

Pentecost +16
Rev. Doug Floyd
Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew asks the question that God's disciples sometimes ask in their hearts, "How many times must I forgive my brother?" Seven times? Jesus answers with the almost incalculable number seventy times seven. This number points to some complete or comprehensive forgiveness that knows no limits.

Jesus tells the now familiar story of the king who forgives his servant of a vast sum and that same servant who fails to forgive his brother of a much smaller debt. How could he fail to forgive so little a debt when he has been forgiven so vast a debt. Exactly.

That's the point of the story. Our debts are small compared to the debt that God has forgiven and continues to forgive us. If I am not careful, I will slip over the profound challenge of today's text without struggling to understand something of the mystery and challenge of forgiveness.

I tried to list some of the types and levels of forgiveness that humans face.

- Irritation – We most often have little irritations that we must let go. A misspoken word, a failure to follow up on our word, a misunderstanding, or some other irritation that we hold onto.
- Fellow drivers – It is easy to fall into the habit of cursing other drivers or at least calling them some less than favorable name. Nowadays, we realize that this kind of offense can easily grow into a life and death road rage situation. Lord teach us to show grace when we drive.
- Workplace offenses – This can be trivial or serious and painful. What happens when a co-worker or a supervisor alters our job in a way that causes us financial loss or unending tension or even job loss altogether?
- Family offenses – A family is sharing the same space and must continually negotiate with one another in the midst of moods, hunger, lack of sleep and other stressors. We are likely to face the challenge of forgiving each other multiple times a day.
- Impersonal offenses – Then we have a series of offenses that we cannot talk to a person directly to solve the problem. Political leaders may make decisions that impact our lives in a negative way. At the same time, people suffer as a result of medical malfeasance, police brutality, and other systemic issues.
- Crime – Some people will suffer at the hands of a con person, a burglary or even some worse crime. This kind of pain can be traumatic.

- Now we come to some deeply difficult degrees of forgiveness that most of us may never face. Consider victims of war crime. The film *The Secret Life of Words* explores the long-lasting suffering of a girl caught in the Balkans War. It is a painful film to watch but communicates the real anguish that many victims of war crime live with the rest of their lives. Christians suffering for their faith have experienced unthinkable treatment at the hands of soldiers and torturers. Richard Wurmbrand who spent over 15 years in prison for his faith suggested that abused wives and children might be compared to persecuted Christians.

As we come to the last few types of forgiveness, we come face to face with deep pains that cause lasting problems. How do people even begin to forgive these traumas? I thought if we are to take seriously Jesus' admonition to forgive, we might focus on these difficult situations of forgiveness. This might help shine light on our everyday forgiveness.

To help me think through this, I looked up an expert on forgiveness: Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian. He grew up in culture of racial tension that eventually turned into the Balkans war. By the time the war came along, Volf was living in America, but he kept ties with family in his homeland. He wrestled theologically with how to forgive an enemy who has harmed you so deeply. As a result Volf wrote *Exclusion and Embrace* and the *End of Memory*, which both explore these difficult issues.

In 2006, he wrote *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. In this book offers a theology of forgiveness through the lens of Martin Luther. I highly recommend it. I think we used to have one or two copies of it at the back. So hopefully some of you have read it.

As we consider the call to forgiveness, I will be drawing from some of Volf's ideas. First of all I am reminded of a thought from Hans Urs Von Balthasar and his short book on hell. When considering the hope of universal salvation for all humanity, Von Balthasar points out that there must be recompense. How can God be just if villains are not punished? Yet how can judgment be exacted in such a way that makes room for mercy.

Justice without mercy means the destruction of all things. For all of us deserve judgment. The film *Dogville* explores this theme. I wouldn't recommend the film. It is dark and depressing but it shows a world of justice without mercy. A woman has been held captive in a small town and used by the people of the town. Eventually she escapes and returns home to her father. He is a gangster and returns with his men to the town, killing everyone in the town.

When people cry for justice, I fear they don't know what they want. Justice without mercy could sweep us all away in a torrent of retribution. We see this kind of terror at the end of the *Odyssey*. After overcoming many great difficulties, Odysseus finally arrives home only to discover all these men living off his wealth and trying to marry his wife because they think he will never return home. He exacts vengeance on these men in an act of horrific bloodshed. Many ancient culture and contemporary cultures live within a cycle of revenge.

Jesus calls us outside of this destructive cycle. He calls us into a life of forgiveness. He calls us into this life by forgiving us. His forgiveness does not ignore the need for justice. His forgiveness fulfills justice through his own life. In the cross of Christ, we see the Triune God respond to the sin of humanity. God takes the breach between humans and God into himself. He takes our sin and the repercussions of our sin onto himself.

All human sin, violence, wrongdoing, hatred, and evil is taken upon himself. Because Jesus Christ is fully man, he can enter into our sin and death. Because Christ is fully God, he can bear all our sin beyond the limits of time. There is no offence that we have committed that cannot be forgiven. Thus Paul can write,

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”¹ Paul can also write, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”²

The unbridgeable gulf between God and humans has been crossed in the person of Jesus Christ. We have received a mercy that knows no depths. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38). This is the place we begin to speak of showing mercy.

This mercy that we show does not ignore the offense of the wrongdoer and this mercy does not operate aside from the Triune God. In other words, when we show mercy, we forgive a specific offense. We acknowledge the offense. At the same time, we count that offense toward the cross of Christ. It is only through the Spirit of God that we can extend the mercy of God to one who has hurt us.

Most of the time, we offer little forgivenesses to one another on a daily basis. But there are pains that grip the heart and haunt the mind. I am suggesting that we can find strength in the power of the Spirit to offer forgiveness to the offender. This topic requires more time than we have today, but I hope it is a beginning for some prayer and reflection for each of us.

I want to offer a shortened account of Corrie Ten Boom’s struggle to forgive. She writes,

“And that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister’s frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 3:10–12.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 5:8.

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!"

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there." No, he did not remember me.

"But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein"—again the hand came out—"will you forgive me?"

And I stood there—I whose sins had every day to be forgiven—and could not. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality.

Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

"Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”³

Corrie Ten Boom still had to struggle with the pain and the feelings. But she kept turning these back to God, and by His Spirit, He freed her and led her more deeply into his love. We are a people that live in the reality of God’s forgiveness. May we be a people who live in the reality of God’s forgiveness.

³ Guideposts Classics: Corrie ten Boom on Forgiveness < <https://guideposts.org/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-forgiveness/>>