



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Seventy-seven Times St. Matthew 18:21-35

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Matthew tells us that one day Peter came to Jesus with a question. He asked, “Lord, how many times do I have to forgive my brother when he sins against me? Is seven times enough?” How many times have we asked the same sort of question? Maybe we didn’t even get to seven. The second or the third time came around and we asked, “Do I really have to forgive again?”

I picture Peter lying wake in the middle of the night thinking about something Jesus had said or done and realizing that it changes everything—but he’s wondering exactly how it changes everything—more specifically *how much* it changes everything. Someone had repeatedly done Peter some wrong at some point and it’s not hard to imagine impetuous Peter, always ready to get in fight, taking revenge. But Jesus changes all of that. Maybe someone had sinned against him that day. The old Peter would have thrown a punch, but something Jesus had said made him stop and instead he forgave. But then it happened again. And, again, Peter held back. And now he’s lying there thinking: How many times do I have to forgive? And so, first thing in the morning, he brings his question to Jesus. But think of the implications. Old Peter wouldn’t have forgiven at all or maybe, if it was a friend, he’d forgive once. After that all bets were off what he might do in return. But he knows that Jesus is teaching grace. Jesus is offering forgiveness—and often to the sorts of people that most thought didn’t deserve to be forgiven. Peter wants to be like Jesus so he asks Jesus what he would do. “Is seven times enough?”

But think about that. If seven times is enough, what happens after that? Imagine Jesus saying, “Yes, Peter, seven times is enough. If your brother sins

against you seven times, forgive give him. But if he sins against you an eighth time, turn around and pop him one right on the nose. If he sins against you an eighth time, teach him a good lesson and make sure he never does it again. If he sins against you an eighth time, start holding a grudge and get really bitter. If he sins against you an eighth time, cut that guy out of your life, Peter; you don’t need that kind of person around.” Can you picture Jesus saying that? Neither can I. And yet this is how we often think. Often it’s the “common sense” advice we give. Be gracious at first, but if it keeps happening you’ve got to deal with it. Don’t let them push you around. Teach ‘em a lesson. Stand up for yourself. Maybe we know better than throw a punch or get revenge so we just cut the offender out of our lives.

But Jesus tells him: “No, Peter. I wouldn’t say seven times. How about you forgive him seventy-seven times?”

You see, here’s the difference. Peter’s wanting to know where grace ends and Jesus is telling him, “Peter, grace doesn’t end. That’s the whole point. That’s what makes grace grace. You forgive and you forgive and you forgive—as many times as your brother or your sisters sins against you, you forgive. That’s grace.” And that’s a hard thing for us to swallow. It’s nice to talk about forgiveness, but at some point, we think, we have to protect our rights. I have a right not to be sinned against, we think. And we’re right, but that’s just the point—that’s what makes sin sin and it’s this forgoing of our rights that makes grace grace. And this is foolishness—at least it’s foolishness to anyone who hasn’t grasped what God had done for us in Jesus.

We can cut Peter a little slack for not getting the point. The Cross was still in his future. He didn’t yet grasp the full extent of what God was going to do for him in Jesus. But this is the point of the story Jesus tells him:

Imagine a king. He’s overspent and his treasury is running low, so he brings in the royal accountant to advise him. The accountant, of course, advises that it would be a good idea if he were to economise and stop spending so much,

but he also points out that the king might be able to pay the bills if he called in some old loans. The accountant points out one man in particular. The king had loaned him ten thousand talents. That’s a lot of money. It’s the Jewish First Century equivalent of Jesus saying that the king had loaned this man a gazillion dollars. It’s a crazy and unreasonable amount—kind of like the national debt—so it’s no wonder the king’s treasury is empty.

The king calls this man to court and insists he pay back the gazillion dollars, but this man doesn’t have the means to pay it back any more than our government has the means to pay back its debt. But the king’s got his own bills to pay. He needs something from this man, so he orders him to be arrested along with his wife and children and orders they be sold as slaves. He won’t get his gazillion dollars back, but at least he’ll have something.

But the man falls at the king’s feet in tears and he begs. He begs for mercy. “Please don’t sell me into slavery. I’ll pay back every penny,” he cries. “Somehow I’ll pay it all back, just don’t sell me into slavery.” It’s a pathetic scene. There was no way he could pay it back, but the king decides to have mercy on him. He knows he’ll never see his money. What he’d get by selling the man as a slave wouldn’t be much anyway, so he graciously decides to forgive this man’s debt. Imagine the relief of the debtor as he left the king’s palace. It had been bad enough to have that huge debt hanging over his head, but then to be threatened with slavery—and now it’s all gone. He should have been the happiest man in the world that day.

