



MINISTRIES

A Ministry of the Athens Universal Life Church
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<https://aulc.us>

TITLE: How Many Times Shall We Forgive?

SERMON IN A SENTENCE: Jesus calls us to practice confrontational forgiveness.

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 18:21-35

Today's scripture lesson comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, verses 21-35.

Starting at verse 21:

Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how many times could my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

"I tell you, not as many as seven," Jesus said to him, "but 70 times seven.

For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves.

When he began to settle accounts, one who owed 10,000 talents was brought before him.

Since he had no way to pay it back, his master commanded that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.

"At this, the slave fell facedown before him and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything!'

Then the master of that slave had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan.

“But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him 100 denarii. He grabbed him, started choking him, and said, ‘Pay what you owe!’

“At this, his fellow slave fell down and began begging him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

But he wasn’t willing. On the contrary, he went and threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed.

When the other slaves saw what had taken place, they were deeply distressed and went and reported to their master everything that had happened.

“Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.

Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’

And his master got angry and handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay everything that was owed.

So My heavenly Father will also do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from his heart.”

May the Lord add His Blessing to the reading of His Word!

How many times should we forgive? The rabbis said "Three times." That was a good answer. It isn't easy to forgive once, much less three times. Today, in our concern about an escalating crime rate, we say "Three strikes and you're out." That means that you were forgiven twice, not three times.

But Peter sensed that Jesus had a real soft spot in his heart for offenders. Besides, that, he was dealing here with church members, not criminals. He understood that Jesus was going to demand more than the usual, so he more than doubled the number—more than doubled it. The rabbis had said, "Forgive three times." Peter said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Until seven times?" (v. 21).

Let me draw your attention to the passage that immediately precedes this. Our text this week starts with verse 21. In verses 15-20, Jesus taught the disciples how to resolve conflict within the church. It says:

- If a church member offends you, go to that church member and try to work it out.
- If that doesn't work, go back to that person with one or two church members and try to work it out.
- If that doesn't work, take it to the church at large.
- If the person who committed the offense absolutely refuses to cooperate, expel that person from the church.

So, on the heels of that, Peter asks, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Until seven times?" In other words, How many times am I OBLIGATED to go through that process? How soon can I take my REVENGE? Peter was being generous when he suggested forgiving seven times.

What's your standard? How many times would you have suggested? Would you be willing to forgive other people seven times? Would you be willing for Jesus to OBLIGATE you to forgive seven times? Think about it carefully. Seven times is a lot!

A friend of mine once said, "Jesus told us to turn the other cheek. If someone strikes me, I'll turn the other cheek. But if he strikes me on that cheek, he had better watch out!" We can identify with that! Most of us would do the same. My friend was willing to forgive once. Or, perhaps it would be better to say that he was willing to turn the other cheek once. I am not sure that he was willing to forgive at all. He sounded more like he was just waiting for an excuse to strike back.

Or a woman finds out that her husband has been cheating on her. How many times should she forgive? Many of us would say, Never! There are some things that you don't forgive! Cut him loose! Find a decent man! But perhaps that's not the right answer!

Or a man becomes physically abusive to his wife. How many times should she forgive? Again, many of us would say, Never!

Or a woman becomes an alcoholic. She becomes irresponsible. She neglects the kids. She spends her money on booze. How many times should her husband forgive her. Many of us would say, Never! Cut her loose! Find a decent woman.

Peter's suggestion begins to sound pretty generous, doesn't it. "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Until seven times?" Seven is a big number. Seven is a lot of times.

But Jesus answered, "**I don't tell you until seven times, but, until seventy times seven**" (v. 22). Scholars disagree about the number. The Greek words can mean seventy-seven, but they can also mean seventy *times* seven—four hundred ninety times.

It really doesn't matter which Jesus meant. Both seventy-seven and four hundred ninety are beyond counting. How can you truly forgive a person seventy-seven times while keeping track? How can you forgive without forgetting?

That presents us with a problem. Common sense tells us that forgiving an abusive or an alcoholic spouse just makes things worse. By forgiving the abuser or the drunk, we become an enabler. Jesus calls for unlimited forgiveness. What should we do?

To answer that question, we need to remember verses 15-20, the verses that lead into this exchange between Jesus and Peter. In those verses, Jesus calls his disciples to tough love.

- If another church member offends us, we are to take the initiative—to go to that person—to make every effort to work out the problem.
- If that fails, we are to get one or two other Christians—and to go to the offender—and to make every effort to work out the problem.
- If that fails, we are to involve the whole church in an attempt to work out the problem.
- If that fails, we are to expel the offender from the church.

Whoa! That's tough love! But tough love is not punitive. Tough love is redemptive. Tough love confronts the offender with the seriousness of his or her sin. Hopefully, it leads them to repent. Tough love is tough, but not uncaring.

