

Handout

Session Nine: The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Memory Verse: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21).

Read Matthew 18:21–35.

The context of this passage is a series of teachings by Jesus to the disciples. Jesus has just taught about relationships within the church, particularly when there has been wrongdoing. Peter jumps in with an important question, “How often should I forgive?”

We can relate to Peter. Invariably he jumps to the heart of the matter—right or wrong.

Read Matthew 18:21.

Specifically, Peter wants to know, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter does not address situations outside the church. He wants to know within the church family. “When is enough—enough?” Peter suggests seven is more than sufficient. Seven is the number of perfection, the number of days of creation as described in Genesis 1.

1. What response might Peter have expected from Jesus?

Read Matthew 18:22.

In his response, Jesus turns things upside down by choosing to focus on grace rather than obligation. The question is changed from “How many times do I have to forgive?” to “Now that I am forgiven, how many times am I free to forgive?” And that makes all the difference. In other words, “Peter, don’t even try to keep track of the number of times you forgive. You simply will run out of fingers and toes to count.”

Specifically, Jesus says, “Not seven times but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Seventy-seven is seven (the number associated with perfection) placed alongside seven (perfection). Some scholars believe the words are intended to be seven times seventy—an even larger number. Any way you look at it, the act of forgiveness is connected to perfection and the divine. We forgive only by the grace of God.

2. How do you imagine Peter responded to the answer of Jesus?

Forgiveness is not a mathematical equation with numbers to track. Rather, forgiving is giving the gift of forgiveness as we have been given and received the gift of forgiveness in Jesus.

3. How important did forgiveness become for Peter? Consider Peter's actions during the trial of Jesus (Matthew 26:69-75) and Peter's encounter with the risen Christ (John 21).
4. What can we learn about forgiveness from Peter's life?

Read Matthew 18:23-34.

Left to our sinful selves, it is easy to count wounds, betrayals, and injustices done to us. Soon, bitterness can consume us and destroy our spirit. Jesus shows another path. He forgives Peter and us, setting all of us free to forgive. In case of any uncertainty, Jesus tells a parable about the unforgiving servant. Once more, the point is clear; forgiven disciples of Jesus are invited, commanded, and empowered to be forgiving people.

5. Why is Jesus so emphatic about forgiving other people?
6. Why does Jesus spend so much time focusing on the topic of forgiveness?