

Seventy times seven!

Peter started the whole thing when he asked Jesus how many times he would have to forgive his brother for sinning against him. Peter was hoping to get a clear response—a nice, easy rule. A number. Peter was hoping to hear a limit.

“Seven times?” Peter asked hopefully.

Jesus’ answered, “Seventy times seven!”

Peter almost gasped. This meant there was practically no limit. Peter shrugged and threw his hands up in a gesture of hopelessness. He could never forgive that many times!

Jesus began to tell them a story about a king who discovered his servant had stolen a huge sum of money. When the servant asked for mercy the king forgave the servant and the debt.

The disciples were surprised at the king’s generosity. Jesus continued with what was going to be one of the sternest lessons Peter and the disciples would ever receive. When that forgiven servant in the story failed to forgive someone who owed him money the king learned of it. Angered that the servant had not shown the same mercy he had been given, the king handed him over to the torturers and made him repay his huge debt.

The Disciples had no trouble reading the moral of the story. God forgives those who forgive others.

Matthew pressed his fingers against his forehead to ease the headache that Jesus was giving him. His years as a public tax collector had taught him to collect debts, not forgive them.

“This king in the story,” Matthew argued, “is unlike any kings of this world. The servant was guilty of stealing. He should have been punished. I can’t believe that any king would feel sorry for him and forgive the debt.”

Jesus smiled back at Matthew and looked peacefully at his other wondering disciples. Thomas, seeing a deeper meaning to the story, reminded Matthew of a point: “Jesus said that the kingdom of God was like that. Perhaps the king is like God himself.” Thomas glanced at Jesus for approval.

John added his insight: “We are like the servant of the king. If we don’t forgive debts that are owed to us, we



can’t expect God to forgive us our debts.”

Peter saw the darker side of the parable, recalling: “Yes, but don’t forget, when the servant failed to forgive his debtors the king no longer forgave the servant. He went to prison to be punished until he paid his huge debt back.”

Silence settled over the group. Bartholomew pulled some bread from his sack and tore off a small piece. He started to eat it, then briefly offered some to Philip who was sitting next to him. Philip waved the bread away. Bartholomew stuffed it into his mouth and thoughtfully began to chew. Jesus seemed pleased that the message was being learned.

When no one spoke for a long time, Jesus issued a final warning. His face hardened as he spoke.

“My heavenly Father will treat you in exactly the same way unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart.”



The Gospel parable invites us to search for the people in our lives who we have not forgiven. Most of us have been deeply hurt in the past. Some of us have been able to forgive. Others may still be carrying bitterness. We cannot track the clean floors of heaven with the muddy boots of our resentments. We must first clean away all anger by forgiving everyone who has offended us. It is a stern lesson indeed. It’s a lesson we need to remember each time we pray the Lord’s Prayer: “...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”