

The Third Sunday in Lent – March 10 & 11, 2007
St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

How Many Times Should I Forgive? Matthew 18:21-35

“I’ll forgive you, but I’ll never forget.” Has anyone ever made that statement to you? Or have you said or thought that as someone apologized to you for some sin they have committed against you? Forgiveness is a difficult thing to do. Why did we hear about a man going through a divorce this past week while flying a small airplane that called his wife and said to her, “You’ll never see your daughter again”? He then proceeded to crash the airplane into his mother-in-law’s home killing himself and his young daughter. It’s called revenge and a refusal to let go and forgive someone for the sin they have committed against you. Everyday you and I are faced with the choice – do I forgive the person who has upset me and is making my life miserable or do I get even and make their life as unbearable and miserable as they have made mine?

Jesus had been talking to his disciples about sin and forgiveness. He had instructed his followers that when someone sins against you, you go and talk to that person privately and confront them. If the person listens to you, you forgive them and go on. However, if the person refuses to admit his wrong, you take other people along as witnesses. If he refuses to listen to the witnesses, then you tell it to the church, the gathering of believers. If the person refuses to listen to the admonishment of the church, then Jesus says you are to treat that person as an unbeliever and inform him that if he continues in his sinful ways he will be lost eternally in hell. After this conversation Peter came up to Jesus and asked a very practical question, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (v. 21) As we examine Jesus’ answer we wish to consider **HOW MANY TIMES SHOULD I FORGIVE?** As we study the parable that Jesus told we need to ponder **I) How Does God Treat Me** and then in view of God’s personal dealings with me **II) How Am I To Treat Others.**

HOW DOES GOD TREAT ME?

Most of us are familiar with debt. If you have ever purchased a car or a home, you may have had to make monthly payments. If you have a credit card, you may purchase things and then make a payment at the end or the beginning of the next month. You owe the one who issued the credit card the amount of money that you charged during the previous month. As a nation we have a debt of over 40 trillion dollars. That means that each of us in this church owes \$147, 312. That is our personal share of our country’s national debt. On top of that many of us also have a house loan, possibly a car loan and maybe credit card debt. Just a few years ago the average American household was carrying over \$10,000 in credit card debt. As a nation and people we are familiar with debt. What would happen if tomorrow we were called to give an accounting and pay off all of our debts? You would have to pay the \$147,312, your portion of our nation’s debt. Then you would have to settle all of your personal loans and debts. How would you feel? Would you be able to come up with all that money and pay off all the creditors? Maybe. Maybe not..

This is exactly what happened to the person in the story that Jesus told when Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother who sins against him. Jesus told this story. There was a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. These were men who had charge over various parts of the king’s kingdom. He called the first servant in and demanded that he pay. The servant owed the man what would be the equivalent of about one hundred and fifty million dollars today. The servant was unable to come up with that amount of money. So the king ordered that the man be sold along with his wife, children and all his possessions to at least pay part of what was owed. There was no bankruptcy that this man could declare. He had to settle the account with his entire family being sold into slavery and any assets he had being liquidated. What a mess. What’s the man to do?

Jesus tells us that he fell at the feet of the king and pleaded and begged the king to have patience with him. He assured the king that he would pay all 150 million dollars. He didn't want to lose what he had. He did not wish to see his family sold as slaves and split up. He promises that he would, if the king were patient, eventually pay all that he owed. Was that possible? Probably not. What was the king going to do?

Jesus tells us, "The servant's master has pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go." (v. 27) What a turn of events. From facing total ruin and losing his family, this man now had everything and he did not owe a single cent. He was debt free. What relief.

What the king did for his servant is exactly what our heavenly King has done for each of us. The debt that we owe to God because of our failure to be perfect and because of all the sins that we commit everyday is one that we could never repay. We would have to suffer forever and pay and pay eternally. And we would never get close to erasing the debt that we owe to our Creator.

