

MS-0399-007,008,035

HOW MANY TIMES?

Matthew 18:21-35

A woman with fourteen children, ages one through fourteen, sued her husband for divorce on the grounds of desertion.

"When did he desert you?" the judge asked.

"Thirteen years ago," she replied.

"If he left thirteen years ago, where did all these children come from?" asked the judge.

"Oh," said the woman, "he kept coming back to say he was sorry."

Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven."

This is a hard teaching.

A villager said to the little monk: "My neighbor slapped me. Should I forgive him?"

"Yes," answered the little monk.

"How many times should I forgive my neighbor?" the villager asked.

"How many times did he slap you?" asked the little monk.

"Once," came the answer. "Then forgive him once," said the little monk. "But what if he slaps me fifty times?" the villager asked.

"Then you should forgive him forty-nine times," came the answer.

"Why only forty-nine times, if I were struck fifty times?" the villager asked.

The little monk: "Freely accept the fiftieth slap. You would deserve it for being such a fool to allow yourself to be slapped the first forty-nine times." (1)

This is a hard teaching. Do I keep forgiving someone who keeps hurting me time and time again? I don't think so. There are wives and husbands who ought to walk away from an abusive spouse. There are children who ought to walk away from abusive parents—and parents who ought to cut the cord with children who hurt them time and time again. Jesus is not advocating a destructive co-dependency. But he is advocating a pro-active policy of forgiving and forgetting that can take a lot of the hurt out of human relationships.

Sometimes we forgive because it is healthy for our own mind, body and spirit to forgive. It's hard to keep hating someone, resenting someone, despising someone without it taking a toll on us.

It's like the little boy who was sitting on a park bench in obvious agony.

A man walking by asked him what was wrong. The boy answered, "I'm sitting on a bumble bee," the little boy replied.

"Then why don't you get up?" the man asked.

The boy replied, "Because I figure I'm hurting him more than he is hurting me!" The healing process begins when we get up off the park bench. (2)

It takes a toll when we hold on to a grudge.

There was an interesting study conducted by the Gallup Organization and reported in 1994. In this study Philadelphia ranked first among U.S. cities on what was called the "hostility index." The hostility index was based on a nine-question scale that asked people how they felt about such things as loud rock music, supermarket checkout lines, and traffic jams. Other cities on the hostility top five were New York, Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit. Perhaps you saw in the newspapers just a few months ago that New York City has a much higher death rate than average from coronary disease. At the bottom of the hostility index were Des Moines, Minneapolis, Denver, Seattle, and Honolulu.

Medical experts looking at the results felt it was no coincidence that the cities that rated high on the hostility index also had higher death rates. Commenting on the study, Dr. Redford Williams of Duke University Medical School said, "Anger kills. There is a strong correlation between hostility and death rates. The angrier people are and the more cynical they are, the shorter their life span." (3)

Dr. Robert R. Kopp puts it this way: grudge-holders are grave-diggers and the only graves that they dig are their own. Or as John Huffman once said, "The world's most miserable person is one who won't forgive. Nothing can gnarl the soul more quickly. It has been said so aptly, 'If I had an enemy whom I wanted to punish, I would teach him to hate someone.'" (4)

Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "I make it a practice to avoid hating anyone. If someone's been guilty of despicable actions, especially toward me, I try to forget him. I used to follow a practice—somewhat contrived, I admit—to write the man's name on a piece of scrap paper, drop it into the lowest drawer of my desk. That drawer became over the years a sort of private wastebasket for crumpled-up spite and discarded personalities. Besides, it seemed to be effective, and helped me avoid harboring useless black feelings."

Resentment and hatred are "useless, black feelings." Usually they do more harm to us than the person we resent. That's the first reason we forgive: it's good for our mind, body and spirit.

The second reason we forgive is that Christ told us to forgive. We are followers of Jesus. Sometimes it is difficult to tell Christians from everybody else in society, but this is where we should be different. We should be forgivers. ~~In a televised debate with the Rev. Jerry Falwell, the outstanding trial attorney and Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz once made the statement that as a Jew he does not have to turn the other cheek. And that is true—though some of the kindest, most loving people who have ever lived have been Jewish. But Christians are to be judged by a different standard. Where forgiving is possible—and where it will not be destructive—as in an abusive relationship, we are to forgive. This is part of our witness to Christ's presence in our lives.~~

The Associated Press carried a story last year about Steven McDonald, a New York

police detective, who has spent nearly a dozen years in a wheelchair, paralyzed by a teenager's bullets in Central Park. In July 1986, McDonald was a 29-year-old patrolman. Shavod Jones, a 15-year-old bicycle thief, put three bullets into McDonald's head and spine and left him for dead. McDonald lived, but feels nothing below his neck, breathes only with a machine and goes nowhere without a wheelchair and a nurse.

Because of his religious faith, McDonald publicly forgave Jones, hoping Jones would help him bring a message of forgiveness and anti-violence to schoolchildren. But Jones died in a motorcycle accident days after his release from prison in 1995, and the two never got the chance.

