

“Forgive 77 Times or 490 Times – Whatever Works Best for You”

Exodus 14:19-31, Psalm 114, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 16, September 17, 2023, dedicated to all Jews across the globe who celebrate their new year 5784, to the memory of Jenkins Smith and always to the glory of God!

Our passage from Matthew speaks of forgiveness as something to be done 77 times. Elsewhere Luke and Matthew talk about forgiving 7 times 70 times or 490 times. The sermon title has it wrong – it is not 77 times 7 (or 539 but 7 times 70). So, it’s either 77 or 490 that you and I are challenged by Jesus to forgive others... whatever works best for you. Please forgive my bad math.

Also, I want to add a reading today. There is a beautiful book of Wisdom writings in the Apocrypha named Sirach. The Book of Sirach, also called the Wisdom of Sirach or simply Sirach, is also known as the **Book of Ecclesiasticus** or Ben Sira. It is a Jewish work originally in Hebrew of ethical teachings, from approximately 200 to 175 BCE, written by the Jewish scribe Ben Sira of Jerusalem, on the inspiration of his father Joshua son of Sirach, sometimes called Jesus son of Sirach or Yeshua ben Eliezer ben Sira.

Today, Sirach 27:30-28:7 is a reading in the lectionary in other parts of Christian Churches around the globe. I share it with you because it fits well with Matthew 18:21-35. Listen for the wisdom of Sirach:

- ³⁰ Anger and wrath, these also are abominations,
and the sinful man will possess them.
- ²⁸ He that takes vengeance will suffer vengeance from the Lord,
and he will firmly establish[a] his sins.
- ² Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done,
and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.
- ³ Does a man harbor anger against another,
and yet seek for healing from the Lord?
- ⁴ Does he have no mercy toward a man like himself,
and yet pray for his own sins?
- ⁵ If he himself, being flesh, maintains wrath,
who will make expiation for his sins?
- ⁶ Remember the end of your life, and cease from enmity,
remember destruction and death, and be true to the
commandments.
- ⁷ Remember the commandments, and do not be angry with
your neighbor; remember the covenant of the Most High,
and overlook ignorance.

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations
of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock,
and our salvation. Amen.*

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A wise Catholic sister named Sr. Margaret once said, “Be careful about over-
tending your wounds. Some people go through life pressing a bruise so that neither
they nor (they hope) the world will ever forget it” (Sr. Mary M. McGlone).

It was quite an image. I can see myself, focusing on a purple mark on my
arm, remembering exactly who had bumped up against me and my schemes,

and thrown my perfect plans out of whack. Can you? Have you done something similar?

Sister Margaret's advice was a gentler version of Sirach's opening observation: "Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner holds them tight."

What motivates us to cherish wrath and anger? Sirach doesn't say, but he suggests that a remedy is to "**remember our last days and set enmity aside**" (Sirach 27:30-28:7). Another Rabbi wrote years later, begin each day forgiving those toward whom you feel wrath and anger, as it was your last day. He was asked by his student, "why? When we know we have many more days to live?" His teacher responded, "we need to live each day like it is our last day, because it may be."

Where the wisdom of Sirach gives us clear maxims, Jesus tells a story to confound us from multiple angles. When Jesus talks about a king and two servants, the story sounds pretty straightforward. One person forgave, another didn't, so the stingy guy loses in the end. Anyone from about 5 years old on, can get this message. But what if we dig deeper?

First of all, we have the king. Playing the role of God in this production, the King, of course, is omnipotent. He can buy and sell both people and things at will. He calls one of his slaves (that's the literal translation) to "settle accounts."

Now the slave is in big trouble; he owes the king something on the order of 6,000-10,000 days' worth of wages — that's about 20 years of work or well over a \$1,000,000. Nobody but another king could come through with that repayment. When the slave begs, the king spares him and his family from being banished into obscurity.

What did the king accomplish? He demonstrated and acted with the full extent of his power and authority. The power to erase a debt is even greater than being able to collect on it. As we know from the reaction of the servants, the public saw what he did. What did the slave perceive? We might say that

he pleaded with the king and got what he asked for. Did he think he had pulled one over on the king? Did he feel ashamed that he had to stoop to begging? Did he feel like he had gotten let off? Did he think the king was stupid?

All those attitudes are possible at the same time. Even if the slave had conned the king, the entire situation made the vast difference in their power immensely, painfully, obviously. As a slave, whether debtor or released, he would always see himself as beholden to the king – as would others.

In the very next act, the tables turn. The absolved debtor has the upper hand over someone who owes him. And what does he do? Having learned nothing about real power, he exposes the tininess of his mind and heart by sending his fellow debtor to prison until the debt is paid – a highly unlikely outcome.

When other people see how the tables turned, they tell the king. In the end, the original debtor ends up in a torturous condition that he brought upon himself.

When we go beneath the surface of the story, we see that even after being relieved of his debt, the first slave chose to live in a world of oppression and domination. Although the king's forgiveness had created an alternative to strict economic justice or tit-for-tat relationships, the slave rejected that option.

