

## Seventy-seven Times?

Years ago, while in Nigeria  
    We would occasionally lodge  
        At the Baptist Guest House in Jos.

It was a little American oasis in the heart of Africa!

The guesthouse was run by an elderly lady  
    From South Carolina.

One evening following a nice American-style meal  
    We lingered over coffee with a couple from New Zealand.

Discussion turned to colleges in the US.

Their daughter was considering going to school there  
    And they were told by several people

That the colleges in the north of the country  
    Were superior to the ones in the south.

The South Carolina woman overheard the conversation  
    And was quick to point out

“Well, we didn’t start the war!”  
    And then stormed off.

It took me a moment to figure out  
    Which war she was talking about.  
Of course, she was talking about the Civil War  
    An event that took place more than 150 years-ago.

Yet, the way she acted  
    You would have thought it was yesterday.

The bitterness, suspicion, and hostility  
    Had been passed down through the generations.

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Peter asks Jesus how many times  
    He should forgive someone who wronged him

## Seventy-seven Times?

Even up to seven times?

Now I'm thinking, Peter is thinking  
He's quite generous with the number seven.

The Jewish teaching of the day required a person  
To forgive up to three times for the same offence.

But Jesus tells him not seven times but seventy-seven times.

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I mean Jesus has to be exaggerating here, right?

Come on . . . 77 times?

Do we expect a person in an abusive relationship  
To forgive the abuser 77 times?

No.

But it appears Jesus meant what he said.

Because he goes on to teach them a parable  
With an explicit answer to Peter's question.

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I confess having a bit of a problem with the parable.

Maybe it's me.

But if the lesson is on the need to forgive 77 times

And if the king represents God

Then the king himself does not follow through  
On the command to forgive 77 times.

Instead of forgiving the servant again  
Like the lesson supposedly teaches  
The king has him tortured and imprisoned!

### Seventy-seven Times?

It would be a tough stretch to explain this away  
Except to say, as Jesus teaches us  
In a passage we looked at earlier

*Matthew 6:14-15 (CEV) <sup>14</sup> If you forgive others for the wrongs they do to you, your Father in heaven will forgive you. <sup>15</sup> But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

In today's passage, Jesus enforces the idea  
That no one enters the kingdom of God  
With an unforgiving heart.

And so, an essential teaching of Jesus is to forgive.  
But saying we'll do it . . .  
And actually doing do it . . . are two different things.

Tim Keller, retired pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian, NYC      Helps  
me to understand      Some of the dynamics in forgiveness.

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When someone wrongs us, an injustice has been committed.

Because of the wrong . . .  
We feel the perpetrator must pay some sort of penalty.

If we simply forgive . . .  
Then the wrongdoer gets away with it.

Therefore, it is not right to simply dismiss it.

There are two ways to respond.

The first way is to find a way to make the perpetrator pay  
For what he/she has done.

Sometimes we passively do this.

We break off our relationship with them  
Seeking to ignore them out of existence.

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Sometimes we actively seek ways for them to pay.

We say or do things that hurt them.

We speak ill to their face and to others  
Hoping to have others turn against them.

If the wrongdoer begins to suffer as a result  
In some way we feel compensated.

One of the problem with this is our own attitude.

Once this sort of action starts, it becomes all obsessive  
And eventually turns us into cold hearted people.

We may even begin to dislike other people  
Who are similar to the person who wronged us.

Say, for example, if the person is rich  
We will come to dislike rich people.

If the person is male  
We may hold grudges towards all men.

Perhaps, if the person is of another race  
We become prejudiced against the whole class.

And not only, another problem  
Like in our opening illustration  
Hard feelings towards a certain group of people  
Can be passed on for generations.

With an attitude of revenge  
Nothing breaks the cycle of retaliation  
And it is lived over and over and over again.

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The other way to respond to a wrong is this.

## Seventy-seven Times?

We forgive.

It doesn't mean we don't hold the perpetrator accountable.

Forgiveness is refusing to get sucked into  
The vicious cycle of getting even or one better.

Forgiveness, however, is extremely hard work.

The desire to inflict misery on the offender  
Is often stronger than the desire to forgive.

We end up not only suffering the original wrong  
The loss of happiness and trust.

We don't even get the satisfaction  
Of making that person suffer for what they did.

We end up absorbing the pain of the injustice.

Where's the justice in that?

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But there's something about Jesus here.

This is the exact description of Christ's atonement . . .  
His unjust death on the cross.

Jesus absorbs the pain of wrong done to him  
And forgives without demanding retribution.

*Matthew 5:38-39 (CEV) <sup>38</sup> You know that you have been taught, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." <sup>39</sup> But I tell you not to try to get even with a person who has done something to you. When someone slaps your right cheek, turn and let that person slap your other cheek.*

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Jesus' death is the fullest expression of God's love.

Do you think it was easy?

## Seventy-seven Times?

But just as Jesus absorbed unjust punishment  
Jesus transforms it into a victory  
Through his resurrection.

Our will to forgive a wrong  
Will also lead to its own resurrection.

The anger will subside  
The hostile and vengeful feelings will lift  
And peace will replace the hurt.

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We have to forgive in the mind  
Before it becomes real in the heart.

It may not come immediately.

But if you remain focused on the intent to forgive  
It will come eventually.

It will lead to a new peace  
And end the vicious cycles of hate and evil.

It is the only way to stop the spread of evil.

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“But shouldn’t the perpetrators be held accountable?”

Of course!

But do so in an attitude of love.

The best way to love them is to challenge them  
In the hope they might change.

Love yourself and other potential victims  
By making sure the wrong can’t happen again.

But this should not be our only goal.

## Seventy-seven Times?

We need some personal health care  
And that means learning to forgive.

Forgiveness is costly.

Forgiveness is painful.

But it is the only way to free from the hurt.

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A black woman in South Africa stood in the courtroom  
Listening to a white police officer  
Acknowledge atrocities committed  
During the Apartheid.

Officer Van de Broek confessed his responsibility  
In the death of her son.

He had shot the 18-year-old and burned the body  
While he and other officers drank beer

Eight years later, the very same police officer  
Went to the woman's house and seized her husband.

He returned a couple of hours later  
And took the woman to a woodpile  
Where her husband lay bound.

They forced her to watch  
As they poured gasoline over his body  
And ignited the flames that consumed him.

Her husband's final words were, "Forgive them."

Now the same man stood awaiting judgment before  
The South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

They asked the woman what justice she wanted.

She said calmly, "I want three things,"

## Seventy-seven Times?

“I want Mr. Van de Broek to take me to the place  
Where he burned my husband’s body.”

“I want to gather up the dust and give him a decent burial.”

“Second, Mr. Van de Broek took away the only family I had.”

“Twice a month, I want him to come to the ghetto  
And spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him.”

“Third, I would like Mr. Van de Broek to know  
That he is forgiven by God  
And that I forgive him, too.”

“And now, would someone lead me to him  
So I can embrace him  
So he knows my forgiveness is real.”

As the elderly woman was helped across the courtroom  
Mr. Van de Broek, collapsed and fainted.

Someone started in singing Amazing Grace  
Soon everyone joined in.

This woman understood that to be reconciled to God  
And to be reconciled with neighbor and enemy  
Is to be truly free.

(from Stanley Green, *The Canadian Mennonite*, 9.04.00)

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In this Season of Lent  
We come to the foot of the cross

Seeking to learn the hard and difficult lessons  
Of forgiving one another as Christ forgives us.