

Pentecost 16 / September 13, 2026

Matthew 18:9-21

"Then Peter came up and said to Him, 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him?'"

Forgiveness from the Heart

In the bible our relationship with God is always spoken of in terms of our relationship with others. Jesus said, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'* On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." Love for God and love for others is the essence of the message of the bible. St. John went so far as to say that a person who claims to love God whom he has not seen, while hating his brother or sister, whom he sees day in and day out, is deceiving him or herself. In a situation comedy one of the main characters said, "It's not humanity that I hate, its people." People have a hard time getting along. It's obvious, but it needs to be said, because we easily delude ourselves, thinking we care for humanity as a whole and human beings in general, while having a profound dislike for individual people we encounter from time to time, members of our families, communities and even our community of faith. Why is it so easy to love God whom we have not seen and so hard to love people whom we encounter daily, some of whom are our flesh and blood, some who are family members in the faith?

It's easier to have a relationship with someone we cannot see and with whom we have little or no physical interaction than someone we experience physically day in and day out. How many of you liked Dolly Parton? I wasn't a huge fan. I never visited or even thought of going to Dollywood. I liked her music, she had a beautiful voice, I felt for her when she pleaded with Jolene not to take her man. I thought she was a fine woman and I can't say I had one thing against her. I got along great with her in my mind, because I never met her. We get along splendidly with people we don't know and admire from a distance. It can be like that with God too. The rubber hits the road as the saying goes, when we have to put our relationship with God whom we can't see, into action in our relationship with people we see daily; people to whom we don't feel much attraction, people who don't see things as we do and have habits and opinions that annoy us. A real relationship with God is expressed in real relationships with other people. Relationship with God is based on His forgiveness of our faults, failings, sins and imperfections. We experience that

in relationship with other people. Relationship with God is expressed through our expression of His forgiveness in our forgiveness of others. That's where we learn to forgive from the heart as Jesus says.

I never had to forgive Dolly Parton and she never had to forgive me, because we didn't know each other, but if we had known each other we would have needed forgiveness. We would have needed forgiveness, because people who know each other get on each others nerves from time to time, do things that are insensitive and down right hurtful from time to time. That's just the way it is among human beings infected by sin, affected by sinfulness in a world in bondage to sin, enslaved by the devil and under the condemnation of death. We all sin in our thoughts, in our words and in our deeds. We all sin and even though we may be unaware of it, someone else always notices, even as we always notice when someone offends us. Even as we always live with God in forgiveness for the sake of Christ Jesus, we need to consciously live with each other in forgiveness for the sake of Christ Jesus; forgiving from the heart as God forgives us from the heart of His love in Christ Jesus.

Paul and Barnabas were two great missionaries. Barnabas sought out Paul when he was living in Tarsus. He brought him to Antioch to work with him teaching the church. They were the first missionary team. They travelled all over Cyprus, Salamis, Pisidian Antioch, to Lystra and Debe all the way around to Jerusalem, where they reported on their missionary activities and the success of the gospel among the Gentiles, who were turning to Jesus in droves. Then they had a disagreement, an argument, a verbal battle so intense that they parted and went their separate ways. If these two pillars of the church could have a disagreement and part ways, it can happen to anyone in the church. We all need to live with each other in forgiveness, even as each day we need to live with God in forgiveness for the sake of Christ Jesus. Paul and Barnabas eventually reconciled, because reconciliation is the heart of our relationship with God for the sake of Christ Jesus. God forgives us abundantly and continuously in Christ Jesus. We live in forgiveness with God, others and each other in the abundance of His forgiveness in Christ Jesus; forgiving from the heart even as God forgives us from the heart of His love in Christ Jesus.

It's easy to forget or underestimate our need for forgiveness from God. It's easy to remember and overestimate the sins others have committed against us and the reparation we figure they owe us. Simon Peter clearly didn't think he needed much forgiveness from God when he queried Jesus as to how many times he needed to

forgive his brother. He suggested seven times to start the bargaining, which he probably hoped would quickly bottom out at something much lower. In the Sermon on the Mount, he heard Jesus say *"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek turn to him the other also."* How many is that, two? Maybe one, because turning the cheek was the act of forgiveness. How about a good solid one time for being obligated to forgive? Imagine the look on his face when Jesus said, *"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."* Wow, how many is that? Peter probably had his abacus out flipping beads, calculating. Oh, that's an Asian calculator. If we're counting, seventy times seven is 490. Peter's probably going "What?!" But realize seventy times seven is really an expression for without limit, Because, as Jesus' following story illustrates that's how often God forgives us; without limit and from the heart.

Before Peter can wipe the shocked look off his face Jesus tells a story of two servants and one master. The first servant owes his master something like ten thousand lifetimes of wages, because a talent was what a worker would earn in a year and this guy owes ten thousand of them. That's our debt of sin in relation to God. That's a debt that no one could pay. We owe God a debt of sin that none of us could pay. The master forgives the servant the whole debt, not because he has to, but because he is merciful and gracious. God forgives us our whole debt of sin, not because He has to, but because He is merciful and gracious. The servant is so happy that he goes out and immediately finds a fellow servant who owes him a few days wages, grabs him by the throat, demands immediate payment and when he can't come up with the cash, has him thrown into prison. That's gratitude for you. Well, that's essentially what we are doing when we refuse to forgive one another our debts as our heavenly Father forgives us. Forgiveness towards others is grounded in the realization of the forgiveness God bestows on us richly, freely and daily from His heart for the sake of Christ.

But there's more to it than that. Forgiveness is not according to the law; it's motivated by the gospel. We are not asked to forgive 490 times because we have to. We are called to forgive without limit from thankful hearts because we want to, because we are conscious of and grateful for the forgiveness God lavishes upon us from His heart for the sake of Christ Jesus. St. John famously wrote, *"We love because He first loved us"* In the same way, we forgive, because He has first forgiven us; first and foremost, time and again, over and over, continuously all the days of our lives. As the psalmist sings, *"As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us."* Jesus warns that we will suffer the same

consequences as the first servant, whose debt returned to him, if we hold others sins against them, *"If you do not forgive your brother from your heart."* Forgiveness from the heart means forgiving because we want to forgive. It means wanting to forgive, because we realize what an awesome gift is the forgiveness we receive from God. It means forgiving, because we realize what our forgiveness cost and the price that was paid. You see, God didn't just cancel the debt; in Christ, He paid the debt.

Forgiveness from the heart means forgiving our sisters and brothers, because we have compassion on them. We have compassion, because we live together in the same world of sin and death. We experience the same joys and sorrows. We face the same challenges and tribulations. We all struggle with our own sin and sinfulness. God's compassion is giving Jesus to join us in relationship, sharing in our humanity, experiencing life as we do in this world of sin and death. God's compassion is Jesus taking our sins upon Himself and atoning for their guilt through His blood shed on the cross that we would be forgiven, that we would live in forgiveness with God and each other, forgiving from the heart as God forgives us from the heart of His love in Christ Jesus. God bless us with His Holy Spirit and with forgiven, forgiving hearts for the sake of Christ Jesus. In His Name. Amen.