

INI

Last week we learned (if we hadn't known it already) that there is indeed such a thing as a stupid question. The disciples had come asking Jesus who the greatest in the kingdom of heaven was. So, Jesus used their foolishness for an opportunity for a period of instruction. And His answer laid the foundation for understanding many things in the life of discipleship, many things that came in the following verses.

A person's relationship to the heavenly Father stems from first realizing that we are mere children—helpless, needy, and totally dependent. Attitudes about ourselves and our responsibilities were set aright. We *are* our brother's keeper. It matters what we do or fail to do regarding our brothers and sisters in Christ. We dare not lead a weaker brother or sister into temptation. And if one has become lost, we as Christ's Church are to seek them out. The most important person in the kingdom is not the one who has done the most boastworthy things, but the one who has the greatest need.

We even got a model for Church discipline. If another child of God is erring or has offended us, we have instructions. Talk to them one on one. If they refuse to listen, take witnesses. If they are still stuck in their sinful ways, take it to the Church. And finally, and only as a last resort, when they have proven that they have excluded themselves from the faith and fellowship of the body of Christ, treat them as an outsider. But the goal is *always, always, always*, restoring the lost and erring weaker brother, *never, never, never* to kick people out because we don't like the way they look or dress or smell. But again, all of this understanding starts with first understanding that we ourselves are just as needy and dependent children as everyone else is.

This week, the scene continues. Peter offers another supposedly "not stupid" question. **"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"**

I'm sure Peter had thought he had figured it out. In biblical numerology, seven is one of those perfect numbers, a number of completion. So, Peter figures if he forgives seven times, he has done his job. Any other offenses and the person will be on their own, he thinks. After all, Peter would have done what was required of him.

But Jesus responds yet again in a way that challenges Peter, the rest of the disciples, and us. **"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."**

Then Jesus goes into the parable of the unforgiving servant. A servant owes 10,000 talents. The king seeks justice. But fearing for his own life and the lives of his family, the servant pleads for mercy. Out of pity (and the word *σπλαγγίζομαι* used there is the same for when Jesus has compassion on the crowds), out of pity, out of compassion, out of gut-wrenching care and concern for the servant in his helpless state, the king forgives the debt.

Then the servant goes out and sees someone who owes him money and has his chance to pay it forward. This second fellow servant also pleads for mercy. But the first servant refuses and throws him in prison for a mere 100 denarii.

Some perspective: A denarius was a day's wage. So, the second servant, could have *possibly* worked it off the debt in 100 days. *Realistically* it would have taken longer because he still needs to eat, feed his own family if he had one, have federal income tax taken out of the wages, pay his electric bill, fill his car up with gas—you know, normal daily expenses in biblical times. Even with out all of that modern stuff, it would have taken longer, but was still possible. It was a significant amount, but not much when compared with what the first servant owed.

10,000 talents. With an exchange rate of 6,000 denarii to a single Tyrian talent, the first servant's debt would have taken him 60 *million!* days to pay off! Even at a pretty generous, albeit unrealistic, estimate of repaying as much as 10 talents per year, it would have taken the first servant 1,000 years to pay off his debt. It doesn't take an advanced degree in mathematics to figure out who owed more. One debt was simply impossible to be repaid...and yet it was forgiven. And yet the one who was forgiven,

being owed a relatively tiny sum, sought vengeance and refused forgiveness.

In this parable we see the model of how God's kingdom operates, and, at the same time, how we struggle apart from faith and the work of the Holy Spirit. The prescription is to forgive, and to forgive such insignificant offenses when compared with our own offenses. And the prescription comes with a warning.

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."

Jesus speaks the same way, outside of any parable, in Matthew 6. So, there is no question about it. Jesus is not being hyperbolic with His prescription and warning. Right after Jesus gave the Lord's Prayer as a model of prayer, He said very plainly, **"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."** Matthew 6:14-15

For us to make sense of it, we need to again first remember that we ourselves are needy children with impossible debt to repay. If there is any doubt in your mind, look to the 10 Commandments. Start backward with coveting and work your way to the front keeping in mind sins of thought and word as well as deed. Perhaps assign a denarius to each offense. And watch as the tally of debt owed goes up, up and away from any chance of ever repaying it (*as if we could*) as we get closer to the most often broken first commandment.

And we often, like Peter, wonder how many times must *we* forgive? And we look to this passage and we wonder, "does 'seventy times seven' mean 77 times or 490 times?" Well either translation is accepted by scholars. But if we, like Peter, get caught up in the bare minimum number required of us, we are missing the point. How many times must we forgive? Only as many times as we need forgiveness from our Heavenly King. That is the model. That is the pattern of life for a child of the kingdom. Forgiving as we have been forgiven. Forgiving because He first forgave us.

A struggle to forgive is not at all the same thing as a refusal to forgive. Refusing to forgive is actually despising the forgiveness that is given to us first. Refusal to forgive is behaving childishly outside of the kingdom, rather than as child of God. Refusal to forgive is desiring the gifts of the kingdom while also desiring to live outside of and apart from the kingdom and its requirements.

A struggle to forgive is nothing more than an indicator that you are a Child of God but you are also still in the flesh, still awaiting the fulness of the kingdom at Christ's return. In this life, as we wage war with our Old Adam, our sinful self, we *will* struggle with forgiveness. Some hurts are lasting. Some wounds are deep. And while we can say "I forgive you," it may take a while for our sinful hearts and raw emotions to catch up with the words that our believing tongues have uttered.

If you are struggling to forgive, as we all struggle at times, the place to start lies back in the first 5 verses Matthew 18. Remember first, that you *are* a child of God, totally dependent on His mercy, totally indebted to Him, and yet totally forgiven for your insurmountable debt, totally joined through the waters of baptism to His forgiveness, His perfect life, His death, and His resurrection.

And remember that as His child you are invited to pray to God as your own Father in the words of the Lord's Prayer. And when you do pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" you are calling as a loving child upon your loving Father to forgive your sins. For we know that we have sinned daily and can never hope to earn forgiveness. But we also remember that we are already forgiven. So, in praying those words you also are asking for His help to forgive others who have sinned against you in such comparatively small ways as you have already been forgiven.

God has forgiven your sins in Christ and now He calls you, frees you, and sends you to forgive the sins of others. With His help may we live in His kingdom as children of the kingdom forgiving others in the way, and because, He has first forgiven us. Amen.