

**Sermon for September 14, 2014**  
**Matthew 18:21**

Forgiveness—we hear that word a lot but just what does it mean. What it doesn't mean are those forced "I'm sorrys" that our parents would have us make to our siblings or to our friends. You know the ones I mean. My one sister and I would fight like cats and dogs when we were younger. One day we were seeing who could fight better with our feet. I was at one end of the couch and she was at the other with our feet meeting in the middle. All was going well until I missed hitting her foot and kicked her in the mouth instead and kicked out one of her teeth! It wasn't as bad as it sounds because the tooth was already quite loose, but you wouldn't have known it by the fit my sister was having!

So my mom comes in to see what's going on; hears the story and tells me to apologize to my sister. I do but my "I'm sorry" came through clenched teeth and that's when I felt it—my mom's grip tightening on my arm with her telling me to say it like I mean it! My "I'm sorry" sounded a whole lot more convincing the next time. True forgiveness isn't flippant and it isn't easy. Maybe that's why Jesus says we should forgive seventy-seven times or as some Bibles interpret it as seventy times seven times. He knows we need the practice.

Forgiving also isn't about keeping count. We like to keep track of what is owed to us. We're not alone in this—notice how Peter asks Jesus for a number. We want to know how much is expected of us; how much is required to fulfill the law; how much is reasonable. And Peter gives what he thinks is a reasonable number of times-seven. You see the Pharisees only required you to forgive someone four

times and then you could stop. So Peter thinks he's going above and beyond when he mentions seven times.

But Jesus turns Peter's answer on its head and tells him this huge number because Jesus doesn't want us to count. Forgiveness like love is relational, not legal and therefore can't be counted. If Peter had asked Jesus how many times he should love his neighbor we would have seen his mistake, but Peter asks about forgiveness and we miss it.

We tend to treat forgiveness as a response to the law, but it's more than that. Yes, laws are important because they hold us accountable to the values and morals we've agreed upon and that makes room for our relationships to grow. But the law can't make us friends with people or make us love them. Forgiveness is not about regulating behavior but is about nurturing our relationships.

And forgiving is not about forgetting. I dislike the phrase, "forgive and forget." Never mind the fact that it's impossible to do, but sometimes it's the wrong thing to do. Take abusive relationships for example. We can love someone who is abusive; we can even forgive them, but forgetting is the worst thing we can do for that person. Sometimes the most loving and forgiving thing to do for a relationship is to not put up with the abusive behavior.

What forgiveness is able to do is to free us. Forgiveness frees us from the past and opens up a whole new future for us. When we forgive we are saying that we accept that we cannot change the past; that the past can't hold us captive any longer and by doing that we open up a whole new future for us. When we can't forgive we remain captive to that past until the end of time.

Forgiveness isn't about letting others treat us badly and it isn't about telling people they have to forgive. Forgiveness like love doesn't happen on command and it can't be forced. But we can pray for it. We can pray for the ability to forgive those who have hurt us; even if the best thing for us is to distance ourselves from them. And we can pray to forgive ourselves for our own past mistakes, regrets and hurts that we have caused.

We can also pray that God keeps bringing us here to this community of faith where we can hear week after week God's promises to forgive us and to form us into a community of love and forgiveness; a community where we see the cross of Jesus as God's promise to forgive all of us and to see in Jesus' resurrection the possibility of an open future.

As we end today's sermon think of someone you're having a hard time forgiving and let us take a few moments to offer a prayer to God asking for God's help in restoring our broken relationship.