

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (Matthew 18:21-35 NIV2011)

Forgive as Your Father Forgives You

He knew it was coming sooner or later. He had done the math. It would take him more than 1000 years to work off this debt of 10,000 bags of gold. He didn’t know how things had gotten so far out of hand. But there he was and the king wants to settle accounts. He knew there was no excuse he could make. He knew better. But he couldn’t let his wife and kids end up in prison working off this debt. He loved them so much. But all he could do was beg and plead as he falls to his knees at his master’s feet. “Be patient with me! I promise I’ll pay it back. Can’t we work something out? I’ll do better next time, I swear it! Have mercy on me!” He wasn’t just saying it to say it either. This was coming from the heart.

Then he hears it. Are you serious? You aren’t kidding? The master says, “Your debt is canceled. You are free.” The servant knows it’s not because of the promises he makes. It’s not because he struck a great bargain with the king. It’s not because of how genuine his pleading was. It’s because the king is compassionate. His heart went

out to this poor servant who could never pay him back. And out of love, the king forgives. He's free! The heavy burden of that debt that was always on the back of his mind is gone. He's free from any sort of obligations or demands. He's free from having to work anything off. He's free. Everything has changed. It was like being given a new life.

He had to have an extra skip in his step as he went home to tell his wife and kids the good news. That is, until he saw him. He was having such a great day too. He had borrowed that guy pretty much a quarter of his yearly salary—three months of his own money. But it wasn't just the money that bothered him—it was the principal of the fact. This was a personal offense against him and his family. It's high time for this debt to be settled. His fellow servant's cries sound so pitiful as he shakes him. Did he think that crying for mercy would pay the bills? What did this guy's promises mean? Words are cheap. Promises worth even less. Can't his fellow servant see how much he hurt him? Can't he see what he did to his life? Did he really think patience and mercy were possible after what he did?

We look at that guy from Jesus' parable and we think: "What a jerk. How could he be so mean? How could he act like that?"

You hear, "Your sins are forgiven. Depart in peace." But then, how long after you walk out of those church doors do you see or think of someone who has wronged you and you want them to know how you feel. You remember someone who took advantage of your love. You see someone who hasn't always treated you very lovingly. They said some things that just came off as cruel. No, you didn't go and strangle them with your hands. But the bitterness and resentment you feel towards them could have. They need to "pay up." Do you even have to wait until you reach the church doors? Or have you already thought of someone who fits that bill? It sometimes happens when you read your devotions and something triggers your thoughts about someone. Then there's this slow-simmering rage that begins boiling underneath. Other times it was right after something happened and you said, "I don't think I could ever forgive you." We will make comments about how we all need to better forgive. But then it's almost a point of personal pride that people know better than to wrong you because will hold it against them.

And you have your reasons too. And in your mind they are valid and warranted. They hurt you. They hurt someone you love. It was cruel. They should have known better. You are still dealing with the fall-out and trauma of the entire situation. You want to make sure this doesn't happen to anyone else. You don't want there to be a future-you who is in the same situation. You don't want to do this to them, you say, but you need to protect others. You want to make sure someone pays for the wrongs of the

past. You can't just let them slip past; that's not fair. And so we hold those sins over people's heads to make sure their apology is genuine enough and up to your standards. You say you forgive them but then demand they do a specific action to show they have *really* repented. You keep that grudge in your back pocket just in case they sin against you again. Then you can pile it onto all of their past wrongs and point out, "I knew they would do it again." And worldly speaking, you're right. It's hard to argue against. It makes sense because otherwise what you suffered might be ignored and forgotten. It's not fair.

So, which one of your sins do you want God to hold against you? Which one of your sins do you want God to demand you repay?

When the king hears what this servant did, it did not sit too well with him. He wasn't angry before about the outstanding debt. The servant wasn't wicked until he did this. It seems so obvious: **"Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"** But because this servant demands to hold this debt against his fellow servant, the king demands the same. And so, the servant is thrown into jail where the jailers would torture him until he was able to pay back what he owes. In other words, it's never going to stop.

Jesus says, **"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."** You pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Do you recognize what you are saying as you hold onto those grudges, as you hold those sins against others, as you demand they pay for what they've done wrong, as you continue to harbor that resentment? Yes, it hurts. And, yes, it's hard. But if you insist on holding that sin against them when they have repented, which one of your sins do you want God to hold against you?

The thing is the king doesn't want to. He knows even after a 1000 years you couldn't come close to paying for one sin. He hears your promises and knows that they'll be broken. He knows even your best intentions won't be enough. And so, what does the Father do knowing full well he should throw you into the prison of hell to be tortured for all eternity?

He forgives you. He sees the devil grabbing you in a chokehold accusing you of all your sins. He sees how the world wants to hold them over your head. He sees how your conscience shakes you to the very core knowing the debt you owe the King of heaven and earth. And the Father sees your miserable state and loves you. Because he knows that that debt has already been paid at the cross. While we still owed him the debt for our sins, Jesus dies for us. With the shedding of his blood worth more than any silver or gold Jesus pays the entire debt you and I could not. Instead of torturing you for eternity, the Father punishes his own Son on the cross. Instead of demanding

your life from you, Jesus willingly gives his own. And when Jesus breathes his last, death imprisons Jesus in that tomb. But the price had been paid. And the King accepted it. And three days later the King shows us the receipt with the empty tomb. We know the debt is paid because Jesus lives.

That same Jesus tells you, “Stop trying to make up for your sins. I already paid for them all. Stop promising to do better next time. I did it all perfectly for you. I’ve already forgiven you all your sins, including those times when you have not forgiven as the Father forgives you. I want nothing in return or for you to try and pay me back. It’s yours. It’s free. It’s fresh, new, and infinite each and every morning. I’ve set you free!”

That’s what the Holy Spirit seals to you at your baptism. From the time the water and Word touches your head until the day he calls you home God will never call you to pay for a single sin. It’s all forgiven in Jesus’ name. That’s what he assures you of when you receive Jesus’ body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. There you receive the payment for your sin and assurance that your sins are forgiven again. When you’ve fallen into the same sin again, Jesus doesn’t say, “That was one time too many. You’ve reached your limit.” No, because you are God’s blood-bought, baptized, sin-debt free child, he forgives you.

This means everything has changed. You have a new life with Jesus’ forgiveness as your own. This forgiveness doesn’t stop at the doors of the church. You breathe this forgiveness and share it with one another. We forgive not so that we can be forgiven. We already are. We forgive because forgiveness is yours through faith. Because God has forgiven you, this is what we want to do as his people. This is ultimately our goal when confronting sinners. We want them to confess their sins so that we might forgive them.

But how often? What if they do it again? That’s Peter’s question. And I’m sure he thinks that he’s being pretty generous when he asks, “Up to 7 times?” But from Jesus’ response we learn, it’s not about doing the math or keeping the score. Because I’m already forgiven and part of God’s kingdom, I don’t need to. I don’t need try and get even. I don’t need or want to hold someone’s sins over their heads. It’s not up to me to make sure they are *really* sorry. I don’t need to try and keep count. Thanks be to God their entire debt along with my own is already forgiven in Jesus’ name. So, forgive from the heart as the Father forgives you. Amen.