

Learning to Forgive
May 21, 2023
Matthew 18:21-22

21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

"How many times am I required to forgive the same person?" That is what Peter wants to know. "What's the limit?" "Let me throw out a number – say 7 times?" "Higher," says Jesus. "Seventeen times?" "Higher," says Jesus, until he lands on the number 77.

Different translations give a different number. Some say, "Seventy times seven," which is 490. In the gospel of Luke, its seven times a day. (Luke 17:3-4) Whether it is 7 times a day, or 77, or 490, the answer to Peter's question is a lot - stop counting.

Peter's question follows on the heels of a teaching about resolving conflict in the community. It appears that Matthew has edited together his source material because there is some kind of conflict in his community. The problem is that his editing doesn't give us a coherent message. The verses that bookend Jesus' teaching on unlimited forgiveness, both end up with wrongdoers being excommunicated and cast out. It is impossible to reconcile. Is forgiveness unlimited or not.

So, to read this passage in context is a challenge. But to lift this verse out of context can be dangerous. How many spouses and children have been sent back to their abusers with this passage? How has this command to forgive unlimited times been used to silence the offended and wounded? How easy it is to use this verse to say, "get over it." Where is accountability? If we just forgive all the time, when do the real issues ever get confronted and dealt with?

Is Jesus asking us to be doormats for abuse? I think we know the answer is "no." Yet, if the answer is "no," then what is forgiveness, and how do we do it? Why is it so important?

It's so very frustrating that Jesus doesn't provide explicit instructions. And yet, we know enough to know that Jesus' ministry included healing and wholeness for the sick and broken he met on the way. We know that he was concerned about relationships and overcoming the barriers between us. We can also appreciate how Jesus didn't seem to identify people by their reputations or sins, he treated all as welcomed guests at God's table. Jesus also released people from the bondage of unforgiveness and teaches in the Lord's Prayer, "forgive as we have been forgiven." He lived forgiveness. He just didn't explain it.

Thankfully, scientists and researchers have found the topic so important, they have invested time and energy in researching it. We have websites like “The Forgiveness Project,”¹ and “The International Forgiveness Institute,”² housed at major universities. They address the questions of “why” and “how.”

Richard Enright is a pioneer in the field and the title of his book “Forgiveness is a Choice,” is a powerful reminder that forgiveness is not something that can be prescribed. We may think it, but it is not our place to say, “you need to forgive so and so.” That said, some people so misunderstand forgiveness, they don’t even realize it is a choice; a choice that can lead to release and healing.

One misconception about forgiveness is that to forgive is to forget. That is absolutely not the case. Forgiveness is not about sweeping pain under the rug and moving on. Trauma lives in our bodies and some hurts cannot be forgotten. You can fully forgive someone and still have flashbacks to the trauma. Forgiveness is not about forgetting.

Another misconception is that forgiveness fails to hold the offender accountable. Also, not true. The process of forgiveness includes an honest assessment of the hurt and pain caused by the other – it’s not a free pass – it’s not about releasing people from the consequences of their actions.

Some people think forgiveness is dependent upon the remorse of the offender. It is not. Forgiveness can happen regardless of the response of the offender.

There is also a misconception that forgiveness is a one and done kind of thing. We’ve been told it’s the right and good thing to do so we forgive. Perhaps, with minor offenses, that is true. But for the deep wounds we inflict upon each other, forgiveness is a process that cannot be rushed or short-circuited.

Finally, in situations where your personal safety is at risk, or you are still in a crisis, or in the early stages of grief, it is not the time to talk about forgiveness.

When we get past these misconceptions about forgiveness, we can then open ourselves to the why and how of forgiveness.

First the why. According to [WebMD.com](https://www.webmd.com),” if you can bring yourself to forgive, you are likely to enjoy lower blood pressure, a stronger immune system, and a drop in the stress hormones circulating in your blood. Back pain, stomach problems, and headaches may disappear. And you’ll reduce the anger, bitterness, resentment, depression, and other negative emotions that accompany the failure to forgive.” Refusing to forgive may not directly cause disease but the

¹ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/>

² <https://internationalforgiveness.com/need-to-forgive/>

negative consequences of holding on to painful memories and keeping wounds festering can weaken your immune system and make yourself vulnerable to disease. These are just the physical implications.

