

## **“Not seven, but seventy times seven”**

*Where forgiveness takes us ...*

**September 14, 2008**

*Text: Psalm 103:8-13, Matthew 18:21-35*

### I.

In all of the Bible and certainly in the gospel of Jesus, *forgiveness* is a powerful theme. And if we think about it, how could it *not* be?

As human beings, created in freedom—free to make choices, to express all the desires and needs that stir in our spirit, we’re going to DO things and SAY things that create tension in our relationships. We’re going to need to forgive and be forgiven.

As we say all the time, STUFF happens. LIFE happens. And envy and jealousy ... anger and resentment rise up in our spirit, and there’s tension in our relationships—or ill will, or whatever it is—stuff we gotta work through.

What’s at stake here, of course, is: How do we move on with our lives? How do we *live again*? How do we fix the brokenness ... make the crooked straight ... find our way to a new beginning?

When this is our life-situation, we have to find the strength, the courage, and the means to forgive. Or, as the case may be, the *grace* to BE forgiven. If not, how else can we move on? How else can there be HOPE for our lives?

Friends, God knows this; and Jesus knows this.

### II.

The ***parable of the unforgiving servant***, that I just shared with us, certainly makes this point. Let’s take a look! I’m going to modernize the story a bit to help us get in to it:

An employer is trying to settle accounts with his employees. As the employees are brought in, there’s this one who has run up a debt of *a thousand dollars*. He can’t pay up and so the employer orders that he be sent off to a heavy labor camp until his debt is paid off.

Totally deflated, the beleaguered man gets down on his knees and begs his employer to reconsider: *Give me another chance*, he pleads. *I’ll do better and in no time I’ll have you paid off. I promise, I promise! Just give me another chance.*

Moved by the poor man’s plea, the employer reconsiders and lets the man go free, erasing his debt as well.

However, the employee is no sooner out the door when he comes upon a lesser employee who happens to owe him *ten dollars*. Amazingly, he aggressively confronts him and demands that he *pay up, now!*

The poor man, overwhelmed and distraught, gets on his knees and begs: *Give me another chance. I'll pay you back, I promise! Just give me another chance!*

But he wouldn't do it; and he had the man arrested and thrown in jail. Imagine that! What an ingrate!

- This is a man who had just been forgiven himself of a much larger debt.
- When the other employees hear about this, they are outraged and they bring a detailed report to the employer (the boss).

Understandably, the employer is outraged as well and he has the man brought before him: *You evil, mean-spirited person*, he says to him. *What an incredible ingrate! I forgave you when you begged for mercy ... and now when a fellow employee begs you for mercy, you have no mercy for him?*

Furious, the employer has him sent off to labor camp until his entire debt is paid off.

And Jesus concludes: ***This is the way God will treat any of you who doesn't forgive, unconditionally, anyone who asks for mercy.***

### III.

Jesus' parable seems a bit tough and stern, perhaps, but the point is made. God expects us to forgive one another ... and to have mercy for one another.

Earlier, Peter was checking this out with Jesus, asking him: ***If someone sins against me, how many times must I forgive him*** (or her, as the case may be)? ***How many times, Jesus, seven? Seven times?***

And immediately, Jesus says him, ***Not seven, but seventy times seven***. Whoa! That's a lot of forgiveness.

Friends, couldn't there be a clue here about the size of God's love? We comment and reflect all the time how *forgiveness is the highest expression of love*. According to Jesus and the gospel stories, clearly, it is. God's serious about forgiveness.

How many times do we forgive? ***Not seven, but seventy times seven***. In other words, as many times as it takes.

Depending on our circumstances, of course, sometimes that might be more than what we're ready for. Forgiveness can be a heavy load.

There are sins and grievances that are not easy to move beyond. Sometimes we need more time ... and a lot of prayer ... and time for some serious *sorting out*. Still, God's word on forgiveness is a strong word. ***Not seven, but seventy times seven.***

#### IV.

What's often lost in *forgiveness* is that it's relational. It's a two-way street. As a beloved seminary professor of mine said in a sermon one time: *There's an equality of dependence between the forgiver and the forgiven. And any refusal of forgiveness is a continuation of the guilt and responsibility for the brokenness in the relationship.*

It's not just about us forgiving others; it's also about accepting and receiving forgiveness ourselves.