But he wasn’t. Instead of going home to tell his wife the good news he remembers a guy to whom he’d loaned money himself—some of that gazillion dollar loan that he’d spread around. This man owned him a hundred denarii. A hundred denarii isn’t anything to sniff at. It’s a lot of money. Today it would be something like the price of a new car. It’s a lot, but it’s nothing like the gazillion dollars the first man owed the king. So having been forgiven this huge and unpayable debt, the man leaves the

palace to find the man who owes him money. When he finds him he grabs him by the throat, throttles him, and demands his money. And just as the first man had fallen on his knees before the king and begged for mercy, this second man falls on his knees and does the same. He too promises to pay back every penny—just not today. But that’s not good enough. The first man has him thrown into prison until he can make good on the debt.

But that’s not the end of it, Jesus says. Word gets around and eventually the king hears what happened. We can imagine how angry he would be. He calls the first man back to the palace. “You wicked servant! You scoundrel! You good for nothing!” the king shouts at him. You begged to be forgiven and in my mercy I forgave your entire debt. Shouldn’t you have shown mercy to your friend the way I showed mercy to you? And so the king in his anger had him sent to prison, just as he had sent his friend to prison. Jesus says he was handed over to the jailers. More specifically, Jesus uses a word that describes jailers who abuse and torture their prisoners.

And Jesus adds one short but frightening explanation: This is what my heavenly Father will do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart. We say, “Wait. What did you just say Jesus?” And he says, you heard me, “This is what my heavenly Father will do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.” Think about it. The lesser loan for a hundred denarii had to come out of the ten thousand talents the king had loaned the first man. With that loan forgiven, there was absolutely no need to collect on the second, lesser loan. And just so with God’s forgiveness. When he forgives our sins against him, we’ve been freed from our debt. We have absolutely no reason to go after our fellow sinners for the debts they owe to us. We do, however, have good reason to forgive them. Each time we forgive, we share a little bit of the forgiveness God had given us.

It helps, too, to remember sin from God’s perspective. We have a tendency to think of ourselves as just ordinary, run-of-the-mill sinners, but then we look at others—especially the people who have sinned against us, the people against whom we hold grudges, the people we don’t like—and we think of them as being really big sinners. But, Brothers and Sisters, from the perspective of God’s perfect holiness, the difference between my sin and your sin or even the sins of the most awful people we can imagine is like the distance between Courtenay and Victoria when you look at a map of the whole world. From our perspective on the ground it seems like a long way. It takes a couple of hours to drive. But then you look at a map of the world or you look at a globe and you can’t even put your finger on Victoria without covering up the whole Island. From that perspective the difference is nothing. From the perspective of God’s infinite and perfect holiness there’s simply no significant difference between your sinfulness and my sinfulness or your neighbour’s sinfulness.

Now, that said, Jesus’ point is not that we just pretend the offense or the sin didn’t happen. Forgiveness isn’t the same thing as ignoring the offense. Just before this in Chapter 18 Jesus tells the disciples that what we’re after is *reconciliation*. If your brother or your sisters sins against you, Jesus says in verse 15, go and talk to him or to her about it one on one. Our tendency when someone offends us is to get angry, to retaliate, or to just shut that person out of our life, but that’s not what Christians are called to do. Go and talk to the person about it. He may apologise and you can be friends again. It may be that he didn’t even realise he’d done something wrong. It might be that *you* misinterpreted the incident. So go and talk about it between the two of you, sort it out, apologise and forgive as the situation requires, and be *restored*. But, Jesus says, if he won’t listen to you, don’t just write him off. Go back with one or two others and try again. Again, the goal is reconciliation and restoration. If that still doesn’t work, then Jesus says to “tell it to the church”—let the elders

or the bishop go to this person and talk to him about it. If that doesn’t work, then that person is to be treated, Jesus says, like a tax collector or a Gentile—like an outsider. The “churchy” term for this is excommunication. An unrepentant sinner is to be treated like a non-Christian. But excommunication isn’t meant to be revenge or retaliation. It’s a warning from his fellow Christians: If you’re not going to bear the fruit Christians are supposed to bear—especially repentance—then you’re no longer welcome at the Lord’s Table. This is a place for people who have repented and committed to following Jesus and you’re doing just the opposite. And, as Paul points out later in the New Testament, our hope and prayer is that this person will snap out of it and repent and start being the Christian he’s claimed to be—that he’ll be restored and really start living the life the Spirit has given him. Unrepentant sin really does need to be addressed. Forgiveness doesn’t set it aside. Forgiveness seeks to bring to bear the sacrifice Jesus has made at the cross on our human conflicts. It seeks to restore an unrepentance believer and it seeks to show God’s grace and mercy to unbelievers.

