

But Who's Counting?  
Matthew 18:21-34  
Psalm 130

2-8-04  
First Christian Church  
Columbia, Missouri  
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In one of her books, Corrie ten Boom tells the story of meeting a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat in the basement of a church in Germany in 1947. She, a Dutch woman who had been sent to a Nazi concentration camp for hiding Jews in her home, had gone to Munich to speak about God's forgiveness to the Germans. After she finished talking this man came before her and told her that he had been a guard in the camp where she had been held, and where her sister had died. He stuck out his hand and said, "I know that God has forgiven me the cruel things I did, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, will you forgive me?" It was the first time since her release that she had come face to face with one of her captors, and as he stood there with his hand out to her, her blood seemed to freeze and she went cold. It was the hardest thing she had ever been asked to do.

Have you ever been asked to do it? Have you ever had to do most difficult thing in the world; to forgive! That is the question of the day which was raised by one of our friends. How can we forgive? How many times should we forgive? Why should we forgive?

There is a story in the Bible which speaks to that question; take a look at it for a few minutes: One day Peter came up to Jesus and asked a question,

"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?"

Coventional wisdom of Jesus day said that three times is enough to forgive. One of the ancient Jewish rabbis said, "If a man commits an offence once, they forgive him; if he commits an offence a second time, they forgive him; if he commits an offence a third time, they forgive him; the fourth time they do not forgive." Three times was enough.

It makes sense! We can understand if someone says something untrue about us. We might think to ourselves, "You have must misunderstood what she said. Are you sure she was not talking about someone else? I cannot believe she would say such a thing. Even if she did, she really did not mean it. And so you over look it and forget about it!

And perhaps if we really work at it, we could forgive twice. And perhaps if we really stretch it, we could you forgive three times. The ancient rabbis taught that one is obligated to forgive three times.

Peter knew what the Rabbis taught, and when he asked Jesus about forgiveness, he thought he would be generous, "Lord how often shall someone sin against me, and I forgive? As many as seven times?" Seven times, that would be really difficult, but Jesus made some hard demands upon his followers, and Peter thought surely that Jesus would commend him for extending the limit from three to seven.

But listen to Jesus' answer, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."

"What did you say, seventy times seven?"

"That's right, Peter, seventy times seven."

"But you have to be kidding; no one could forgive that many times."

"No, I am not kidding, Peter. Let me tell you a story, then figure it out for yourself."

And then Jesus tells the story about the king who forgave a servant who owed him \$10,000, but later that same servant refused to forgive one of his friends who owed him a mere \$20. "Now, Peter what do you think?"

What do you think? What in the world was Jesus talking about?

Someone might say that it was just an exaggeration Jesus used to make his point. Like we say, "There were 40 million people on the slopes after Christmas. There were so many people at Winter Park that we couldn't ski at all. I think half the world was there!" We know there were not 40 million people, but you get the point, it means a lot of people.

Someone might suggest that Jesus was actually misquoted in this instance; that he did not really mean that we must forgive so many times. It must have been a scribal error as someone copied the scripture, working late at night, under some dim candle light, he misread the text and put in the wrong number.

Someone might suggest that is just an example of how completely unrelated religion is to the modern world. Everyone knows that you have to stand up for yourself, that you cannot allow people to trample you all the time. You have to put an end to it somewhere, or it will never end.

We had lunch with my sister in St. Louis on Friday. She is director of the St. Louis Family Support Network; her agency does child abuse education and prevention. And I was reminded of the statistics:

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2001:

Child protective service agencies across the country received 2,672,000 reports of possible maltreatment of children,

903,000 cases of abuse and neglect we substantiated.

About 1,300 children die of abuse or neglect every year.

Every year four million women are assaulted by their partners.

Physical violence in dating relationships ranges from 20-35%.

The number one cause of women's injuries is abuse at home.

(Woman's Rural Advocacy Program of southeastern Minnesota, [www.letswrap.com](http://www.letswrap.com))

We cannot allow people to trample on us. In his commentary on this text, one of the

scholars says,

Unlimited forgiveness is not to be confused with sentimental toleration of hurtful behavior. Christians are too often guilty of forgiving too much and too quickly. The misbehavior of alcoholics is not to be laughed off. Ministers who fail to control their sexual impulses are not to be lightly excused. Teenagers who betray their parents' trust are not simply to be forgiven; a much more loving course of action is to insist that they amend their behavior so that they can regain that trust.

Unlimited forgiveness is not to be confused with sentimental toleration of hurtful behavior. There is no question about that. We cannot allow people to walk all over us.