Unforgiveness can make us bitter, graceless, and cause us to push people away, leading to isolation and fractured relationships. Unforgiveness can also perpetuate the cycle of violence and vengeance. It is toxic to the soul.

A refusal to forgive someone gives us the illusion of power over the person(s) who hurt us – but what it ends up doing is keeping the two forever connected. And sometimes there is a reluctance to give up that sense of power and that connection.

There is an old proverb that says withholding forgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.

Nelson Mandela, after being imprisoned for 27 years for his activism in South Africa's apartheid, said this as he left prison.

“As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.” — Nelson Mandela

Unforgiveness can lead to a prison of our own making.

So how do we forgive? The how of forgiveness describes a process that, for some, can take years. And it is not necessarily a linear process. It is a meandering pathway. According to Dr. Enright, the basic process is outlined in these four phases:

First there is the “Uncovering Phase,” where you become aware of the emotional pain associated with the offense. It takes courage to confront the pain, anger, and possibly hatred that may live within you. In this initial phase you name how your life has been impacted. You don't have to edit yourself – just be honest – name what you feel – name the loss.

The next phase is “Deciding to Forgive” which is exactly that; making the decision to engage the process of forgiveness after determining that what you have been doing has not been working.

Phase three is “Working on Forgiveness” where you try out different approaches to discovering a more empathetic regard for the offending party. Rather than seeing that person who hurt you as a monster, or evil, or whatever...you start to see that person who hurt you as a human, with a story. This is not easy work.

In this phase you work to accept the pain and make the decision not to pass it on to others or the offender. The final step of this phase is giving the offender a gift “in the form of merciful restraint, generosity, and moral love.” It doesn't have to be reconciliation.

In her book, Plan B, Anne Lamott writes:

“Forgiveness means it finally becomes unimportant that you hit back. You're done. It doesn't necessarily mean that you want to have lunch with the person. If you keep hitting back, you stay trapped in the nightmare...”

The final phase is the “Outcome/Deepening” phase of forgiveness. This is when you start to realize you are experiencing the relief of forgiving. You might find meaning or purpose in your experience and this can lead to increased compassion for yourself and others. People sometimes discover a new purpose in life and an active concern for a cause or their community.

Amy Biehl was a Stanford graduate and a Fulbright Scholar studying in Cape Town, South Africa, when she was murdered by a group of youth attacking people driving alone. It certainly didn't happen overnight, but through the process of forgiveness, the Biehl family went on to meet their daughter's killers, support their pardon by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and start The Amy Biehl Foundation, which serves vulnerable youth in South Africa.

In this deepening phase, “the forgiver discovers the paradox of forgiveness: as we give to others the gifts of mercy, generosity, and moral love, we ourselves are healed.”³

St. Francis of Assisi said it this way, “It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.”

I love how Desmond Tutu described forgiveness. He said, “forgiveness is like this: a room can be dank because you have closed the windows, you've closed the curtains. But the sun is shining outside, and the air is fresh outside. In order to get that fresh air, you have to get up and open the window and draw the curtains apart.”

Jesus' response to Peter suggests that forgiveness can become for us a mindset; a mindset that fosters compassion and healing. We can pick at our wounds – post on Facebook – rant and rage about the person who did this or that. We can seek revenge or actively pursue punishment. But then what?

Forgiveness is a choice that ultimately releases us from a prison of bitterness and leads us to love.

Jesus may not have written the instructions – but he sure wrote the book.

Amen.

Note: For additional resources you can investigate the work of Everett Worthington and the REACH model of forgiveness. There are DIY workbooks available for those who want to learn more and work on forgiving at: <http://www.evworthington-forgiveness.com/diy-workbooks>

³ <https://internationalforgiveness.com/need-to-forgive/>

