

## 7 X 70

A very compassionate and effective Christian counsellor and family therapist based his practice on Jesus, on counselling like Jesus. Isaiah calls Jesus “Wonderful Counsellor” (Isaiah 9:6). In his efforts to help his clients, this Christian counsellor gave them things to do. He noticed that Jesus gave people things to do, what the counsellor liked to call “homework.” Jesus even gave math homework. Most of us don’t like homework. Many of us don’t like math though there’s a lot of power and beauty in it.

Here’s an example of Jesus’ math homework for one of His disciples, and for us. In Matthew 18:21-22 we read, “Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’”

Jesus and Peter use a wonderful little Greek word for forgiveness, *afeami*, which means to release from legal or moral obligation or consequence, cancel, remit, pardon, to forgive...to let go...like a ship released from its mooring to sail free.

This forgiveness is not just about excusing people for “offending” us. It’s not just that we don’t like this or that about them or that they ignore us or irritate us. The Greek word here for sinning is *hamartanow*. This is real genuine sin. The command of Jesus is all about forgiving people for actually sinning against us, for wronging us, for hurting us, the way we’ve all sinned against God God.

Jesus says the number of times that Peter must forgive is way more than he imagined:  $7 \times 70$ . Take it home with you and think about it Peter, put this into practice. It's not the easiest multiplication. Peter could have asked, "10 times?" Jesus could have said "50 times 10 times" which would have made the math easy, 500.  $7 \times 70$  requires a little more work in our mental times tables.

What's the point? Say you have 100 brothers and sisters in Christ.  $7 \times 70 \times 100 = 49,000$  situations to forgive. But is this per day, per week, per year, per lifetime? Say per year, so it equals 49,000. But say it is per week for a year =  $49,000 \times 52 \times 100$  brothers and sisters = 2,548,000 times to forgive every year. What if Jesus meant not just the 100 in your life but everyone on earth, about 7,000,000,000 people, that you forgive just  $7 \times 70$  or 490 times in one lifetime. This means the potential to forgive 3,430,000,000,000 times, over three trillion times.

What if Jesus had to atone for just one sin per person per day for their adult lifetimes. Seven billion people  $\times$  50 years  $\times$  365 days = 127,750,000,000,000. 127 trillion just for people living now, not counting past or future generations. Jesus' atonement would cover all from every generation.

Matthew writes this about Jesus early in his Gospel, "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Paul said, "Christ died for our sins" (1Corinthians 15:3). John wrote: "He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for

ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). Jesus gave His life to pay for God’s forgiveness our sins. We don’t have to die for our sins because He did. We have to put our faith in Him, confess Him, repent of our sins, receive His forgiveness through baptism for the remission of our sins, and live forgiving others. Jesus said in Matthew 6:14-15, “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” Jesus illustrates his point to Peter: we must forgive to be forgiven. This is the horizontal dimension of “body of Christ” we remember in the Lord’s Supper.

In the big picture we must see too that our Father and Jesus are not teaching the blind tolerance and acceptance of sin or ignoring it. Nor are God and His Apostles teaching that we overlook serious fundamental errors of human doctrine over the truth of the Bible. A climate of ignoring sin sets an equally bad example for the church as does living in it. To show this is all true, beginning just six verses before Matthew 18:22 in verses 15-20 Jesus teaches about reproving the brother who sins and the process of church discipline and expulsion in the context of His presence. Paul gives instructions about disciplining and dismissing from fellowship Christians who persist in serious wilful sins. Though Jesus does not specifically attach the important dimension of repentance to His command to forgive without limit here in Matthew, He does so in Luke 17:3-5.

So what about the number? Is it about multiplying two “perfect numbers,” 7 and 10? Then perhaps for Jewish listeners like Peter it could have been 7 and 12. In any case, it is memorable. One important key to Jesus’ teaching

is: it is a high number yielding even higher totals if He means it to be daily as in the context of Luke 17. If it is daily, weekly, yearly, lifetime, it doesn't really matter. The point is: it is limitless. It is ongoing, a way of life for Peter and for us. Since "Love keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:5) we would never count to 490 then say no more at 491. The homework is about realizing the infinite power of God to redeem. The power and capacity to live like this, to forgive without limit, come from God in the same way that the power to live a holy and loving life comes from God because He is love, holy and forgiving.

Forgiveness must come from the heart. A terrifying reality comes with unforgiveness: God won't forgive us if we don't forgive others who sin against us. Jesus gave His life to pay for God's forgiveness of our sins. His sacrifice is priceless and limitless. God's forgiveness is limitless but it is conditional: we are to forgive like Jesus and as we do, repenting of our own sins, our heavenly Father forgives us without limit.

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