- Tough love gives an abuser an incentive to change:
- Tough love enables an abused spouse to get help.
- Tough love encourages an abused spouse to call the police.
- Tough love encourages an abused spouse to press charges.
- Tough love permits the abused spouse to leave—if the abuse continues.
- The abused spouse need not tolerate abuse for years—or months—or even weeks.
- The vow, "Till death us do part," does not require an abused spouse to invite death at the hands of an abuser.
- Hopefully, faced with tough love, the abuser will see that he or she needs help. The quicker the toughness, the better.

It's appropriate for the spouse of an alcoholic or drug addict to practice tough love. Tolerating intolerable behavior doesn't solve anything. Jesus gives us a model of confrontation in verses 15-20. It gets outsiders involved. It gets the church involved. It pushes for change. If the alcoholic refuses to change, it's appropriate to leave.

But the purpose isn't to get rid of the offender. The purpose is redemption. The purpose is to force the offender to see the offense and to get help. With abusers or alcoholics or drug addicts, we can hardly be tough enough. But that doesn't mean closing the door on forgiveness. We need to continue our openness to forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't mean **ACCEPTING** intolerable behavior. It does mean **REFUSING TO CARRY THE POISON INSIDE US**. It does mean **LETTING GO OF THE BITTERNESS**.

But most of our problems with other people are not as serious as abuse or alcoholism. Perhaps a person said the wrong thing. Or they failed to carry out their responsibilities. Or they owe us money. Perhaps we just can't stand their personal habits. Or perhaps they just squeeze the toothpaste tube from the middle when we want them to roll it from the end. People get divorces over things like that.

Jesus says that we are to forgive, not seven times, but seventy-seven—or seventy **TIMES** seven—depending on how you translate it. Lots of times! Times beyond measure! Times beyond counting!

If we have suffered serious injury at the hands of another person, we may have to forgive them every day. We will be tempted every day to wallow in our bitterness. We will be tempted every day to let bad memories of old injuries poison us. The injury may have been yesterday, but the forgiveness must be today and tomorrow and the day after that.

The church is a community of forgiveness. It is a place where we come to be forgiven, and it is a place where we are called to forgive. That doesn't mean tolerating intolerable behavior. It doesn't mean

being soft-headed. It doesn't mean living with abuse. It *does* mean refusing to carry the poison inside us. It *does* mean letting go of the bitterness.

A young woman once told me that she was getting divorced. There were two small children. I asked if she had any family nearby. She said, "Only my church family." She goes to a fundamentalist church, so I asked how they were responding to her divorce. She said, "Very caringly." She said, "They are very caring, very loving, very supportive, very forgiving." I thought, "That's the church really being the church!"

Not all forgiveness takes place within the context of the church. I'm thinking about the Cubs—the Chicago Cubs. The Cubs hadn't won the World Series since 1908—more than a hundred years earlier—but the Cubs had fans who had forgiven them a hundred times.

That can not have been easy, but it kept the Cubs in the game.

Jack Brickhouse was a sportscaster who covered a number of sports, but was especially known for his play-by-play coverage of the Cubs. He covered Cubs games from 1948 to 1981—thirty-three years—the prime of Brickhouse's life. During that time, the Cubs not only never won a World Series—they never even got to play in a World Series. But Brickhouse forgave them thirty-three times. He said, "Everyone is entitled to a bad century."

Then in 2003, the Cubs had a chance—a very good chance. They were ahead 3-0 in Game 6 when Luis Castillo of the Florida Marlins hit a foul ball that barely cleared the short wall. Moises Alou stretched to catch it—and to end the game and cinch the Series.

But Steve Bartman, sitting in the front row, reached out to catch the ball, making it impossible for Alou to catch the ball and win the Series. Alou made angry gestures on the field, and Bartman became the most hated man in Chicago when the Marlins went on to win that game and the next to win the Series.

Then in 2016, as most of you know, the Cubs finally won the World Series. When that happened, the team did the most wonderful thing—they forgave Steve Bartman—forgave him publicly. They did something unprecedented. When gold rings were being cast for team members, they had one cast for Steve Bartman. His World Series ring has his name engraved on it.

The Cubs issued this statement to the press:

"While no gesture can fully lift the public burden he has endured for more than a decade, we felt it was important Steve knows he has been and continues to be fully embraced by this organization. After all he has sacrificed, we are proud to recognize Steve Bartman with this gift today."

The church can learn a lesson from the Cubs and their fans. We have more at stake than a baseball game—or even the World Series. Christ helps people to win the game of life, and we are his team. We are Christ's team!

We can't help if we are fighting among ourselves. How many times must we forgive? Seventy TIMES seven TIMES seven TIMES seven—until our calculator responds with a big "E" for Error because it cannot handle such a large number.

That's our Lord's message for this Lord's Day and I hope you got a blessing out of it!

Go out this week and be a blessing and be blessed! For the more you are a blessing, the more you will be blessed!

Thank you all for watching and listening and we will see you all next week!

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