Sept. 13, 2020    “You Do the Math”    Rev. Pat Weatherwax

Matthew 18:21-35  (The Passion Translation)

Later Peter approached Jesus and said, “How many times do I have to forgive my fellow believer who keeps offending me? Seven times?” Jesus answered, “Not seven times, Peter, but seventy times seven times!

The lessons of forgiveness in heaven’s kingdom realm can be illustrated like this: “There once was a king who had servants who had borrowed money from the royal treasury. He decided to settle accounts with each of them. As he began the process, it came to his attention that one of his servants  owed him one billion dollars.  So he summoned the servant before him and said to him, ‘Pay me what you owe me.’ When his servant was unable to repay his debt, the king ordered that he be sold as a slave along with his wife and children and every possession they owned as payment toward his debt. The servant threw himself facedown at his master’s feet and begged for mercy. ‘Please be patient with me. Just give me more time and I will repay you all that I owe.’ Upon hearing his pleas, the king had compassion on his servant, and released him, and forgave his entire debt.

“No sooner had the servant left when he met one of his fellow servants, who owed him twenty thousand dollars  He seized him by the throat and began to choke him, saying, ‘You’d better pay me right now everything you owe me!’ His fellow servant threw himself facedown at his feet and begged, ‘Please be patient with me. If you’ll just give me time, I will repay you all that is owed.’ But the one who had his debt forgiven stubbornly refused to forgive what was owed him. He had his fellow servant thrown into prison and demanded he remain there until he repaid the debt in full. “When his associates saw what was going on, they were outraged and went to the king and told him the whole story. The king said to him, ‘You scoundrel!  Is this the way you respond to my mercy? Because you begged me, I forgave you the massive debt that you owed me. Why didn’t you show the same mercy to your fellow servant that I showed to you?’ In a fury of anger, the king turned him over to the prison guards to be tortured until all his debt was repaid. In this same way, my heavenly Father will deal with any of you if you do not release forgiveness from your heart  toward your fellow believer.”  Matthew 18:21-35 [TPT](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage?search=Matthew%2018:21-35&version=TPT)

**Introduction**

This is a difficult parable to consider in our racially tense and violent current social environment. It seems here that Jesus is nonchalant about torture, incarceration, and slavery, the buying and selling of people. Remember this is a parable, an illustration they could relate to, not what Jesus wishes for humankind. The topic of slavery and the violent power of the Romans is huge in the gospels. So we need to read this in the cultural context.  We need to know and read in context! In my study, this bit of historical information caught my attention:

Josephus, a Jewish historian who wrote about the Jewish revolt against Rome in the first century, claimed that the Roman army captured 97,000 slaves in Galilee and Judea—so many that the slave market was glutted (*Jewish War* 6.384, 420).”

Galilee and Judea- the regions of Jesus and his disciples. That’s a lot of the people who became enslaved, just like they were in the era of Moses and the Pharaohs, and like our American history for more than 250 years. The context. Slavery and violence has greatly impacted the lives of God’s people thorughout history, and not for the better.

**But, I *really* want to look at the Math in this text: First Peter’s Math**

Again, we read in context. Earlier in Matthew 18 Jesus instructed his disciples about how to best deal with conflict among people. Peter “later” approached Jesus (had he even been listening?) and said, so: “How many times *do* I have to forgive someone who offends me? Seven times?” Jesus answered, “Not seven times, Peter, but seventy times seven times!

I got intrigued here by the numbers in this text. First, where did Peter get the “forgiving 7 times”?Interestingly, in the rabbinical teaching of that time, the consensus was, from the first two chapters of the book of Amos, that God promised to forgive 3, ok, 4 times but from then on comes judgement. Repeatedly the prophet states that God says: “For three transgressions, and for four I will not punish, but ...”.

So, Peter’s pretty pleased with *his* math. He knew what the rabbis were teaching. God forgives 4 times. Of course people are not as virtuous as God, so people were expected to forgive up to 3 times, and to not need to ask forgiveness more than three times, either. So, Peter doubles it and adds one for good measure. “Should I forgive up to 7 times?” What a generous offer, Peter!

**But then there’s Jesus’ math.**

Jesus answered, “Not seven times, Peter, but seventy times seven times! Wait, this translation says *490*?  Is it to forgive *77* times, as translation versions, including our usual NRSV say, or 70 *times* seven times, as most English versions do? This discrepancy bothered me. So I did some searching.

The textual variation goes *way* back. The difference shows up between the *Hebrew* Old Testament Bible and the Septuagint, the common *Greek* translation of the Hebrew Bible, from before the common era, that is from *before* Jesus.

