

## Jesus' Prayer: Forgive

*Matthew 18:21-35 (Common English Bible)*

*Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"*

*Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. Because the servant didn't have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, 'Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.' The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.*

*"When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, 'Pay me back what you owe me.'*

*"Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.*

*"When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. His master called the first servant and said, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. Shouldn't you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt.*

*"My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

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Parents of an Ecuadorian tribe have an unforgiving custom. When their children go to sleep at night, they linger by the bedside and whisper in their ears the names of the people they must hate when they're older. It's the tribe's way of keeping feuds alive from generation to generation.

We hear this custom and wonder how parents could do that to their kids. We know such negativity can poison the minds of children. Adults and kids aren't made to live with such hostility. It corrodes the heart and eats like an acid into the soul.

But if we're honest with ourselves, haven't we felt the same? We resent family members for the way they've treated us. We're jealous of neighbors and friends. We still remember being hurt or embarrassed from years ago. Our hearts are warehouses of unsorted wounds, grudges, or disappointments. And many of them can still bring fire to our eyes and color to our cheeks.

Jesus understood this part of our humanity. He experienced such feelings and witnessed them in his family, followers, and friends. He knew an unforgiving spirit can settle like a fog and shut out

God's grace. Throughout his ministry he talked about and practiced acts of forgiveness and mercy.

Jesus emphasized it with everyone, especially his disciples. They were normal human beings with grudges and resentments. Peter was probably the worst. He was a volatile man, given to outbursts of tongue and temper. He marched up to his Master one day and demanded, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

We can imagine the altercation precipitating his question. Maybe it was with Thomas. Thomas was a quiet, stubborn man who may have needled others when offended. You know the type - a little dagger here, a little dagger there. Not a lot of bloodletting, but many little stabs. Maybe he called Peter Mr. Know-It-All or Mr. Blabbermouth. Accusations close to the truth hurt more than insults that miss us by a mile.

Peter's red face barely contained his anger. "Lord, how many times must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Peter thought he was being generous. The Jewish law required a three-fold pattern of forgiveness. He doubled the number and hoped Jesus would say, "Oh, I don't think you need to go that far. Maybe four times. Then you can confront him."

But Jesus didn't. Jesus replied, "Not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times." Or as some translations say, "seventy times seven." The actual number isn't important. Jesus didn't literally mean 77 or 490 times.

He meant, "You haven't begun to get warm. You're supposed to forgive time after time after time. You're supposed to forgive more times than you want to count. You're suppose to forgive so many times you can't remember the wrong by the time you reach the end."

According to Jesus, there's no limit to forgiveness. Forgiveness is a way of life that grows out of one's understanding of God and the world. A heart in tune with God produces forgiveness as regularly and effortlessly as the glands in our bodies secrete fluids necessary for life. It's all part of the fabric of forgiveness.

Jesus weaves a story about the fabric of forgiveness by telling about a king who was going over his accounts. He found one servant owed him a fantastic sum of money - ten thousand bags of gold. It's like the national debt! The servant couldn't possibly re-pay it.

Faced with being sold into slavery along with his wife and children, the servant begged for mercy. The king took pity on him, released him and forgave the debt. In one gracious, unbelievable act, the king wiped out astronomical indebtedness.

This newly forgiven servant went into the king's courtyard. He spied a fellow who owed him money - a hundred gold coins. It wasn't a huge debt. In fact, it was infinitesimal compared to the debt the servant had just been forgiven.

Apparently the first servant forgot what the king had done. He also had a shallow sense of gratitude. He failed to be transformed by the great mercy shown to him. Grabbing his fellow servant by the throat - a vicious gesture – he demanded to be paid. When the second servant pleaded for patience, the first had none and had him thrown into prison until he paid his debt.

Word got back to the king about the forgiven servant's behavior. The king was furious. How could anyone have such a lopsided understanding of justice? Summoning the servant back to his court the king said, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. Shouldn't you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?”

In his rage over the servant's unforgiving spirit, the king had him thrown into prison until he could pay his entire debt, which everyone knew wasn't going to happen. Jesus ended by saying, “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Now Jesus isn't saying, “God's forgiveness is tit for tat, but forgiveness is all of one fabric. You and I cannot have our forgiveness without granting it to others. God has forgiven our sins, as terrible as they were. You and I are to share that forgiveness with others who have offended us. Whatever anyone has done to us cannot compare with the hurt we cause God.

Beloved, when we know we're forgiven by God and held in the divine heart, when this gracious and wonderful realization is internalized and embodied, we can forgive anyone anything. We can pray, as Jesus did, even for the person who persecutes us.

Max Lucado tells a powerful story of forgiveness. It's about a man named Daniel who lived in the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre. He worked at a gym and dreamed of owning it. The bank agreed to finance the purchase if he could find someone to cosign the note. His brother agreed.

They filled out the applications and awaited approval. Everything went smoothly, and Daniel received a call from the bank telling him to pick up the check. As soon as he got off work, he went to the bank. When the loan officer saw Daniel, he looked surprised and asked why he was there. To pick up the check, he said.

"That's funny," responded the banker. “Your brother was here earlier. He cashed the check and used it to retire the mortgage on his house.”

Daniel was incensed. He never dreamed his own brother would betray him. He stormed over to his brother's house and pounded on the door. The brother answered the door with his daughter in his arms. He knew Daniel wouldn't hit him if he was holding a child. He was right.

Daniel didn't hit him. But he promised his brother that if he ever saw him again, he would break his neck. Daniel went home, his big heart bruised and ravaged by his brother's trickery. He had no choice but to go back to the gym and work to pay off the debt.

Months later, Daniel met a young American missionary named Alien Dutton. Alien befriended Daniel and taught him about Jesus Christ. Daniel and his wife became Christians. But Daniel struggled with forgiveness. He knew he was forgiven much, he found it impossible to forgive his brother. The wound was deep. The pot of revenge still simmered.

Daniel didn't see his brother for two years. He couldn't bring himself to look into the face of the one who betrayed him. And his brother liked his own face too much to let Daniel see it. But an encounter was inevitable.

It happened one day on a busy street. Listen to Daniel tell what happened: *I saw (my brother), but he didn't see me. I felt my fists clench and my face get hot. My initial impulse was to grab him around the throat and choke the life out of him. But as I looked into his face, my anger began to melt. For I saw in him the image of my father. I saw my father's eyes. I saw my father's look. I saw my father's expression. And as I saw my father in his face, my enemy once again became my brother.*

Daniel walked toward him. The brother stopped, turned, and started to run, but Daniel grabbed his shoulder. The brother winced, expecting the worst. But rather than have his throat squeezed by Daniel's hands, he found himself hugged by Daniel's big arms. The two brothers stood in the middle of a river of people and wept together.

Daniel's words are worth repeating: "When I saw the image of my father in his face, my enemy became my brother."

Seeing Our Father's image in the face of your enemy. Try that next time you see or think of the one who broke your heart. Look again for the face of the One who forgave you. Look into the eyes of the King who wept when you pleaded for mercy. Look into the face of God who gave you grace when no one else gave you a chance. And because God has forgiven you more than you can imagine, more than you'll ever have to forgive your sister or brother, set yourself and that person free. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

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