But there is a difference between forgiveness and masochism. And still the call to forgive remains before us. What do we make of it?

Why would Jesus say that we must go on forgiving until we lose count? Perhaps because he knew that most of us have good intentions, but we just miss the mark and mess things up.

That, by the way, is the meaning of sin. We often think of sin as something ghastly, so terrible evil that no person in his or her right mind would ever think of doing it. We think of lying, murder, stealing, unfaithfulness, and the like. And to be sure, those kinds of deeds are sin, in that they alienate us from one another, and from God.

But the Greek word translated "sin" in our text is hamartia, which means "to miss the mark." To miss the mark!

Who misses the mark, but someone who takes aim at something!

A hunter misses the mark on the opening day of deer season, and comes home empty-handed.

A bowler misses the mark enough times and comes home from the tournament without a trophy.

A golfer misses the green and winds up in the rough, or a sand trap, or in the lake, and winds up with a bunch of bogeys and double-bogeys, and needs a calculator to add up the score.

Such is life! Life is a game of misses! We need to remember that, in dealing with others, and in dealing with ourselves. Who of us starts out with the intention of messing things up?

Who us starts out to cook supper thinking, "Tonight I plan to burn the roast, scorch the potatoes, serve a soggy salad, forget the rolls, and make coffee that tastes like dishwater. What an Epicurean delight that will be for the family this evening!" We know better than that!

We start off with the best intentions! But phone rings, then it rings again and again. Little Jimmy falls out of a tree in the back yard, comes screaming into the house, "I've broken my head." Big sister walks into the kitchen and announces that she is going to drop out of school, and go to Europe. And the little girl across the streets rings the door bell and asks how many boxes of girl scout cookies we want to buy this year. That's how it happens! We have the best of intentions, but along the way people and things get in the way, and suddenly the supper is spoiled.

And that's the way it works in life all too often. Who among us starts out life thinking,

"I'm going to become a drug addict. I'm going to such an addict that I'll never be able to hold a job. I'll never have enough money to support my habit. I lie and cheat and steal and lose my wife and kids, and wind up friendless and in jail."

Who of us starts out a relationship deliberately intending to lie and deceive and cheat on our spouses? No one that I have ever known!

Oh, to be sure there are sick souls who delight in making people suffer, and never feel any shame or remorse in hurting other people.

But mostly people come into life with a desire to please those people who love and care for them. And given any kind of stable, loving childhood, most people start out life with good intentions.

But along the way we miss the mark, and sometimes mess things up.

As the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of John says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

One of our friends embroidered a sign and framed it for us, which now hangs in our family room, "Nobodys Purfect." P-U-R-F-E-C-T!

Jesus knew that we all miss the mark, and deserve another chance to try again.

Why should we forgive? Because forgiving is the only way to nurture and maintain healthy relationships, and mend broken relationships.

Can you imagine trying to keep a relationship alive without it? Can you imagine a husband saying to his wife just after their wedding,

"I want you to know that I forgive you."

"What's that for? I haven't done anything to you."

"I know you haven't but I am sure you will. I just want to say I forgive you now, so I won't ever have to say it again." I wouldn't want to place any bets on the success of that marriage.

Why is forgiving so vital? Because the spirit of God cannot enter an unforgiving

heart! And this is precisely the conclusion of the parable: The kingdom of heaven is like a king who forgave a servant a great debt he owed, but that servant refused to forgive another a much smaller debt. When the king heard about the servant's refusal to forgive, he handed over that servant to prison until he could pay his debt.

The point is clear,

If we refuse to forgive one another, then we have missed the grace of God.  
If our hearts are closed against one another, our hearts are closed against God.  
If a relationship with another is broken, then our relationship with God is broken.

Jesus said we must forgive until we lose count, if that is what it takes to be reconciled. There is nothing easy about. It is a hard challenge.

But what a door it opens to welcome the spirit of God into our midst.

According to her story, when the balding heavy-set man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands stood before and stuck out his hand and asked her to forgive him for the cruel things he did in the concentration camp, she could not do it.

“It could not have been many seconds that he stood,” she said, “hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.”

She knew that Jesus said that if she did not forgive others God will not forgive her. She said she knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience.

Since the end of the war I had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still she stood there with the coldness clutching her heart. And then she prayed, “Jesus, help me!”

“And so woodenly, mechanically,” she said, “I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’”

(from Corrie Ten Boom, *Clippings From My Notebook*)

May God so offer our hands in forgiveness to one another, and warm our hearts and change our world. Amen!