

# Unlimited Love

Matthew 18:21—35

## Introduction

In our Gospel lesson today, Peter asks Jesus how many times he must forgive a brother who sins against him, seven times? Jesus replies, *“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times (Matthew 18:22).* Some translations read “seventy times seven.” But that doesn’t matter. Jesus doesn’t want us to keep track or keep score. Seven is a number of completeness. So is ten. Seventy-seven is  $10 \times 7 + 7$ . Seventy times seven is  $10 \times 7 \times 7$ . Both numbers express extreme completeness, perfection. It’s not about quantity, but quality. Perfect forgiveness is impossible for us to attain. Why?

## Keeping Score

One reason we have trouble with forgiveness is what we mentioned earlier. Peter’s question, “how many times?” shows our propensity for keeping score. Our granddaughter’s first year in soccer was all about learning the game, teamwork, and having fun. They played three on a side and there was no goalie. Also, they didn’t keep score. Well, they didn’t, but that doesn’t mean parents and grandparents didn’t. Competition can be good. It motivates us to be better, to improve. But the desire to win can also lead to cheating. Some people even cheat at solitaire. You can’t cheat at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a competition. Forgiveness is the result of love. Forgiving your brother is how you love him.

## Getting Even

Closely associated with keeping score is getting even. This is when you hear people misuse the adage, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” They think it means that if you harm me, I have the right and even the duty to repay you in kind. This was actually a law found in many ancient cultures. It is the *law of reciprocity* or *lex talionis*, often called the “law of the tooth.” The purpose of this law was to restrict reciprocity, to make the punishment fit the crime, the death penalty for murder, restitution for stealing, etc. Forgiveness is about grace, not law.

## Holding a Grudge

Another reason we have trouble with forgiveness is when it comes to pain, we have memories like elephants. I’m sure you’ve heard, “I’ll forgive you, but I’ll never forget what you’ve done.” Forgetting always accompanies forgiveness. God says in Isaiah, *“I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (Isaiah 43:25).* Notice also, God says He blots out our transgressions *for His own sake*. He doesn’t forgive us for our sake, but for His. Like we say in the words of Absolution: *“Almighty God, in His mercy, has given His Son to die for you. And for His sake forgives you all of your sins.”* It does us good to forgive and forget. The object of forgiveness is the healing of a relationship. If the sin is not forgotten, the relationship cannot be restored.

## It Hurts Too Deeply

Sometimes, it just hurts too deeply. The closer a person is to us who sins against us, the more powerful and painful the betrayal is. For that is what it is when a brother sins against us, a betrayal. Only one close can betray. But we must ask ourselves, “Can I hurt deeper than how I’ve hurt Christ?”

## Prejudice

A life of forgiveness extends that forgiveness beyond brothers and sisters to neighbors. Sometimes, we have difficulty forgiving our neighbors because of prejudice. One of the ways this has been made obvious is the way people have a tendency to view all Muslims as evil because of the acts of a few terrorists. But that hatred, that animosity goes back to the crusades, when European Christian kings sent armies to Jerusalem to defend the Holy City from the heathen Arabs, while the Arabs were trying to defend themselves from the invading infidels of Europe.

## Forgive Us Our Trespases as We Forgive ... (Matthew 18:23—35)

The key to live by is the Fifth Petition in the Lord's Prayer: *Forgive us our trespases as we forgive those who trespass against us*. The parable Jesus told in our Gospel lesson illustrates this very well. The servant did not forgive as he was forgiven, and his forgiveness was taken away from him. If we don't forgive others, we show that we have not really received forgiveness from God.

## Example of Christ

We have the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who said about those who were killing Him, and by extension, us, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"* (**Luke 23:34**). As the people were abusing, humiliating, and killing Him, Jesus offered forgiveness to them. This is how we are to forgive. But how can we ever hope to be able to forgive like that?

## Agape

After His resurrection, when Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, He used the word *agape*. Peter answered with *phileo*. Agape denotes the love of reason. It's not an emotion. It is an act of the will. The supreme act of agape is forgiveness. Agape is selfless. It is the love that Jesus showed us from the cross. Phileo, sometimes called brotherly love, is a fondness for. Phileo is more common with us, an attraction for, a fondness for someone. Two other types of love are *eros*, romantic love and *storge*, mother love. Phileo, eros and storge are all natural loves. They all have something to do with myself, what I am getting out of a relationship. Agape is the selfless, sacrificial love that doesn't think about oneself. It is concerned only with the other. And it only comes from God.

## Means of Grace

We receive agape from God through the means of Grace: Word and Sacrament. When we hear the Word or receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ, God forgives our sins and gives us agape, the self-sacrificing love that empowers us to forgive others as He has forgiven us. That is *Ultimate Love*.

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*And the peace of God,  
Which surpasses all understanding,  
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

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