,22

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Isn't Seven Times Enough?

Matthew 18:21-35 (NASB)

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus *said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. ²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ "And when he had begun to settle *them*, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ "But since he did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. ²⁶ "The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.' ²⁷ "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ "But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and *began* to choke *him*, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' ²⁹ "So his fellow slave fell down and *began* to entreat him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' ³⁰ "He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. ³¹ "So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. ³² "Then summoning him, his lord *said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. ³³ 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ "And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. ³⁵ "So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.

Introduction The first rule of how to study the Bible, is to learn simply how to observe what is in the text. *Not to interpret it, and not to apply it*, until we learn how to simply observe what is there. And in doing just a little bit of simple observation, I was interested to see that in the Book of Matthew the number 7 shows up a few times (Mark and Luke have a couple of these instances and John curiously doesn't use the number "7" at all.) I am not one to be interested much in "numerology"—the suspicion that there is embedded in Scripture (or other places) secret meanings and messages or prophecies in the arrangements and permutations of various numbers. But I do notice that Matthew quotes four of Jesus' talks in which our Lord uses the number "seven."

Matthew 12:45

“Then it [an unclean spirit] goes, and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with this evil generation.”

Matthew 15:34

And Jesus *said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” And they said, “Seven, and a few small fish.”

Matthew 15:37

And they all ate, and were satisfied, and they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, seven large baskets full.

Matthew 22:25

“Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother;

And in our passage today,

Matthew 18:21

Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

The NASB has Jesus replying “seventy times seven” whereas the NIV translators wrote “seventy-seven times.”¹ Specifically, **I do not say unto you up to seven times but up to seventy times seven.** Probably the NIV is a little better here, since Jesus quoted the Septuagint of Genesis 4:24 exactly here, and it has “seventy-seven times.” Even though the difference between these two translations is great numerically, it is not a very important difference. Jesus was not specifying a maximum number of times His disciples should forgive their brothers. Neither was He wiping out what He had just taught about confronting an erring brother (vv. 15–20). His point was that DISCIPLES WHO ARE HUMBLE SHOULD NOT LIMIT THE NUMBER OF TIMES THEY FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER NOR THE FREQUENCY WITH WHICH THEY FORGIVE EACH OTHER. The following parable of the unmerciful servant clarified this point.² But for Jesus to say “Do it a bunch of sevens” is a typically graphic Jewish way of saying “**NEVER HOLD GRUDGES.**”³ Or as MacArthur puts it, “forgiveness should be granted unendingly.”⁴

Meanwhile, Luke records Jesus saying,

“And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” Luke 17:4 Here Jesus imagines a really bad day!

¹ ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ *hebdomēkontakis hepta* “seventy times,” or “seventy multiples” (*Dictionary of Biblical Languages*)

² Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003), Mt 18:21.

³ Craig S. Keener and InterVarsity Press, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Mt 18:21.

⁴ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, note on Luke 17:4

Peter probably imagined he was being very gracious with the hypothetical offer to be a forgiver of seven offenses by the same brother. Some rabbis after all, only required three forgivenesses, BECAUSE TRUE REPENTANCE SHOULD INVOLVE TURNING FROM SIN. (We shouldn't have to forgive a true brother even three times.) Peter might have thought his offer of seven times was quite generous.

Let's ponder that for a moment from a practical standpoint—basically Peter is thinking that “surely SEVEN acts of forgiveness from me to my brother is really something!”

Are you aware of when someone sins against you? This isn't terminology that we talk about too much, except *maybe* in marriage family counseling. In most other relationships we seem to talk about

being misunderstood, misinterpreted, misquoted, defrauded maybe or perhaps once in a while, someone speaks sarcastically to us.

We don't seem to talk about being SINNED AGAINST though too often. People have come to us many times over the years from serious and very hurtful conflicts in other churches, and I have never heard someone say, “Well that pastor or one of the leaders sinned against me.” We are loathe, for some reason, to accuse another Christian of “sinning against us.”

