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Matthew 18:21-35
“Is there a limit to forgiveness?”

Praise the LORD, O my soul, and never forget all the good he has done: He is the One who forgives all your sins. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

In today’s Gospel, Peter asks an extremely practical question about forgiveness: **“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”**

There is good reason for us to think about this question still today. We live in a sinful world, surrounded by fellow sinners in all our relationships. Husbands sin against wives, and wives against husbands. Parents sin against children, and children against parents. Brothers and

sisters fight with each other, hurtful words fly between family members and friends, inconsiderate actions cause us difficulty at work, cruelty from a fellow student makes school miserable, the inattentive driver puts our lives in danger.

Just how much should we take? Just how much should we be willing to let go, especially if it happens again and again. If we keep forgiving people, won't they just take it for granted? **Is there a limit to forgiveness?** That's really what Peter asks here. And a part of us wonders too: **how many times shall I forgive? Is there a limit to forgiveness?**

Some would answer using the "baseball rule": 'three strikes and you're out.' One rabbi from Jesus' time even said: "If a man transgresses three times, forgive him. If a man transgresses four times, do not forgive him." That makes Peter's statement about forgiving **up to seven times** pretty generous.

But the true **Lord and Master** of forgiveness, Jesus disagrees: **"I tell you, not seven times, but**

seventy-seven times. Jesus answer might also be translated as **seventy times seven**, that is, 490 times!

Either way, the number Jesus gives is too big for keeping track and way more than anyone would expect! The point is this: don't keep score, but freely forgive the one who sins against you again, and again, and again...

Wait, are you telling me, Jesus, there is to be no limit to forgiveness!? I think you could have seen Peter's jaw drop as Jesus said this!

And then Jesus drives the point home with a story about a servant who owes his king **ten thousand talents**. Now that's not a lot of money, *IT IS A RIDICULOUS, OBSCENE AMOUNT OF MONEY!* Scholars estimate it would take an average common labor of that time period about 16 years to earn *just one talent*. So it would take *150,000* years for a common person to earn **ten thousand talents!** In our day, we're talking about hundreds of millions, even billions of dollars!

This is an impossible, immoral debt of reckless spending and waste! What a horribly irresponsible servant! And we know him personally. That servant is you and me.

God our King who gives us life and everything we have, has every right to require that we honor, praise and obey Him perfectly in every thought, word and action, every second of our life.

But when God's Word calls us to account, sin after sin swells our spiritual debt. Valuable minutes and hours wasted by selfishness, the good we could have done left undone, prayers left unspoken, help we didn't give others, times we were so focused on our own troubles we weren't even aware of what someone else needed. Add in the wrongs we have spoken, the sins of hand and eye, and every moment where mind and heart were not perfectly focused on what God calls pure and holy and perhaps we start to see how accurately a debt of **ten thousand talents** pictures our sin before God. And we could never pay it off! Not when the penalty for just one sin is forever in hell's torment.

The only thing more shocking than that we sinful servants have racked up such a wicked debt is this: **The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.** Just like that, the king forgives. He releases the servant from punishment. He tears the bill to pieces! He takes the loss on himself and demands nothing in return! The King forgives without limit.

Through the Holy Spirit's gift of faith, we know this King as our God who so loved a world of sinful debtors He gave His only Son to save. This King is the God who in amazing mercy became man in Jesus Christ to make our debt to be His debt, and His riches to be our riches. By His holy life and innocent death, Jesus took our debt of sin and paid it in full so that we go free to live in His heavenly riches! Indeed, the Lord's forgiveness is without limit!

But the story goes on to teach us about the way to respond to God's amazing forgiveness: **But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred**

denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. Doesn’t it just make you mad to hear how this servant who experienced so much mercy could in now be so cruel to his fellow servant?

Now the fellow servant’s debt of a **hundred denarii** is far from small. It adds up to a third of a year’s wages, several thousand dollars. That is a lot! This of course stands for the sins other people committed against us.

Notice God doesn’t downplay how much others hurt us, but He is teaching us with a comparison. Our 10,000 talents, 150,000 years of wages of sinful debt and wrong against God on one hand. 100 Denarii, 1/3 of a year’s wages of our neighbor’s sins against us. *10,000... 100.* There’s just no comparison here!

The point: we can’t forgive anyone more than God has already forgiven us. **Is there a limit to forgiveness?** Only if you can out-love and out-forgive God, and *that’s* not going to happen! So, God tells us: forgive without limit.

And he punctuates it with a warning! **This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.** And it starts to hit home. We have been this unmerciful servant too. He lives within our sinful nature and escapes into our lives.

Our fingers reach out for our fellow servants necks when we think some version of ‘I’ll make her wait a little longer for forgiveness, until she’s good and sorry’, or “I need to hear how I was right and they were wrong.” Or we secretly demand payment as we *say* ‘I forgive’, but still hold the hurt and grudge inside and as bitterness grows we long to see that person who hurt us ‘get what they have coming’. In God’s holy eyes, we’ve as good as thrown our fellow servant into prison even when we did finally forgive, but only after a struggle, only after thinking it over.

So how terrifying to hear Jesus warn us we’re in danger of not being forgiven by the Father in heaven! Now Jesus is not saying earn you earn forgiveness when you forgive others. No, forgiveness is always God’s gift.

But Jesus is helping us see that when we stubbornly refuse to forgive others, when we hold a grudge, we're essentially telling God we don't believe in the forgiveness of sins, that is we don't believe people should be forgiven freely, but they need to earn it, they need to pay for their wrongs!

See the problem? We're telling God we want nothing to do with free forgiveness and that we too should have to pay for all our sin, including failure to perfectly forgive. And we'll never be done paying that debt, not for all eternity in hell's endless torture.

Let this horrible knowledge of our cold and sinful hearts drive us to cry out for our King's mercy!

And then let Jesus' amazing words fill you with His mercy you need! **I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.** Understand that Jesus is not just teaching you how to forgive others here. He is also describing how He has perfectly forgiven you and me.

Jesus didn't just preach about limitless forgiveness, He practiced it too! He stood in our place and perfectly succeeded where we failed. And He makes His perfection count for us! Jesus never held a grudge. Christ always forgave from the heart. Even as they nailed Him to the cross, He prayed: **Father forgive them!**

And then He stayed upon that cross taking the torture of hell we earned so that trusting Him we will not go there. And from the throne of His cross, our Savior King announced that all our sin, even the times we reached out to choke our fellow servants with our slowness to forgive, even that debt is canceled, paid for in full, forgiven. That what He was saying when He shouted: **It is finished!**

Risen from the dead as the victorious proof of forgiveness, Jesus still comes and speaks to our hearts in His Gospel voice in the announcement of forgiveness in worship and on the lips of a fellow Christian, in the promises of Scripture, our Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and He announces once again: You are forgiven. I have paid it all. I give

you a home with me in heaven. Listen to Jesus in His Word and with a sigh of relief, believe this rock solid truth: **The Lord forgives us without limit!**

With hearts refreshed and renewed by God's amazing love, consider that bucket full of hurts others have given you to the vast ocean the Lord has freely forgiven you, and forgive others, *just as in Christ, God forgave you*—without limit. Amen.

Lord, increase our faith. Amen.