

Matthew 18:21-22; Genesis 50:15-21

“Forgive us our trespasses,” we pray, “As we forgive those who trespass against us.” Can you imagine changing these words to say, “Forgive us seven times, because that’s how often I intend to forgive my neighbor?” It’s a good thing that Jesus is the One who gave us this prayer, and not Peter. For had Peter given it to us, that “seven times” clause may well have been at its heart and center.

And Peter thought that he was being generous. The Jewish Rabbis limited forgiveness to three times. He was more than doubling that number. And so when he asked Jesus, “How often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Peter really believed that he was being more than fair. But when Jesus responded, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven,” Peter’s mouth must have flown open. His jaw must have dropped four inches. But that’s...that’s...the calculation wheels were spinning in his head...that’s 490 times! How will I ever keep track?

But isn’t that the whole point? If I keep track of the number of times I forgive my brother, then I’m not really forgiving him. If I’m keeping score somehow then, for me, the score won’t be settled until the day when I can finally get even. If Peter was correct in his thinking, then each of us would have a tablet somewhere in our homes, and on that tablet we would have, written in ink, names and behind the names tally marks recording the number of times we have forgiven each name. But if that’s how we really want to live, then you and I could never pray the Lord’s Prayer; for then, each time we prayed it, we would be asking God to keep a record of the times He has forgiven us...and we dare not forget the words of the Psalmist: “If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins; O Lord, who could stand!”

I think that Peter did not know his Bible stories as well as he should have known them, for the story of Joseph and his brothers is one which should have stood out in his mind here. Joseph’s brothers sinned against him relentlessly. They hated him. They were mean to him. They ruined his life. They sold him into slavery. They had thoughts of killing him. When the tables were turned, by the hand of God, and Joseph was ruler in Egypt, his brothers were terrified. “What if,” they thought, “Joseph kept track of all the evil we did against him?” They came before him trembling. “Please forgive us,” they pleaded,” For the sake of our father, Jacob.”

And he did. But even before they came to him, Joseph in his heart had forgiven them. Even before they asked him to, he forgave their wickedness against him. Joseph had not kept a tablet under his pillow. He had not written down the names of each of his brothers with big, bold tally marks behind each name. In his heart he was at peace with them. In his mind he had no angry thoughts toward them. He bore no grudges. He kept no remembrance of their sins against him. He had forgiven them. It wasn’t three times for Joseph; or seven times; or even 490 times. He forgave them, period. Forgiveness has no limit, no number, no record, no keeping track. Anything less is not forgiveness.

I’m not sure that we forgive like that. I wonder if we do have tablets, maybe not in our homes, but in our minds. We tend to resemble Peter more than Joseph. We like to keep track of who has done what to us. We don’t really like to forgive. We may say words like: Forget about it...Don’t worry about it...Oh, that’s okay, it’s no big deal...” but within our

hearts and minds we still harbor a grudge against them. We are irritated by the fact that they got away with hurting our feelings; with doing something mean to us.

Who has irritated you lately? Spouse, children, parents, teachers, fellow students, boss, coworker, pastor? We tend to recall pretty well the evil that others do to us, and not so well the sins we commit against them. There are days when we prefer to follow Peter and not Jesus; when we like Peter's "seven times" much more than Jesus' "seventy times seven." We may pass off something done against us, but if they do it again—watch out! And if they keep doing it, even though they're sorry, we're not so ready to forgive.

Repent! You and I need to repent of our refusals to forgive. We need to repent of our sinful attitude that we are somehow entitled to either forgive, or not forgive, when someone hurts us.

Even before Joseph's brothers came to him, he forgave them. He did not base his forgiveness on whether his brothers were sorry or not. He forgave them because God had forgiven him. Joseph, not Peter, is a picture of God for you here. He is not, like Peter, wondering how often He has to forgive you. Rather like Joseph, God in His heart has already forgiven each one of you—and not because you asked Him to, but because Jesus died on the cross for you. "For the sake of Jacob," Joseph's brothers begged, "Forgive us." For the sake of Jesus, each one of you is forgiven by your God.

Not one of us deserves this forgiveness. Not one of us deserves to be shown such mercy. Neither did Joseph's brothers. As ruler, Joseph had the authority to ruin their lives. He could have tossed each one of them, along with their families, into prison and thrown away the key. He could have had them executed. Rather, he forgave them. They did not deserve it, but he showed them mercy—and he then gave them every rich blessing that the land of Egypt had to offer.

That's what God has done for you. What we deserve is punishment for our sins. We deserve a place in hell. Friend, Jesus took that place for you. Jesus suffered your punishment. Jesus is the mercy of God. God is merciful to you for His sake. Nothing you do can stop God from forgiving you, because He already has in His heart for the sake of your Savior. And with Christ He blesses you with every heavenly gift that He has to give.

Friend, do you believe all this? Your believing it or not believing it does not change the fact that it is true—but it does change you. Before Joseph's brothers heard the word of forgiveness from his mouth, they lived in terror and fear. Joseph was at peace with them, but it did them no good until they heard that word from Joseph. As your pastor, I am "Joseph" to you. Not Peter, creating doubt in your mind about whether God will keep forgiving you, but Joseph—for God commands your pastor to be His mouth to you: "I forgive you all your sins," He says, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Do not doubt whether these words are true. Do not fear. No matter how sinful you are; no matter how often you have refused to forgive your brother; no matter how long you have borne a grudge in your heart, believe today that your God is at peace with you. He forgives you.

And believing this, you will be changed. Christ now lives in you. Through you, Christ now forgives those who hurt you. Within you, Christ Jesus creates faith, not doubt, so that

you can live in confidence and joy, believing that heaven is yours for Jesus' sake; believing that God gives you heaven even though you are a sinner, because Jesus earned your place there.

There is no "seven times" with God. There is no "490 times." There is no number with God—He forgives you, period. "Forgive us our trespasses," we pray; and He does because of Jesus. And because He forgives you He, through you, will forgive those who "trespass against you." Amen.