

Sermon given by Steve Thomas **Forgiveness Unlimited**

Sept. 13, 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

Pentecost 15A

"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times can my brother sin against me and I have to forgive him? Seven times?' " " 'No, not seven times,' answered Jesus, 'but seventy times seven' " (Matthew 13:21-22). Big blundering Peter was always blurting out something! Every time he opens his mouth, according to the N. Testament, he puts his foot in it. Yet, we can be thankful that Peter was that way. Better an over-enthusiastic Peter, than a cold, conniving Judas. Besides, the words that Jesus used to answer Peter's impetuous remarks and questions were often great words for us today. No doubt about it, the big fisherman thought he was being over generous in suggesting he forgive seven times. He probably expected a compliment from Jesus for suggesting that he should be so patient and forgiving. Instead, Jesus surprised them all with his advice. "No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven" (Matthew 13:22).

The rabbis taught that you should forgive your brother three times. Rabbi Jose ben Hanina said, "He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times." They worked this out from the book of Amos in the Old Testament. In the first chapters of Amos, there is a series of condemnations on the countries for three transgressions and for four. From this, they reasoned that God would forgive you three times; but, punishment would be given out on the fourth. They further reasoned that no person could be more forgiving than their God. So forgiveness was limited to three offenses.

No doubt Peter thought he was really offering to be very generous when he offered seven times. He expected to be praised for the generous seven times - instead Jesus' answer says there is no limit at all to God's forgiveness and no limit on a Christian's forgiveness - it is forgiveness unlimited.

A worker was shorted two dollars in his pay envelope, and complained to the paymaster. "You were overpaid two dollars last week and didn't object," reasoned the paymaster. "I know," said the employee, "I don't mind overlooking one mistake, but when it happens the second time, I think it's time to complain."

Jesus then tells the story of a man who was forgiven, but went out and refused to forgive someone who owed him a tiny fraction of what he had been forgiven. Jesus condemned the man without mercy. He said, "... That is how my father in heaven will treat you if you do not forgive your brother, every one of you, from your heart" Here are several things which Jesus taught over and over. A person must forgive others to know forgiveness. That theme runs all through the New Testament. Forgive to be

forgiven. We are told over and over - we will not be forgiven unless we forgive our fellow persons. We can't hope for God's forgiveness unless we forgive. "Happy are those who are merciful to others; God will be merciful to them" (Matthew 5:7). And in the great disciples' prayer, Jesus taught them: "If you forgive others the wrongs they have done you, your father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive the wrongs of others, then your father in heaven will not forgive the wrongs you have done" (Matthew 6:14-15). James put it: "For God will not show mercy when he judges the man who has not been merciful; but mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13).

They go together like bread and butter, like ham and eggs, like hand and glove. Divine, or God's forgiveness, and our forgiveness of each other belong together. To know forgiveness, we must forgive.

Clarence E. McCartney tells this story about forgiveness: During one of the persecutions of the Armenians by the Turks, an Armenian girl and her brother were pursued by a bloodthirsty Turkish soldier. He trapped them at the end of a lane and killed the brother before the sister's eyes. The sister managed to escape by leaping over the wall and fleeing into the country. Later she became a nurse. One day a wounded soldier was brought into her hospital. She recognized him at once as the soldier who had killed her brother and had tried to kill her. His condition was such that the least neglect or carelessness on the part of the nurse would have cost him his life. But she gave him the most painstaking and constant care. One day when he was on the road to recovery, he recognized her as the girl whose brother he had slain. He said to her, "Why have you done this for me, who killed your brother?" She answered, "Because I have a religion which teaches me to forgive my enemies."

There is a big difference between the two debts. The first person's debt was a whale of a lot of money. It would be equal to the budget of a small town in our day, an incredible debt - millions of dollars. The debt that the fellow servant owed was a tiny one compared to the first. A few dollars is what it is called in the Today's English Bible. In fact, it was approximately one five-hundred thousandth of the first debt. The contrast between the two debts is overwhelming. That's the point Jesus was making: Nothing that people can do to us can in any way compare with what we have done to God. If God is willing to forgive us all we owe him, we should be willing to forgive each other. Their debts to us are so small compared with what God has forgiven us. And let's remember always that Christians' forgiveness is always limitless.

