

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

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The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Forgiveness: Stop Debt-Collecting*”

Old Testament	Genesis 50:15-21	(Joseph reminds his brother that God plans all things for good)
Psalter	Psalms 103:1-5, 8-13	(Praise to the Lord for forgiveness and healing)
Epistle	Romans 14:1-12	(We are not to judge one another)
Gospel	St. Matthew 18:21-35	(Jesus teaches about forgiveness from our hearts)

A prayer that many of us say at least once a week—some of us daily—is: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” But is that what we really want? Sure, we want God’s forgiveness. Of that, we are quite convinced. However, we’re not so certain about the second part—forgiving others. We know we’re not nearly as quick to forgive others as we hope and pray that God will forgive us.

The Psalmist (145:8) says, “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.” Good news: We mess up. We ask God for forgiveness. And God forgives us because the Lord is full of compassion and mercy. But when someone treats *us* wrong, when someone does *us* dirty, we’re like, “Not so fast!” We are not as full of compassion and mercy. We are not as slow to anger and of great kindness. In fact, we may be quick to rage and full of... colorful language. Still, Jesus taught us to pray: “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”¹

In today’s Gospel lesson, Peter comes to Jesus asking: “Lord, if someone sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter always seems to ask the questions we’d like to ask. He’s so earnest and eager to do the right thing. Yet often, Peter gets it wrong. Maybe it’s his fallible humanity that makes Peter such a compelling model for us. He heard Jesus talk about forgiveness, so he wants to know more.

Peter must have done his homework, too, because an ancient rabbinic tradition said a person should forgive another who has sinned against them as many as four times. So, Peter, earnest and eager, tries to be more magnanimous than the rabbis and adds three more times. “Master, should I forgive a person up to *seven* times?” He figures seven times is a lot—even more than the rabbis’ quota. It’s turning the other cheek and absolving someone who has done you wrong, once for every day of the week.

Perhaps Peter expected Jesus to praise him for suggesting such extravagant mercy. Or, he hoped for a pat on the back, a gold star, or maybe an A-plus on his forgiveness exam. Oops. Not happening. Rather, Jesus turns and says, “No, not seven times, but *seventy-seven* times.” New Testament scholars debate whether the Greek text means “seventy-seven times” or “seventy times seven times.” But that’s beside the point, because either way, Jesus is holding up an enormous number, one so large we can’t begin to calculate it in terms of forgiveness.

Peter wants a rule, a measurement, so he holds wide his hands and asks: “This much, Lord? Should I forgive this much?” And Jesus replies, “No, much more than that. You’re not even using the right scale. As far as the east is from the west, that’s how much you should forgive.” It’s such an enormous amount of forgiveness, it would be senseless to try to compute how much or how often.

A fair amount of social research has been done on forgiveness. It turns out, forgiveness is good for you. People who forgive have lower levels of anger, anxiety, and depression; are more agreeable and emotionally stable; and also may gain various health benefits. In their book, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, university professors Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman list forgiveness as one of twenty-four character strengths that make for a good life and which contribute to our wellbeing.² It’s good to know there’s some social scientific evidence to support the claim that forgiveness is beneficial for us, although that’s probably not what Jesus was getting at.

One instrument designed to assess our forgiving character is known as the “Forgiveness Likelihood Scale.”³ It gives ten scenarios of wrongdoing and then asks participants to indicate their likelihood to forgive on a scale from ‘very unlikely’ to ‘very likely.’ Here are a few of the setups:

You share something embarrassing about yourself to a friend who promises to keep the information confidential. However, the friend breaks her promise and proceeds to blab to several people. What is the likelihood that you would choose to forgive your friend?

A family member humiliates you in front of others by sharing a story about you that you did not want anyone to know. What is the likelihood that you would choose to forgive that family member?

A stranger breaks into your house, steals a substantial sum of money from you, and injures your pet or child. What is the likelihood that you would choose to forgive the stranger?

How are we doing so far?

It seems as though Peter comes to Jesus with his own version of a ‘Forgiveness Likelihood Scale,’ when he asks: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” As we have seen, Jesus’ answer is literally *off the scale*: “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (or seventy times seven times, which equals *490 times*).

Jesus is not saying Peter needs to recalibrate his ‘Forgiveness Likelihood Scale.’ Rather, our Lord’s response explains that the question and what it’s trying to determine isn’t quite right. The Psalmist says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has [God] removed our sins from us.” It’s impossible to assign a quantity to such infinite mercy, to forgiveness that immense.

Yet, many of us may still sympathize with Peter. Like him, we want to follow Jesus, but without it costing us too terribly much. Christ wants us to forgive those who have sinned against us and to love our enemies. He says our righteousness ought to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Okay. We’re trying the best we can. But, perhaps like Peter, we’d like some benchmarks to know how we’re doing. For most of us, at some time in our walk with the Lord, we’ve probably wondered: Am I getting this right? We, too, tend to need rules and guidelines, moral check lists we can easily keep track of.

