

How Many Times Must I Forgive?

Matthew 18:21–35 | Following Jesus Together — Week 2

My Saints of Advent, last Sunday, as we began **Following Jesus Together**, Jesus taught us what to do when relationships become difficult: **Go. Speak the truth. Listen with grace. Seek to regain.** Peter has been listening. Peter recognizes the difficulty: *Lord, what if I go and it happens again? What if I forgive and they hurt me again?* So Peter asks: **“Lord, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”** Peter's question is our question: **How many times?**

Peter thinks seven times is generous. Jesus answers: **“Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”** Jesus is not giving Peter a bigger number to record. Peter wants to know **when forgiveness can stop.** Jesus wants to change **the heart that keeps the ledger.** Then Jesus tells a story.

The Jesus gave one an example of a servant owes his king **ten thousand talents**, an unimaginable debt, representing roughly **60 million days of ordinary wages, more than 160,000 years of work.** Jesus' point is simple: **He could never repay it.** The servant falls down and pleads: **“Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.”** He asks for more time. The king gives him something greater: **mercy.** The entire debt is forgiven. **He asked for more time. He received a new beginning.**

Here Jesus turns our attention from what someone owes us toward what God has done for us. God says: **“I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”**, **Jeremiah 31:34.** The Psalmist says: **“As far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.”**, **Psalm 103:12.** God forgives, and God does not keep reopening forgiven sin to imprison us in yesterday.

Then the forgiven servant meets someone who owes him far less. He grabs him: **“Pay what you owe!”** The other servant pleads: **“Have patience with me...”** Those words should sound familiar. **They were his own words.** His enormous debt had been forgiven, yet he kept another person's debt alive. **He had been released, but he would not release.** He received freedom but kept another person imprisoned.

Growing up in Haya culture in Tanzania, there is a way people sometimes describe this kind of forgiveness: **“You can come to my house, but always remember what you did to me.”** The door is open, **but the ledger is still open too.** And that can happen as we follow Jesus together. We worship together, **but I remember what you did.** We serve together, **but I remember what you did.** We receive Communion together, **but I remember what you did.** We exchange the peace, **but I remember what you said.** You are welcome in the house, **but I keep you imprisoned in your past.**

And sometimes the person imprisoned is **ourselves.** We remember our failures, our mistakes, our guilt. God has forgiven us, but we keep reopening our own ledger. We keep sentencing ourselves for something God has already forgiven. If we don’t forgive. If we don’t forgive, do not think we are safe. Imprison ourselves in anger, hatred and judgment. And it hurts us. This is why the Scriptures says **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” — Romans 8:1.** My Saints of Advent, if God has released you, **why keep yourself imprisoned?** And if God’s mercy has released your brothers or sisters, **why should yesterday become the only way you see them today?**

Paul says: **“Forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” — Ephesians 4:32.** Forgiveness does not mean our memory suddenly disappears. Some wounds leave scars. But there is a difference between **remembering something and holding it against someone.** When God says, **“I will remember their sin no more,”** the past is no longer continually brought forward as a charge against the forgiven person.

So perhaps “forgive and forget” means something deeper: **I remember, but I refuse to use the memory as your prison.** I will not make your worst moment the definition of your whole life. I will not keep demanding payment for a debt I have chosen to release. And I will not keep punishing myself for what God has forgiven. **Forgiven people are called to become forgiving people.**

Challenge of the Week: Whose name is still written in my ledger? Someone else’s? Or perhaps, **my own?** Bring that ledger before God. Name the hurt honestly. Name the failure honestly. Then pray: **“Lord, as you have forgiven me, teach me to release.**

Do not let yesterday imprison me or imprison another person through me.” Then take **one faithful step**. Stop rehearsing the offense. Stop using yesterday as today's weapon. Stop condemning yourself for what God has forgiven. Where appropriate, take a step toward another person. **Forgive and release.**

My Saints of Advent, Peter came to Jesus counting: **How many times?** And sometimes, **so are we**. Counting offenses. Counting disappointments. Counting failures. Keeping the ledger. But Jesus turns Peter's eyes from the debt **toward mercy.**

When you remember what they did, **remember mercy.** When your own past accuses you, **remember mercy.** When forgiveness becomes difficult, **remember mercy.** Because forgiveness does not mean the wound never happened. **It means the wound will not become a prison.**

Last Sunday Jesus said: **Go. Seek to regain.** Today Jesus takes us deeper: **Go but don't carry the ledger. Receive mercy. Remember mercy. Release mercy.** Do not imprison your brother or sister in yesterday. **Do not imprison yourself there either.** Because **Following Jesus Together means giving one another room, by God's grace, for tomorrow.**

And next Sunday Jesus will take us even deeper: What happens when God gives that same grace, **to someone we think does not deserve it?** Then Jesus will teach us: **Grace Is Not Always Fair.**

Glory be to God. **Amen.**