

Sermon by the Rev. Eric Moulton  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
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## **SEVENTY TIMES SEVENTY**

Matthew 18:21-35

The other day my wife Serinda took our son Jude to little league ball practice. The venue was a large, multi-field complex. After practice, she and Jude walked back to where Serinda thought she had parked the car...only the car was not there!

I was on the other side of town with several of our other kids when I got her call. Eric, she told me, your car has been stolen. Silence. What? She had to be kidding, right?

My car stolen? From the little league fields? I asked her if she had left the keys in it? No, she said, I have the keys. Did you lock it? Well, no, she said, but at least this way they probably didn't break a window. Then she offered a crime stat. You know, she added, it is a Honda Accord. Those are the most frequently stolen cars.

Serinda was peaceful! *Too* peaceful. I was freaking out. So I'll call the police, she said, but come pick us up...

My skin was melting because my insides were so hot. I had hot magna rage and to be honest, I was angry at Serinda for not locking the car doors. Then I tried to imagine the little league ball park car thieves!

There was no forgiveness flowing. Although I was freaking out, I did remind myself that I needed to calm down. I put it into a broader perspective—everyone is safe, it's only a car.

Our kids who were with me began circulating the news. Dad's car has been stolen! By the time we were on our way to the scene of the crime to pick up Serinda and Jude the grim reality was setting in. All I could think about was police reports...insurance claims...and I hadn't memorized my license tag number!

I took a breath and decided we should pray. I prayed and it was so feeble. We thanked God no one was hurt. As I prayed, I remembered that just the other day I had put an Alpha online wallpaper on the car's navigation screen. It was a

reminder for me to pray for St. John's Alpha series. So we prayed that the carjackers would be intrigued by the wallpaper and explore [alphawilmington.com](http://alphawilmington.com), then give their hearts to Jesus and the whole situation would be redeemed.

No sooner had we said amen than Serinda called to let us know she and Jude had found the car after all. She had been confused about the lot in which she had parked the car before practice.

In the span of 10 minutes, I saw just how far I needed to come in the area of forgiveness! I think only birth and death can rival the emotional intensity around the issue of forgiveness, no matter which side of the street you're on. Either you need to forgive, or you need to be forgiven.

These days it seems that the concepts of "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you" are becoming endangered species. Sincere apologies are rare. Accepting a sincere apology may be even more rare.

Many public apologies are efforts to protect an image. Often when a apology would be appropriate, blame shifting and pointing the finger at others becomes a strategy to weather the storm, to work the system and justify one's actions. It's all about optics and PR. And it's not just celebrities who do this. I personally know a guy who is not famous at all, who routinely uses the same tactics.

Maybe the most Christian things we should learn are how to apologize, how to ask for forgiveness, and how to forgive when someone comes asking for forgiveness. You will find some of the most empowering moments of your life are when you can tell someone "I am sorry" or "I forgive you." But these words do not come naturally at all. See how easy they are for you the next time you get into a spat with your spouse or friend or the next time you over-react with your child. What a challenge it is to forgive someone who has crossed you, even over something minor.

Forgiveness may be the biggest issue of all between people—person to person—and between humans and God. The subtitle to the Bible could be "Lessons in Reconciliation." Jesus Christ entered the world because the world needed forgiveness.

Let's jump into the parable in Matthew 18: 21-35. Jesus has just been teaching on reconciliation and restoration. Peter follows up with a question for clarity because, after all, there has to be a limit, a reasonable capacity for this forgiveness stuff. We love counting, measuring, keeping books, score-keeping, being official bean counters, as Robert Capon would say, because that is what comes naturally.

Peter floats a suggestion. He asks Jesus, How many times must I forgive, Lord? Seven? This probably seemed generous to Peter. Jesus' answer must have blown Peter's mind. Seven? Try seventy times seven! Try unlimited! When it comes to forgiving, try to stop counting altogether!

When Jesus shares this parable, it is an emphatic teaching moment regarding mercy, grace and forgiveness—a window into God's heart, his passion to absolve, forgive and pardon sinners like me and you. It's also a window into what really makes God angry, that is, when we receive his mercy for ourselves but refuse to show it to others.

The servant in this parable was in the proverbial hole. He owed everything. His large debt—ten thousand talents—as a monetary value is nearly \$6 billion in today's world. Obviously Jesus is hyping this number to make his point clear. It's a laughable sum. The servant can't pay it! Never will be able to pay it! It makes his plea to the king even more laughable. "Have patience with me. I will repay everything."

Talk about saying what the king wants to hear—like when your five year old says, "I'll take care of the puppy, I promise." Or when we think we can make a deal with God. "God, if you do this for me, I promise...I'll never...."