Here’s where that comes from: Jesus’ teaching to forgive, it’s reversing the proclamation of Lamech in Genesis 4. (Gen 4:24)  "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold." (NASB). Forgiving, the opposite of avenging, the opposite of revenge.  So, referencing either the Hebrew or the Greek, Jesus could have used either number.  Both the Hebrew Scriptures and Greek translations of the same Genesis account were in use in that era.  If Jesus was remembering and quoting from the Greek, then he said "seventy times seven." If he quoted the Hebrew, then he probably said "seventy seven (times)".  Does it matter? Does it really matter?  What’s Jesus teaching? The answer for either amount then is the same- simply forgive, and forgive more than you can keep track of. And don’t keep score.

But that might not mean what you think. Forgiveness, it isn’t mindless tolerance of wrong. Turn back to read Matthew 18:17, the context of this account:  If someone persists in sin, Jesus says, treat them like a tax collector or an outsider. That means: Love them, but don’t ask them to hurt you more!  Want what’s best for everyone, not what is harmful.

Love is the goal- loving your neighbor as yourself, from Leviticus (19:18) and Jesus’ teaching in Matthew (22:39). “When Jesus said love your neighbor, he knew your neighbor would act, look, believe and love differently than you. It’s kind of the whole point.” (Social media meme.) So

**Forgive,** seventy times seven times. Don’t keep track. Just lose your place in the counting. And...  If you’re counting another's faults, it may be that your attitude is worse than their behavior. Jesus was pretty sure those who judge others are the ones who have the bigger problem. He taught that in Matthew 7 (:4-5 NLT):  “why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? We instead, are to live humbly, knowing our sin is ever before us. Open the eyes of my heart, Lord! Remove the log from my eyes.

And God, the Master in the parable, reminds that human forgiveness is a mere percentile compared to divine forgiveness. Figuratively? A billion compared to 20 thousand! That should humble us; .02% if my math is right. No amount of our righteousness compares to the grace of God.

**What does your forgiveness math look like?**

Here’s some thoughts for when **You Do the Math:**

In his book about Living and Dying, Ira Byock’s “*The Four Things that Matter Most*” aren't things, but phrases. And not words in and of themselves, but the healthy relationships that healthy, open communication builds. Relationships need words.The words, he suggests we use regularly are:

Please Forgive Me,

I Forgive You.  (also)

Thank you  (and)

And I love you.

These are powerful words. Forgiveness; it’s vital to our relationships. Then add in gratitude and love. Those four things...

Then there's that line in the Lord’s Prayer- *Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*

Prolific wordsmith, Fredrick Beuchner wrote:  “our unforgivingness is among those things about us that we need to have God forgive us most. What Jesus apparently *is* saying is that the pride that keeps us from forgiving is the same pride that keeps us from accepting forgiveness, and will God *please* help us do something about it”!  (Beuchner, Beyond Words: Forgiveness).

Besides being too proud to forgive others, are we too ashamed to forgive ourselves? Do we remember how God knows us, and loves us anyway? C.S. Lewis, another most excellent writer, used to save copies of the letters he wrote to people. He gave this advice about considering your own failings: “...

always to pick yourself up again and ask forgiveness. In reviewing your sins don’t either exaggerate them or minimize them. Call them by their ordinary names and try to see them as you would see the same faults in somebody else—no special blackening or whitewashing. Remember the condition on which we are promised forgiveness: we shall always be forgiven provided that we forgive all who sin against us. If we do that we have nothing to fear: if we don’t, all else will be in vain. Of course there are other helps which are more common sense. We must learn by experience to avoid either trains of thought or social situations which for us (not necessarily for everyone) lead to temptations. Like motoring—don’t wait till the last moment before you put on the brakes but put them on, gently and quietly, while the danger is still a good way off. ...God bless you.”

(From The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume III, Compiled in *Yours, Jack)*

God bless you, Lewis says!  Blessings, count those! Sins? Lose count! Always ask for forgiveness. And forgive yourself.

Forgive others because, as King David wrote, *“If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, LORD, who could stand?”* (Psalm 130:3, NIV).  Could you stand before God? Yes, you can, and you will, because God *doesn’t* have a scorecard — making notes of the ways we have offended, disappointed, were nonchalant or even inattentive toward God and others, because of Jesus Christ. Why then, do we want to keep score on others?

**So, what’s the CONCLUSION? In all this I think the point is:**

**There’s no discernible math in forgiveness!**

Martin Luther King Jr. said it this way: “Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.”

So, put yourself in the parable and know this about God, our king: Matthew 18:27, “the king had compassion on his servant, and released him, and forgave his entire debt.”

God’s forgiveness: it is measureless. Let’s use Peter’s formula:  God forgives, infinity times two, plus one. Thanks be to God.

**Benediction:**

Here’s some more of God’s kind of math: From Ephesians 3:20-21:

Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to God in the church and in Christ Jesus, through all generations forever and ever! Amen.