Unfortunately, that may be part of the problem. The spiritual danger is that when we focus on achieving virtue in our lives and building our character strengths, we may become overly preoccupied with ourselves. The greater danger is when we start thinking of such character strengths as accomplishments of our own noble, virtuous, righteous selves. We can too easily slide into *self*-righteousness, the smug attitude that knows what real forgiveness is; who is a truly forgiving person and who is not; who deserves forgiveness and who does not; and maybe even the extent and limits of forgiveness: “Seven times seems about right.”

While our character strengths and moral virtues may indeed glorify God, when it comes to the Gospel, our Lord doesn’t just deal with parts of us, those noble bits we like to put on display. Rather, God seeks a relationship with us as whole human beings—every thought, word, and deed, everything, *absolutely everything*, that we are, think, say, and do. When we remember this, none of us—whether we are off-the-charts on the forgiveness scale or still struggle to forgive—have anything to boast about.

Every single one of us is utterly dependent on the unconditional, unmerited grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, who, by His death and resurrection, has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west. Perhaps that’s why Christ tells Peter the parable of the unforgiving servant, a story where the numbers don’t add up, because the numbers can’t be totaled when it comes to what Jesus has done for us. In the story, a servant owes the king ten thousand talents. Now, this is a crazy number. A single talent was more than 15 years’ worth of daily wages. So, when Jesus says this servant owed the king ten thousand talents He’s effectively saying the man owed his boss a gazillion dollars.

It’s no surprise the servant couldn’t pay back the debt. So, the king orders him and everything he has to be sold off. In response, the servant falls to his knees and begs for an extension, promising that if he’s given extra time, he’ll pay back everything. We’re not sure whether to laugh at or to pity him, because there’s no way this servant will ever be able to pay back the king. Possibly, the king was amused, because he responds to this ridiculous request with an amazing act: Since there is no way the slave will ever be able to pay back what he owes, the king simply forgives the debt, every last cent, and sets the slave free.

Yet, when this servant, who has just been forgiven a debt of a gazillion dollars, runs into a guy who owes him a hundred denarii—amounting to a few bucks in comparison to what he owed the king—what does he do? He grabs the man by the throat and demands that he pay up. And when the king finds out the servant for whom he had just forgiven an unimaginable amount wouldn't forgive the pittance that was owed him by another, he has that servant thrown into prison.

In this story, Jesus reframes the whole question about forgiveness. When it comes to forgiveness, we are all like servants who owe our Lord and King more than we can imagine. Try as we may to repay our debt through our character strengths or our virtues, or our willingness to forgive as many as seven times, seventy times seven, or even 490 times, we will never be able to pay back all that we owe to God. But the good news is that despite our inability to ever give back to God everything we owe, God forgives us anyway, *completely*. Moreover, Scripture tells us God also *forgets* our sins—another thing we struggle to do when others have hurt us.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has taken upon Himself all our burdens, sins, and debts and has forgiven every one of them. We are completely, irrevocably, utterly forgiven and healed by Jesus Christ, the God who forgives.

If you're still wondering “what exactly is forgiveness?,” the clue lies in one translation of the Lord's Prayer: “Forgive us our *debts*, as we forgive our *debtors*.” Forgiveness is an act of the will, not an emotional decision. To forgive another person, you have to first become aware of what you think that person owed you—for instance: kindness, honesty, loyalty, sanity, etc. Then, if you are able—or if not, keep praying for the Lord's grace and help—you release the person from that debt.

In other words, they no longer owe you kindness, honesty, loyalty, sanity, etc. because they simply weren't capable of it. Forgiveness is not *excusing* what the other person did. It's not even *forgetting* what they did. You can have forgiven someone, but still feel hurt over what they did.

Take, for example, the Holocaust. Or even, more recently, 9-11. How could anyone forgive *those* horrors? But to realize the perpetrators were not capable of compassion, humanity, justice, and so forth, is to release them from that debt—and turn them over to God. Forgiveness is about setting *ourselves* free from “debt collecting” even if it may never even have an impact on the person or event we are forgiving.

We are able to forgive—to release others from the debt they owe us—because on the Cross, Jesus released us from *our* debts. Practicing forgiveness often may indeed contribute to better, happier lives. But, Jesus reminds us, when it comes to our ability and need to forgive, we are, *all of us*—even those who have great character strengths and those of us who do not—penitents and debtors kneeling at the foot of the Cross.

If Christ could forgive our dreadful sins, can't we find it within ourselves to forgive the bad behaviors of others? Pray about it. God will help you.

Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. J. S. Pagano, “Forgiveness,” 2020. [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/forgiveness-pentecost-16-a-september-17-2023/), <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/forgiveness-pentecost-16-a-september-17-2023/> 2 September 2023.

² Peterson, Christopher and Seligman, Martin, [Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification](#) (American Psychological Association / Oxford University Press, 2004).

³ Mark S. Rye, et al., “Evaluation of the Psychometric Properties of Two Forgiveness Scales.” [Current Psychology](#) 20(3):260–277. <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/s/forgiveness-likelihood-scale/> 2 September 2023.