Sometimes we think we can repay God what we owe, or we think that the basis of our relationship with God or others is a running tally of credits and debits. Thus, we live our lives with an internal accounting software churning in the background. Do you know this is the worst way to live in relationship with others? I'm referring to *any* relationship—a friendship, a marriage, parent/child, in-laws, work colleagues, employer/employee. Hear me! The quickest way to ruin a relationship is to keep score. Score-keeping in relationships is just a veiled way of harboring un-forgiveness.

Parents, with your kids, beware the phrase "I do everything for you!" Manipulating your kids by reminding them how much they owe you is like keeping score, saving up collateral to unleash if we ever need it. We can use the collateral to hang over someone's head as we exert our will over that person's life. It comes out like

*You always...*

*Remember when you...*

*You do the same thing...*

*I'm not nearly as bad as...*

*What about that time...*

*You never...*

Maybe you've been in a conversation that took a strange turn into hurt feelings. Someone takes exception to a comment and suddenly accusations are flying. Offenses from a year ago are dug up and re-hashed. Asking for and giving forgiveness—daily—is crucial. Buried unforgiveness will compound and erupt.

So, in our parable the king forgives the servant. He doesn't even send the servant down the hall to work out a payment plan. You are cleared. Ledger. Wiped. Clean. Forgiven. Your \$6 billion debt? No worries. Go live your best life. Wow! Mercy hit the servant like a tidal wave. He and all his family were so blessed. You see, un-forgiveness binds you and multiplies burdens, but forgiveness sets you free and multiplies blessings to others.

Then the parable gets uncomfortable. Before the forgiven servant had even reached home, he went out and found a fellow servant who owed him money. Although the debt was not an inconsequential sum, it was only a fraction of what the first servant had just been forgiven. He pursued his debtor with merciless vigor. The fellow servant pleaded, Be patient, I'll pay you back! Familiar words.

No patience. No mercy. The forgiven servant pressed charges against his fellow servant, who was from the same neighborhood with similar circumstances, issues, hopes, fears. No mercy. Sometimes the hardest people to forgive are those in our own homes or the people we are around the most often.

The good news is that when we receive the Grace of Christ, it shifts our perspectives. If the reason Jesus came into the world was for us to know redemption by forgiveness through his blood, then it stands to reason that Jesus envisions a church that extends grace, forgiveness and mercy to one another and to the world around us.

What shakes me in this parable—and what ought to shake us all—is the blindness of the forgiven servant. The very fact that his blindness is so obvious makes the parable a warning to our own blindspots. I smugly walk in the debt-free, no condemnation zone of Jesus' mercy while at the same time heaping condemnation toward others... in my judgment, my critical spirit, my grudges, my scorekeeping, my bitterness, my lack of empathy and concern. Beware the seed of criticism and accusation. It creeps into our midsts unawares.

I love social media. I believe the connectivity, collaboration, idea generating and life sharing that happens on these platforms is such a gift, but it is also a temptation to toxicity in all kinds of directions. As followers of Jesus, how can we show mercy? How can we build people up? How can we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep? What if part of our ministry on social media—yes, I just said that, our ministry on social media—were to prayerfully

engage in the art of mercy, forgiveness, love, encouragement? That's all the same stuff we need and crave, which we have been given in Christ, extended to others.

If the heart of Jesus is to reconcile by forgiving, then his very Body, the church, is to be a community of forgiveness. It's a sad irony that the outside world rarely describes the church in this way.

Jesus' model prayer for his disciples placed the need for forgiveness in the very heart, the very center, of the prayer. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. If you have ever mediated a playground reconciliation between two five year olds, you know that forgiveness is the stuff of true miracle.

C. S. Lewis, in his chapter on forgiveness in *Mere Christianity*, describes how untenable the phrase "Hate the sin, love the sinner" always had seemed to him. Forgiveness always seems to boil down to this. As he reflected on the phrase, he came to a surprising conclusion. C. S. Lewis wrote:

*But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life (that is, hating the sin, but loving the sinner), namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. there had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact, the very reason why I hated the things was that I loved the man. Just because I loved myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those things.*

*Consequently, Christianity does not want us to reduce by one atom the hatred we feel for cruelty and treachery. We ought to hate them. Not one word of what we have said about them needs to be unsaid. But it does want us to hate them in the same way in which we hate things in ourselves: Being sorry that the man should have done such things, and hoping, if it is any way possible, that somehow, sometime, somewhere, he can be cured and made human again.*

There is no one hearing this today—I'm going out on a limb here—no one who doesn't have a relationship, friendship, circumstance, that could use either an "I'm sorry" or "I forgive you" from you. There is a reason we confess our sins regularly in church in our gathered worship, and why we should confess our sins in personal prayers—because life its so messy. In the same way we pray for our

daily bread, we pray also to be forgiven of our offenses just as we forgive when someone sins against us.

