

*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”*

<sup>22</sup> *Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

<sup>23</sup> *“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*

<sup>26</sup> *“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ <sup>27</sup> The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.*

<sup>28</sup> *“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.*

<sup>29</sup> *“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’*

<sup>30</sup> *“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.*

<sup>32</sup> *“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ <sup>34</sup> In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*

<sup>35</sup> *“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”  
(Matthew 18:21-35)*

### **Forgive Your Brother from the Heart**

What makes it hard to forgive someone? I’ve sat with couples who can’t forgive each other and with siblings who have a lifetime of anger they refuse to let go of. I’ve sat with parents who can’t forgive their children – teenagers and even younger. Why is this so hard? People who study things like this list various factors. How close was the person who hurt you? It’s much harder to forgive someone that you were very close to. How often has the person hurt you? It’s much harder to forgive, if that person has hurt you over and over again. How badly did that person hurt you? Obviously, it takes a much greater effort to forgive something really traumatic. Has the person who hurt you expressed any sorrow for what they did? Have they asked for forgiveness? If they have, it’s much easier to grant.

There are more factors you could mention. But usually, they focus on the person who hurt us. But this morning, Jesus flips the discussion around. He doesn’t focus on what the other person has done. He focuses on us, on the thing inside us that makes it so hard to forgive: our sinful pride. Jesus commands us this morning to overcome that pride. He commands us this to do something that’s totally contrary to our human nature: **forgive your brother from the heart.**

#### **I.**

What does that mean? Surprisingly, Jesus spends very little time on emotions this morning. That’s what we would expect someone who says “Forgive your brother from the heart” to talk about. But instead, Jesus zeroes in on our attitude. **Forgive your brother from the heart without keeping score.**

Remember the question that prompted this whole discussion: **“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”** I don’t know what caused Peter to ask this question. He was part of a group of twelve men who clearly were jealous of each other at times. They spent three years traveling and learning together. Was he thinking of an ongoing problem with another one of these men? We don’t often think about it, but Peter was married. Did his commitment to following the Lord lead to conflicts with his wife or with her family? Was he thinking of some ongoing personal strife? Or was this more of a theoretical issue for him?

I don’t know what caused Peter to ask this question, but we can all understand where he was coming from. How many times do I have to let someone off the hook? How many times do I have to let them say they’re sorry and shake hands? When do I get to say, “Enough! You’ve crossed the line one time too many and now, we’re through!” Have you ever felt like that?

Peter thought that seven times would be enough. But Jesus said, “**Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.**” Or as the old King James said, “**Seventy times seven.**” The Greek is a little unclear here, and that would be a problem if Jesus meant that we were supposed to count how many times we let someone say they’re sorry and forgive them. In that case, the difference between seventy-seven times and seventy times seven times, that is 490 times, is pretty important. But that’s not what Jesus was saying. Rather, he took Peter’s attempt to set a high number and he turned into an impossible number. How could you really keep track of how many times you forgave someone? Whether it’s 77 or 490, you’re going to lose count once you get up above twenty or thirty – especially if you’re keeping a separate list for every friend and family member. There is no limit. God requires us to forgive every time someone comes and tells us they’re sorry. We don’t get to keep score.

Why would we want to? For no other reason than our sinful pride. “That person that I loved and trusted did this *to me!* How dare they!” We obsess about our hurt. We repeat it over and over and over again in our minds and little by little, we distort the facts and we turn that person into a monster, all because we’re angry about what they did *to us*. That is pride, my friends. God commands us to forgive. When we can’t or won’t because we’re so angry over our hurt, then we are sinning. Stop counting! Stop keeping score and forgive! That’s what Jesus commands you to do. And if you sit there and make excuses for why you should allowed to continue to be angry, if you try to come up with a list of all the special circumstances in your case, you’re not listening to Christ. You are sinning – and Christians who refuse to forgive deserve God’s punishment in hell forever. Is your pride worth that?

Obviously not. Yet, we all struggle to forgive. When people treat us badly, it hurts. It’s natural for us to obsess about it and even to hate those people. Then God condemns us for sinning. Does that feel like a trap to you? Jesus came, to free us from that trap. No one ever loved like Jesus did. When Roman soldiers nailed him to a cross, he prayed, “**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**” He didn’t obsess about the pain or how unfair it all was or how he deserved better. He prayed for those soldiers and then he died for them. He died for all his enemies. He died for sinners like you and me. He paid for the evil in our hearts that naturally hates people who hurt us. He paid for our sinful pride that obsesses over all the hurts I’ve suffered. He died and he paid for all that sin and self love. Then he rose to tell us that we won’t go to hell, no matter how much we deserve it. We are forgiven. We are free.

## II.

In that forgiveness lies the key to our ability to forgive others. **Forgive your brother from the heart because you have been forgiven.** But to understand that truth, we need to understand the parable Jesus told. A king had servants who owed him money and he called in those who were past due. He brought in one servant who owed him ten thousand talents. A talent was a weight of silver or gold used for money. The most common talent was worth 6,000 denarii. A denarius was a coin that equated to a day’s wages for a day laborer. So think of it as minimum wage. In Michigan, minimum wage is \$7.40 an hour, so figure roughly \$60 per day. One talent, then, would be worth \$360,000. This man owed the king ten thousand talents, so that would be 3.6 billion dollars.

