



The King's Ransom

Matthew 20:28

Text

Matthew 18:21-35

Topic

Jesus stuns His disciples by telling them that they must forgive others "up to seventy times seven times"

Title

"The Magnificent 70x7"

Introduction

You know what a 3-Strikes law is and does.

It's a statute enacted by state governments in the United States which mandates state courts to impose harsher sentences on habitual offenders who are convicted of three or more serious criminal offenses.

Like them or not - some people don't - 3-Strikes laws represent our feeling that you should only give a repeat offender so many chances.

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Matthew 18:21-35

"The Magnificent 70x7"

The Jews in the first century had a type of 3-Strikes law. At least, they had a 3-Strikes mentality. The rabbis, citing several verses from the prophet Amos (1:3, 6, 9, 11, & 13), taught that since God forgave Israel's enemies only three times, it was presumptuous and unnecessary to forgive *anyone* more than three times.

One rabbi whose writings we have said, "If a man commits an offense once, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a second time, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a third time, they forgive him; **the fourth time they do not forgive him.**"

Peter more than doubled that when he asked Jesus, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to **seven** times?"

Jesus blew Peter's doors off, saying in response, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, **but up to seventy times seven.**"

How is that even possible?

That is what we need to find out today. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Your Forgiveness Doesn't Have A Limit, and #2 Your Forgiveness Does Have A Leniency.

#1 Your Forgiveness Doesn't Have A Limit

(v21-22)

These verses don't stand alone. Jesus had just instructed His followers how we are to proceed when one among us sins. We are to go to the sinning brother or sister, one-on-one, tell them they are in sin, seeking to gain them back into fellowship with us and with The Lord.

- If they will not confess their sin, and repent, we are to go to them two-or-three on one.
- If they will not confess their sin, and repent, we are to tell the church.
- If they will not confess their sin, and repent, we are to treat the sinning brother or sister as a heathen or a tax collector.

Mulling this over, Peter wanted to know how to deal with a repeat offender. He was familiar with the rabbi's and their 3-Strikes approach; but he has heard Jesus teach that our righteousness must exceed that of the most religious Jews.

He thus suggested his amplified version of 3-Strikes.

Mat 18:21 Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Peter doubled it and added one for good measure.

But that's the problem. Forgiveness, by its very nature, **cannot be measured.**

A 3-Strikes law makes sense in the civil courts, to protect society from habitual offenders. But we cannot have the same mentality when discussing the spiritual quality of forgiveness.

If you are a Christian, God has, in Jesus Christ, forgiven you. Is there a limit to it?

Psa 103:12 As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

Adam Clark said of this verse, "As the east and the west can never meet in one point, but be for ever at the same distance from each other, so our sins and their decreed punishment are removed to an eternal distance by God's mercy."

Albert Barnes said, "We are safe from all condemnation for our sins, as if they had not been committed at all."

William MacDonald said, "The believer and his sins will never meet. Those sins have been put out of God's sight forever by a miracle of love."

In Isaiah 38:17 we read, "For You have cast all my sins behind Your back."

- "Behind the back" is a strong figure for "out of sight" and "out of mind."
- "Casting" behind the back implies resolute purpose. It is as if God had thoroughly made up His mind that He would never look upon them again; He had done with them forever.

In Micah 7:19 we read, "He will again have compassion on us, And will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins Into the depths of the sea." Nothing brings to us the sense of hopeless, irretrievable loss, like dropping a thing into the fathomless depths of mid-ocean.

It is with that understanding of God's limitless forgiveness that Jesus answered Peter.

Mat 18:22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

Jesus multiplied the number, not to set a limit or to measure forgiveness, but to show that it cannot be limited or measured.

It is like trying to measure the distance between the east and the west. It cannot be done.

Forgiveness is never a *quantity*; it is a *quality* - a spiritual quality.

It might be a good time to pause and discuss exactly what we mean by forgiveness; or, at the very least, to say a few important things about the quality of biblical forgiveness.

I'll start with this: **Forgiveness is not unconditional.**

God does not forgive unconditionally. His forgiveness has clear, unmistakable conditions. Both Jesus, as well as the apostles after Him, preached "**repentance** and the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 24:47; Acts 17:30).

In the parallel passage to this in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus said,

Luk 17:3 Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he **repents**, forgive him.

Luk 17:4 And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I **repent**,' you shall forgive him."

The word translated "repent" means *to turn*. It indicates a turn around, an about face, in your thinking that leads to an about face in your behavior.

