

# Seventy Times Seven

Matthew 18:21-35

Why was Jesus able to love people so abundantly and consistently throughout His ministry on earth? The disciples ignored Him, told Him what to do, argued over who was the greatest, misunderstood grace, and consistently failed to believe Him—and these were His *friends*. And yet Jesus constantly forgave them. He teaches us how to live out the victory of grace, imitating Him as we forgive seventy times seven.

## The Kingdom of Forgiveness

Jesus gives the keys of the kingdom, the power to bind and loose, to the church (16:19; 19:18), and so Peter wants to know how many times should we forgive those who sin against us. Up to seven (v. 21)? Jesus' answer that we have to forgive seventy times seven does not only mean we have to forgive a lot. This phrase first occurs in Genesis 4:24 where Lamech boasts of vengeance: "For I have killed a man for wounding me, even a young man for hurting me. If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (Gen. 4:23-24). Lamech is the great-great-great grandson of Cain, the sixth generation of violence. Cain murders his brother Abel because he obeyed God, and when the Lord asks Cain where Abel is, he lies and says, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9). Instead of loving God and his brother, Cain murders, lies, denies responsibility, and then implicitly blames God. By the sixth generation naked violence has broken out. The *lex talionis*, eye for eye, was given to curb violence and personal vengeance, and it was helpful (Ex. 21:23-27). But Jesus came in the power of the Holy Spirit to do what the law could not. Lamech committed himself to violence, and before the flood it filled the earth (Gen. 6:5, 11). Jesus came to multiply forgiveness and fill the world with the fellowship and peace of forgiveness. The other seventy times seven is the seventy weeks ("seventy sevens") that the angel Gabriel spoke to Daniel about. Israel was near the end of her seventy-year exile in Babylon, and Daniel was fasting and praying in preparation for it when God promised another period of seventy would follow: "Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy" (Dan. 9:24). Seventy weeks is seventy times seven, the 490 years leading up to the Messiah when Israel would be freed from the curse of sin and the blessing of Abraham would come to all the nations (Gal. 3:13-14, 22-24). The ramifications of this go beyond individuals. Peter asks about forgiving a brother seven times, but Jesus says everything is about to change. The prophecy of Daniel will soon be fulfilled (cf. Matt. 1:21; Lk. 1:77, 7:49; Acts 2:38).

## The Heart of Forgiveness

The kingdom of heaven is *here*, and this is what it's like (v. 23). The king wants to sort out accounts with his servants, and discovers one who owes him 10,000 talents. One talent equals 6,000 working days' wages, so this man owes him an impossible debt. He can't pay, so he's removed from whatever position allowed him to rack up this absurd amount and sold with his wife and children to work in debtor's prison (v. 25). He comes and falls down before the king, pleading for patience until he can pay all of it, and the king, moved with compassion, forgives all of it and releases the servant (vv. 26-27). Then that same servant discovers another servant who owes him a hundred denarii, a few months' wages, and takes him by the throat to demand repayment (v. 28). The debtor makes the same plea, but the servant throws him in prison anyway until the debt is paid (vv. 29-30). When the king finds out, he confronts the wicked servant for not showing compassion as it was showed to him and in anger delivers him to the torturers

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until he pays all that was due (vv. 31-34). Jesus drives the point home: “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (v. 35). Because the first servant had been forgiven an astronomical debt, it should have been easy for him to forgive his fellow servant. This is how it always is between us and our neighbor. Every sin we commit in thought, word, and deed is against an infinitely holy and righteous God. Some of the grossest sins are those we use to insist on our righteousness: “But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags” (Is. 64:6). Outside of Christ, this is our disposition: we are good enough and owe nothing. When we ask God for mercy—demerited favor—He delights to show it (Ps. 145:8-10). But when we ask for, much less insist on, what we deserve, He will give that as well: “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). C.S. Lewis said that heaven is us saying to God “Thy will be done”, and hell is Him saying to us “Thy will be done.” The servant who was forgiven ten thousand talents appears to have believed he deserved it. If God has shown us mercy for a debt *we cannot repay*, and we are not willing to forgive our brother, we have another thing coming. But if we forgive as we have been forgiven, we are simply imitating, to an infinitely lesser degree, what God has done for us (cf. Rom. 5:5). This is not optional.

## The Joy of Forgiveness

Seeking forgiveness is different than saying “I’m sorry.” You can be sorry that your friend got cancer, and sorry that you accidentally stepped on someone’s foot. You ask forgiveness for something that is totally inexcusable, which is to say, for *sin*. To cite circumstances, good intentions, and other excuses really amounts to saying it was a reasonable/acceptable/understandable thing to do and that you don’t need forgiveness. The Greek word for confess is *homologeō*, “to say the same thing.” Name the sin the way the Bible does: anger, lust, adultery, unkindness, disrespect, selfishness, greed, lies, unbelief and so on. When we do this, God forgives us for Christ’s sake and takes our sin as far away from us as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12). He forgets it: “For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more” (Heb. 8:12; Jer. 31:34). When we forgive our brothers and sisters, like God, we are making a promise not to bring it up to ourselves, to God, or to others. By not going over it repeatedly, we often forget entirely and are able to heal completely. Forgiveness is an exchange. To be received, it must be asked for. If someone has sinned against you, you are to be ready and willing to forgive them the way you have been forgiven, hopeful they will make it right (cf. Matt. 18:15-17). You know you are obeying Jesus if you want them to be blessed despite the pain they may have caused you. The great self-deception about withholding forgiveness from someone is the feeling that it somehow protects you. You feel like you are hurting them, when in fact you are spreading spiritual cancer through your own heart and life (Heb. 12:15). It’s been said that not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die. By forgiving we trust God to deal with them and to heal us, and so He does. It’s a kind of death from which God brings resurrection seventy times seven. When the church lives this way, there is nothing that can hold the gospel back.