But that doesn’t fully answer why Jesus says so solemnly that those who refuse to forgive will themselves be refused forgiveness. Some people try to explain away the plain meaning of what Jesus says here. I was talking with one man who had been holding a grudge for so long that it had consumed everything. The grudge had become his reason for living. I pointed him to Jesus’ parable here and this scary warning and his response was that it couldn’t mean what looks like at face value because if it did then Jesus would be saying that we’re saved by our works. “God’s forgiveness covers everything,” he told me, “even our unforgiveness.”

And yet this is the whole point of the parable. The king’s mercy forgave the first man’s debt—but *not* when he refused to forgive his friends debt. And Jesus really does say, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother

from your heart.” And it’s not just Jesus who makes this point. We come back to this throughout the New Testament. God’s forgiveness isn’t like your mom’s dinner that will still be there for you even if you didn’t clean your room like she asked or even if you argued with her and went off in a huff. God’s forgiveness isn’t like the Christmas gift that loving grandparents give their bratty grandchild who doesn’t like to visit and who doesn’t even think of getting them a gift in return.

Forgiveness is different. Think of it like breathing. You can only inhale a lung-full of fresh, oxygen-rich air if you first exhale the stale, depleted air that’s already in your lungs. Inhale and refuse to exhale and you’ll suffocate. If you’re giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and you insist on keeping your lung-full of air to yourself instead of sharing it with someone in need, you’ll both die. And just so with our hearts. Your heart can be closed or it can be open. If your heart is open, if you’re willing to forgive others, your heart will naturally be open to receive the forgiveness that God offers us in Jesus. But if your heart is closed, if you’ve shut it tight and refuse to forgive, your shut heart won’t be able to receive God’s forgiveness.

This isn’t easy, but Jesus gets at the key at the beginning of the chapter. The disciples came to him and asked who the greatest in the kingdom would be. “Hey Jesus, which one of us is your favourite?” But instead of giving the answer they wanted to hear, Jesus picked up a child and said, “Unless you change and become like children, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven. You’ve got to become *humble*, like this child, then you will be great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Why do we struggle to forgive?

Because we think we’re something, because we demand our rights, because our *pride* has been hurt. Someone sins against me and my first thought is for my rights. My pride keeps me from seeking reconciliation with the jerk who sinned against me—with that loser who doesn’t know Jesus, with that jerk who needs God’s judgement. Pride keeps us

from forgiving. It was pride that drove the man in the parable to have his friend thrown into prison. He should have been joyful that the king forgave his debt, but instead he was angry and resentful for having been humbled before the king. And so, because of his pride, he went looking for someone lower than himself, someone over whom he had power—someone he could kick around so that he could recover his lost dignity and feeling of superiority. And it’s the same with us when we kneel before God and receive his forgiveness and then go out to assert our rights or lord our power over another by refusing to forgive. It makes our show of humility before God just that: a show, a sham. This is why we can’t receive God’s forgiveness unless we’re willing to be forgiving ourselves. If we truly are humble before God we will be humble before our others too.

These past few weeks we’ve heard Paul in our Epistles urging us to live the life the Spirit has given. That includes loving each other, showing mercy to each other, patiently bearing with each other—showing forgiveness to each other. As you come to the Lord’s Table this morning, think of the fact that in Jesus, God humbled himself for our sake. St. Paul writes in Philippians:

**Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.**  
(Philippians 2:3-7)

Have *this* mind among yourselves. If you’re counting the times you’ve forgiven someone you don’t have the mind of Christ. If you’re holding a grudge you don’t have the mind of Christ. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus gave his life for ours. Jesus humbled himself for our sake. It takes humility to open our hearts, to admit our sin and to

repent. It takes humility to receive the grace offered by a beaten man hanging on a bloody cross. But if we are humble enough to open our hearts to such grace, our hearts will inevitably be humble and open to others, ready to share God’s grace with the worst of sinners that they, too, can know the reconciling love of God in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we pray as Jesus taught us: forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. May those be more than words we say. Forgiving is so often hard to do. Break our pride. Make us truly humble. And teach us to share your grace with others, that as you have forgiven us, we will forgive others—not grudgingly, but each time with greater and greater joy—joy to spread your grace around us, joy to see others experience the love of Jesus. We ask this in his name. Amen.