

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 15th Sunday After Pentecost, Sept. 10, 2017

**It's Mathematics**  
September 17, 2017

Matthew 18:21-35

Last Sunday I began a three week series on fairness. I said then that one should follow the advice of Jesus to talk to those with whom you have a problem. Be fair with them. Listen to their viewpoint. Hopefully the disagreement, whatever it is, can be resolved amicably.

Our scripture reading this morning carries that advice even further. Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who has sinned --- seven times? Jesus responds saying seventy-seven times.

Peter was very impulsive as we know. One reference that I have <sup>(1)</sup> calls him, "The patron saint of those of us born without a filter between their brain and their mouth." Peter was liable to blurt out almost anything but here he was being careful so he does the math. He knows how forgiving Jesus is so he sets what he thinks is a huge level of forgiveness --- seven times.

Think about it. Do the math. Someone has sinned against you or the church and Peter inquires is they should be forgiven up to seven times. That is a huge number. Most of us would write the person off before being that forgiving.

Think about that. Someone has wronged you and you go to talk to them about what they did. You forgive them. But they keep doing it and you forgive them again and again. Seven times seems to be an incredible number but to Jesus, it isn't. Seven is chicken feed. Jesus says that you should forgive the person as much as seventy-seven times if necessary.

However the mathematics of counting forgiveness is sinful in itself. If you are counting, you are not practicing grace --- you are just drawing out your patience. By keeping score, you really are not forgiving the person. By keeping count you are practicing unforgiveness --- you are not getting rid of the past. You are keeping it handy for ready reference. You are holding it handy, ready to bring up again the next time anything you disagree with happens.

In our scripture reading, Jesus tells the story of a servant who had his debt

forgiven but who failed, in turn, to show forgiveness to someone else. He was totally unfair. He was forgiven a great debt but would not forgive a small debt. God freely forgives us. We are the undeserving recipients of his grace and he expects us to forgive others accordingly --- if need be seventy-seven times.

These Days (January 20, 2015) said, *“I wish that Jesus had explained about forgiveness more clearly. Though he tells a parable about forgiveness ... he never says **how** we are to do such a thing as forgive seventy-seven times. Our rational selves ask, ‘Is it really wise to forgive at all when there hasn’t been any repentance on the part of the wrongdoer?’*

*“If God asked that question of us, we’d be in trouble. We know that God has forgiven us many times more than seventy-seven even without our repentance. We know some of the things for which we need forgiveness. But there are many things of which we are unaware. **Every** day probably consists of God’s forgiving us at least seventy-seven times. We cannot come close to fathoming God’s forgiveness of us.”*

Try to do the math. Try to count how many times God has forgiven you. You can’t do it. If you can count how many times you have forgiven others, you really have not forgiven them. You have just stored their sins in your memory to bring up the next time you see them sin. There is no scorecard for forgiveness and there shouldn’t be.

In his book “Victory Over the Darkness,” <sup>(2)</sup> Neil T. Anderson reminds us that we don’t forgive others for their sake; we do it for our own sake.

He prescribes a twelve step prescription for forgiveness:

1. Ask God to remind you of those you need to forgive.
2. Acknowledge the hurt and the hate that you feel.
3. Understand how the Cross is significant. Jesus took the sins of the world upon himself on that Cross.
4. Decide that you will indeed take on the burden of the sins of others, just as Jesus did on the Cross for you.
5. Decide to forgive. This is a choice *“to let the other person off of the hook and to free you from the past.”*
6. Pray about the offenses that you felt. Make a list.
7. Destroy the list.
8. Don’t expect your forgiveness to change the other person.

9. Try to understand the person you are forgiving but don't attempt to rationalize what they did.
10. Expect your forgiveness to bring positive results to you.
11. Thank God for what you have learned and for what you have gained through your forgiveness.
12. Accept your part of the blame for what you have suffered.

In his seminal book, "Mere Christianity", C. S. Lewis <sup>(3)</sup> said, "Every one says that forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive." He cites the reaction of people who were asked to forgive the Nazis after the Second World War and says "... *to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger.*"

Then he refers to the Lord's Prayer in which we ask for forgiveness of our sins just as we forgive those who sin against us. "*It is made perfectly clear that if we do not forgive we shall not be forgiven. There are two ways about it.*"

Have you ever thought about what you are praying for week in and week out when we pray the Lord's Prayer in church or in the privacy of our homes?

We pray for God's Kingdom to come. We pray for our daily bread. We pray not to be tempted to sin. And most of all we pray for forgiveness and that we forgive those who sin against us, no matter how many times they do. Not seven and not seventy-seven, but as many times as necessary.

**Amen.**

1. Brian Erickson in "A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series" Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2016.
2. Neil T. Anderson, "Victory Over the Darkness", Regal Books, Ventura, CA, 2000
3. C. S. Lewis, "Mere Christianity", HarperCollins, New York, 1980