

**The Merciful King**  
**September 16 and 17, 2023**  
**Sixteen Saturday and Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Second in a Series of Four Sermons, “Connecting People to Jesus”**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

**Peter came up and said to Jesus, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.**

Dear Friends in Christ,

According to an excerpt of the book *Why Forgive?* in Plough Quarterly, Steven McDonald was a young police officer in 1986 when he was shot by a teenager in New York’s Central Park, an incident that left him paralyzed. “I forgave [the shooter] because I believe the only thing worse than receiving a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart,” McDonald wrote.

*An Iranian woman Samereh Alinejad had told The Associated Press that “retribution had been her only thought” after her teenage son was murdered. But in a dramatic turn at the gallows, literally moments before the killer was to be executed, she made a last-minute decision to pardon the man. She is now considered a hero.*

*In an interview with Real Simple, domestic violence survivor Pascale Kavanagh said that she never thought she would reconnect with her mother—her abuser—during her adult life. However, in 2010, her mother suffered several strokes that left her unable to communicate or take care of herself. With no one else to help, Kavanagh began to sit by her mother’s bedside and read to her. Through this, Kavanagh says the hate she had for her mother dissipated into forgiveness and love.*

Peter should be given credit for extending personal forgiveness to “up to seven times.” The old Jewish teaching was that three times was enough. Human nature is to live according to the laws of the jungle - eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, and life for life. You push me, and I’ll push you back harder. You mess with me one too many times, and you’ll be sorry. When our hearts go untouched by God’s love, we are tempted towards bitterness on steroids, or to say it another way, unlimited vindictiveness.

In today's sermon, we will unpack what Jesus means when he says to Peter that we are to forgive each other up to seventy seven times, or to say it another way unlimited forgiveness.

In this sermon series, our theme is "Connecting People to Jesus."

- Last Sunday, we focused on Jesus, the Passionate Lover of our souls. We explored going through life from the perspective of 1) a child growing up welcomed, encouraged, protected, provided for, and disciplined, and 2) a lost sheep that had been searched for, rescued, returned, and rejoiced over.
- Next Sunday, - "Jesus the Generous Master"
- The Sunday after that - "Jesus, the Obedient Servant."
- Today - Jesus, the Merciful King.

Three quotes for you to keep in mind as we explore our text tonight.

*Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.*

*Always forgive your enemies, it really annoys them.*

And a lesson that Joseph learned and expressed in today's Old Testament lesson, *"Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does open the door to an enlarged future.*

***Two lessons we would learn about what it looks and sounds like when we forgive others their trespasses, in response to God forgiving ours. First we would learn about God's heart, and secondly, what it means to have a heart for our neighbors.***

***First we would explore what was in the heart of the king in today's parable.***

In terms of today's dollars, servant #1 owed the king 7.2 billion. I arrive at that number starting with 10,000 talents. One denarii equals one day's wages for a common laborer. At \$15 an hour, 8 hours a day, each talent of gold equals 600,000 denarii. Old sermons I've preached listed the debt at 12 million and as high as 1 billion. Today's sermon - 7.2 billion. The bottom line is that it's an unpayable debt.

So also imagine that you and I could limit ourselves to 10 sins a day. 10 times 365 is 365,000. Now imagine that you are as old as my sister Judy who turns 72 today. 72 times 365,000 is 26,280,000 sins. Bottom line - an unpayable debt.

The first **truth** we learn about the king's heart is that the debt has to be paid. **Since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.**

Notice what the king did not say. He did not say that times were tough and I'm sure you're doing the best you can, I'll let it go just this once. No. Even though the top price for a slave in that day was 1 talent of gold, he insisted on full payment.

So also did God thunder in Old Testament times, **"Be ye therefore holy, even as I am holy."** And Jesus declaring in His Sermon on the Mount what we know is impossible, **"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."**

Truth #1 about the king's heart is that debt has to be paid. Truth #2 about the King's heart is that when patience is begged for, there is a compassion that finds a way to release the petitioner and forgive the debt.

One more time this morning, we celebrate that not only was God patient with the nation of Israel, He found a way to make full and complete payment for the sins of poor and miserable and stubborn and rebellious people of Israel. That way has a Name. You know it well.