There can be no granting of forgiveness without this change of mind and turning from sin.

If there was forgiveness apart from repentance, everyone would automatically be saved; and they are not - only whosoever believes in Jesus Christ.

I might add that the very fact that there is a procedure set forth in this chapter for dealing with sin proves that forgiveness is not unconditional.

Jesus didn't say, "if your brother sins against you, *forgive him unconditionally.*" No; He said, "if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother."

We "tell" the one in sin so that they will confess. True confession has been described as "agreement with another who is in agreement with God's Word."

You cannot skip confession and repentance and get to real biblical forgiveness any other way. **You are therefore not obligated to forgive someone who is unrepentant. Instead, you are obligated to urge them to repent.**

I hope that is somewhat liberating for you. Most of the cultural voices are telling you to forgive unconditionally; and it sounds spiritual. But it isn't, because it isn't biblical.

Here is something else we need to understand about forgiveness. It is not a feeling, or based upon feelings. In the process Jesus outlined, He never suggests that you must wait until you 'feel' like forgiving the repentant sinner.

And that's why, as near as I can explain it, forgiveness must be a **promise** you make to the repentant sinner.

God promises to forgive you when He says, "I will not remember your sins" (Isaiah 43:25). In another place He says, "sin I will remember no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).

God cannot forget our sins; He is, after all, omniscient. But He can choose to not remember them - to never bring them up, or hold them against us.

He can do it because Jesus died for our sins on the Cross. When I confess Him as my Savior, and repent, and by faith am saved, my sins are as far away from me as the east is from the west; they are no more remembered by my Father in Heaven. When the conditions are met, His forgiveness is limitless. So must ours be of those who repent.

That sounds so amazing; so spiritual. I *want* to forgive that way... But, truth be told, I'm a 3-Strikes guy. In some cases, I'm a 1-Strike guy.

How can I really practice limitless forgiveness?

#2 Your Forgiveness Does Have A Leniency

(v23-35)

Jesus illustrated what He meant by the telling of an often misunderstood parable - the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

Let's read it in full.

Mat 18:23 Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

Mat 18:24 And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

Mat 18:25 But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made.

Mat 18:26 The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'

Mat 18:27 Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

Mat 18:28 "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!'

Mat 18:29 So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'

Mat 18:30 And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

Mat 18:31 So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done.

Mat 18:32 Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.

Mat 18:33 Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?'

Mat 18:34 And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

An allegory is filled with symbolism and most, if not all, of its details signify something else.

Not so a parable; it's usually making a single, bigger point. We will not find an exact counterpart for every detail in a parable; in fact, we should not, or else we might make the parable say something more than was intended.

In this parable, for instance, the king represents God - but not every action of this earthly king has a correspondence to our heavenly Father.

Peter had asked a question about how many times we are required to forgive a repeat offender. The question exposes his natural reluctance to go on forgiving someone. The parable of the unforgiving servant was told to show us the error of our natural reluctance to forgive others - especially when they are multiple offenders.

- The "certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants" represents God as He surveys the human race.
- The "one who owed him ten thousand talents" represents the sinner.
- A "talent" isn't a coin; it is a weight of precious metals. The sum owed here would be in the millions of dollars. The exact amount is not given because it isn't the point. The point is, it is a debt that could never hope to be paid by the servant.
- The debt represents your sin as a man or woman before God. Like the servant, you go through your life as if there will be no accounting for it, no reckoning of it, by God. But then something arrests your attention; some crisis, perhaps. The grace of God that is operating to free your will brings you to a place where you see the crushing weight of your debt of sin; you are terrified, knowing you can never save yourself. You might even make empty resolutions to change; but you know you are too far gone.

I had a moment like that. Many of you who came to Christ later in life had a moment, or moments, like that.

All you can do is throw yourself on the mercy of the king. When you do, you find He is "moved with compassion" for you. He immediately cancels your debt. It is as if it has been paid in full.

It has, of course, been paid in full, by Jesus, on the Cross. Do you remember Jesus' cry from the Cross, "It is finished?"

Found only in the Gospel of John, the Greek word translated "it is finished" is *tetelestai*, an accounting term that means "paid in full."

When Jesus uttered those words, He was declaring the debt owed to His Father was wiped away completely and forever. Jesus eliminated the debt owed by mankind - the debt of sin.

What would you expect from the servant who had been forgiven this incalculable debt? You'd expect him to show mercy to any who owed him a far lesser debt.