How many of us walk around today ... still not having forgiven ourselves for whatever? Something in our past that we deeply regret, for which we've been forgiven, but we still carry the scars and the regret is still alive in our spirit; and it continues to stress us out and even depress us at times. We just can't seem to forgive ourselves.

1. A violation of trust, perhaps, in a relationship ...
2. An ethical lapse with our finances ...
3. Some poor judgment that ended up affecting a lot of people.

But the point is, God has forgiven us ... and we've been forgiven by the others who were involved as well. But we still haven't been able to sufficiently forgive ourselves; and we carry the burden around in our spirit, like a bag of heavy bricks.

In the movie, ***Mission***, one of the leading characters is a former slave-trader of Brazilian Indians who converted to become a ***Jesuit priest***. Going back to work with the Indians, he insists on doing penance by dragging a heavy bundle along with him through the jungle.

Once back, he still refuses to set himself free from the weighty bundle until, in a dramatic cliff-side scene, where the bundle is threatening to make him fall to a certain death, the Indians, whom he is now serving, cut away the bundle, freeing him through a forgiveness he had been unable to accept.

We have to forgive, to be sure; but we have to accept forgiveness as well; or how else can we move on? We must be able to forgive ourselves.

Part of what's at stake in forgiveness is the size of the world we choose to live in. When we refuse forgiveness, as either the forgiver or the forgiven, we choose to live in a smaller world.

## V.

Where forgiveness takes us is to a new life ... to a new and larger world where LOVE moves us beyond our sins and shortcomings of yesterday; beyond our biases, prejudices and bigotry. Again, God knows; and Jesus knows; and it makes all the difference, for how else can we live again?

Sometimes our sins of yesterday seem too big ... or the sins of others against us ... and we can't imagine we can ever move beyond them.

There are times when forgiving and accepting forgiveness is not easy. It takes time, as well it should, because the holiness and sanctity of life are always precious and never to be made light of.

But still, over time, and on the wings of a LOVE that is always greater than we can imagine, the forgiveness that love gives comes; and it gives new birth and new HOPE to the world.

In one of her books, **Corrie Ten Boom**, a Dutch Christian and a survivor of the Holocaust, tells of meeting the guard from the concentration camp where she and her family had been held by the Nazis. At a large church conference, she had been speaking about the forgiveness of Christ. After the conference—having recognized her as she spoke—the man had come forward.

Desperately wanting to experience the forgiveness of Christ, about which she'd been speaking, the former Nazi guard extended his hand towards her. Instinctively, she pulled back, remembering the horrors this man, and others like him, and had caused her and her family.

But then—as she recalls the experience—something came over her, as if from down deep in her soul, and she reached out and grasped his hand and gave her forgiveness, as tears rolled down the man's cheeks.

It was a sacred moment—in the midst of an excruciating personal pain—it was a moment for a wrenching forgiveness that makes new beginnings possible.

How often must we forgive? Seven times? **Not seven, but seventy times seven.**

## VI.

As we think about our lives, our highs and lows along the way, we must be able to move on—beyond the regret, beyond the mistakes and moral/ethical lapses; we must be able to live again.

That's where forgiveness takes us ... to the other side ... to the side where grace and mercy and love overflow. Because—GET THIS, friends—that's where the life is.

- There's no life in all the biases and prejudices of yesterday.
- There's no life in all the stubbornness and hard-headedness that keeps us from being free to move on in our lives.
- There's no life in being forever weighted down by guilt and bad feelings.
- There's no life in being a small person, living in a small world ... living in constant anxiety of what tomorrow might bring.

What God has in mind for each one of us is something totally different. For as the **Psalmist** reminds us,

*God does not deal with us according to our sins and shortcomings,  
nor repay us according to our moral lapses and poor choices.*

*For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God's steadfast love ...  
as far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our sins from us.*

God's closing word for us today is: ***be big ... have a big spirit ... with a big love ... and a big forgiveness ...***

How many times? **Not seven, but seventy times seven.** Whatever it takes.

If you're locked in a life-situation today—a situation, perhaps, you've been in for some time; where you need to forgive or accept forgiveness, allow the grace of God to live in your heart and spirit so you can do what you need to do ... to free yourself from whatever part of your past that is holding you back. **Go for it!**

Forgive and be forgiven, again and again! So you can take hold of the life that really is life.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz  
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*  
6701 Miami Lakeway South\  
Miami Lakes, FL 33014  
On the web at [www.mlcchurch.com](http://www.mlcchurch.com)

