

“Forgiven in Christ”

Matthew 18:21-35

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Feelings are a very fickle human response. Sometimes, one even goes so far as to say they cannot control those feelings, and they are completely overtaken with grief, sorrow, anger, fear, or joy. The sinful flesh abounds with feeling and emotion. It uses them as a weapon for its own gain and to make one turn inward to themselves and their own desires. Think about when someone has done you some wrong, maybe even on multiple occasions. Your natural instinct toward that person is one of anger and resentment. They keep saying they are sorry, but they still keep doing it over and over again, hurting you and others in the process. What are you to do with such a person? Cast them off and treat them as a pariah, belittling them for their indiscretions? How do you get past the hurt and the pain that comes from this person who continually brings you so much trouble in your life? You simply can't forgive them one more time. You're tired of hurting and there's only so much forgiveness that you have to give.

Well, as the prophet says in Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” Thinking with your heart can get you into all kinds of tight spots. That's where Peter is testing the waters with Jesus in our text. He asks the Lord, how many times he has to suffer forgiving his brother that sins against him...“As many as seven times?!?” The Jewish custom was that it was three times and then you had the right to ostracize that person. So, Peter is wondering if the Lord agrees. Peter believes his forgiveness has a limit, and even seven times is beyond the limits of what he is willing to do based on what he feels in his heart. But Jesus sees the heart of His disciple, and knows how to put him at ease. His answer to Peter is not actually a set number that gives a measure or tally one must keep. He says, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” Peter's mind must have been blown. He thought that he was pushing the limits by suggesting seven times, but seventy times seven? How could anyone forgive someone that much? The answer is that forgiveness in Christ knows no bounds.

The bounds of the sinful flesh are emotions and feelings—those things which come from the deceitful heart. If given its run of the mill, it would have you never forgive anyone for any reason. After all, people are people, and they will never change. You can't trust someone when they ask for your forgiveness, because what they did to you just hurt way too much. The evil one twists that knife in your heart as hard as he can, doing everything within his power to keep you from giving that person the relief of

forgiveness. A gift which, by the way, has been given to you already as a free gift of God's grace. The servant in our text this morning certainly learned that one the hard way. Having been forgiven his entire debt, a mind-blowing equivalent of 200,000 years of wages, he doesn't go out and do the same for those who owe him. He chokes a man and demands payment immediately in full, and when he refused, he had him thrown in jail. As a result, the master reapplied the unforgiving servant's debt, and threw him in jail until it should be paid.

Withholding forgiveness is so much more than just a wrong thing to do. It mocks the sacrifice of Jesus who has gone to the cross for the sins of the whole world. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" His forgiveness is a free gift for all, and yet, as poor, miserable sinners, so often you refuse to do the same for those who have done you wrong. When Christ went to the cross, he demanded no penance from those He was redeeming. He demanded no one come to him and repent over and over again. He didn't require a clear sign that you are truly sorry for what you have done, and He didn't insist that you make up for it by making Him feel better about forgiving you. What was done at the cross was Christ going through pain and suffering, being pierced for your transgressions, and dying the death that all sinful mankind deserves to die. Proper forgiveness is not forgiving someone over and over again because it makes you feel better to absolve them. It's not a good work that you do that merits you anything before the Lord.

The "seventy times seven" mentioned by Jesus in our text is nothing more than a roadmap of sorts guiding people to His all-atoning sacrifice for sin. It is meant to be a wild number, the same as the 200,000 years of wages worth of debt that the servant amassed with his master. Your sin problem is so huge that it could not possibly be atoned for on your own. Your debt could never be paid if you were forced to work it out for yourself. And your sinful flesh wants you to give into that reality and believe there is no hope for you, that there is nothing you can do to ever reach the good graces of your Lord. In that regard, your sinful flesh is actually right. There is nothing you can do to reach His good graces. You are totally depraved and absolutely unworthy of His forgiveness. You should have to pay the debt that is owed for your transgressions. Yet, you sit here in your Lord's Divine Service, freely receiving the absolution of Christ which cleanses you from all unrighteousness.

You don't have to pay the debt that you owe. The massive amount of sin that you have amassed in your life has already been forgiven in Christ. Seventy is a number that represents complete judgment. The number seven is the number of judgment—when God (3) and man (4) meet, there must be judgment. And the number ten is the divine

number of completion. So, in response to Peter's assertion that seven times would be an astronomical number of times to forgive, the Lord says that he is way off the mark. There is one act of complete forgiveness that He will do out of His divine love for His people. Complete judgment will be rendered for sin when Jesus goes to the cross to redeem the world. And it is a judgment of justified for all who believe—forgiven in Christ and for His sake alone.

Because of what you have received for the sake of Christ and by His blood shed for you, you forgive others. Not because of your love for them or their sorrow, but because of the forgiveness that Jesus has won for you and for them, you impart that pardon and peace in Christian love. The person who has done you wrong is not forgiven because you made the choice to do it. They are forgiven for the same reason each and every one of you are forgiven—because Jesus Christ, true God and true man, bore the burden of their sin to the cross of Calvary, bled, and died that they might have forgiveness, life, and salvation. Who is any sinner to withhold that from one who needs to hear the truth of that Gospel treasure? “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him (John 3:17).” He came to redeem the world, to seek and to save the lost. He came to forgive a debt that was insurmountable unless the Master wiped it out. And by the death of His only Son, that is exactly what He did for you, and for all who seek the solace of His forgiving embrace.

Jesus does not withhold forgiveness from you because of your unworthiness. Despite your unworthiness, He gives it to you freely through His Means of Grace that He has given as a gift to His Church on earth. The consolation of His Word of absolution that you receive is what is found here in His holy house. You come in contrition and repentance as one who knows the need you have for your Savior's love and grace, and He speaks it freely through the mouth of His called servant. This daily reminder of your Baptism where He claimed you as His own dear child shows you that it is a work of the Lord that brings you the comfort and peace of knowing what He has done on your behalf. And your forgiveness is never more certain than when you eat His body and drink His blood in His Holy Supper. You physically touch your Savior who has given His own life that you might have everlasting life with Him in the heavenly dwelling of His Father and your Father. And you partake of that meal with all those present here with you, sinners who like you need the forgiveness that only Christ can give.

That joy of being forgiven in Christ is yours to share with everyone whom you come into contact. When you are given the opportunity to forgive—forgive! The free gift of forgiveness that Jesus has wrought for you is a precious gift that is meant for all.

Do not find yourself as the unforgiving servant in our text, receiving everything, but giving nothing. What you give is not even yours. What you impart in the forgiveness of sins is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who works faith where He wills, and brings the comfort of Christ to the troubled heart. Your feelings and emotions must be kept at bay, leaning on the truth that Christ has redeemed you and all people equally by His blood alone. Give the treasured gift of forgiveness when it is asked of you, for Jesus gave you the forgiveness of the Father even though you deserve nothing but His wrath. To withhold forgiveness is to abandon Christ, and thus abandon faith in the one who has redeemed you.

But even this is not a work you must do. By faith and through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christ works in and through you to impart His forgiveness to those who come to you in sorrow for their sin. And it is only by His blood shed for the world that they are forgiven. They, like all people, are forgiven in Christ. You all come before the Lord, undeserving and impure, and He makes you worthy and righteous for His sake alone. He clothes you in the robe of His righteousness, making you to be like the saints who have gone before and now dwell in the light of His glory. The perfection of that glory is what awaits all who are forgiven in Christ, to be among the saints and angels in the everlasting love of the Father for all eternity in the new heaven and the new earth where sin shall be no more, and you dwell as His forgiven children forevermore. Amen.