

SERMON FOR SUN. SEPT. 13 AND WED. SEPT. 16, 2020

Pent 15A 2020 Matthew 18:21-35 “Jesus is our Jubilee”

Dear fellow redeemed of, by and for Christ, in our Gospel lesson we heard Peter say to Jesus, **“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”**

Peter may have been thinking his offer was generous, since the teachers of the law only required one to forgive three times. But putting a limit on forgiveness was not God’s intent, so Jesus corrects him. **Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”**

In effect, our Lord said *“do not think of forgiveness according to human standards, of which there is a limit.*

Forgiveness is as deep and high and ever present as God’s love and mercy. So no, Peter, and no, my brothers and sisters in Christ, do not forgive only seven times, but a limitless number of times! **70 TIMES 7!**

Now, if you want to be strict about that, seventy times seven is 490. That’s a lot of times to forgive, and realistically it’s going to be pretty tough to keep track of forgiving someone that many times, and so, in effect, seventy times seven is limitless!

But technically, if you want to interpret Jesus’ words literally, it’s 490 times. So, what are we make of Jesus’ words here?

Is there a limit to our forgiveness – even if it’s a huge one? Or is this a holy hyperbole, like our Lord is saying “You should forgive a *million bajillion* times!”

Well, our Lord’s words are a reference to the law found in Leviticus. In the Old Testament, the numbers 7, 7 times 7, and 70 are highly significant. And so first, from Leviticus chapter 25:

“The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, when you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord.”

So, not only did God establish a Sabbath day, but He also established a Sabbath year, a year of rest for the land and His people – every seventh year. Later in the same chapter, the Lord said: **“You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years.**

And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property, and each of you shall return to his clan.

For the 50th year is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you.”

Thus, not only was there a Sabbath day and a Sabbath year, but God also established a special **year of jubilee**. And that year came after every 7 times 7 years, after 7th Sabbath year.

Now, the purpose of the year of jubilee was freedom, forgiveness, and restoration. During the year of Jubilee Israelites who had become enslaved for debts were set free, and the restoration of lands that had been lost or sold.

Furthermore, these Sabbaths and Jubilees were to be a time of celebration of God’s goodness and blessing. **PAUSE**

In that context, Jesus' statement to Peter about forgiveness begins to make a little more sense. But I think there is one other verse that I think can shed some light for us, from 2 Chron 36:

There we read, **“He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord...until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.”**

You see, even though God had decreed these years of Sabbath and Jubilee, when Israel turned away from God and His Word, they failed to keep those festivals.

And so, the people of Judah were forced to live in exile in Babylon for 70 years. 70 was not an arbitrary number— they had failed to celebrate 70 Sabbaths, and so the land was desolate for 70 years of exile, in effect making up for lost time.

And notice! *If they missed 70 Sabbaths, and the Sabbath year comes every seven years, that is 70 times 7!*

And so, when Jesus tells Peter to forgive 70 times 7 times, He is not merely saying to forgive **“a whole bunch of times!”**

He is making reference to Sabbaths and Jubilees! To a time set aside by God for freedom and forgiveness and restoration!

How does this apply to you and I? God says that we are to forgive each other's sin debts until our time of exile is over, when we are taken into the Promised Land of Heaven. For us, every year is a year of Jubilee, and we are to forgive all the years of your life, until in Heaven, forgiveness is needed no more. **PAUSE**

It today's parable, Jesus invites us to consider that forgiveness is something more than a one-time action applying to us as individuals. Instead, forgiveness is the way of grace that extends through his entire kingdom.

Yes, your forgiveness establishes the relationship you have with God your master, but it also shapes your relationships with others as you live life in God's kingdom.

In Jesus' parable, a master calls a servant to account for his debts, an amount the servant can't repay. His freedom and that of his family is in jeopardy. His property would be liquidated.

Note that servant doesn't offer excuses or ask for mercy. He's guilty and he knows it. Instead, he asks for patience, saying he will work hard as he can to pay back his debt, which of course, he can't.

And yet the Master has another plan. So, the master graciously forgives his servants debt.

From now on, this servant will live in a kingdom ruled by mercy, where all debts are paid by the compassion of the master.

One in which the master not only forgives debts, but frees and restores. Thus, the servant is released and is free to celebrate an incredibly wonderful Jubilee with His family! **PAUSE**

But instead of celebrating, the servant, like Israel of old, does not keep the Jubilee. Once he leaves the master's sight, he enters a world where he believes debts need to be paid.

