

Forgiveness has its limits! Pentecost 17 October 1-2, 2017

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God's grace and peace belong to us because Christ has forgiven us through His sacrifice for all sins. Amen. God's Word of forgiveness for us and forgiveness through us is written in Matthew 18:21-35
These are Your words, heavenly Father, so that we truly appreciate Your daily forgiveness for us. Amen.

Dear forgiven sinners, in Christ,

Everything in life has its limits. A sale at the store says "limit two." An unlimited fish fry will eventually stop when you are too full or when the restaurant closes. In our verses Peter asked Jesus about forgiveness thinking that his forgiving others should be limited. And we also might be tempted to say:

Forgiveness has its limits.

First, since the basis of forgiveness is the love of God, our limit is the total love God has for us. When Peter asked how many times he should forgive, Jesus answered, "*I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times.*" (v.21) Jesus was not telling Peter to keep a running total, but that he shouldn't bother counting. Then Jesus explained it with a parable. A powerful king called his servant, probably a governor, that he should pay the money he owed. The servant owed 10,000 talents, which could be as much as 600,000 days wages or up to 20 million of dollars. There was no way the man could repay that amount! He pleaded for mercy and the king forgave the debt simply out of love. The man didn't deserve this. The king just gave it!

Do we see ourselves as owing that kind of debt to God? We know that we've sinned, but not as bad as others. But, God has a standard of perfection. He doesn't lose track of anything we do wrong against Him or against our neighbors. We don't always honor God as we should. We don't always speak the truth in love or are generous. We all make excuses for the sins we commit, which is a sin too, because excuses keep us from repenting and confessing our sins. We cannot even pay for one sin and we cannot count all of them.

Our holy God is justly angry with us and should fully punish us like the king should have done to the servant. Someone might say, Why didn't God just say, "I forgive all sins?" But, there is no forgiveness without payment. So it is with sins against God. His holiness demanded a payment. In the parable, the King who forgave the servant took the loss of millions of dollars. Since we could not pay for sins, our loving God had Jesus suffer and die in our place. Jesus' sacrifice satisfied God's justice so that He freely offered forgiveness for all. By faith in Christ we are set free by His complete payment! God's love in Christ keeps heaven's door open even to repeat offenders like us. What amazing love God has shown to us!

We who experience God's love, live in His love! "*We love because He first loved us.*" (1 John 4:19) The Good Samaritan showed that kind of love. Unlike the priest and Levite in Jesus' story, this man stopped to help a man who was his enemy. Out of mercy he risked his life and spent his own money to see that the injured man recovered. Due to our lack of love, we don't often show that kind of concern or mercy. But, Jesus reminds us in this parable that we are connected to God's love in Him as our Savior. There is no limit to His love for us or for others through us!

Second, we forgive only as often as God forgives us. God puts no limit on the number of times He forgives. Jesus used the picture of money debt to describe sins. God sees everything we think, do, or say, and takes a full account of all those sins. Without His Word, we wouldn't see the huge debt we owe Him. If we commit 100 sins each day times 365 days, we'd have 36,500 and that's just for one year! It makes Peter's question of 7 times or Jesus answer of 77 seem small. Yet despite our high count of sin, "*where sin increased, grace increased all the more.*" (Romans 5:20) God's forgiveness in Christ covers them all. He no longer demands a payment for even one sin. His payment was made in full.

O that we could forgive like God has done for us! When someone wrongs us even in a small way, our natural reaction is like the servant who demanded payment from his fellow servant of a very small debt. When people sin against us, we suffer and we naturally want to see them pay for what they did. So, we may try to hurt them or hold a grudge to make them feel bad. This is not to say that we shouldn't warn people about their sin. But, Jesus talked about this just before Peter's question. It means that we respond to their sin out of love so they repent. Holding a grudge is the opposite of God's forgiveness. As Jesus' parable shows, God was willing to completely forgive through Jesus. God does not hold a grudge against us. He does not speak in angry ways to get back at us. He keeps "*no record of wrongs.*" (1 Corinthians 13:5)

The sins which people say or do against us hurt us; sometimes very deeply. We may lose our happiness, our friends, our reputation or our money. These hurts are hard to forgive! Peter realized that and he tried to set limits for his forgiveness of others. But Jesus wanted Peter to keep things in perspective. As much as it hurts us when people sin against us, think how much more we would be hurt if God kept His anger against or He withdrew His forgiveness of us! Jesus pictured it with the unforgiving man going to jail where he would be tortured for life! If someone sins against us and we hold hate against the person, we are hurting our relationship with our heavenly Father. Jesus said after teaching His disciples the Lord's Prayer, "*If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*" (Matthew 6:14-15) Jesus is not saying that we earn forgiveness by forgiving others. He is saying that not forgiving others eventually is like poison to our faith. It blocks Christ's free forgiveness so that we don't receive the benefits of His saving work. Holding a grudge shows a lack of repentance. It is as if God's mercy and love mean nothing to us! So, by not forgiving, even though Christ paid for our forgiveness, we are keeping Him at arm's length from our hearts. What spiritual danger we all are in!

If you are like me, too often you may feel very much like the man who was forgiven the great debt but who showed no mercy to another. What do we do, to overcome this powerful sin of lacking forgiveness or wanting revenge when we are hurt? Picture who we are! If you asked a homeless person to borrow \$10 you would not be surprised if they didn't have it. If you ask a person who has been a long-time friend who is now a multi-millionaire for \$10 and he said I can't spare it, you'd be greatly let down. He was just too stingy to help. We don't want to be like that spiritually. We can return to Christ and confess our sins. Then we can more fully appreciate that Jesus gave His life to save us. He took mocking, beatings, and crucifixion and then said, "*Father, forgive them....*" (Luke 23:34) Jesus' forgiveness was part of God's plan to save us and through us He wants more people to know of His salvation. Some people in the Bible did learn to forgive like Jesus. Stephen was a believing Jew who lived after Christ. He was unjustly condemned and as the Jews were stoning him, He forgave them. Joseph in Egypt forgave his brothers for hating him and selling him into slavery. He saw that God had a loving plan to save his family through him so instead of revenge, he forgave them. If Joseph could forgive such awful sins, can we not forgive people's sins against us?

There are two things which our heavenly Father reveals that can help us forgive the sins of others: spiritual humility and wealth. We humbly admit to God that we have committed countless sins. We are spiritually so far in debt we can never repay God. But Christ offers us the riches of His life and death to pay for our sins in full. We daily need to remember God's gracious forgiveness of all our sins to keep in perspective the small sins that people commit against us. That is what Jesus was saying in the Lord's prayer: "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgiven those who trespass against us.*" (Matthew 6:12) In Christ, there are no limits to God's love and forgiveness for us. In Christ, there are no limits as His forgiveness overflows in our lives so we have His love and mercy to show to others. Amen.