Instead, he finds a fellow servant who owes him a very small amount. The second debtor appeals to him in the same way he had appealed to the king. But, instead of compassion, the first servant had contempt, and refused to forgive the debt.

Upon hearing about the unforgiving servant, the king rebuked him, and had him thrown into prison.

The unforgiving servant represents us when we are reluctant to forgive a brother or a sister who has met the condition of repentance.

How can we, who have been forgiven so much by God, withhold forgiveness from those whose sin or sins against us are far less than ours against God?

We who have been forgiven an infinite debt ought to be willing to forgive others an insignificant debt.

No matter their debt, it is insignificant compared to **our** sin before God.

If there is confession and repentance, and we refuse to forgive, *we are exactly like the unforgiving servant.*

When we do promise our forgiveness, and reconcile, then *we are exactly like our Heavenly Father.*

Allow me to address a perceived difficulty, or two, in this parable. In the final verse, we read,

Mat 18:35 "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

On the surface it seems to be saying that the king, i.e., God, will withdraw His forgiveness from you unless you forgive others.

That cannot be true for the simple fact that it would make salvation depend upon your good works to maintain it. Salvation - eternal life - has nothing to do with your good works, or lack of them. It is always the free gift of grace when you trust Jesus Christ to save you.

We need to distinguish between two kinds of forgiveness. Theologians call them Judicial Forgiveness, and Parental Forgiveness.

Those are good names in that you can guess what they stand for, without much explanation, and it makes perfect sense.

When a person comes to the Cross, confesses their sin, repents, and believes in Jesus, God as Judge forgives their sin once-and-for-all. He remembers it no more. They will not, they cannot, be judged for their sin - past, present, or future - and condemned by it to Hell.

The saved person is now a child of God placed in the family of God; God is their Father. As Father, He is training us daily to obey Him and thereby grow in maturity.

We still disobey - just like kids in any family. When we sin, we need to ask for forgiveness of our Father. We need to be restored to fellowship with Him. If not, we are subject to His loving but firm parental discipline.

Judicial Forgiveness is something granted once-and-for-all. Parental Forgiveness is ongoing as we are being changed, conformed, into the image of Jesus Christ.

Thus there is what we might call "forgiveness after forgiveness." Forgiven for eternity, we must ask forgiveness in our daily lives as children of God in the family of God.

The forgiveness that the king is talking about is illustrating God's Parental Forgiveness - *not* His Judicial Forgiveness. It is not teaching a loss of salvation.

Another thing that disturbs people about the parable are the "tormentors." I think this is simply part of the storytelling - part of the parable that doesn't necessarily have a symbolic meaning.

If you do want to assign some spiritual meaning to it, then it would probably be a reference to the biblical truth that "whom The Lord loves, He chastens."

The "tormentors" in the story represent whatever discipline your gracious Heavenly Father deems appropriate for your sin of unforgiveness.

Here is something to consider in light of the overall context of the verses. If a brother or sister repents, and you refuse to forgive them, your refusal is itself a sin that puts you in a position to be confronted with your sin.

The most important words in this entire study might be "from his heart." Here is why I say that.

None of us can really forgive others the way God has forgiven us without His power to do so. Forgiveness - limitless forgiveness - is not natural for us; it must be supernatural.

That's not to say we have to wait for it to happen; that's not to say that we need some special touch from above.

It is already supernaturally possible for you as a Christian because you are indwelt by God the Holy Spirit

I must therefore yield to the Spirit and promise to forgive in response to repentance.

I've found that, for the most part, when a Christian is genuinely repentant, the person or persons he or she has sinned against are empowered to forgive them. Something truly spiritual happens; it's a moment to remember.

(I want to call it a magic moment, but I can't for obvious reasons!).

That doesn't mean there won't be an ongoing struggle in the heart of the one promising to forgive. We still have the flesh to contend with, and the devil hates it when we forgive others the way God in Jesus forgave us.

It doesn't mean that there won't be consequences, either. Depending on the sin, I might be able to forgive the offender, but things may not be able, immediately or ever, to go back the way they were.

You see this when, for example, a Christian leader falls into sin. They repent; you forgive them. But that doesn't mean they keep their position of ministry.

Your forgiveness should have a certain leniency. By that I mean you should always be ready to forgive an offense because of how much you've been forgiven by God; and on account of what it cost - the death of Jesus Christ.

[Eph 4:32](#) And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

When you're having trouble promising forgiveness, remembering someone's sin no more, casting it behind your back and dropping it into the ocean, think about how much you've been forgiven by God at the Cross of Jesus Christ.

