

**Stop Counting!**

Matthew 18:21-35

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A couple was celebrating their golden wedding anniversary on the beaches in Montego Bay, Jamaica. People were impressed by the couple's peaceful demeanor toward one another. The husband, especially, acted in a very gentle manner toward his wife of 50 years.

The local newspaper reporter was inquiring as to the secret of their long and happy marriage. The husband told the following story:

"Well, it dates back to our honeymoon in America. We visited the Grand Canyon, and took a mule trip down to the bottom of the canyon. We hadn't gone too far when my wife's mule stumbled and she almost fell off. My wife looked down at the mule and quietly said, 'That's once.'

"We proceeded a little further and her mule stumbled again. Again my wife quietly said, 'That's twice.'

"We hadn't gone a half-mile when the mule stumbled for the third time. My wife quietly removed a revolver from her purse and shot the mule dead.

"I shouted at her, 'What's wrong with you, Woman! Why did you shoot the poor animal like that? Are you crazy?!'

"My wife looked at me, and quietly said, 'That's once.'"

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Peter asked Jesus, how many times should I forgive a fellow Christian who sins against me--up to seven times?<sup>1</sup> In truth, Peter thought he was being very generous here. You see, by now Peter well understands that the kingdom of which Jesus speaks requires a much higher standard in all things, including righteousness, including holiness, even including forgiveness. And so Peter takes the current rabbinical standard which declares that one need only forgive a friend for three offenses, and he doubles it and adds one to it for good measure. By offering seven times as a new standard for forgiveness, Peter is trying to show that he understands the higher principles of the kingdom of heaven.

But really, still doesn't get it. For Jesus throws Peter's number back in his face and says, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."<sup>2</sup> At first it sounds like Jesus simply grabs the number 77 out of the air. But in truth it has its roots in the story of Lamech, the great-great grandson of Cain. Lamech brags about killing a man, and he vows vengeance upon anybody who crosses him: "If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times."<sup>3</sup> And so you see, in setting the standard of forgiveness at seventy-seven times, Jesus is making the point that forgiveness is not a matter of keeping count at all; instead, Jesus is communicating the message that his principle of forgiveness is about cancelling the principle of vengeance. For if you're caught up in counting the number of times to forgive another, you're

not really thinking of forgiveness; instead of being about forgiveness, you're really just postponing vengeance.

Stop counting, says Jesus, because forgiveness is not about counting; it's about erasing debt—it's about restoring and healing broken relationships. Stop counting, says Jesus, because when you get caught up in counting you let the burden of the other person's offenses weigh you down. Stop counting, says Jesus, because when you get caught up in counting you become imprisoned in your own anger and rage and desire for vengeance. Stop counting, says Jesus, because your Father in Heaven has stopped counting your sins against you.

Jesus makes his point by telling a parable. He tells of a servant who is indebted to the King. The servant's debt is enormous. The Bible says 10,000 talents. In those days, the talent was the highest monetary denomination, and 10,000 was the highest number that was used in arithmetic. I've heard the number described as akin to the national debt, or one man's wages for 150,000 years, or the annual payroll of the North American workforce for General Motors, which in the 1990s was about 170,000 workers. The point is this: it was an unrepayable debt. There is no way the servant can possibly repay the King; he can't even work out some kind of plan, unless he plans to pay it out over 150,000 years.

But the King has mercy on the servant. The King does not exact partial payment. The King does not work out a payment plan. The King does not say to the servant, "you will forever have to work for me, and I will not have to pay you a thing." Instead, the King forgives the servant's debt. The debt is cancelled. The slate is wiped clean. There is nothing left to count.

This is the kind of forgiveness that God extends to us for our sin. The truth is, in our sinfulness we have accumulated an unrepayable debt. Yet out of his infinite love for us, God forgives us. He cancels the debt. He cleans the slate. God is not keeping count.

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Melissa was a young woman who had carried an immense burden of shame for most of her life. It started with some things that her own family members did to her as a child, and continued as she entered a life of prostitution and drugs. Finally she found herself in a home for recovering prostitutes and addicts. She began to conquer her addiction, and she was learning some skills to help her enter the workforce. Yet until she could let go of her shame and her guilt, she couldn't move on. The burden of her shame was too great for her to carry.

A counselor suggested that Melissa get on the computer and type out on a list all the things she could think of that added to her guilt. So Melissa wrote for hours, compiling a list several pages long. When she had finished, the counselor came along, and with a couple of keystrokes on the computer, she selected and highlighted the entire list. Then the counselor hit the delete key, and the list disappeared. In place of the list, the counselor typed these words from the prophet Jeremiah: Thus says the Lord, "I will forgive your iniquity, and I will remember your sin no more..."<sup>4</sup>

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You don't need to count the transgressions of others, says Jesus, because God has stopped counting yours against you. God cancels our debt. God has cleaned the slate. God has stopped counting. So should you stop counting.

In the parable, the forgiven servant fails to extend the same forgiveness to another servant. And in that failure, he demonstrates that he has not truly received the forgiveness of the King. If he had truly received the forgiveness of the King, the servant would have been willing to extend the same kind of forgiveness to others. For the truth is, our own willingness to forgive others is but an echo of the degree to which God's forgiveness has permeated our hearts.

You see, forgiveness is not simply a transaction. When forgiveness is reduced to a transaction, then it is understood as little more than good luck. But when we first see God's forgiveness as arising out of God's love, then it has the capacity to generate love within us, enabling us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Love begets love. Forgiveness begets forgiveness.

And so a failure to forgive is a failure to realize just how great and immeasurable is the love and forgiveness that God has lavished upon us. Until we realize that, then our forgiving is empty, for unless forgiveness is rooted and grounded in the love of God, then all you've really done is agree to a cease-fire. You may have managed the conflict, but you haven't really resolved the rift or healed the relationship.

Forgiveness is more than just accepting an apology. Forgiveness is more than saying, "I won't hold it against you." Forgiveness, real forgiveness, is reaching across the gap that has been created by the wrong that was done and reconciling with the offending party. Forgiveness, real forgiveness, is not something that we quantify; instead, it is to enter into a new quality of relating with one another, in the same way by which God has chosen to relate to us. Forgiveness, real forgiveness, demonstrates the grace that creates new things out of brokenness.

In the aftermath of the first Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles, in the riots, there was an image that was replayed again and again on the TV. It was an aerial view of a horrific beating taking place. Reginald Denny, a trucker who was simply trying to get through the mayhem, was dragged from his truck and viciously beaten by a raging gang. Payback time in L. A.

After his painful recovery, he met face-to-face with his attackers, shook hands with them and forgave them. A reporter, commenting on the scene, wrote, "It is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage."<sup>5</sup>

I'm not sure that it was brain damage that caused Mr. Denny to forgive his attackers. I'd like to believe that he had learned to stop counting.

How many times should we forgive those who sin against us? Up to seven times?

No, says Jesus. If you want a specific number, you can't count that high.

But then again, you shouldn't be counting in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:21

<sup>2</sup> Mt. 18:22

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 4:24

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 31:34

<sup>5</sup> This story, widely reported, was excerpted from William Willimon's sermon, *Our Kind of Crowd*, Journal for Preachers, Pentecost 1997, pp. 22-25.