

## **The Limits of Forgiveness**

### **Cooke's-Portsmouth**

**September 17, 2017**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

There is great truth to the adage that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Unfortunately for the church the weak link often has a direct correlation to the disconnect between *knowing* what is expected of the believer and *doing* what is expected. The gospel lesson for this morning is akin to that of last week. We are to be relentless in our efforts to restore to the fold one who has been hurt and wronged. The text last week outlined a very intentional process to reinstate and re-integrate the lost and the marginalized. This week the gospel teaches that forgiveness is an absolute.

Peter's suggestion that he must forgive up to seven times is not an attempt to place a limit on forgiveness. The number 7 is significant in scripture and is considered a holy number.

The first use of the number 7 in the Bible relates to the creation week in Genesis 1. God spends six days creating the heavens and the earth, and then rests on the seventh day. This is our template for the seven-day week, observed around the world to this day. The seventh day was to be "set apart" for Israel; the Sabbath was a holy day of rest (Deuteronomy 5:12).

Thus, right at the start of the Bible, the number 7 is identified with something being "finished" or "complete." From then on, that association continues, as 7 is often found in contexts involving completeness or divine perfection. So we see the command for animals to be at least seven days old before being used for sacrifice (Exodus 22:30), the command for leprous Naaman to bathe in the Jordan River seven times to effect complete cleansing (2 Kings 5:10), and the command

for Joshua to march around Jericho for seven days (and on the seventh day to make seven circuits) and for seven priests blow to seven trumpets outside the city walls (Joshua 6:3–4). In these instances, 7 signifies a completion of some kind: a divine mandate is fulfilled.

Multiples of 7 also figure into the biblical narrative: Jeremiah 29:10 predicted the Babylonian Captivity would last for seventy years. According to Leviticus 25:8, the Year of Jubilee was to begin after the passing of every forty-ninth year. In all, the number 7 is used in the Bible more than seven hundred times. If we also count the words related to *seven* (terms like *sevenfold* or *seventy* or *seven hundred*), the count is still higher. Of course, not every instance of the number 7 in the Bible carries a deeper significance. Sometimes, a 7 is just a 7, and we must be cautious about attaching symbolic meanings to any text, especially when Scripture is not explicit about such meanings. However, there are times when it *seems* that God is communicating the idea of divine completeness, perfection, and wholeness by means of the number 7. So reference to the number 7 in Matthew 18: 21 is intentional and rife with significance.

Peter is seeking clarification on how to practice forgiveness to the point of perfection. Seven times forgiving could be interpreted as hitting the mark. But Jesus responds that seven times is not sufficient and makes it a multiple of seven. While the exact number is not clear in the Greek the point of the number is: forgiveness must be beyond perfect; beyond counting and keeping track. Forgiveness is to be an absolute: not qualified or diminished in any way; total. So the gospel text for this morning is troubling on two fronts: first it suggests that we are to be ceaseless in dispensing forgiveness- which is an onerous expectation, and, if we are honest, not the most appealing. And secondly, the parable teaches that we are forgiven as we choose to forgive.

The line in the Lord's Prayer that we sing weekly and many recite daily is not idle chatter: forgive us as we forgive others. The slave who was forgiven much and unable to forgive a little saw the grace of the Master transformed into ire. The forgiveness given was rescinded. It appears that forgiveness is conditional: the forgiven must forgive others. Forgive us as we forgive. No small feat in and of itself and requiring grace and discernment.

The abuser who mistreats partner and children cannot expect forgiveness so that the behaviour can be repeated. It is simply not acceptable to mistreat, beseech forgiveness and then mistreat again. Some might argue that this text has been problematic for the church when it has allowed those with no intention of living a better life a loop hole to abuse power and authority. This text is as nigglesome for us in our generation as it must have been for Peter. Some situations leave us pondering just how onerous the demands of faith can be.

If we were to learn that a half -way house for sexual offenders was being built in the neighbourhood in which we live or worship we might be more inclined to assume the worst rather than the best. We may join forces with those in opposition; choosing to believe that a leopard does not change its spots. We may want to argue that some breaches and crimes are nearly impossible to forgive. Should I find myself confronted with this situation I would need to confess that this text may just come into conflict with my personal bias and fears.

I would expect that my initial response would be fear, resistance and worry. I would not want a residence for convicted criminals in my backyard where I, and those whom I love and with I relate would be at risk. I want to reflect the light and grace of Christ but sometimes fear speaks in

a more demanding voice. Still other times the slow burn of a grudge has a greater appeal than the grace of forgiveness.

The story is told of a divorced woman consumed with anger and bitterness towards her ex-husband coming to her spiritual leader for advice and counselling. She was working hard to support her three children and every month was living paycheck to paycheck. She has had to tell her children that there is no money for special outings and treats like a movie and a trip to McDonald's. All the while her ex is living the high life with his new wife in a different state. She cannot forgive him and does not want her spiritual leader to tell her to do so. The pastor responded:

“I am not asking you to forgive him because what he did to you and your family *was* selfish and irresponsible. I am asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman. I want to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically but you keep holding on to him. You are not hurting him by holding onto the resentment. You are hurting yourself.”

Most of know many people who suffer the pain and angst of family members, friends and peers who cannot seem to move past a circumstance, an exchange of words or a difference of opinion. Eye contact is avoided; pleasantries not exchanged if they can even be together in the same room. Everyone walks on egg shells and wants neither to collude in nor prolong the discomfort. And while it is true that the laurel that we proffer may be slapped away, the intent of the gospel is that there must be an attempt made to reconcile and make new. That is what expected of us as

the visible body of Christ. Not just 7 times but seriously and honestly as a matter of course. As an absolute. When we point a finger at another there are three pointing back at ourselves. Forgive us as we forgive. We cannot expect forgiveness if we withhold it from others. We have a responsibility to God, ourselves and others.

Rabbi Jack Reimer has written in a Jewish worship resource:

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end war;  
For we know that You have made the world in a way  
That we must find our own paths to peace  
Within ourselves and with our neighbors.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God,  
To end starvation;  
For You have already given us the resources  
With which to feed the entire world,  
If we would only use them wisely.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God,  
To root out prejudice;  
For You have already given us eyes  
With which to see the good in others,  
If we would only use them rightly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God,  
To end despair;  
For You have already given us the power  
To clear away slums and to give hope,  
If we would only use our power justly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end disease;  
For You have already given us great minds  
With which to search out cures and healings,  
If we would only use them constructively.

Therefore, we pray to You instead, O God,  
For strength, determination, and will power,  
To do instead of just to pray,  
To become instead of merely to wish,  
For Your sake and for ours, speedily and soon,  
That our land and world may be safe,

And that our lives may be blessed.

from *Likrat Shabbat: Worship, Study and Song for Sabbath and Festival Evenings*, Rabbi Sidney Greenberg and Rabbi Jonathan Levine, eds. (Prayer Book Press, 2004)

The gospel lesson reminds that there are no limitations placed on forgiveness. Forgiveness denied will be forgiveness rescinded. We know how much we have been forgiven. May God grace us with compassion and integrity sufficient to continue to forgive our debts as we forgive others. May God bless us in the journey. Amen.