



77 Doesn't Mean 77 – TouchPoint for September 9, 2020

Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSV) ²¹ Then 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?”

²² Jesus 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. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, 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. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But 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.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“Then Peter said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

Didn't we just answer this question last week? Didn't Jesus just give instructions on how to deal with someone who sins against you in the church? Was Peter out getting lunch? Or taking a nap? What's with this guy? Or maybe he heard but preferred to have a hard and fast number. I can appreciate that, no reason for fuzzy math here. Let's get down to brass tacks. Give me a number Jesus.

What is the limit of God's forgiveness? Isn't that the question we all want to know? When can we stop forgiving? When can we finally write people off... in Jesus' name... of course? Isn't that the foundation behind all of our “But what about...” questions?

Now I should probably define what I mean by forgiveness. It means not giving up on someone. It means not writing them off. It means working for their healing and wholeness. It means being a part of their restoration, not their retribution. Either personally or through restorative systems. It means building economic, political, and justice systems that seek restoration of all. Not retribution for some. Forgiveness does not mean enabling. It does not mean anything goes. It means I will do whatever I can, within my power, to make you a better person. And if I can't, I will point you to those who can.

There is a difference between discipline and punishment. Discipline seeks to change, restore, make better. Punishment simply seeks a pound of flesh. When my boys were little, I often put them in time-out or grounded them. I did this because I hadn't given up on them. I still had hope for them. That is forgiveness –

not giving up on the other. If I had simply let them continue in their self-destructive behavior, that wouldn't be forgiveness, that would be giving up on them. And awful parenting. Conversely, if the only reason I came down hard on them was to satisfy my desire for making them pay – making them suffer – then that is punishment. And that only made things worse.

So, Peter wants to know what is the limit of God's working with us, to heal and restore us. And Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Now, I'm not normally a biblical literalist, as you have probably already figured out. But I might be on this one. Mainly because a couple of people just hit 78 on the "Who's sinned against me scorecard" that I keep. I wish someone would just come up with an app for that... so I can keep a running score throughout the day... instead of having to go back and replay every night who has sinned against me that day. It can get rather exhausting. Though I must say, the Old Adam in me finds it somewhat emotionally satisfying with a hint of righteous indignation.

So, a couple of people have hit 78 on my list. Now, it's not really important who it is, but what is important is keeping score, right?! How else do we know who is a winner and who is a loser? How else would we know who is deserving and who is not? How else do we know how to treat people if not through scorekeeping for the purpose of reward and punishment? Is there any other way? I mean, what other way could there possibly be to treat people beside scorekeeping which leads to reward and punishment?

So, here is Peter, asking Jesus basically, what are the limits of forgiveness. And Jesus responds with a parable:

A king is keeping score. And it is time to call in his debts. The first person he calls in has a debt of something like a billion dollars. It's a lot of money. He pleads for patience from the king. Notice he doesn't ask for the debt to be forgiven, but that he might have more time to pay it back. The absurdity of that request should not be dismissed. And what does the king do. He simply forgives the debt. This king, whose original intent it was to have people pay their debt, simply dies to being that kind of king. For whatever reason, he becomes a king of forgiveness rather than debt paying and score keeping.

He makes forgiveness the currency of the land. Not debt paying or scorekeeping for the purpose of reward and punishment.

The debtor, now free of his debt walks free, or maybe not...because as soon as he encounters someone who owes him money, he pounces on him. The debtor pleads in an almost verbatim way with the previously forgiven slave, but the forgiven slave does not forgive. And throws that man into prison. The king then throws the forgiven slave into prison.

So, what do we do with this text? If we take it literally then we are faced with the idea that Jesus is asking Peter to do more than God. Jesus is asking Peter to practice unlimited forgiveness, but God puts a limit on His forgiveness.

And I just don't think that is the point. I think the parable is trying to tell us that forgiveness is not so much individual, as it is relational and corporate. Forgiveness is not so much something given to me as it is a condition in which I live. I don't receive and dole out forgiveness as if it is a commodity. It is not something I can receive and possess. It is a condition, a pronouncement over me that transforms me and changes me.

It is, as I said, relational and corporate.

And that shouldn't come as a surprise because sin is not individual and private, but relational and corporate as well. Think back to the garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve sin against God, brokenness explodes throughout all of creation. Because there is brokenness with God, Adam and Eve's relationship becomes broken. Eve is to be under Adam. By the way, the idea that women are to be subservient to men is a curse of creation, not the original intent, which is why St. Paul can say, "In Christ there is no male or female." In Christ, all of creation is restored to its original intent...

But back to the garden.

Because there is brokenness with God, Adam's work as a tiller of the soil becomes full of thistles and thorns. Because of brokenness with God, childbirth pain is increased for Eve. Because of brokenness with God, animals need to fear humanity and humanity needs to fear the creatures of the earth. Because of brokenness with God, everything is broken.

And so, the opposite is true with forgiveness. It can't just be individual. It doesn't work that way. If one is forgiven – all are forgiven. If you are forgiven, so is the person next to you. And the person on the street corner. And all the deplorables on your list of deplorables.

This is what Jesus means when he says, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." The greatly forgiven slave ends up in debtor's prison because he has never left debtor's prison. He is still scorekeeping. He is still keeping track of debt. He never was free of a debtor's life. He was given a life of freedom, but he refused to die to his life of debt keeping.

It's like this. Someone once asked Nelson Mandela how he was able to forgive his captors and he said, and I'm paraphrasing here, "When I was freed **FROM** prison, I knew if I didn't forgive my captors, I would never be free **OF** the prison."

You see, forgiveness means being the 'forgive-ee' and the 'forgive-or' all at the same time. One can't experience forgiveness and continue keeping score. Forgiveness is the death of scorekeeping. And the old Adam in me does not want to do that. But this parable tells us we have a God who has died to scorekeeping. He is done with it. Over it. "It is finished," to use Jesus' words from the cross. Jesus' death is the death of scorekeeping. Forgiveness is the currency of the land, not scorekeeping for the purpose of reward and punishment.

Let that sink in. "God has died to scorekeeping and debt paying." Forgiveness is God's way. Put that new wine in your old 'God' wineskin and see if it doesn't burst it.

God doesn't limit God's forgiveness. We limit God's forgiveness. Locked up in a world of scorekeeping and debt payment, we simply are in bondage to it and cannot free ourselves. We just can't seem to escape that debtor's prison.

That is why it is so important to come to this meal. Only the words from Christ, "I forgive you," can free us up to live in forgiveness, with ourselves, and others.

Here in this meal, I am set free. And not just me but all of creation. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for ALL people for the forgiveness of sin." This is not just individual; it is relational and corporate.

Freed from having a score kept against me, I also need to be freed of my scorekeeping of others. Like Nelson Mandela, I not only need to be freed **from** that prison, I need to be freed **of** that prison. Its habits and ways and customs. I need a death and resurrection. A death and resurrection that only forgiveness can bring.

Because you see, I have received this meal more than 77 times before, according to my scorekeeping. And my only hope is that we don't take what this text says literally... Actually, that's not quite true. My only hope is that God doesn't take this text literally... And I think I'm pretty safe with that. Because I blew past 77 a long time ago...A long time ago. And yet, each time I partake of this meal, these words are spoken to me...and you,

“I forgive you. I haven’t given up on you. I haven’t written you off.”
Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

Be Still, know that I am God.

Calm Me Lord

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.
Still me Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease.
Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

The Lord's Prayer

The Meal

Come Drink of Living Water

Come drink of living water. Never thirst again.

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you. To shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you. And give you peace....