

## How many times?

Matthew 18:21-35

January 13, 2008

Do you consider yourself a pretty forgiving person? Do you have a long fuse? Will you put up with a lot of crap before you lose your cool? Are you not quick to take offense or to jump down somebody's throat at the slightest provocation? Do you let a lot of the petty insults and personal indignities and rude behaviors just slide by?

And when your brother comes to you and says, *I am so sorry! I know I've let you down, but please forgive me*, do you? Do you tell him, *That's all right; just forget about it ...?*

Is that what you do? How many times?

If this wasn't the first time your brother let you down, but the second time or third time or umpteenth time, will you forgive him again? Will you still say, *Just forget about it ...?*

Or what if it wasn't your brother, but a business associate stealing one of your clients away from you? What if he tells you, *I'm so sorry, but you weren't in the office and I didn't know how to reach you and I didn't want to make her come back, so I just told her I could help her out ... it won't happen again?* What if it does happen again? Will you let it go ... again?

How many times? Doesn't it depend on the nature of the crime? I mean, forgetting to do something is one thing, though it does get old pretty fast if the same person keeps forgetting to do what they said they'd do for you. But what if they keep on lying to you? How many times does that have to happen before you cut off the conversation and vow never to trust them again?

Or what if they keep on lying about you? Could you even forgive that once? How many times will you let that happen before you take matters into your own hands to make sure they will never have the chance to hurt you again?

How many times? Where do you draw the line?

That's what Peter wanted to know: *Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?* Now you've got to give Peter a whole lot of credit! He clearly understands the spiritual obligation to forgive and he's ready to do it. He just wants to understand the limits of that obligation. He wants to know the rules of forgiveness so he can properly obey them. And he's ready to forgive that bothersome brother, that nasty neighbor, that fickle friend, as many as seven times!

Wow! Would you be ready to do that? Would you let someone take advantage of your kindness, kick you in the teeth when you are doing your best to be nice to them -- five times, six times, seven times -- and still be ready to forgive them? *Fool me once, shame on you! Fool me twice, shame on me!*

You may not be ready to go as far as Peter was prepared to go, but you may well agree with him that the obligation to forgive needs some guidelines, some well-defined parameters, some clearly-defined limits, some boundaries. Because without boundaries, well, that'd just be inviting disaster! *Come on, everybody, just walk all over me! I won't mind! I don't care!*

So, how many times? Seven times? *No, answers Jesus, not seven times, but seventy times seven!*

I'm sorry, but that's ridiculous! It's ludicrous! Even if you were to take Jesus seriously, it's an entirely unrealistic and unreasonable expectation. So, I'm going to keep a "you done me wrong" diary, listing the entries after each name? ... 485, 486, 487 ... OK, buddy, you just go right ahead and hurt me again! Your day of reckoning is coming! You've had your fun at my expense, but just three more times and I'm done with you! No more forgiveness from me!

But maybe the answer is ludicrous, because the question is ludicrous. How many times? Maybe it's not a math question or a numbers question or a matter of limits and boundaries. Maybe it's not a question of the limits of the obligation to forgive, but a question of the nature of forgiveness itself.

And what is the nature of forgiveness? It's like this, Jesus said ...

*A king was reviewing his accounts and a servant was brought before him who owed him millions of dollars. "You will have to be sold into slavery along with your wife and your children to pay off the debt," the king told him. But the servant begged for mercy. "Please be patient with me and I will repay you!" The king took pity on the servant and forgave his debt and let him go.*

Now be clear. The king in Jesus' story has every right to demand payment and to exact judgment. He is owed! But the emotional plea of the deadbeat servant moves him to pity. He feels sorry for him. He feels ... and so he forgave the debt and let him go. It's not a matter of the size of the debt -- the debt is enormous. It's not as if the king decides, *Well, I see you don't owe all that much, so I think I can let it go this time.* It's a matter of feeling and of the free and voluntary choice of the king to act on his pity and to forgive.

But Jesus isn't finished with his story ...

*That same servant who was forgiven the enormous debt went out and found another servant who owed him a few bucks. "Pay me what you owe me!," he said, grabbing him by the neck. The other servant begged him for mercy. "Please be patient with me and I will pay you back!" But the first servant refused and had him thrown in jail.*

*There were other servants who saw what happened and reported it to the king. The king said to the first servant, "I showed you mercy by forgiving your great debt. You should have shown the same mercy to your fellow servant." And he had the first servant thrown in jail until he should pay back the full amount of his debt.*

The king feels ... pity. The servant feels ... nothing! He feels no pity. His heart is cold and hard, and he ends up thrown in jail after all. Why? Because he owes his master an enormous amount of money! It is his debt! He is obligated to repay it or to face the consequences! The king adds no new charges to his rap sheet. He simply withdraws his mercy. *And this is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you, Jesus says, unless you forgive your brother from your heart.*

From your heart ...

How many times? You can't answer that question, because it addresses the head. Forgiveness is seated in the heart, not in the head. Forgiveness is a matter of heart, a matter of God's heart, a matter of your heart, and a matter of the ways God's heart has touched and changed yours ...