

## **How Many Times Should We Forgive Someone?**

**From Matthew 18:21-35**

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Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

AMEN

This morning's Gospel reading is a difficult one because it demands so much from us. During the past several Sundays you have been hearing Father John preach on Matthew Chapter 18. I want to go back to the beginning of this chapter and show you there is a pattern of mercy and forgiveness in what Matthew is telling us.

The chapter starts out with the disciples asking Jesus "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus responds by saying "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." To be like a child would be to have childlike trust. Kids are vulnerable as we well know from reading in the papers or hearing on the news how they are taken advantage of by the likes of predators and others. Jesus is very concerned for people who are vulnerable as we should be too. Jesus wants us to be concerned for all people.

Jesus follows up this story in Matthew 18:12-13 “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountain and go in search of the one that went astray’. Here the Great Shepherd is not content to have ninety-nine safe, but will risk everything in search of the lost sheep and bring it back to safety. In the eyes of our Great Shepherd every sheep is important. Jesus wants us to employ the same sense of seriousness for the sheep that is outside the sheep fold.

From saving the lost sheep Jesus tells His disciples in Matthew 18:15 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” In other words, not to gossip about what he had done. Jesus tells us that when the brother who sins listens to you, you have gained your brother. The purpose of this story is for us to obtain reconciliation with our brother or sister. For those who refuse to respond to the reconciliation process, the penalty will be severe.

In Luke 17:1-4 Jesus tells his disciples “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying ‘I repent’, you must forgive him,” In this passage, forgiveness is conditional upon the sinner seeking repentance. Today’s Gospel, if you remember, does not mention anything about repentance. In chapter 18:15-20 Matthew records Jesus saying “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the

church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Here a Gentile is anyone other than a Jew. They were known to be rebellious against God and most often had their own gods to worship.

Now we come to today’s gospel reading. Our reading this morning is a continuation of the first part of the chapter. Being an accountant, I think of this parable to be like telling someone in today’s language to throw away their calculator and stop counting how many times they are to forgive. Forgiveness is what matters not how many times. Peter asks Jesus “Lord how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” In Judaism, three times was deemed sufficient. So when Peter says seven times he thought he was being generous. This parable tells us that true disciples of Jesus should show forgiveness without keeping a count. Jesus tells him not seven times but seventy-seven times. The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, which I highly recommend for serious Bible study, tells us that the number 77 is a beautiful number because it symbolizes that all sins have been forgiven. And that no generation was missed by the divine gift of the cross. The number 77 is associated with Jesus Christ. Assigning sequential numbers to our alphabet, such as 1 for A, 2 for B, 3 for C, the numbers assigned to “Christ” are C=3, then H=8, R=18, I=9, S=19, and T=20 when added up they total 77. With Christ all sins are forgiven. I thought that was very interesting. By the way did you know in Luke’s gospel in Chapter 3:23-38 we are given the genealogy of Jesus back to Adam. If you count the decedents there are 77 generations in descending order starting with Jesus all the way back to Adam the source of the first sin. By doing so Luke shows that Christ’s mercy and forgiveness go back to Adam.

When I read today's gospel account it reminds me of my grandma Sadie, my dad's mom. She would always remind me that we should forgive those who have hurt us as often as it takes and not keep track.

St. Hilary of Poitiers who lived from 315-367 or 368 was a leading theologian and writer in what is today called France. He tells us in his commentary on Matthew that we should forgive each other as God has forgiven us our sins in their entirety by His gift and not by our merit. We can not earn forgiveness. Only by the grace of God and His son Jesus Christ can we be forgiven.

We should learn to forgive one another as God forgives us by the death of His Son on the cross. God's greatest gift to us was forgiveness. Humanity tested God and still does by not loving and forgiving one another when we get hurt. Sometimes it takes courage to offer forgiveness when we think the other person is to blame. Anger takes more energy than loving does.

We are to pattern our lives after Jesus. Since Jesus forgave us our sins by dying for us on the cross, we should forgive our neighbors.

Just like grandma Sadie taught, we should not even think about how many times we forgive, but need to cease being angry with those who sin against us, as often as it is necessary. Frequency of pardoning or forgiveness illustrates for us there is never a time for anger, since God pardon's us for all our sins in their entirety by His gift of mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus continues and tells Peter in the story that the king wanted settlement which amounted to 10,000 talents. 10,000 talents was an enormous amount of money considering that a person's average earnings were a talent a year. That amount in today's dollars would be over \$6 billion.

In our parable today, the king starts with the servant who owed the most. This servant was entrusted with a very lot of money as I just mentioned a few moments ago. We don't know what the servant did with the money. He could have squandered it or lost it some way. The reason for not being able to pay is not the point of the lesson.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:21-23 "not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name? And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" Luke also tells us in chapter 13:22-30 "He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few? And he said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ' Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.'" Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.'" But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from."

Depart from me, all you workers of evil! In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

After the king tells the servant that his family will be sold to pay the debt, he begs him to have patience with him. He promises to pay

everything that is owed. I think the king wants this to be a learning experience for the servant and those around him. He wants the servant to ask for mercy, in order for the servant to not think he was innocent of what he had done. By having pity on the servant, the king was hoping the servant would in turn have pity on his fellow servant. He wanted the servant to learn from his own situation and be merciful or forgiving to his servant.

Chromatius a bishop of Aquileia from around 388 to around 407, a city in Italy, in his commentary tells us the king is the Son of God in this parable, who held the whole human race guilty in the infinite debt of sin, since through the original sin we were all debtors of sin and death.” He further said “The ten thousand talents represent the seriousness of sin in the human race.” Chromatius continues in his commentary to tell us that though all people, by natural law, were trespassers to the heavenly king and thereby guilty of sin. All people, Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin. The Jews in particular because they could not keep the law that was received by Moses. There was no way the Jews, who had the law of Moses or for that matter the Gentiles to pay off such a debt of sin. So, our heavenly King, moved by mercy, forgave us all our sins. Now you may ask what are those sins. They are the sins we pray about in the Lord’s Prayer when we ask “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Again, there is no way, we can make penance for our sins. This is why God sent his Son to die for us on the cross. What a great gift that was and still is for us! Our debt has been paid in full. Think of it as a note with the bank or some other creditor. Our note has been paid in full for us the by water of our baptisms and the drops of Christ’ blood from the cross.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:25-27 “Therefore having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the

sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” He continues in vs29-32 “Let the bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” Forgiveness should not be given out in limited fashion. Forgiveness should be abundant and not counted and we should remember to make it available to everyone just as God’s grace and mercy has been poured out to us.

The measure of a man is not how great his faith is but how great his love is. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:13 And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

The mighty oak was once a little nut that stood its ground.

A man shall not be established by wickedness: but the root of the righteous shall not be moved. Proverbs 12:3

Let us pray. Merciful God, to thee we commend ourselves and all those who need thy help and correction. Where there is hatred, give love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is sadness, joy; where there is darkness, light. Grant that we may not seek so much to be consoled, as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for in giving we receive, in pardoning we are pardoned, and dying we are born into eternal life AMEN.