"In time he apologized for the terrible act of violence he did to me and my family," said McDonald. The reason McDonald's story was being replayed in the newspapers last year was that he was beginning a nine-day trip to Belfast, Ireland where he hoped his story could inspire a country devastated by revenge.

"God has his design and he wants me to be his legs," McDonald said after he wheeled his chair up a paved hill in Central Park where he returned to make his announcement. "It's worth it all if I can help one person . . . if I could change the heart and mind of one person."

Returning for the first time in years to the spot near a lake in Central Park where he was first shot, he led onlookers in the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. "Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon."

That's what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We forgive not only because it is to our benefit to forgive. We forgive because we have been ordered by our Lord to forgive. But there is one more reason why we forgive. **We forgive because we have been forgiven.**

Jesus followed his admonition to Peter with a somewhat hilarious story. He said the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One servant owed about a million dollars in today's money. Since this servant was not able to pay his debt, the master ordered that the servant and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

Confronted with the threat of such severe punishment the servant fell down, prostrated himself before his master and said, "Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything." The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

But then something amazing happened. The servant who had been forgiven this enormous debt went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred dollars or so and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, "Pay back what you owe."

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back." But the servant who had been forgiven a debt of one million dollars was unwilling to forgive the fellow servant who owed him a hundred dollars. He had him thrown into prison.

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Summoning this wicked servant, his

master said to him, "I forgave you all that debt. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" And his master, moved with anger, handed the wicked servant over to the jailors to torture him until he should repay all that was owed him. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you," said Jesus, "unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Jesus continually linked forgiveness for our fellow human beings with our forgiveness by God. Jesus purposely used wild exaggeration in this story to make a point: You and I have been forgiven by God for every sin, every indiscretion, for every stupid thing we have ever done. Can we not find it in our hearts to forgive others?

Ron Lee Davis, in his book, *A FORGIVING GOD IN AN UNFORGIVING WORLD*, tells about a moment when God's remarkable spirit of forgiveness became real to him. His best friend Jim had been hit and killed while out riding a motorcycle. The driver of the car, Mr. Smith, simply hadn't seen Jim in time and had plowed right into him.

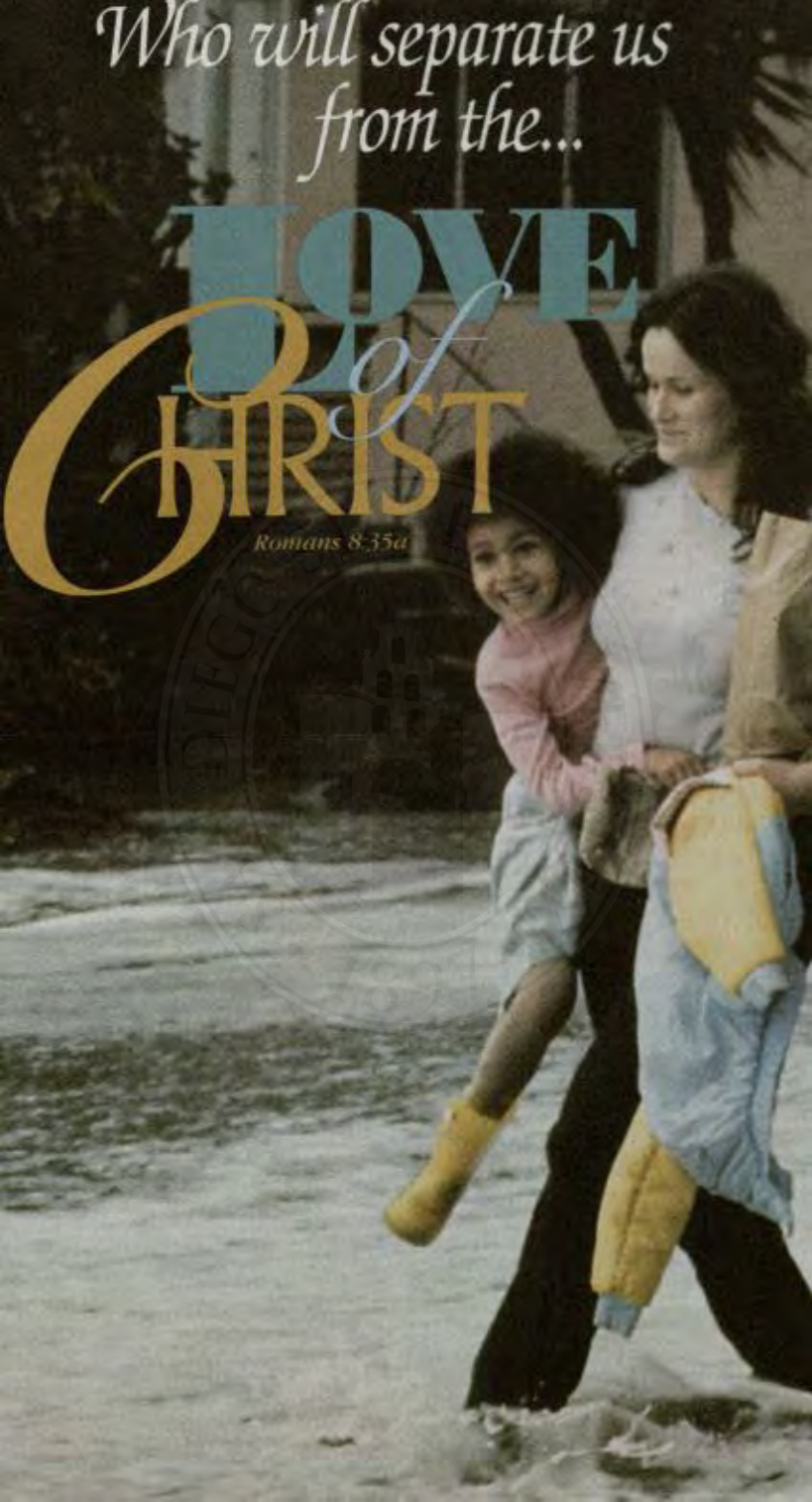
As Ron drove to visit Jim's parents, he struggled with anger against Mr. Smith. He was amazed to discover, however, that Jim's family felt only compassion for the man who had accidentally killed their son. In fact, the first question they asked when Ron walked through the door was, "Do you know how Mr. Smith is doing?" They had been praying for him all night. (5)

