

No Trespassing!
Mathew 18: 21-35

How much forgiveness is enough? That seemed to be the question Peter was asking Jesus that day in Capernaum so long ago. Put another way, Peter was asking a question that we may ponder at times- "How many times may someone sin against me before I can say enough is enough- I can't forgive you anymore?" That is a difficult question, but Jesus has a way of providing answers to even the most complex of questions in life.

The question Peter asked Jesus was a fair one, for he and the other disciples had just heard Jesus give them a three step plan about how they were to respond if they believed a fellow church member had caused them harm. The first step is to bring it up with the person in private, one on one. If the wrongdoer is unwilling to admit his or her mistake, the next step is to take two or three others with knowledge of the situation and try again. If that does not bring about a resolution, the last resort is to bring the matter before the entire church. If the one who caused harm is still unwilling to admit their mistake and make things right, they are to be treated as a "Gentile or a tax collector", as Jesus puts it. In other words, they were now seen as an outsider rather than a brother or sister in Christ. It sounds much like baseball or felony drug dealing. Three strikes and you are out. It is painful rule yet necessary, for without rules there is no fair play and the game will suffer. Without laws, there is anarchy and society will suffer. Without Scriptural authority, church doctrine and discipline, there is no moral compass and the body of Christ will suffer.

Notice that Jesus did not mention the need for forgiveness in that three- step process for reconciliation. Where and how does forgiveness fit into any of that, especially as it relates to our relationship with other believers in the church, the body of Christ? It was not until Peter asked his mathematical question that forgiveness, rather than discipline, became the focal point of Jesus teaching that day.

We can infer from the first part of his question that Peter knew in his heart that **reconciliation requires forgiveness**. Some biblical scholars surmise that he had the OT book of Amos in mind when he suggested that forgiving someone 7 times was more than enough. Amos was one of the twelve Minor Prophets of the Old Testament, and in the book that bears his name we find that God severely punished 8 different nations for their sin, each after their third transgression. So, in his mind, Peter may have thought that seven was a reasonable number. It was more than double the number of times that God chose, and it would mean going above and beyond what God had demonstrated. His heart, his mind and even the Scriptures suggested the need for forgiveness, but with reasonable limits. Jesus soon showed him and the others that he was mistaken on all three. Now that they were His followers, they were to forgive each other 490 times, or in other words without limit.

Followers of Jesus are called to be forgiving people. Why? There are many good answers, but the best is that we are forgiven people. Think about the number of times God has forgiven you and me for falling short. Do you think it is seven times, or is it seventy times, or is it closer to the number that Jesus used- 490? I do not know what number is in your mind, but I suspect it would be on the larger end of the scale.

Does that mean we can sin at will and expect God to offer forgiveness so we can do it again? Paul deals with that very question in the Book of Romans. *6:16- What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace might abound? Certainly not! How shall we who die to sin live any longer in it?* The problem with recurring sin is that our hearts can easily become hardened to it, and soon we may not recognize our behavior as sinful. If we allow that to happen, we no longer see the need to seek God's forgiveness. To say it another way, we find no need to repent. That is not a good place to be, for we will soon see that **unrepentant sin is unforgiven sin**.

As He loved to do, Jesus taught His disciples about Christian forgiveness with a parable. He said that the kingdom of heaven, in other words the church, is like a certain king who wanted to settle his accounts with his servants. One servant owed a great debt to his master- ten thousand talents. A talent was the highest denomination of currency in use at the time- much like our \$100.00 bill. In today's world, it would add up to a million dollars. The point is that it is a huge sum, almost beyond imagination of folks at the time. We do not know whether it was negligence, ignorance, or something worse that got the servant into trouble, but it did not matter. He owed the king money and the king would have no choice but to sell the servant and his family into slavery to try and recoup what was rightfully his. The servant's only option was to beg the king for mercy and hope that he was a just ruler who would understand his plight. Do not miss verse 26- "please have patience with me". The king did and forgave the servant's debt.

Having such a debt removed and freedom from a life of slavery must have had a tremendous impact on the servant. He certainly learned a valuable lesson! Not. Soon after leaving the king's presence, he had an opportunity to be just like the king in his own little kingdom and offer forgiveness and freedom to one of his servants. But instead he chose to do something else. Look at verses 28-31. The reaction of the other servants is understandable. Seeing his lack of compassion and love and the violent reaction for the failure to pay a relatively paltry sum of money was almost too much to take. Verse 31 says they were "very grieved". Do you wonder if they faced the temptation to ask the same question Peter did? Lord, how often do we have to forgive?

The king was not happy. How could he not understand how someone who had received such great mercy would fail to respond likewise when they had the opportunity to do the same? The king had the servant delivered to the torturers until he should pay all that was owed to him. Of course, the servant would not have had the resources to pay that debt. **Unrepentant sin is unforgiven sin.**

Once we see God as the king, and you and I the servant and our sins for the money that was owed, we will begin to understand the parable. What can we do when we are confronted with such a large debt and no way to repay it? Much like owing the IRS or your mortgage company, if you owe them money and cannot pay what is due, life becomes stressful. Not only is there the debt, a penalty will be required for non-payment.

We are like that servant in debt, pleading for relief. Once again it does not matter whether it was negligence, ignorance, or something worse that got us into trouble, Lord, please be patient with me. I am trying. Please give me another chance to do the right thing. One of the things this parable teaches us is that when we pray and rely upon Jesus like that, He hears and responds with compassion. Just as the king wiped out the servant's entire million-dollar debt, Jesus will do the same for us. I suggest to you that this parable also teaches us that unrepentant sin is not forgiven. We will be trapped in a place we do not want to be if we sin against God or another and fail to seek forgiveness. Likewise, when another has sinned against us and we harden our hearts and refuse to accept their offer of repentance and plea for forgiveness. The words of Jesus in verse 35 are some of the most alarming in all the Scriptures. It is a great big no trespassing sign. Thank God for grace and mercy, for we would be doomed without it.

A story about Clara Barton comes to mind. A Civil War nurse, she founded the American Red Cross. She was said to have never harbored resentments. One time a friend recalled a cruel thing that had happened to her in years past, but Clara seemed not to remember it. The friend asked her- Don't you remember the wrong done to you? No, answered Clara. I distinctly remember forgetting that. Let us do that very thing as often as necessary, and when we ask for God's forgiveness, let us remember that it only comes if we are willing to forgive others. Amen