Even in serious marital conflict, husbands and wives usually say things like, “She just doesn't understand me,” or “he was mean to me.” And in several divorces that I have sadly watched, I don't even remember one or the other covenanted partner saying, “He or she sinned against me, and therefore, he or she cannot achieve my forgiveness—they are permanently disqualified from that.” We don't *say* these words, but we clearly react as though we were sinned against, grievously so!

We just don't think in terms of sinning against each other. But that is the context of Matthew 18, isn't it? In verse 15 Jesus said, ***If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault just between the two of you.*** That seems eminently more practical and simple—what ARE sins between people?

Well, the Bible is pretty clear about those things: adultery, unkindness, lying or slander, injury, stealing from them, speaking unkindly (or worse) to them, belittling them, treating them as less important than myself, and so forth. These things are sins between people. They are offenses to the person and to God. We DO them sometimes, and I don't think any one of us is immune from doing them though for some reason we don't want to admit that we do, and in fact, we PRETEND that we never do them. Jesus said the first thing to do is to go

to the person and **show him his fault**. “Oh THAT’S fun,” you’re thinking! But if we sin against another person—and we do—then we need forgiveness. And if we do it multiple times, we need multiple forgiveness.

We don’t need forgiveness for being misunderstood, misinterpreted, insufficiently assertive, having Asperger’s syndrome or not caring about something as much as someone else thinks we need to. We don’t need forgiveness for something our grandfathers did or for not being in the right political party, for forgetting someone’s birthday, for not going to a wake, for not adoring the KJV or for talking in church. We need forgiveness for **SINNING**, Jesus taught, and sometimes you and I actually sin **against a brother**.

If we are sinned against multiple times, I THINK THE HURT AND THE WOUND GO DEEPER AND DEEPER AND IT BECOMES HARDER TO FORGIVE.

- A kid who has to grow up with alcoholic parents endures multiple sins.
- A wife whose husband insists on some form or other of intimacy which humiliates and degrades her, endures multiple sins.
- An employee who is poorly treated by a tyrant boss for years and puts up with it because he can’t afford to lose his job, endures multiple sins.
- A teenager who is constantly made fun of because she is fat or visually deficient in some other way, endures multiple sins.

But it also becomes more critical for our own sense of well-being that we DO forgive. Remember, forgiving is to **cut the debt loose**. It is to **NOT stand around waiting for the person to repent**, to **NOT keep accounts of what they owe you** and **grind your teeth waiting for them to say they’re sorry**. It is to **MOVE ON** and **not to allow your focus to remain on the offense**. We need to do this as a lifestyle. We need to do it because Jesus TELLS us to do it, as subjects of HIS Kingdom, and to stubbornly refuse *not* to forgive is maybe, just maybe, to reveal that we haven’t really and truly met the Forgiver yet.

- It doesn’t mean we pretend that they never sinned against us, because I don’t think we’re ever called upon to pretend in the Christian life.
- We may be slow to expose ourselves to injury in the future when around a frequent injurer. There is nothing noble about being naive.
- We may be slow to deeply trust someone again who has hurt us.
- But we are NOT authorized to NOT forgive them and
- we are NOT authorized to terminate our relationship with someone because they have sinned against us. This is what Jesus is implying by telling Peter, “Seventy times seven, “ or “seventy seven times.”

I think these are some of the things that lay behind Peter’s question to Jesus. In the first century, as an early Jesus follower, you couldn’t just pack up your family and move down the road to the next assembly of Jesus followers.

They needed to put up with each other. They needed to do like Paul eventually told the Ephesian believers—***be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven you*** (Eph.4:32) and the Colossian believers—***bear with one another and forgiving each other whoever has a complaint against anyone, just as the Lord forgave you so also should you*** (Col. 3:13). There is no greater kindness, when you have been hurt by someone, no greater gesture of Christlikeness, than to let it go and not hold it against them, to soften your heart and realize that even as you have been hurt, you HAVE HURT people too. And to calibrate *the other person's NEED* to be forgiven by how much YOU have needed God to forgive you.

