

## Forgiven...Forgiving

Peter asked, "How often shall I forgive my brother?" Jesus replied with an immeasurable value of 490 times. Jesus also taught his disciples that if a brother "sins against you seven times in a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him."

These are hard teachings. No one could really conceive of having to forgive someone 490 times or seven times *in one day*. In short, Jesus taught that forgiveness has no boundaries.

Humans are prone to make forgiveness rules. Perhaps it is because we really do understand the demand of forgiveness. The one who forgives takes the blame, shoulders the guilt, or bears the pain. The one forgiven is released from his debt. Forgiveness is unfair.

Jesus was not talking about God's forgiveness, but rather, forgiveness at the person-to-person level. Jesus taught that forgiveness makes no restrictions; no limit to the number of times that you are expected to forgive your brother. If he says, "I repent," accept him at his word and forgive him.

### Yes, but...

Some folks have difficulty letting the words of Jesus stand on their own and feel that they must explain *what he really meant*. They explain the relevance of certain limitation. Some have tried to define every possible 'sin situation' in order to write rules for repentance. They then use their rules to justify the withholding of forgiveness. In the end they have created a system to judge and certify the authenticity of a person's repentance. They have validated their own unforgiving spirit.

It is true that Jesus acknowledged that we will know a person by their *fruit*. However, that is not some sort of forgiveness loophole in which forgiveness is withheld until the fruit is obvious or acceptable to me. Jesus taught that we are to accept a person at their word. It might be the

words, "I repent," or "Would you forgive me," or "I didn't mean to hurt you," or simply, "I'm sorry."

Anyone who assumes the task of assessing repentance in another individual has presumptuously taken over God's seat of judgment.

Repentance is a change of heart. We must have patience with fellow Christians they mature. A penitent heart is filled with sorrow and *desires* to walk in the path of righteousness. However, old habits often linger; the *renewing of the mind* takes time. We would do well to reflect on our own past, perhaps not that long ago, when we stumbled over a sin again and again. Did God forgive you each time you asked?

### What if I am wrong?

What if I am unsure about someone's repentance? I do not want to forgive where I should not. Neither do I want to withhold forgiveness where I should forgive.

Two facts are evident: I am not God; and Jesus did not give us magical insight into the hearts of other people to know their intentions.

In reality we probably will make a mistake where forgiveness is concerned. We never want to encourage sin. Yet, Jesus taught that we will not be forgiven unless we forgive our brother from the heart. When faced with a dilemma, being unsure about someone's repentance, wouldn't you rather *err on the side of forgiveness*?

I am confident that God will judge righteously and I also believe the warning that Jesus gave his disciples: "If you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."

May each of us resolve in our heart to have a forgiving spirit toward our fellow Christians.

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