

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Simon Peter thought he was being generous. He thought he was being generous when he told Jesus he was going to forgive someone 7 times. I can almost see Peter making a mental checklist of those 7 wrongdoings he was going to forgive. And to me, it does seem like a generous offer. To forgive someone 7 times in a row for making the same for mistake seems pretty challenging. I can only think how difficult it would be for me to forgive someone 7 times in a row.

But then Jesus completely throws Peter off guard with his answer, and demands that he must forgive 77 times. Forgive someone 77 times in a row? For making the same mistake?

Before we can go any further into the topic of forgiveness, we need to understand one thing. We are forgiven. You are forgiven. We have a savior who does not keep track of every fault. Jesus’ mission was not one of keeping track of moral wrongdoings or remembering how many times someone made a mistake.

Jesus’ mission was and IS about forgiveness. It is God in Christ Jesus who came here and walked among people – sinners and as imperfect as we come – who saw humanity at its worst – the unclean, the murderers, the liars, the selfish...and loved us anyway.

We cannot truly understand forgiveness until we believe that we are first forgiven. Do you know what good news this is???? To know that Christ died for us...to know that we are forgiven EVERY TIME we ask?

To know that you can come to church on this very day...you can talk to God about wrongdoings, and you can leave here knowing that you are still a loved and forgiven child of God – it is radical good news that we need to hear again and again in a world that tries to tell us just the opposite.

That we’re not good enough. That we’re not pretty enough or rich enough or thin enough. That we’re not good people unless we have the latest cell phone or newest computer or most expensive clothes.

God doesn’t care about that. God cares about you. About how you live your life and how you serve your neighbor. And God forgives you.

Do you believe it yet? And when we can believe that we are forgiven people of God, we can then go to the next part of forgiveness – being able to forgive ourselves. I think maybe one of the reasons it is so difficult to forgive others is because we are so good at not forgiving ourselves first.

As much as we may tend to see others' faults, if you're anything like me, it is almost second nature to list our own shortcomings and failings, and to be harder on ourselves than we are on other people.

But where in scripture do we find a command to belittle ourselves or fixate on our imperfections? In a society where "perfection" is pushed, it is very easy to fall into this trap. We are bombarded everyday with images of the "perfect" body, or what the "perfect" family should look like, and I'm sure we all know someone who is the self-proclaimed perfectionist. Eating disorders and other "perfection-driven" illnesses have become rampant.

As a matter of fact, the Dove soap company has launched a campaign rallying against the perfectionistic media. They have decided, in their ads on tv and in magazines, to portray "real" people...not airbrushed or stick thin, models, but rather people who have freckles and curves or who are short.

I remember back in seminary when I took a class called Scripture By Heart. It was a class where we would memorize stories out of the Bible and then present them in front of an audience. This class terrified me because I wouldn't be able to use any notes or hide behind a pulpit – I would have to act out a story solely from memory. Our first assignment was to memorize a few short verses in the Bible. I remember that week how hard I worked to memorize my lines, and how nervous I was getting as the time drew closer when I would perform.

And then the time came for me to perform my story...and I remember how terrified I was as the person before me finished her story. My hands started sweating and I thought I was going to throw up. I got up in front of the class, and started reciting my lines. I did fine with the first few lines, and then my mind went blank. I stood there in a very awkward silence, desperately trying to remember what came next, but I couldn't. So I said, "I can't remember my lines anymore...I'm done." And I sat down and felt like the biggest failure.

I considered dropping the class because I was so embarrassed, but my professor talked me into staying. And he pointed out something that I had completely missed during that first class...almost everyone else had forgotten their lines, too. I did stick with that class and eventually was able to memorize long pieces of scripture and perform them with no problem. But it was so easy to berate myself.

One of the best things we can do is learn how to be kind to our own selves and to forgive our selves. Maybe Jesus wanted us to remember that forgiving 77 times includes forgiving ourselves 77 times. I have in my office a quote by Max Ehrmann that says, "be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars. In the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul." This week I invite you to practice forgiveness – practice forgiving yourself.

Now we get to the heart of the matter. No matter how we look at it, as followers of Jesus, the calling to forgive others is not an option. To forgive is to live as Jesus lived and it is at the very core of our faith. Disregarding forgiveness is almost like disregarding the very reason for Jesus' mission and life here!

And please do not misunderstand me when I speak of total forgiveness. To forgive does not mean to forget. This is especially true in instances where abuse or other injustices have occurred. To forgive does not mean to allow yourself or others to be put in harms way, and it doesn't mean having to suffer at the hand of an abuser. There is a difference between forgiving a person and allowing an unacceptable behavior to continue.

Forgiveness is difficult. Is there someone or a number of people that you need to forgive? Are there hurts that you have held on to for too long? Arguments that have caused a rift between you and another person? Forgiveness is difficult.

Corrie Ten Boom, wrote an autobiography called *The Hiding Place*. She was imprisoned by the Nazi regime for hiding and protecting Jews. In the book, she tells of her experience of preaching at a church service on the very subject of forgiveness after the war was over and she had been released from prison camp. As she left the pulpit and came down to the center of the sanctuary, she noticed a man coming toward her with his hand extended and a bright smile on his face. She recognized him as the chief guard in the concentration camp where she and her sister had been incarcerated and where her sister had died. The guard's face was beaming that night after the church service. "Oh, Fraulein," he said, "how grateful I am for your powerful message. To think that Jesus washed my sins away."

Corrie Ten Boom found herself paralyzed as the guard thrust his hand out toward hers. She could not raise her hand from her side. She writes, "Even as the vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. . . . and yet I could do nothing about it. I could not feel even the slightest spark of love or charity. And so I breathed this silent prayer. 'Jesus, I cannot forgive him, please give me your forgiveness.'"

And with that prayer she was able to lift her hand from her side and touched the hand of the man who had persecuted her. "From my shoulder," she writes, "along my arm and through my hand passed a current from me to him . . . and in that moment I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing depends, the world's healing depends upon God. When our Lord tells us to love our enemies, he gives us, along with the command to do it, the love itself" [New York: Bantam Books, 1971; p. 238].

Forgiveness is difficult. You cannot make yourself forgive anyone, but you can know that God accepts you in all your wrongdoing and sin. And it may be that all you can do is extend your hand out to the person who wronged you. And if you simply cannot forgive, you can pray. You can pray that the time will come when you can forgive. Be honest before God in confessing that you cannot forgive. God can take you in whatever condition you are in.

Forgiveness is difficult, but it is freeing. And it is what we are called to do. And what better a place to practice forgiveness than here, in this worship space? All are equally sinners at the table of communion, and all taste the grace of God and the promise of forgiveness.

And what no better time than now, as we remembered September 11 earlier this week, to both hear a word of forgiveness and to speak it to others? On a day that marks a horrific tragedy in the lives of so many of our brothers and sisters, we can ask God to take whatever bitterness or hatred is in our hearts and reconcile those feelings.

To see the world as Jesus did – imperfect, but filled with the people of God longing for a word of hope and forgiveness. These are difficult times, people of God, and this is why the calling to forgive is urgent, imperative, and not really an option.

So go. As forgiven children of God. And forgive others as you have been forgiven. Amen.