

"Forgive"  
September 17, 2017  
Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ  
15th Sunday after Pentecost

*Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"*

*Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*

*"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.*

*When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.*

*But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'*

*Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.*

*When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.*

*Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'*

*And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.*

*So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

To forgive another person for something they have done to us is the most difficult thing we are called to do in the community of faith. Learning about God, serving in the mission field, joining a local church to walk out our journey in faith, or giving generously to spread the good news of Jesus are easy compared to this one thing that in many instances we would rather take with us to the grave than have to do. When harmed,

there are times we take a vow that expresses itself in words such as, *"I will never forgive him,"* and *"You don't understand, I can never forgive her."* Deeply held grudges and incarcerated hatred are locked way down in hearts so hardened they cause us to be sick. But it is always Jesus's desire that we experience healing—God's *shalom*. This desire is born directly out of the heart of a loving God. And much of that healing, and today's message is a call to forgive.

### Peter Has a Question

In this section of Matthew's gospel Jesus is giving instructions for the church, or community of faith, on how to act with each other, particularly when there is controversy. Last week we heard the importance of going to someone who has offended or hurt us in some way. And today we hear about this idea of forgiveness.

Yes, of course, to forgive another is the right thing to do. This is something understood by people both inside and out of Christianity. But what is the limit? When do we draw the line with repeat offenders? This is Peter's question:

*"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"*

Peter, Peter, Peter. Another well meaning, but un-thought-out, response. Seven times; perfect; seven times seems generous. Forgiving more than that would be gullible, the work of a fool.

*"Not seven times, but,"* Jesus says, *"I tell you, seventy-seven times."* Or, as some translations have it, *"Seventy times seven."* But whether is seventy-seven times or four hundred ninety times, the point is made: always. And there is good reason, which inspires Jesus to tell the parable of a king who settles accounts with his slaves—a story that illustrates God's mercy.

### Mercy and No Mercy

Mercy. We all need it. We would be in trouble without it. Sometimes what we owe goes so far beyond what we are capable of repaying that mercy and forgiveness is the only thing that can save us. In the parable the slave whose debt is so high he will never be able to repay it pleads for mercy. He falls to his knees and begs

*"Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave releases him and forgives him the debt."*

That's mercy. That's forgiveness. That's grace—the unmerited favor on God in our lives.

But as the story goes on we know that the servant who receives the grace of the king is not as generous when he runs into a fellow slave who happens to owe him money (a mere fraction of what he himself owed the king). His heart is hardened and his hand reaches out in anger to grab his fellow slave by the throat when he demands his money. No mercy.

### A Story of Forgiveness

I recently heard several speakers at the Global Leadership Summit share their thoughts on faith, leadership, and the direction the world is moving in these days. One

of the speakers was Immaculée Ilibagiza, a woman from a small village in Rwanda, Africa. She told her story of surviving the Rwandan genocide of the mid-nineties. She was home from school on Easter break and the President of Rwanda who was from the Hutu tribe had just been assassinated by the Tutsi tribe. This led to the extended systematic massacre of Tutsis throughout the country. Immaculée is from the Tutsi tribe.

When the trouble began her father sent her to a local pastor's house to hide. She and seven other women hid in a 3-foot by 4-foot bathroom for 91 days. Before sending her, her Catholic father gave her a set of rosary beads. In her months of hiding she sustained herself through prayer. But the real challenge was yet to come. As her biography on her website describes it:

After 91 days, Immaculée was finally liberated from her hiding place only to face a horrific reality. Immaculée emerged from that small bathroom weighing just 65 pounds, and finding her entire family brutally murdered, with the exception of one brother who was studying abroad. She also found nearly one million of her extended family, friends, neighbors and fellow Rwandans massacred.

After the genocide, Immaculée came face-to-face with the man who killed her mother and one of her brothers. After enduring months of physical, mental and spiritual suffering, Immaculée was still able to offer the unthinkable, telling the man, "I forgive you."

Her hands, which held the rosary for 91 days, still hold that same rosary whenever she makes a public appearance to tell her story. These are hands that could have easily tightened and struck back, and struck back hard. But they did not. They reached out in forgiveness.

Should we forgive seven times? Seventy-seven times? A million times?

### The Cost of Un-forgiveness

Think about the cost of un-forgiveness; what happens when we hold back mercy. Something dark grows inside of us when we harbor that grudge, that grievance, that sense of having been wronged. It's like a pet monster we keep hidden beneath the floorboards. We forget about it most of the time, but every once in awhile it rears it's ugly head and demands to be fed.

There are times in life when we have been extremely hurt by someone. Some have been abused, attacked, or abandoned. These are situations that are not simply cleaned up with a click of the forgiveness switch. The injury is deep, the pain is real, and healing is a careful and deliberative process.

But lest we throw our ourselves into a darker dungeon we are guided by the Spirit of God to acts of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not an invitation to be hurt again by the one responsible for your pain. It's simply an act of release that sets our own hearts free from the prisons we set up for ourselves when we live with un-forgiveness. It's a softening of our hearts that leads to an extension of our hand to forgive another.

### Forgiveness Comes from the Heart

Jesus goes all the way to the extreme when he tells about the king going back after that unmerciful slave to whom he showed mercy.

*'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.*

Then Jesus, to make his point, puts that extreme measure on the ones he just told the parable:

*So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

Hyperbolic language to make the message clear: forgiveness must come from the heart; the territory where all spiritual battles are waged and won or lost. Your heart will either remain imprisoned or finally set free. As I said at the beginning, forgiveness is the most difficult thing we are called to do. And that Jesus is telling us to do it over and over again only makes things more challenging.

But the good news is that God has been extremely merciful with us and forgiven us for all the things we have done, because it is God's desire to be reconciled with us. This is the reality that makes it possible for us to forgive others. This is a transaction in the heart when in the Lord's prayer we say, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Once we experience the grace of God through the reality of Jesus in our own lives, we begin to see how we can extend this grace to others.

Life is brief. Reconciling with God and with each other happens in a short window. Take a moment before it is too late to consider where un-forgiveness exists in your life and keeps you imprisoned. Allow the Spirit of God to reveal this to you, to unlock your heart, and to guide you in how to forgive. Then, go and forgive. Amen.