Given the opportunity to increase the bounteousness in the world, he instead supported a caste system that offered him petty superiority. By reinforcing a strictly transactional system and the power of domination, he ultimately became his own torturer. As Sirach warned, he held tight to terrible things: there would always be someone over him and that would always torment him.

Sirach talked about cherishing wrath. That seems to be the direct route to self-inflicted torment.

Is there another way to go? How about the alternative to cherishing wrath – cherishing gratitude? Instead of pressing the bruise, we could rejoice and marvel at our bodies’ remarkable powers of regeneration and healing. Before we call in any debts, we might take account of what we have been given, beginning with life itself, and then all the unmerited advantages of our time and place in history (Sr. Mary McGlone, National Catholic Reporter, September 16, 2023; a version of this story appeared in the Sept 1-14, 2023, print issue, headline, “*God Lavishes*”).

I can think of at least 490 reasons to forgive. But I want to be practical. It is in your self-interest to forgive. Forgiveness helps you heal. In a study on “Unforgiveness,” John Hopkins Medicine revealed significant impacts on the body, both physically and mentally when a person refuses to forgive. According to the study, unresolved conflicts can lead to chronic anger, which puts the body into a fight-or-flight mode, resulting in changes in heart rate, blood pressure, and immune response. These changes increase the risk of depression, heart disease, and diabetes, among other conditions.

Research has also shown that unforgiveness is connected to high blood pressure, weakened immune systems, reduced sleep, chronic pain, and cardiovascular problems. Because unforgiveness hinders the body’s ability to heal, forgiveness exercises are now being included in cancer treatment plans for patients.

It’s important to note that forgiveness can have significant health benefits. Studies have found that the act of forgiveness can lower the risk of heart attack; improve cholesterol levels and sleep; and reduce pain, blood pressure, and levels of anxiety, depression, and stress.

If you’re struggling with forgiveness, it’s important to remember that it’s an active process in which you make a conscious decision to let go of negative feelings whether the person deserves it or not.

This is where Jesus’ teaching on forgiving 77 times, or 490 times comes in. Dr. Karen Swartz, M.D., director of the Mood Disorders Adult Consultation

Clinic at The Johns Hopkins Hospital, writes that we have to make Forgiveness part of our lives on a daily basis – working on Forgiveness over and over again.

She says, “Forgiveness is a choice. You are choosing to offer compassion and empathy to the person who wronged you.” The following steps can help you develop a more forgiving attitude and benefit from better emotional and physical health.

Practice these six steps: **First, Reflect and remember.** That includes the events themselves, and also how you reacted, how you felt, and how the anger and hurt have affected you since.

Second, Empathize with the other person. For instance, if your spouse grew up in an alcoholic family, then angers when you have too many glasses of wine it might be more understandable, says Swartz.

Third, Forgive deeply. Simply forgiving someone because you think you have no other alternative or because you think your religion requires it may be enough to bring some healing. One study found that people whose forgiveness came in part from understanding that no one is perfect were able to resume a normal relationship with the other person, even if that person never apologized. Those who only forgave in an effort to salvage the relationship wound up with a worse relationship.

Fourth, Let go of expectations. An apology may not change your relationship with the other person or elicit an apology. If you don’t expect either, you won’t be disappointed.

Fifth, Decide to forgive. Once you make that choice, seal it with an action. If you don’t feel you can talk to the person who wronged you, write about your forgiveness in a journal or even talk about it to someone else in your life whom you trust.

Sixth, Forgive yourself. The act of forgiving includes forgiving yourself. For instance, if your spouse had an affair, recognize that the affair is not a reflection of your worth, says Swartz.

Literally, at the Heart of all of this is the essential work of Forgiving oneself. Forgiving oneself can be a challenging process, but it is essential for mental health and well-being. Here are five steps that may help you forgive yourself:

1. **Understand your emotions:** Becoming aware of the emotions you are experiencing is an important part of learning to forgive yourself. Research has found that identifying and labeling your emotions can help reduce the intensity of your feelings.
2. **Accept responsibility for what happened:** Forgiving yourself is about more than just putting the past behind you and moving on. It is about accepting what has happened and showing compassion to yourself. Facing what you have done or what has happened is the first step toward self-forgiveness.
3. **Treat yourself with kindness and compassion:** Forgiving yourself requires confronting your actions and showing remorse for what happened, but it is important to approach this with self-compassion.
4. **Express remorse for your mistakes:** Expressing remorse for your mistakes can help you move forward and let go of negative feelings.
5. **Make amends and apologize (including apologizing to yourself):** Making amends and apologizing can help you take responsibility for your actions and show that you are truly moving on.

You and I don't need to keep pressing the bruises on our arms. And we certainly don't need to end up in a prison of our own creation. In fact, according to Matthew 18:21-35, it is by **not forgiving** that we end up in such a place. ("Forgiveness: Your Health Depends on It," John Hopkins Medical website).

No matter how you get there, forgive 77 times or 490 times, 77 days or 490 days, 77 months or 490 months – whatever works best for you. But make the choice and start today to forgive others and forgive yourself. It will be good for your health and happiness and good for everyone around you, too. Amen.