Let me offer two reasons for the way the Gospel is unique in answering the question of forgiveness.

The first way the Gospel helps us to forgive is simply God—God’s being, his character, his wisdom, his goodness, his trustworthiness, his authority, his father’s heart of love over all things, his desire to bring all things to a just end and a new beginning. When we refuse to forgive, when we withhold mercy, we are seizing the role of God—and doing so rather unsuccessfully.

In Jesus on the cross, we find the power of the love and the justice of God at the perfect convergence. God’s wrath toward sin, evil, oppression and injustice is laid upon Jesus, and we recognize this as an act of love because Jesus endures this—in our place. Jesus Christ willingly absorbs the just wrath that we deserve while displaying an eternal lavish love that we do not deserve. We owed \$6 billion. Jesus paid it all. Oh, the fathomless love of God. This is our God! Who is like him?

The second way the Gospel helps us as we wrestle to forgive is to remember that as Christians, we walk with an eternal perspective. When we hold others in contempt and will not forgive, it is about our desire to be in control. We may say that we believe in Resurrection and the New Creation, but we live like this time is our only season. Not only have we forgotten God in whom we can release others, but we also have forgotten that this present age is giving way to an age to come. Jesus taught and warned that if we fight for this life alone, we’ll be in no fit state for the world to come.

So it is that we sometimes withhold forgiveness because we mistakenly think that this life and world are all there is. Here is where looking to Christ is everything. Father, forgive them for they know not what they do! Jesus’ confidence in his Father’s love and promise, in the Resurrection and in the ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God, allowed him to forgive under the most humiliating, agonizing and tortuous scenarios imaginable.

My thinking might go, If I forgive them, they win. If I don’t forgive them, then maybe I hold on to something—I keep something from them, I keep my love from them, I hold them under the veil of my condemnation which ultimately requires me to cling to bitterness and anger. Withholding forgiveness really only poisons me. By attempting to maintain my own anger, I imprison myself. I am unable to pray God’s will for them. I want their condemnation.

Some wounds are deep and the struggle to forgive seems impossible. Sometimes we are called to forgive through episodes of abuse and seasons of oppression.

Forgiveness is not an acceptance of the sin or evil someone did to you. Rather, it is letting go of our role as judge, releasing them to the Lord and praying God's mercy and God's best for them. Sometimes working through issues of forgiveness is most effective with friends in the Body of Christ, people committed to walking with us in prayer. Issues of forgiveness take time to work through, but the grace of God is sufficient for even the deepest wounds.

Sometimes our call is to forgive when the offense seems monumental. Most of the time we are called to forgive when offenses are elemental—the routine accumulation of debris from our everyday interactions in a Fallen world.

When we choose to forgive, we are walking in the Spirit and the light of Christ is shining. Maybe our act of forgiveness toward someone will be a catalyst used by the Holy Spirit, which helps them see Jesus. And it could be that our most difficult act of forgiving is the moment the light of Christ shines most brightly through us—when we forgive, we mirror the God of forgiveness.

At the end of John's Gospel there is a powerful moment after Jesus has been raised from the dead. Jesus appears to the disciples and he commissions them for the ministry of the church. He tells them this: Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven their sins. If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld. What does Jesus mean?

It doesn't mean that the church or its ministers have the power to forgive sins. Only God has that authority. But Jesus gives the church—its ordained ministers as we preach and administer the sacraments—the authority to proclaim the forgiveness of sins through Christ! How else will the world know?

Jesus also gives this authority to the whole church—to the priesthood of all believer! We are to be representative witnesses and proclaimers of the grace and mercy of Jesus, an army of the forgiven who proclaim the forgiveness of Christ to the world!

You see, the way a world learns to understand the reality of the God who forgives, of a Savior whose mission was to secure our forgiveness, is for us to be a people of forgiveness, whose ministry of forgiving and asking for forgiveness points to the very Savior and to the cross where true forgiveness is found.

This might be just what you are looking for right now. Honestly, we know we owe for our sins—we owe \$6 billion multiplied by forever! But Jesus paid it all. God

gave up bookkeeping, as Robert Capon wrote, the moment Jesus bore the cross and proclaimed "Father, forgive them!"

There is no greater news! There is no greater Savior! He loves us! He loves you!

Now he only wants to know, Will you stop counting? And will you lay down and rest in the grace of his forgiveness?

Amen.