Back in Matthew 18 and the parable of the unforgiving servant, as Jesus told the story, the problem was that the man was ***unwilling to forgive*** (vs.30.) That is the problem. It isn't that we want to go UP TO seven forgivenesses and well, we just couldn't go further. It is that we control whether we will, or not. And if we do not, it usually is because we WILL not.

Since Jesus required His disciples to forgive this way, the kingdom had become similar to what He proceeded to describe, not the king in the parable but the whole parable scene. The whole parable taught a certain type of interpersonal relationship based on forgiveness. This parable illustrates kingdom conditions, conditions that will prevail when Jesus establishes His kingdom. Jesus was not saying the kingdom was in existence then any more than He was saying that the conditions He described were already in existence. He argued that kingdom conditions should be those that the King's disciples should seek to follow in their lives now since they already live under the King's authority (cf. chs. 5–7). The whole parable deals with repeated personal forgiveness and the reason for it. The King has already forgiven them much more than they can ever forgive their fellow disciples.⁵

I think if you carry this out to its logical conclusion, you see a family of people who have probably injured each other pretty frequently. We are redeemed but we are still sinners. We are slow learners. Some of us let our tongues wag too loosely and we hurt each other by what we say, repeatedly. Eventually we learn to control our speech but it takes years. Others of us are sneaky. We craft little plots against or around each other to make sure we get what we deserve, or to make sure THEY don't get something they're not entitled to. Others of us are lustful, selfish sorts. We want what we want, NOW. We are driven by desire. And we all live like this within the same week-to-week community. That community might be our families or it might be the family of the church. If we're going to call ourselves Jesus-followers then we need to have as our creed, "a bunch of 7's."

⁵ Tom Constable, *Ibid.*

We should make a plaque for our church and hang it someplace prominent:
hebdomēkontakis hepta!

Others of us have other problems that end up hurting people around us. We carry bruises and maybe even scars from repeated “fender-benders” with each other. But if we really took Jesus’ words to Peter seriously (almost as if we thought they might actually be *sacred words*), we would cling together in a frequently-forgiving one another community. New people would come in and detect that we knew each other really, really well, but they would FEEL GRACE among us because we would testify that well, Jesus had forgiven US, so what right do we have to NOT forgive each other?

If we took Jesus’ words seriously I think we would ALMOST NEVER see divorce—and yet, what do you think the divorce rate is between fundamental Christian couples? It is just below the national rate for ALL people. Christians don’t do much better in this area, though we SAY, “Oh I wasn’t sinned against.” We just ACT IN COURT like we’ve been sinned against, and we hire lawyers to “represent our interests” before a secular judge—we who love to sing, “Amazing grace.”

Maintaining a sense of belonging is not easy. You will find yourself worshipping with people who irritate you, people with whom you disagree, people you find difficult to forgive at times. But the very reason you put up with their flaws and stupidities, and they with yours, is that you both belong to a family you cannot escape.

- Mark Galli (Christianity Today)

Jesus raises the bar—he says we might sin against each other. And then He tells us to throw the bar away. “Forgive each other not seven times, but a whole bunch of seven times.” Because that is the quality of relationship that He has freely given to us. We are to act, and live, in the way that He has acted towards us.

May God give us the grace to love and forgive and to say, “No, seven forgivenesses to my brother or sister simply will not do.”

This is what it means to be Spirit-filled.

This is what it means to really walk with Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

This is what it means to have a transformed and changed life.

This is what it means to be intimate with the Savior.

With Isaac Watt’s words from three hundred years ago, once again,

*How sweet and awesome is the place, with Christ within the doors,
while everlasting Love displays the choicest of her stores.*