

PENTECOST 15, A – September 13, 2020
SCRIPTURES – Ps. 143; Genesis 50:15-21; Rom. 14:1-12; Matt. 18:21-35

Peter came up and said to [Jesus], “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matt. 18:21ff)

“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” This is a simple and straightforward question. The answer is also simple and straightforward: **“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”** In other words, there is to be no limit to your forgiveness. Jesus then goes on to illustrate His answer with a parable, the meaning of which is I’m sure clear to you: if you, who have been forgiven so much, refuse to forgive one who sins against you, then God will remember your sins and make you pay for them forever in hell. Got it?

If only forgiving – and also believing that you have truly been forgiven; that your sins have been set aside and will never be held against you – were so easy. It is not. That Joseph’s brothers could not put out of their minds the terrible sin that they had committed against him 40 or so years before, of hating him and selling him into slavery... and so, with this sin in their minds, could not believe that Joseph’s blessing them and taking care of them in Egypt for the past 17 years were evidence of his forgiveness and mercy... this shows that forgiveness is not easy. The story of Joseph and his brothers is not an ancient story that we cannot relate to, is it? How many families do you know whose members are divided from one another and want nothing to do with each other because of something that happened years ago? Is yours one? But, above all, the fact that, in order for us to be forgiven, the eternal Son of God had to become flesh and live among us, and then take upon Himself the debt of our sins and die for them on a cross, makes clear that forgiveness is not easy. It is not easy because

our minds have a hard time forgetting and setting aside sins that have been committed against us, hurts that we have received. It is not easy because our hearts are not willing to put others – especially those who have hurt us – before our desire for justice... for retribution... for being seen to be right. Forgiving, and so looking with love and mercy upon one who has hurt you by his sin: it is far harder than not stealing, or not committing adultery, or not saying things that are untrue about others. But, forgiving, and so looking with love and mercy especially upon those who have sinned against you... it is at the heart of God's good will for your life.

He therefore makes it a command. God doesn't just hope you will respond with forgiveness when you are sinned against. He demands it. Jesus warns that you will go to hell if you hold onto sins and grievances and refuse to forgive. That is the clear teaching of His parable of the unforgiving servant.

But, why? Why does Jesus respond so bluntly to Peter's attempt to put some limits on forgiveness? And, rather reasonable limits, frankly. I mean, Peter is pretty generous. Forgive seven times. Gee, lie to me or steal from me three or four times and I won't want anything more to do with you. Seven times? That's a lot. But, seventy times seven times... that's ridiculous! What kind of a fool do you think I am?

Jesus thinks I'm God's fool. He thinks you are, too. Is not God's Word clear on this? He calls us servants of the king, not independent citizens. And, we're told in Rom. 12: ***"None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."*** You are not your own. You belong to God. He is your King, and you are to do – you must do – what He demands... or else. So, when someone sins against you – and especially when that someone is one who is close to you, and whose sin therefore hurts deeply – forgive that person. Set aside their sin and your desire to be proven right. This is what God demands... period. Honor Him!

But, even more, see the honor God gives you of forgiving. God has done far more than just set aside your own sins, canceled their enormous debt... a debt that is vastly greater than any sin committed against you. God has given you the honor of representing Him and speaking for Him! That's what you are doing when you forgive as you have been forgiven. You are standing out, doing differently from what people expect. You are doing God's work.

How different is Christ's forgiveness, and so our forgiveness as His people? Well, people usually forgive only after the person who sins against them admits his sin; says, "I'm sorry;" and then asks for forgiveness. Notice, however, that in Jesus' parable the king canceled the debt of the 1st servant without being asked to do so. The servant had only asked for more time to repay it – an unreasonable request, for the debt was so huge that many lifetimes would still not be enough to make enough money to repay it. But, amazingly, the king decided to simply cancel the debt. No repayment was required, not even just a little bit! Why was the king so generous? ***"Out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt."*** God isn't unmoved

by the misery that we bring upon ourselves by our sins. His heart goes out to us!... so much so that He sent His Son to bear the punishment that we have earned by our sins. Jesus was talking about Himself in the parable. He is the king who absorbed the cost of the debt his servant owed him.

Forgiving like this – before and without being asked to do so; before there is any admission of wrongdoing; completely setting aside all hold over the person because of his sin, and so not speaking of it to others or broadcasting it over social media – people will see this to be quite unusual. You may even be called foolish and overly lenient. This will give you the opportunity to tell of why you forgave as you did: because of your own forgiveness in Jesus. Then He, the true and ultimate forgiver of sin, will be honored and glorified! Your free and full forgiveness will help people to believe in God's free and full forgiveness in Christ. And your heavenly Father will be pleased.

This does not mean that forgiving as Jesus demands will be easy. It is very hard! How can we poor sinners, who struggle to get past sins out of our memories, truly do this?

Keep in mind the words of Joseph to his brothers: ***“Am I in the place of God? You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”*** You and I are not in the place of God, but in the place of men. We are sinners, just like everyone else. The more you confess this by honestly and truly confessing your own sins, the more you will see that you are not different from or better than the one who sins against you. This will work to awaken pity within you. Then, the more you gratefully receive and live in God's forgiveness in Jesus – a forgiveness that cost Him so much, but which price He gladly paid; a forgiveness that is freely given and complete, covering and canceling all of your sins – the more will you treasure it and realize how it changes you. Even so, it can change the one who has sinned against you! Our God can turn to good what is intended to harm – as we see with Joseph, who, although sold into slavery into Egypt, ended up being raised to Pharaoh's right hand and put in charge of all Egypt so that he might prepare for a 7-year-long famine and save many people during it. Jesus' crucifixion is the best example of God turning what was intended for evil into great good: the forgiveness of us all! – including the one who sins against you.

Trust your Savior, who died for you and forgave you so greatly, to care for you. Trust Him as He does His great work of forgiveness through you. Trust Him to then turn even what is meant for evil against you to good. He will comfort you with His love, and even in the midst of turmoil will give you, and fill you with, His peace. In the saving name of Jesus! Amen.