

Matthew 18:21-35 16th Sunday after Pentecost September 15, 1996

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²²Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

"And in anger his Lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How many times I have wanted to make a club of these words and beat someone over the head with it. If you don't forgive your sister or brother from your heart God will torture you until you have paid the entire debt. If you are going to call yourself a Christian you must forgive. If you are going to pray the Lord's Prayer, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us then you can never hold a grudge.

Forgive. From your heart.

You must.

Or else.

But every time I have taken Jesus' words and beat someone up with them, suddenly their face is transformed into Jesus' face. My club is wounding my Lord.

I can't use Jesus words on you - only on my own hardened heart.

When I do not forgive I am thrown into a prison and tortured.

And I am.

The bars of the prison are my anger; the lock on the door is my pride. I construct those bars and that door for the one who has hurt me. But as soon as the door is locked tight I discover that in my unforgiving heart I am the one imprisoned by my anger, not my enemy. I am the one whose freedom has been lost. I am the one in pain.

But when I forgive from my heart the door is thrown open, I am free. Or at least I would be if I could.

I know what it is like day and night, especially in the middle of the night to be imprisoned in anger. I tell him off in my mind, again and again. I condemn and belittle and destroy my enemy. I get even in a thousand ways, and the bars grow thicker.

Sometimes I carry the imagining getting even into life. I speak mean words, words intended to hurt. I turn my other cheek, but not in the way Jesus meant, I turn my cheek to ignore, to snub, to send a message that I am angry. During my college days a number of times I hit people in anger.

But Jesus says forgive seventy seven times. Forgive.

Have you ever been forgiven?

Have you ever done something for which there was no excuse? No extenuating circumstances, no blaming on someone or something. Have you ever done something for which the sorrow is a stream flowing from your very heart?

Have you ever been forgiven? No holding back, no conditions, no wait and see if you really were sorry? Forgiven and then there is laughter once more, a light and lively spirit. Forgiven and there is no more to pay or prove or earn. Forgiven?

Jesus forgives you. You do not have to dress in black anymore, or be solemn. You can walk right out of that prison and live under blue skies and sunshine.

Jesus gives you the power to forgive like that. To open the prison door and let someone else out, or is it you who is really being freed from your anger? Jesus is making us into his body where there will be no more prisons, no more bars of anger holding ourselves and our neighbor.

All of this only cost Jesus his life. To free you Jesus suffered and died.

To free your neighbor you will suffer and die, also. Forgiving is a suffering, a dying but out of that death of pride, that death of demanding my rights comes new life.

In opening your neighbor's prison you are freed.

Forgive. That is Jesus' word to you. Forgive as you have been forgiven. This word of Jesus is life for you. And for your neighbor. Life for us all. Amen.