

Pentecost 15 / September 13, 2020

Matthew 18:21

“Then Peter came up and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?’”

I wonder at what point the disciples realized that following Jesus was harder than they expected it to be. There was so much to understand and just when they thought they understood, they would get hit with a curve ball. Peter realized that more than a prophet, Jesus was the Christ, *“the Son of the living God.”* But then he was immediately corrected for misunderstanding that it was necessary for the Christ to go to Jerusalem, suffer and die for our sins and rise for our justification. When they vied for position in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus humbled them with a child saying, *“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”* Then there was the whole matter of forgiveness. They realized that forgiveness was an important part of Jesus’ teaching and ministry. Jesus forgave people and healed them. Jesus forgave people who came in repentance. Forgiveness was important to their relationship with Him and with each other, but the whole concept seemed open to abuse.

It’s one thing if someone wrongs us once, says sorry and never does it again; but what if they do it again? Furthermore, what if they keep on doing it and expect forgiveness each time they say they are sorry. There are people who are like that you know! So, Peter comes to Jesus with a question. That took a lot of faith, because one never knew what to expect when asking Jesus questions. Peter simply wants to know the limits of his responsibility to forgive. He wonders, if seven times would be sufficient for him to fulfil his obligation to God and his duty to his brothers. Imagine how he felt when Jesus said not seven times, but seventy times seven. It was risky business asking Jesus a question, you might not like the answer He gave.

How often should we forgive those who sin against us? I guess we can ask how often we want to be forgiven, when we sin against God and against our sisters and brothers. There are people who take advantage of forgiveness, who do the same things over again, say ‘sorry’ and expect to be forgiven. Those people are Peter, you and me. We all sin. We sin repeatedly. We repeat sins. But God forgives us repeatedly and constantly for the sake of His love. As the psalmist sang in Psalm 103 the first benefit of the Lord is forgiveness of sin. God expressed His love in forgiveness, by giving Jesus to bear our sins on the cross. He forgives us from His heart, so we may also forgive from our hearts.

Forgiveness was at the heart of ancient Israel’s covenant relationship with God. The Psalmist sang, *“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and faithfulness.”* The first and chief benefit of the Lord was the forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness was the purpose for which Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. The angel that came to Joseph in a dream to assure him of Mary’s words and encourage him to take her as his wife said, *“...for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”* The disciples hoped for many blessings and expected to receive many benefits from following Jesus. But the chief blessing and foremost benefit of following Jesus, is the forgiveness of sin.

Which was fine, until Jesus started talking about the disciples forgiving each other as God forgave them. It’s not easy to forgive once. When someone does something that offends us, even if they apologize, even if they never do it or say it again, it still annoys us. It never goes away! Even if we don’t think about it, it always remains in the back of our minds. Whenever we remember, we are angry again. When a person does the same thing or similar offensive things over and over, our anger and annoyance are off the scale. Then to make matters more difficult, Jesus tells a parable about a king who forgave a man a huge debt. The man then refuses to forgive a brother a lesser debt. Jesus concludes saying that if we do not forgive our sisters and brothers from the heart, His heavenly Father will not us forgive us either. How can we possibly forgive as fully and freely as God forgives us? We can’t, but in Christ we have forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, who continually blesses us with grace to live in forgiveness, even though its not easy to forgive. In Jesus there is forgiveness and the power to forgive from the heart.

We need Jesus, because it is hard to forgive; without Him its impossible to forgive as God forgives us. We know this ourselves if someone has caused us great harm. In the aftermath of the second world war an injured Nazi death camp worker, stricken with remorse, asked his Jewish physician to forgive him. The physician recalled that he was unable to forgive the man. The wound was too great and the hurt was too deep. Even though he was

cares for this man, he could not forgive him. We often have to forgive an offense repeatedly, even though it happened once and was not repeated once more, let alone seven times in day; because as often as we remember it, we feel hurt and anger. In our lesson from Genesis, after many years, Joseph assures his brothers he will not harm them. He finds God's good purpose in what he suffered. But when he remembered his suffering, how often did he have to forgive his brothers? We should never underestimate how difficult it is to forgive. If it was easy to forgive, we wouldn't need God to help us forgive others as He forgives us.

Consider what Jesus had to go through for our forgiveness. It was a long and involved process. He had to be conceived and born into the world. He had to grow from childhood to adulthood. He was thirty years old when He was baptized by John, anointed by the Holy Spirit and heard the divine voice declare: "*You are my Son whom I love, with you I am well pleased.*" He lived as a human being and suffered all the indignities of life in a world in bondage to sin and under the condemnation of death. He was tempted as we are and yet lived a life free from sin, in perfect obedience to the moral law of the Ten Commandments and the ceremonial law of the Mount Sinai Covenant. Then He had to suffer death on the cross. It certainly wasn't easy to suffer and die on the cross. It was even more difficult to suffer and die, bearing the burden of the sin of the world and paying the debt for all. It wasn't easy for Jesus to earn our forgiveness, yet He triumphed over sin through His cross. It won't be easy for us to forgive others, but we have Jesus' forgiveness to empower us to forgive others as God forgives us.

Jesus expressed God's desire to forgive and to reconcile separated people in the parable of the loving Father. In that parable a man has two sons, who work with him on his farm. The younger one demands his share of the estate, while the father is still alive. The father acquiesces to his request, divides the property and off he goes to spend his money on a good time. When the money is spent and the good times are gone, the younger son returns home to say 'sorry.' Before he can say sorry, the father sees him in the distance. The father doesn't wait or walk, he runs to his son, embraces him and kisses him. He says to his servants, "*Bring quickly the best robe and it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*" The parable shows that God wants to forgive us. He wants to embrace us. He wants to free us from our sins, clothe us in garments of righteousness and bring us to celebrate in His presence in peace forever.

The younger son says 'sorry,' but when the older brother hears about it, he says 'Sorry?' what a bunch of bunk! The father wants to forgive his lost son. God wants to forgive us. Like the man in today's gospel who was forgiven an unpayable debt, we want to be forgiven; but we don't always feel so charitable towards others who owe us a debt. Like the older son in the parable of the loving father, we don't want to forgive others as our heavenly Father forgives us. What can we do? First, we need to realize that whatever others owe us in terms of debt, hurt and sorry that we owe God an even greater debt of sin. Second, we need to realize that Jesus paid our debt, as well as the debt others owe us. Jesus paid all our debt out of the heart of God's love. We forgive others their debt out of the heart of God's love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ Jesus!

When we suffer hurt and are sinned against, we feel emotions. We feel anger. We feel sadness. We often equate forgiveness with the removal of those emotions and their replacement with more positive emotions. Positive emotions are a fruit of forgiveness, but they are not the essence of forgiveness. First and foremost, forgiveness is an act of the will, by which we desire to set aside the offense someone has committed against us, even if it continues to hurt and make us angry. God wanted to forgive us. He sent Jesus to be our Saviour as an act of His will. God wants to forgive us. He sends the Holy Spirit to return us to the promise of our baptism in repentance that He make speak words of forgiveness. He does this not seventy times seven, but constantly. We find the will to forgive by turning to Him for our own forgiveness. We receive the will to forgive by seeking His grace that He would both forgive us and empower us to forgive others by pouring His love in our hearts by the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus. We forgive from the heart of God's love in Christ Jesus. God who forgives us richly, freely and constantly for the sake of His steadfast love in Christ Jesus, bless us to forgive in Jesus' Name. Amen