

*21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

From the time you were born until today, how many times do you think you have been forgiven by the members of your family? Did you use a crayon to write on some walls? Did you let the dog out when someone told you not to? Did you ignore a mother's request that you clean your room, or do your homework or help with the dishes? If you are a teenager have you stayed out past curfew, or been inconsiderate of your sister or brother? Have you had a fender bender or been caught in a lie or a deception? If you are a husband or wife have you spoken harsh words or been critical or distant toward your spouse? If you are a parent have you lost your temper, or ignored the requests of your child or given bad advice? How many times have you been forgiven by parents or children or spouse when no words were even spoken, when the hurt was ignored and everyone went on as if nothing happened?

Most of us could not even begin to count how many times forgiveness has been given. So many times we are not aware of the hurt we have caused, not aware of those who love us forgiving us. In a family that is healthy, forgiveness is like the air we breathe – always present – and never even given a thought except in those moments when we have really failed those who love us. Even then how many times we are forgiven.

Now that does not mean there have been no consequences for our sins against one another. Parents forgive but they also punish. The teenager that ignores her curfew may lose some privileges but even while she is grounded

forgiveness has already been given by her parents. Most of the time parents do not even think about forgiving – they just do it. This relationship between parent and child is loving for life – forgiveness is just a part of love.

Peter came to Jesus and asked, “If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered, “Not seven times but I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Now it all depends which translation you read whether that number is seventy-seven or seventy times seven. The Greek could mean either. But I doubt Jesus was intending to leave Peter with a specific number.

I read of a play that was written about this text. In the drama a husband and a wife are the characters. Seventy times seven is the number – 490. Every time she cooks the wrong thing or comes home from the store with something he does not approve of he marks it on a chart with 490 boxes. Not a word said, just a mark.

With forgiveness there can be no keeping track of totals. No number of sins that once you reach it forgiveness runs out. Jesus wanted Peter to understand that with sisters and brothers in the church there is no counting of sins. And then Jesus told a parable. The first slave owed the king an amount far greater than all the money King Herod received in a year. The slave could not pay – begging for patience – the king was not only patient but forgave the whole debt. Now that slave was owed a hundred denarii – in the world of slaves a significant number – but nothing compared to the debt the first slave had been forgiven. But he grabbed the man who owed him by the throat – demanded payment, and when he could not throw him into prison until he could pay the debt. The other slaves saw it all and told on him. The king was angry when he heard what had happened – handed him over to be tortured until he should pay the debt.

What a hopeless situation there is when we will not forgive our sisters and brothers in Christ. That is what Jesus wanted us to know. Jesus said something like that when he taught the Lord’s prayer and said, “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Forgiveness is not optional. If the church is to exist there must be forgiveness – God forgiving you – you forgiving your sisters and brothers in Christ who sin against you.

But notice forgiveness is not permissiveness. The son that is beaten needs to forgive – but also needs to go to the authorities to ensure the beating stops. Forgiveness is a requirement of love, but taking a stand is also a requirement of love.

That is what Jesus is doing with his teaching on the Lord 's Prayer – in love for us he sets a boundary – whenever you set your sister or brother in Christ outside the embrace of forgiveness – God puts you outside. That is a tough thing for Jesus to say to you. He loves you too much not to say it.

On September 11 I need to say one more thing. Jesus is not talking about our enemies in this passage. This passage about forgiveness is about the church, our sisters and brothers in Christ. Yet Jesus did teach us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

Whether we are talking about a father sexually abusing a daughter or terrorists destroying buildings love does not mean letting them have their way. We are harmed by those that use violence against us – and they are harmed by what they do as well. Love in many situations demands a forceful response. But that response is not about getting even – there is no getting even.

For when God confronted the mess and mass of our sin against God and against one another God did not get even – not even when sin led to the crucifixion of the only son of God – God did not get even. God forgives. Even as God is at work through you and me to make this a world where children are safe and have enough to eat and need not fear every stranger, God forgives.

You and I are immersed in the forgiveness of God – covered by it surrounded by it – breathing it in with our every breath. Jesus, who loves us, wants us to forgive one another. Always. Amen.