But God has paid the debt. He has canceled all that we owe. He did not overlook our sins. What God did was provide someone to pay the debt for us. During this season of Lent we are seeing how Jesus, the God-Man, has paid our debt. He met God's demands of us to be perfect and holy by living the sinless life for us. He experienced being cast to the tormentors to be tortured to satisfy the justice and anger of God for us. Because of this God says, "I forgive your wickedness and I remember your sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:34c) We have been pardoned. Our debt has been canceled by the blood of Jesus Christ. What relief. We don't have to make eternal restitution for our sins. We don't have to pay God what we owe for our sinfulness and our sins. We have been pardoned. If you have ever had a debt finally paid off, you know the feelings of relief and the pressure that is gone to have to make those monthly payments on time. That's what Jesus has done for us so that we can look at the bill that we owe our God and see stamped in big bold red letters of blood **PAID IN FULL!** This is how God has treated us.

HOW AM I TO TREAT OTHERS?

Now back to Peter's original question, "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? (v. 21) Peter was being generous with the number of times he thought you should forgive someone. According to old Jewish teaching three times was enough and after that you stopped forgiving. Let's look at Jesus' parable again see what our Savior says about how we are to treat one another.

After the servant who owed 150 million dollars had his debt totally canceled, he left the king's presence and went and met a fellow servant who owed him in today's money about 16,000 dollars. It was the sum of one hundred days' wages. Notice how this servant treats his fellow servant, "He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me.', he demanded." (v. 28b) His fellow servant begged him just as the former servant had of the king, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back." (v. 29) What was the servant's response to this request for patience and time? Jesus tells us, "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt." (v. 30) Where is the compassion? Where is the mercy and patience? You would think after what this man had gone through with the king; he would have been more understanding.

When other servants of the king saw what their fellow servant had done to an associate, they went and told the king what had happened. The king was angry and he called his servant in. Listen to what he said, "You wicked servant. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" Then Jesus tells us, "In anger his master turned him over to the torturers to be tortured, until he should pay back all that he owed." Our Savior then makes this application to us, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart." (Vv. 32-35)

What's the answer to Peter's question? How often should we forgive someone who sins against us? Over and over again. We are to forgive just as God has forgiven us. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32)

This is something that every one of us has to work on in our own lives with God's help. It is so easy to hold grudges, to refuse forgiveness, to harbor bitterness and anger in our hearts over something that someone has done against us. God says, let go. Don't hang on to that. Forgive as I have forgiven you. When we refuse to forgive it makes us a bitter person and someone that people avoid. To continue to refuse to forgive jeopardizes our relationship with our Lord and our eternal salvation as Jesus notes in this parable. Thank God that he continues to reach out to us and forgive us even for these sins and say to us, "leave your life of sin."

I learned the lesson of how hard it is to forgive early in my ministry. I was once accused by one of my church council members of malfeasance in office. The man did not think I was doing my job the way it should be done. The president of the congregation called me and told me that I should see Jack because he had a problem with me. I called him and made an appointment to see him at his home the following week. As we talked it became evident that Jack thought because he gave the majority of the congregation's yearly offerings, he could call the shots and I wasn't doing what he thought should be done. I told him if that was the reason he had given the money to the church, it wasn't God pleasing and we would give it back to him. Needless to say this caused quite a stir and we got into a heated argument. He threatened to quit the church and I told him to go right ahead and quit because it was no skin off my nose. He replied, "I mean it. I'm going to quit" and I retorted, "Quit!" His wife Jesse intervened and said, "Jack, you don't mean that." He replied, "I certainly do" and I said, "Good, quit!" Finally, she got us to cool down, shake hands and I left. Since I did not live in the community where our church was located all the mail went to the secretary who was Jack. Every week I had to go to his insurance office and pick up the church's mail. Every month we had a church council meeting and Jack was there. Jack and his wife came to church every Sunday. Whenever I saw him I was very cordial, but inside my stomach was tied in knots. I was so upset and angry. I realized that this wasn't good for me. It was my problem and I had to deal with it. I needed to forgive Jack and let go and move on. It wasn't easy and it took many months before I was able to let go of the hurt and the anger. I realized if I was preaching about God's forgiveness every week that I needed to forgive Jack. If I was regularly praying the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." I needed to forgive too. Then I thought, "If God who is holy and perfect every day forgives and forgets all of my sins, then I who am unholy and imperfect need to forgive my fellow human being who is just as imperfect and unholy as I am. But it isn't easy.

What empowers you and me to forgive others who continue to sin against us? It is the fact that God continues daily to forgive you and me for the same sins that we commit over and over again and often don't recognize or even admit to our heavenly Father.

God help us to forgive as he richly and freely pardons us every day.

Amen.