The freedom, forgiveness, and restoration granted to him he is unwilling to give to another. Instead, he enforces the debt, imprisoning his fellow servant.

And honestly, without reason. For the debt owed him was tiny compared to the enormous debt he'd been forgiven.

And then as we with Judah, the result of such ingratitude is exile, slavery, imprisonment.

For you see, forgiving someone their sin debt is not your right. You aren't their judge, God is.

The Sabbaths and Jubilees, with their rest, forgiveness, freedom, restoration – all are gifts from God.

Just as Israel and the servant in today's parable didn't earn or deserve the freedom, restoration and forgiveness, neither can we earn our forgiveness, we cannot pay back our debts.

No, only Jesus, who paid our sin debt for us, is our Jubilee. Only his grace and mercy enable us to stand forgiven before our heavenly Father.

When we fail to forgive others sin debts, especially in light of the enormity of the sin debt God has forgiven us, then His forgiveness and freedom and Jubilee are scorned and abused. We've become ingrates who despise God's gracious gifts. So, one lesson from this parable is ***that the gift of forgiveness is never earned, but it can be lost. PAUSE***

All of what I've been saying so far sheds a whole new light on Peter's question, **"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"**

As I said earlier, the answer is really, ***"As long and as often as it takes. Until our exile is over. Until forgiveness is needed no more. Until we're in heaven."***

As Christians, we are not to harbor in our heart hatred and anger and bitterness – that's not who we are. Our Spirit driven response to all we've been forgiven, is to forgive in return.

At least once a week, we pray the Lord's Prayer. But do we really mean it when we say, **"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us?"**

I submit, we do not. Not really, not in our heart of hearts. There are some things, some sin debts, that our just too big for us to want to forgive.

That is why we continually need the Spirit to drive us to repent of our stingy forgiveness, our self-righteous attitude that, **"Hey, I've forgiven so and so 7 times already, enough is enough."**

And that is why we must continuously rely on the grace and mercy of God in Christ.

When Jesus said, **"Father, forgive them,"** He was undergoing extreme physical and mental anguish.

He was enduring God's wrath, ultimately losing His life for our sin, for our hatred and depravity and anger and malice and selfishness and greed and lust!

Like the Master in our parable, Jesus spoke those words while we were still His enemies; before we could ask for forgiveness.

And yet His heart was filled with forgiveness for us, even while He was suffering for our sins. And these words were for you too. ***"Father, forgive them."***

"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? In other words, *Lord, how badly can my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?*"

I'll bet you've had occasion to think similar words when others have hurt you. As if there is a limit for what, and just as important to who we have to forgive?

We heard about Joseph in the Old Testament reading from Genesis. His brothers had sinned against him. As a result, for many years his life was a mess. He was taken as a slave to a foreign land. He was later falsely imprisoned.

By all human standards, he certainly would have been justified in holding a grudge against his brothers! But he forgave. And in forgiving, he gave up his right for revenge.

And he did so because he recognized that **“you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”**

A heart that refuses to forgive cannot make such a statement! It instead fixates on the evil that was done against it and in light of that evil thinks that forgiveness is just not possible.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, do not fix your eyes on the evil, but on the cross.

The cross which was meant for evil, but God meant it for good. The cross where Jesus said, **“Father, forgive them.”**

Jesus is our Jubilee, for on the cross he graciously won our freedom, our forgiveness, our restoration.

And not only in the future, but living now in our wonderful Jubilee of forgiveness, freedom, and restoration, we can look at those who we are nursing a grudge against and say, **“you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”**

No, it isn't easy! But then again, loving even your enemies never is. How can we forgive?

Because in Holy Baptism we have been born again and raised to a new life in the image and likeness of Christ – the Christ who on the cross said, **“Father, forgive them.”** . . .

How can we forgive? Because in absolution, we are forgiven, and Christ's words **“Father, forgive them”** are spoken to us, **“I forgive you all your sins.”**

So let us praise God this morning that for Jesus' sake our sin debts have forgiven and we who were slaves to sin have been set free! Freed, forgiven, and restored by Jesus our Jubilee.

My friends, forgiveness is not a one time, individual get out of jail free card. No, it's a life changing event that changes who we are and how we treat others.

God has forgiven your sins in Christ, and now He sends you out into the world to forgive the sins of others.

In Spirit empowered response to the mercy shown us, Christ's words become our words, and we as Christians are enabled to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Whether its little sin debt or a big one, it doesn't matter.

Living in Christ and the shadow of His cross of Jubilee, with our present and our future in His hands, knowing that all our debts have been paid, we can say honestly say, **“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. AMEN**