There are people like that in this world. They forgive those who have done them wrong. They are called Christians. Let's pray to God that we can be people like that. How many times shall we forgive? That depends. Ask yourself this question: Do you need to forgive for your own peace of mind? Usually the answer will be yes. Secondly, remind yourself of Christ's teaching and ask yourself if you need to forgive in order to witness to Christ's presence in your life. Finally, ask yourself if there have not been times when you have sinned against others or against God. Has God forgiven you? If the answer is a resounding yes, then don't you think it is time you forgive someone else?

Who will separate us
from the...

LOVE
of
CHRIST

Romans 8:35a



MORNING WORSHIP SERVICE

August 8, 1999

10:30 A.M.



PREPARATION OF OUR HEARTS FOR WORSHIP

"Let the people be in silent meditation and prayer upon entering the sanctuary."

WE PRAISE GOD

PRELUDE

Organist

CHORAL INTROIT

PRAYER OF PREPARATION

...

HYMN OF PRAISE "When ~~the~~ Morning Stars Together" #486

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CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Let us exalt our Lord and praise God.

People: For he is perfect in faithfulness and has done marvelous things.

Leader: The Lord Almighty will provide a feast of lasting food for all people.

People: Therefore, today let us say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him and he saved us."

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (In Unison)

Quiet the distressing noise within our hearts and minds, O God. Help us to be still and know you. Quiet the distressing sound of our fear, the sobbing of our grief, the murmuring of our suspicions, the complaints of our suffering, the shuffle of our tired souls. Then give us ears to hear the whispers of your peace and love. To every listening heart, speak the good news of Christ's victory over sin and death. Save us and help us, we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

DECLARATION OF PARDON

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

("The Apostle's Creed" The Presbyterian Hymnal)

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WE GIVE THANKS TO GOD

Mr. William Ellis

ANTHEM

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Leader: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them up to the Lord.

Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Leader: Let us pray.

PASTORAL PRAYER

CHORAL RESPONSE

Organist

CHILDREN'S SERMON

...

5
RITUAL OF FRIENDSHIP

Organist

GIVING OF TITHES AND OFFERINGS
OFFERTORY MUSIC "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" # 276

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DOXOLOGY "Praise God, From Whom All Blessings Flow" Congregation

OFFERTORY PRAYER

THREEFOLD AMEN

GOD SPEAKS TO US

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 18:21-35

MUSICAL SELECTION

Mrs. Shirley Logan

SERMON

Rev. George W. Smith

"How Many Times"

INVITATIONAL HYMN "Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart" # 326

CHORAL BENEDICTION

Organist

§Congregation standing

¶Congregation sitting

...Worshiper will be seated

TO OUR GUESTS: You are welcome to our worship service and all activities of the church. Please help us to know you by filling out a visitor's card from one of the Ushers. You are invited to meet with others in the Fellowship Hall for refreshments following the Worship Service. Please come again and invite your friends and neighbors to come with you.

USHERS FOR TODAY are Gene Moore, Thomas Stille, Willie Thigpen, Calvin Yeldell

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO RECEIVE CHRIST AS YOUR SAVIOR, we invite you to come to the front of the sanctuary during the Invitational Hymn. Elders William Ponder and Noble Shade will be at the front of the sanctuary to greet you.

PREPARING FOOD FOR THE HOMELESS TODAY will be **The Men's Association**

HOSTING THE FELLOWSHIP HOUR TODAY will be **The August Birthday Club.**



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