Not only has God been patient with us Gentiles, He did what was necessary for the debts of thousands of generations of poor and miserable and ornery and arrogant sinners to be satisfied. The one person in world history who could offer up a once and for all sacrifice to end all other required sacrifices did what he was sent to do. Jesus had to be a true man so that he could be our substitute. He had to be true God so His sacrifice could be a sufficient ransom payment.

A story is told about a missionary who was talking to an old Indian about what it was like to be a Christian. The Indian said that being a Christian was like having two dogs inside of him fighting. There was the bad dog, called sin, and the good dog, called righteousness. The missionary asked which dog was winning. The answer: the one I feed the most.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers full of folks with a battle going on in each of their hearts, every day, with no exception. It is a battle between a spirit of gratefulness to God for mercy received and a spirit of bitterness towards others for damage done. Gratefulness vs. bitterness.

***Secondly, we learn how ugly life can get when we refuse to pass along God's mercy to others. And how beautiful life can be when gratefulness to God wins the day.***

The servant who had been forgiven the equivalent of 7.2 billion dollars went out and found a fellow servant who owed, in today's dollars, \$12,000. He grabbed him by the throat and said, "Pay me what you owe." The fellow servant did exactly what he had done. He fell down at his feet, begged for patience, and promised to pay all. The encounter went from bad to worse. Servant #1 did what he had the right to do. He denied the request and followed the law.

At which time, the situation went from worse to ugly. Fellow servants were understandably upset. They reported to the king what the ungrateful servant had done. Busted! With a righteous anger, the master delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

Dear friends in Christ, as often as we are tempted into bitterness for wrongs committed against us, life gets ugly. Grudges that are nurtured are grudges that grow and bear bad fruit. The desire to punish those who continue to disappoint us are unholy desires and never have a good ending. One more time this morning, we would bring all the grudges we have been feeding, all of the bitterness we have been holding onto, and all of the memories that have been dragging us down -we bring them to the foot of the cross. We beg one more time for God to be patient with us. We behold the Lamb of God who drinks the full cup of a righteous God's wrath. He taketh away the guilt of our sins, he taketh away the power of our temptations, he taketh away the ugliness of our unholy desires.

Dear friends, how beautiful our life together can be when we cry out for God's forgiveness, we receive and enjoy that forgiveness, and then we give it away as fast as we can do so.

In closing today, we would focus on what forgiving 70 times 7 is not and what it is.

Forgiving without limit those who have sinned against us ***is not*** to wait to be triggered by that other person apologizing and changing their ways. It is to be triggered by the mercies of Almighty God which are new every morning.

Forgiving 70 times 7 those who keep on disappointing and hurting us with their bad behavior does not mean staying quiet and remaining in abusive situations. It does mean making a decision not to seek revenge, even as we stand in God's grace and rebuke them for the error of their ways.

Forgiving our neighbors from the heart does not necessarily mean that we are reconciled to them or that we trust them or that we enjoy spending time with them. It does mean that we treat them as we would like them to treat us. That our desire for them to get what they deserve gives way to a holy desire for them to get what Christ has earned for them by suffering, dying, and rising again.

Some of you are old enough to remember the Lennon sisters, who sang their way to fame back in the 60's along with the likes of Jimmy Durante and Lawrence Welk. You might not remember that their father was brutally killed by an emotionally disturbed man who claimed to be one of the sisters' husbands. That night, as the family gathered together with their priest for comfort and prayer, 11 year old Mimi Lennon quickly piped up, "We have to pray for the man who shot Daddy. And so on the very night their father died, this family held hands and prayed for their daddy's killer. One sister Kathy Lennon later wrote, "It was one of the beautiful things that came out of Dad's death."

One of my favorite songs includes this refrain,  
*Oh, Lord, You're beautiful*  
*Your face is all I seek*  
*For when Your eyes are on this child*  
*Your grace abounds to me*

Dear friends in Christ, my simple prayer in closing today is that the beautiful moments in our life together would more and more outnumber the ugly ones.

In our ugly moments, we will refuse to pass along God's mercy to others, and in so doing, we will forfeit our own forgiveness. Stinginess, pettiness, and grudge-holding will win the day.

In our beautiful moments, we will be confessing our faults and failures early and often, at which time God's grace will sweep over our sanctuary and rule in our hearts. Gratefulness, humility, prayerfulness, and the forgiveness of sins will win the day. In the strong Name of Christ. Amen.