

Sunday, September 11-17 (A) - Matthew 18:21-35

The Challenge of Discipleship: *Forgiveness*

Focus question: *What place does forgiveness have in your life and why?*

word of life

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Matthew 18:21 (NRSV)

Read Matthew 18:21–35.

The context of this passage is a series of teachings by Jesus to the disciples. Jesus has just taught about relationships within the church, particularly when there has been wrongdoing. Peter jumps in with an important question, “How often should I forgive?”

We can relate to Peter. Invariably he jumps to the heart of the matter—right or wrong.

Specifically, Peter wants to know, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter does not address situations outside the church. He wants to know within the church family. “When is enough—enough?” Peter suggests seven is more than sufficient. Seven is the number of perfection, the number of days of creation as described in Genesis 1.

1. *What response might Peter have expected from Jesus?*

In his response, Jesus turns things upside down by choosing to focus on grace rather than obligation. The question is changed from “How many times do I *have* to forgive?” to “Now that I am forgiven, how many times am I *free* to forgive?” And that makes all the difference. In other words, “Peter, don’t even try to keep track of the number of times you forgive. You simply will run out of fingers and toes to count.”

Specifically, Jesus says, “Not seven times but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Seventy-seven is seven (the number associated with perfection) placed along side seven (perfection). Some scholars believe the words are intended to be seven times seventy—an even larger number. Any way you look at it, the act of forgiveness is connected to perfection and the divine. We forgive only by the grace of God.

2. *How do you imagine Peter responded to the answer of Jesus?*

Forgiveness is not a mathematical equation with numbers to track. Rather, forgiving is giving the gift of forgiveness *as we have been given and received* the gift of forgiveness in Jesus.

3. *How important did forgiveness become for Peter? Consider Peter’s actions during the trial of Jesus (Matthew 26:69-75) and Peter’s encounter with the risen Christ (John 21).*
4. *What can we learn about forgiveness from Peter’s life?*

Left to our sinful selves, it is easy to count wounds, betrayals, and injustices done to us. Soon, bitterness can consume us and destroy our spirit. Jesus shows another path. He forgives Peter and us, setting all of us free to forgive. In case of any uncertainty, Jesus tells a parable about the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-34). Once more, the point is clear; forgiven disciples of Jesus are invited, commanded, and empowered to be forgiving people.

5. *Why is Jesus so emphatic about forgiving other people?*
6. *Why does Jesus spend so much time focusing on the topic of forgiveness?*

word among us

This is a difficult text to be read in congregations in the USA during the week of September 11 with all the memories of that horrific day. Does Jesus intend Christians to forgive the terrorists? How far-reaching is forgiveness?

1. *Does Jesus expect people to forgive the terrorists or others who commit horrific crimes?*
2. *Where does the Christian draw the line concerning forgiveness?*

On the one hand, it would be easy to dismiss this passage by restricting the implications to church members alone. After all, Peter qualified his question to Jesus. He didn't mention terrorists, malicious non-Christians, and others. Maybe forgiveness is just to be extended to other Christians.

On the other hand, we know that isn't true. The images of Jesus hanging on the cross, forgiving those who killed him as well as the thief on the cross are etched in our memories. Jesus forgives Jews and Gentiles, male and female, young and old. Jesus forgives *them*—and us.

3. *What have you learned in your own life about forgiveness?*

Jesus doesn't just forgive us and draw a line. Instead, Jesus extends forgiveness to us again and again. He forgives us seventy-seven times and then, forgives us more. That number *seventy-seven* prods us. It is perfection times perfection. How can we forgive, but by the grace of God?

4. *What role has forgiveness played in your own faith journey?*

Forgiveness is not easy, especially when it comes to the deep wounds of life. It might be done quickly when someone steps on our toes or bumps into us in the hallway; but when we face significant hurt, all good reason stops. We freeze in the trenches of resentment, bitterness and revenge. The only thing is—we lose. *Our* energy is zapped. Hatred and resentment eat away at joy and life-giving activities. Thus, we become victimized again. There is no room or energy to follow Jesus Christ in mission and ministry.

5. *What makes forgiving so difficult?*

Forgiveness does not happen with a snap of the fingers. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to forgive. Forgetting is not proof that forgiveness has or hasn't occurred. We can learn from the past wounds so they are not repeated. Yet, in forgiving, our life is changed. We are not the same. Our relationship with those we forgive, and with those who have forgiven us, is different.

One of the most challenging things for disciples of Jesus Christ is not just to receive forgiveness for ourselves, but also to extend forgiveness to others. By the grace of God, disciples of Jesus are forgiven *and* forgiving.

6. *Who do you need to forgive? (Take a moment for silent prayer.)*

Prayer

Forgiving Christ, teach us to forgive. Amen

Dig Deeper

Luke 23:32-34



last word

This week, make a list of people who are in need of your forgiveness. Ask God to help you forgive them.

Daily Discipleship

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