

Pre-forgiveness
Matthew 18:21-22

July 15, 2018

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.

This is a well known lesson on forgiveness that is a lot easier to read than it is to obey. It is a lesson for all. Forgiveness is mandatory for the Christian because it is commanded by Jesus. Forgiveness is also beneficial for the forgiving Christian because with forgiveness it is impossible to have hurt feelings. Of all the things in life that we are to do as Christians I think forgiveness is one of the hardest things to do - if not the hardest thing to do.

Our Scripture takes place when Jesus is in Galilee teaching the disciples. Peter came to him to clarify an uncertainty and to talk one on one with teacher. In school when a teacher teaches the class each student has a different level of interest from not caring at all to being highly interested and wanting to learn more. If they are interested they will ask questions. If they are really interested they will stay behind and talk one on one with the teacher. This is where Peter is. In the Scripture Peter came to Jesus; he made an effort to engage in discussion with the teacher. Burning within Peter is the question of forgiveness. "{How often should I forgive a church member who sins against me?"

Human reality is that it is hard to forgive one time. But Peter asks what he thinks is generous. To Peter the proposal is extravagant; it is way more than expected. Maybe he is trying to impress Jesus. "How often should I forgive, as many as seven times?" This seems to be an extreme but what Peter proposes is actually limited. Jesus teaches "no, no, no, not seven times but 77 times (this can also be interpreted as 7x70). The response of Jesus is far beyond Peter's proposal. Once again Jesus teaches something that is unexpected. The difference is not a matter of math. The difference lies in the nature of forgiveness. The number is not what is significant. You do not get to seek vengeance on number 78. You do not get to put it on your calendar and forgive every day for 77 days and then get even. You do not get even on October 1st - that is eleven weeks and one day from now. It is not the number that is significant. What is significant is the meaning. Whoever counts has not forgiven. We are to have unlimited forgiveness. In the realm of Jesus (which is the realm of Christianity) there are to be no ends to our forgiveness. The forgiveness that Jesus calls for is beyond calculation. Forgiveness is required regardless of the offense. As hard as it may be forgiveness is required regardless of the offense. And the amount of forgiveness that is required is unlimited. Without faith this is beyond the realm of human possibility.

There are several occasions in the Bible where forgiveness is a lesson. It is a hard lesson to learn and it is an even harder lesson to live by. To help Peter and the disciples understand the lesson Jesus follows up with a story about a king and a slave. In the story the king represents God and the slave represents us, the servants of God. The debt is forgiven but the slave, instead of responding generously and forgiving the debts that are owed to him, is brutal. This is an example of our relationship with God who has already forgiven us. We are to pay it forward, to forgive others as God has forgiven us. We are to treat others with love and forgiveness just as God has done unto us.

Again, I think forgiveness is one of the hardest things to do. I was talking with a man several years ago. He is not a member of this congregation or any other past ministry but is

someone I once knew. He confided in me a personal heartache of his. He owned a nice house that was a brick ranch with a level yard and today it would probably be valued at around \$175,000. His nephew talked him into signing it over to him. After he did so his nephew disowned him. He refused to have anything else to do with him and refused to even talk with him. The man was heartbroken. He could not believe his loved one would treat him this way. But what was even more difficult for him is the fact that he just could not find it in his heart to forgive him. In his mind the nephew did him wrong and so he could not let go of the resentment. He was shocked to learn that he, himself, was at fault for his failure to forgive.

Forgiveness is the hardest gift to give. It was easier to give away a house than it was to give the gift of forgiveness. But there is a tremendous benefit to offering forgiveness. It benefits the forgiver. This means that you give up the resentment, the pain of being wronged. You release all of the anger and negative emotions that make you unhappy. When you fail to forgive it robs your happiness. The gift you give yourself is the removal of bad feelings. Forgiveness heals you. It contributes to your happiness. It takes away the pain of being wronged.

The title is *Pre-forgiveness* because we are already forgiven. The gift of forgiveness is already given to us. It is a Gift from God. Like I said before forgiveness is the hardest gift to give. It is definitely a hard commandment to follow. But it is easier to follow when you remember that first we are the recipients of forgiveness. Where do you find the spiritual fortitude to forgive everyone and everything? The answer is Jesus. God's answer is look at Jesus and you will see that you were already forgiven some 2000 years ago. What a revelation! God forgave me before I was born. God forgives all through pre-forgiveness. If you forgive everybody, everyday, do you know what you get? You get peace - a life of peace. The problem with the offense is that it robs your peace. Forgiveness is how you get your peace back. You may not get vengeance or justice but what you get is the peace. What you want with vengeance and justice is peace and satisfaction. With forgiveness you bypass the pain of seeking satisfaction and go straight to receiving satisfaction. True forgiveness brings overwhelming peace to you. Not just peace, but a life of peace.

We are reminded of God's grace. God forgives us, all of us, for our offenses, all of them. When we are reminded of God's grace it is easier to follow the hard lessons. With faith we can respond in kind. We are to respond to God's grace by doing to others as God has done unto us. We offer the hardest gift of all to give - forgiveness.