Obviously, he could never pay that debt, so the king was going to sell this man and his wife and his children into slavery to recover what he could of the debt. He would seize all that the man owned and sell that, too. And he still couldn’t possibly collect enough money to pay the debt off. This massive, unpayable debt represents our sin. We owe God more than we could ever pay. We owe him death and hell because every day of our lives, we sin. Every time we think a sinful thought or feel a sinful desire, we pile up another eternity of hell. Jesus deliberately chose to represent our sin with an amount of money so huge that all of us together could never earn it to show us how much we owe God.

In the parable, the servant fell on his knees and begged his master to be patient with him. He promised to pay it all back. Now, the king was no dummy. He knew this servant could never pay the debt. But the king had compassion on him. He canceled the debt. One minute, this man owed billions of dollars. The next, he owed nothing. Great news, right? That’s forgiveness. All our debt, all our death and hell are wiped out in a moment by the mercy of God.

But what did this man – who represents us – do next? He spotted another man – presumably another Christian – who owed him money, 100 denarii. Now, this was no insignificant sum. It wasn’t \$3.6 billion, but it was 100 days’ wages, so, at \$60 a day, that comes to \$6000. That matters because this debt represents the hurts that others inflict on us. Jesus did not represent those things as insignificant. He understood that

sometimes people do real damage to us. Sometimes, even Christians are guilty of hurting others. Sometimes, we hurt the people we love the most. And forgiveness is always a challenge for us when we're really hurt.

But Jesus does not allow the seriousness of the hurt to excuse sin. The first man choked the second man and demanded that he pay back everything. When that second man begged for patience and mercy, the first man had none. He threw him into debtor's prison until the debt was paid. And then the king's anger fell on his head. Suddenly, his debt was no longer canceled – the king was going to collect that \$3.6 billion. He threw the man into prison and tortured him until the debt was paid. Understand what that means. He threw him into hell.

The king said, **“I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”** We have experienced the mercy of God. Where is our mercy? The key to freeing ourselves from the natural response of our sinful hearts is repentance. We have to recognize the sin of holding on to our anger and of obsessing about how we were hurt. We have to recognize that we are guilty when we refuse to forgive, because God has forgiven us more than we will ever need to forgive. True repentance recognizes that I am just as much a sinner as that person who hurt me. I have no right to sit on my high horse and demand anything from anybody. Then comes faith. True repentance trusts that God has indeed forgiven me. Christ did indeed die for me. God has indeed freed me from hell. The Holy Spirit put a new believer inside me that loves to forgive. Every time I hear about Jesus' love and forgiveness, the Holy Spirit gives that new believer power to fight against the selfishness and pride that want to obsess about the way another person hurt me. Forgiveness is a gift we receive from God. And when he forgives us, he gives us the power to forgive each other, to let go of our hurts and their sins.

Forgiving someone else is an act of will. We often equate forgiveness with forgetting. But we don't have the power to erase the memories of the hurts we've suffered. We also tend to equate forgiveness with emotions. If I forgive, then I'm not angry anymore. If I forgive, then I stop hurting. Or, once I stop hurting and being angry, then I have forgiven that person. Sadly, that isn't really true either, at least, not right away. In many cases, forgiveness has to come before the end of the anger and hurt. Forgiveness is choosing to put the past in the past and move on. Rather than somehow evaporating our hurt, it's letting go of all rights to revenge or repayment. It's deciding to treat that person with love in spite of what they have done in the past.

So, on a practical level, I may need to forgive someone over and over again for the same sin. I may need to remind myself that God calls me to forgive, to let go of my anger, to put the whole thing in the past and change my attitude. And for five minutes, I succeed. But then the unhealed hurt in my heart surges to the top again and once again, I'm angry and bitter. And I need to forgive them again, at least in my own heart.

But constantly returning to the cross where we are forgiven and constantly going through that process of forgiving others will eventually lead us to a point where our anger and hurt are healed. The Holy Spirit works through the message about Jesus. He gives the healing and peace that our hearts need in order to feel like we've forgiven someone. But we actually forgive when we make the decision to turn from our anger and treat that person with compassion and love, in spite of what they have done to us and in spite how we feel about it.

Is this a hard thing to do? Without a doubt. For as long as we live here, we will struggle with it, because we're sinners. In heaven, forgiveness will be easy and it will be total. But we aren't in heaven yet. Every day, there is a war in our hearts between the believer who forgives and the unbeliever inside us who never can. Some days, that unbeliever gets the upper hand. But those are the days when we confess to our Savior that we have sinned and our hearts are hard. And we ask him to forgive us. And we ask him to send his Spirit and change our hearts. It may seem like we will never feel that peace of having forgiven others. But God's promise is that we will. We can certainly hope that we will feel it here in this life. But even if we don't, we will feel it in heaven. Trust in your Savior who makes that promise. Trust in the one who died and rose and forgave you, and forgive one another, from a heart of faith. Amen.