

UNFORGIVENESS AS A SELF-MADE PRISON CELL

“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him...even seven times?”

A sermon for Sunday, September 17, 2017, by the Rev. Dr. James Mutayoba

Gospel: **Matthew 18:21-35** 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.”

I begin with Paul’s words to the Ephesians 4:31-32: “Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling and slander along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.”

In asking the question *how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him*, Peter was disappointed like we are with our relatives or spouses who keep committing sin. They promise to stop, they don’t! Forgiving a person all the time was not Peter’s option. There must be **an end**. There should be **a limit**, Peter thought.

I want to take you back to v.15 of this chapter where Jesus said: “If a brother sins against you, tell him in private (between you and him). Take three witnesses; take it to the Church; Pray for him in Christ’s name for the purpose of restoring a brother.” Peter may have done all these things as a matter of Christian duty until he was fed up and wanted some kind of **limit to forgiving, an end to pardoning a sinning brother**.

But Jesus gave Peter a rather perplexing response saying: **You must forgive. “I do not say... seven times, but seventy seven times.”**

- Why then confront a brother if you are going to forgive him?
- Why take witnesses if, in the end, you are going to forgive him?
- Why appeal to a council of the church if you are going to forgive?

Here is the reason: **Because the Lord demands it.**

I grew up in the Tropics where lemons and limes grow plentifully. **Lemons and limes** are citrus fruits; they **are acidic**, they **taste bitter**. When lemons are diluted and brewed proportionately they make wonderful juice. I enjoy lemonade -- well brewed lemonade is good.

In metaphorical sense, **human beings** can be as **bitter** as **lemons**. **Bitterness** is **anger** which has **become chronic** and won’t go away.

Anger is a natural feeling - a gift from God yet it can lead to sin. God gave us some feeling of anger. **Anger forces me to defend myself; it enables me to flee away. It forces me discern what I can endure and what I cannot.**

But Scripture discourages anger saying, ***“Be angry but sin not!”*** It is almost impossible to become angry without sinning!!!

“Angry I will not be!!” Peter thought. He asked Jesus, ***“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him, even 7 times?”***

Jesus responds, **seventy times seven you must **forgive**.**

- Why must we forgive seventy times seven? Because Jesus says so.
- **Anger** turns into **chronic bitterness**
- **Chronic bitterness is detrimental** to the body.
- **Anger and Bitterness** are strongholds - **They will destroy you.**

Bitter feelings carry **INTENTIONAL UNKINDNESS** from **the heart**.

Unresolved anger leads to resentment & guilt.

Both bitterness & resentment are time-bombs ready to explode. They influence:

HOW WE THINK,

HOW WE ACT and

HOW WE RESPOND TO PEOPLE and CIRCUMSTANCES.

Bitter people seek revenge. Revenge is sweet to them. **Tit for tat is fair play! An eye for eye! A tooth for a tooth!** **Bitter people express cowboy mentality. BUT Jesus teaches we must forgive.** Revenge is not an option.

What happens if we don't forgive? Well **we create a self-made prison cell.** We are the prisoner and the guard at the same time. **We have the keys** to the lock in our hands, **yet we choose to stay locked up in the paralysis of bitterness and resentment.**

One may ask, “What becomes of my anger?” What shall I do with it?

Jesus says, ***“Forgive, Not only 7 times, but 70 times 7.”*** Go a great length to **correct/restore a Christian** brother/sister. Forgiveness cannot be confined to how many times one does it; **we must forgive none-stop**, as the need arises.

When the disciples asked the Lord to **teach them to pray**, the lord added one interesting part which says: ***Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*** When we say this part of the Lord's Prayer, we dig our own grave; we weave our own hangman's noose, we determine our fate. We sat that **God should give us an equal dose of forgiveness as we offer to others** when we really seldom offer forgiveness. **We make a verdict against ourselves** and convict ourselves!

Only in the divine Court, did Jesus plead saying, ***“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!”***

In the earthly Court of Law, ignorance is no defense.

For this reason the Psalmist writes: “*Bless the Lord O my soul*” (Why bless the Lord?)
Because - “*He forgives all my iniquities, heals all my diseases, ... He is slow to anger and abundant in love ...*”

Think about it. **When we forgive the sins of any, we do it for our own sakes.**

- **We take the burden off our shoulders.**
- **We untie the self-made noose from our necks and loosen our own trap.**
- **We can breathe when we meet the person who wronged us.**
- **He can no longer control our life** and our emotions.
- **He is no longer a burden to us** every time we see him.

Chains are broken and we are no longer paralyzed.

Let us pray to the Lord to give us the ability to **FORGIVE WITHOUT CEASING.**

Thank you, Lord.

Amen.