



## **Matthew 18:21–22**

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” 22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

### **Reflection**

A short couple of verses, with a simple point that is extremely difficult to do. In

fact, no matter how often we read them they just never seem to sink in. So why not read them again now, slowly and deliberately.

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Over the last couple of days Jesus has been teaching his disciples about church discipline. He’s given them some very practical procedures on how to deal with repeated and unrepentant public sin in the church. Sin like this is not only disastrous for an individual but it can also tear whole churches apart. As Peter no doubt plays

some of the these scenarios through his mind he comes to Jesus with what is actually a very good question. It appears he's learning. Jesus has been speaking about a corporate response to sin, but what about the response of an individual? Exactly how many times should we forgive someone for repeatedly committing the same sin against us? It's with this question that Peter comes to Jesus in verse 21,

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?"

He even goes on to offer Jesus a figure. "Up to seven times?" Which was actually pretty magnanimous of him. Maybe he

really was learning. You see in Peter's day, the practice amongst Judaism was to forgive one another up to three times. These practices were based on some verses in Amos and Job as well as their traditions. But Peter more than doubles this figure, suggesting that Christians should forgive someone who sins against them up to seven times. In the bible the number seven often represents completeness. It's a round number. A full number. This wasn't a bad effort by Peter, it was a generous statement. And so he would have been stunned with Jesus' reply,

22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

In the Greek the words 'seventy-seven'

may even be translated 'seventy times seven.' Either way Jesus' point is clear. He's not saying 'just wait until the seventy-eighth time and then you can let them have it'. He's teaching Peter and us to forgive countless times, to never stop forgiving.

You see it isn't just unrepentant sin that breaks down relationships and divides churches. Bitterness, grudges and unforgiving hearts can divide friends, families and churches just as easily. Whole communities can become poisoned by personal animosity and feuds borne out unforgiven incidents from the distant past. So Jesus is teaching Peter that the church and every individual within it must be ready to forgive and restore anyone who genuinely repents. Not seven times or even sev-

enty-seven time but countless times.

It's important however that we don't misunderstand what Jesus is saying. He isn't talking about letting yourself be walked all over, or taken advantage of and certainly not for a moment is Jesus speaking about putting up with any kind of abusive relationship. Jesus is talking about repeatedly forgiving genuinely repentant people who display the type of repentance that is accompanied with both unfeigned contrition and a distinct change of behaviour. For the others, the repeat offenders who only pretend to forgive, Jesus has just given us very detailed instructions for their discipline and ultimate expulsion from the church if they persist in their ways.

A short couple of verses, with a simple

point that is extremely difficult to do. Never stop forgiving. And in tomorrow's passage Jesus' is going to share with us a parable that gives us a compelling reason as to why.

## **Think**

But for today we already have enough to consider and so we're going to take a little more time now than usual to really turn over the implications of these verses in our minds and then apply them to our lives. Let's start with this question. Can you think of anyone who, in the last week or month or year, you have consciously forgiven for the same offense as many as seven times? How is your forgiveness going? Who is it that you need to forgive today? Do you forgive like Jesus is teaching us in

this passage? Or do you withdraw when people treat you like this, begin to avoid them, give up on them, perhaps even cut them off entirely? What would the opposite behaviour look like? Perhaps visualise someone in your life like this and then consider what it would be like instead to regularly seek out their presence and graciously forgive them again and again. And to pray for them, and in the meantime always holding out hope that God's Spirit would perform a work in their hearts and that they would leave that sin behind forever? Who might you do this for out of obedience to Jesus?

I know it's uncomfortable but the next step must be to look into our hearts, both yours and mine, for any signs of bitterness or any grudges that we might hold towards peo-



ple who've sinned against us in the past. Forgiveness. Not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Because these types of feelings cause disunity in the church and quite simply are, in and of themselves, sinful. In tomorrow's passage Jesus is going to make this powerfully clear but he's also been very direct with us in the past. Do you remember where? In the Lord's Prayer no less. The model for our daily prayer life. Here's what Jesus said in the Lord's Prayer and in the two verses that follow directly after it:

12 And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one.

14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Countless forgiveness. Because if we can't bring ourselves to forgive others for even as little as seventy-seven sins, then how can our Father in heaven forgive us for our limitless sins against him? But more along these lines tomorrow.

## **Prayer**

Spend some time now in prayer. Perhaps you'd like to begin by praying the Lord's Prayer and then praying against any bitterness in your heart or any grudges that

you may hold. Who is it that you need to forgive today? What are you doing to do? Pray for the strength and peace that you need to let these feelings go and genuinely forgive as you've been forgiven. Then repent. And forgive that person today. Pray also for your Christian friends and your church that they might never be divided by unforgiving hearts but instead be characterised by the limitless grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. He bought the forgiveness that we now all share in by his precious blood. Such costly forgiveness. Such countless forgiveness. In his name we pray, Amen.

