

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' ³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

FORGIVE LIKE GOD

Some 500 years ago, when Martin Luther was preaching on the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Martin Luther made a careful distinction between what the kingdom of heaven is like and what kingdoms on earth are like. The kingdom of heaven is the work of the church. The work of the church is ruled by the gospel. The goal of the gospel is to establish peace between God and man through the forgiveness of sins. The kingdoms on earth work differently. Our governing authorities are not ruled by the gospel, but by the law. Our governing authorities keep the peace between man and man by keeping good order through the punishing of sins. And whenever parental and other governing authorities become negligent in punishing sin, the sins of children and citizens under such negligent authorities only become worse.

This is all to say there is a time and a place for justice. And that time and place is for children in their homes. And that time and place is for citizens who disobey the governing authorities. And that time will come again when our Lord Jesus visits us again on the Last Day and Lord punishes the people who either never came to believe in Jesus or grew tired in their believing. But we who have gathered here today belong to the kingdom of heaven and conduct ourselves differently in the gospel ministry of the church.

The Apostle Peter, in our Gospel today, understood what Jesus was talking about. Peter knew, for instance, if brother Andrew sinned against Peter, Peter should make Andrew aware of what he had done so Andrew could repent of his sin. The classic words for repentance are: "I'm sorry." And then Peter would respond with the classic word of absolution: "I forgive you." Peter was a good student because Peter asked questions and the question Peter asks is, "*Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?*" This is a good question, but because Peter is Peter and thinks of himself as a self-appointed teacher's assistant, Peter playfully offers the answer, "*Up to seven times?*" Playfully, ²² *Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."* In other words: "Keep counting Peter." In better words, "Stop counting, Peter."

Ugh. If there's one thing sisters and brothers are good at, it's keeping score, isn't it? The classic words for such injustice: "It's not fair!" And in the old game of who did what when and why, all a sister or brother wants is what is fair. And in the Old Testament case of Joseph versus his older brothers, what was fair to the older brothers was for Joseph to be sold as a slave for all the years of favoritism and preferential treatment Joseph enjoyed from their father.

We too have our own ideas of fair. We too have our own way of maximizing the sins of our brother or sister Christians all the while we minimizing our own sins. So, whose sins are you counting? What score were you looking to settle? I know, "it's not fair," and it's about to get worse. Not only are we sinned against. Not only are we not allowed to keep score and settle scores. Did you peak ahead to the last words in our Gospel? Jesus ends his teaching, "*Forgive your brother or sister from the heart.*" Ugh.

From the heart? Is your forgiveness from the heart or does your forgiveness feel kind of forced? If you have ever had your mother grab you with one hand and your brother or sister by the other hand, you know what's coming next. "Stop fighting!" "You, what do you say to your brother?" "I'm sorry!" "Now, say it like you mean it." "I'm sorry." And you, what do you say to your sister, "I forgive you!" "Now, say it like you mean it." "I forgive you." When your mother takes you by the hand or literally picks you up, so you and your brother are forced to face each other and

then your mother asks, "What are you supposed to say?" and "What are you supposed to say?" When parents are training their children in confession and absolution, this is the step-by-step process. Step #1 Face each other, eye-contact. Step #2 Say the words: "I'm sorry." "I forgive you." And step #3 Mean it. At least sound like you mean it, and children for the most part, eventually with God's help, are sorry for what they have done and do forgive one another. This is the step-by-step process for children and for immature adults who are still behaving like children. Mature, grown-up repentance and forgiveness are the opposite. Repentance and forgiveness are step #1 from the heart and are quickly followed by step #2 words of repentance and absolution and those words are followed by step #3 actions that reinforce the genuineness of repentance and forgiveness. And so yes, we not only need forgiveness for those who sin against us, we also need forgiveness for the sinful way we forgive one another, because God forgives from the heart.

So how is Jesus going to get us to forgive like God, from the heart? Jesus is going to get us there with a couple of stories. And here is the first part of the first story: *"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' Ten thousand bags of gold is a significant number. Back when \$100 was considered a day's wage, this amount of gold was equal to \$6 billion dollars. It's worth much more today. And yet even the smaller number of \$6 billion dollars is more than any of us could payback. How foolish for the servant to say, 'I'll pay everything back.' He couldn't and he didn't. ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."*

This story has a second half: *²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' ³⁰ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. A hundred silver coins is a significant number. Still not sure about today's dollars, but back when \$100 was a day's wage, a hundred silver coins was equal to \$10,000. \$10,000 isn't what it used to be, but \$10,000 is still a significant amount of money. Revisiting the case between Joseph versus his brothers. The sins Joseph's brothers had committed against Joseph were significant. At 17 years of age, Joseph was separated from his family. Because of a false accusation, Joseph spent most of his twenty-aged years in prison. What Joseph suffered was traumatic. Not every sin committed against Joseph and against us is as traumatic. We do not need to become offended at every offense. At yet when we have suffered a significant wrong like Joseph suffered, we can forgive our brothers and sister from the heart when we see God working in all things in our lives, even in the wrongs we have suffered, for our good. And in the story Jesus teaches the wrongs we have suffered from fellow sinners are very different from the wrong Jesus suffered because of our sins. And that's our second story.*

This second story is about our Lord Jesus Christ, who was pieced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. At a time and place of great suffering, Jesus offered the prayer, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* And later, when the thief on his right repented, telling his partner on the other side of Jesus, *"We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve,"* Jesus didn't wait for the pearly gates to tell the repentance thief about the kingdom of heaven, but said then and there, *"today you will be with me in paradise"* (Lk 23). From the heart is the only way Jesus knows how to forgive. And everything Jesus said and says and everything Jesus did and does for his people is from the heart.

In the 5th Petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us," the untrained ear might hear a little negotiating going on between the Father in heaven and his children on earth. *"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."* Our forgiveness is NOT conditional on our forgiving. Our forgiving is the fruit of our faith. And what does our faith believe. We believe in many teachings. Shortly in the Apostles Creed we will say, "I believe in God the Father, ... I believe in Jesus Christ, I believe in the Holy Spirit," and within this confession of faith we will also say, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." Do you believe in the forgiveness of sins? Do you believe in sins, your sins? Do you believe your sins damn you to an eternity in hell? Do you believe your sins are really that bad? Do you believe God has forgiven you from all of your sins through the saving work of Jesus? Do you believe your God is really that good? The sins of those who sin against us are offensive, and sometimes the kingdoms on this earth like our parents will get involved and establish some kind of justice through the law, but the sins of those who sin against us also present us with an opportunity to demonstrate the fruit of our faith, that we do believe in God and we do believe in the forgiveness of sins, the forgiveness of our sins, and what better way to demonstrate this faith than to forgive our brother and sisters again and again, forever and ever. Amen.