During the Revolutionary War, at the town of Ephrata there lived a very reputable and highly respectable citizen who had suffered an injury from a worthless and vile man in their town. This wicked man enlisted in the army, and there lived up to his evil record in

civil life. Presently he was arrested for a serious offense, convicted by a court martial and sentenced to be hanged. The news of the sentence got back to Ephrata. Then that citizen whom this convicted man had wronged set out for the army, walking all the way to Philadelphia and beyond. When he found his way to Washington's headquarters, he pleaded for the life of this convicted man. Washington heard him through and then said he was sorry, but he could not grant the request. But seeing the disappointment in the man's face when he turned to go, Washington said, "Are you a relative of this man?" The man said, "No." "Then," said Washington, "are you his friend?" "No, that man was my deadly enemy."

Nothing that we must forget and forgive and let go is even remotely close to what God has had to overlook and forgive in us.

Not far from New York there is a cemetery which has inscribed upon a headstone just one word - "Forgiven." There is no name, no date of birth or death. The stone is unblemished by the sculptor's art. There is no epitaph, no fulsome eulogy - just that one word, "Forgiven," but that is the greatest thing that can be said of any person, or written upon one's grave, "Forgiven."

We have been forgiven much more than we could possibly ever repay. For our sins, for the sins of our sinful race, brought about God's son dying on a cross for our forgiveness. So that we might have relief and pardon and a clean slate, he went to Calvary. That means we have the opportunity to start over forgiven. When you get that kind of forgiveness, you are just compelled to make a part of that starting over the forgiveness of those petty little grievances with other people.

We get angry with that servant whose master forgave him so much while he refused to forgive so little. Yet we are often like him. We nurse along a grudge, and we refuse to overlook a mistake, we keep warm a dislike or resentment, while the whole time Christ is stretched out on that cross that we might be forgiven.

Let's do two things about this Gospel today. Let's remember again all that our patient heavenly Father has done for us. Let's remember again Bethlehem, and Nazareth, and Galilee, and Jerusalem. Let's remember the cross and the agony, and whipping, and torment, and sweat, and blood, and suffering there. All this was done so the gift of forgiveness might be offered to us over and over again by a loving and patient Father. Then, when we have that firm and renewed in our mind, let's be about forgiving our fellow persons. And let us especially begin within our own fellowship of Christian believers. Let us not neglect our own family, mates, and those who live in our homes.

When Jesus said seventy times seven, Luke records the disciples as saying, "Make our faith greater" (Luke 17:5b). Seventy times seven is four-hundred ninety. We can do it in our heads, but this is God's arithmetic: we must "do it in our hearts." To little things we sometimes say: "Don't worry about it," or "Forget it." Those words don't mean big forgiveness. Here Jesus wants us to forgive those things that hurt, that gnaw away at us, that eat us up inside, and when it just isn't our fault. Sometimes we are like the man who said that he buried the hatchet, but remembered where he buried it!

Out of the great overflow and warm knowledge of what God has done and is doing for us, let us also forgive. Pick out someone to whom you will offer forgiveness today. Offer the hand and heart in love. Patch up the relationship, strengthen the friendship, set up the fellowship again. We are indeed the forgiven, the forgiving.

The Norwegian writer Johan Bojer, in *The Great Hunger*, tells of a man whose little child was killed by a neighbor's dog. Revenge would not long satisfy this man, so he found a better way to relieve the agony of his heart. When a famine had plagued the people and his neighbor's fields lay bare and he had no corn to plant for next year's harvest, the troubled father went out one night and sowed the neighbor's field, explaining: "I went and sowed seed in my enemy's field that God might exist."

Just as someone who has suffered grief can best give sympathy to those who grieve, just as a person who has lost his job can offer help to an unemployed person, just as someone who has been divorced can best help someone going through divorce, so we, who know what it is to have the tremendous weight of guilt and fear lifted up from us, can best lift it from another.

Let us rejoice in the way God has forgiven us. Let us forgive each other; and let us remember that we must forgive in order to be forgiven. Amen