

My brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, our sermon text for this week continues from the Gospel of Luke; it is the section that follows Jesus’ account of the rich man and poor Lazarus which we had the opportunity to study last week.

Luke 17:3-6 (NIV): “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. 4 Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent, ’you must forgive them.”

This command of Jesus is met with a unique expression: “Lord, increase our faith!” Now when you are with the Son of God himself, you have to be a little careful about how you respond to what he says. And you have to even be a little creative if he tells you something that seems unreasonable. What is it that the disciples are really saying? Lord, this is impossible! Lord, we can’t do this. Jesus, you haven’t given us enough faith to do this! You’re asking too much.

And why would this command illicit this pretty brazen response? Well, I think that we all know it. We know it cognitively in our heads, but we also know it much more deeply in our hearts. There are 8 billion people on this earth, and it is bound to happen that someone is going to hurt you. Someone is going to sin against you. It doesn’t matter how kind you are; it doesn’t matter how patient and compassionate, and considerate you may be, someone will sin against you. Every person on this earth has a sinful nature, and it will cause you to be sinned against. Jesus even says this when he says: **“Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come”**

The more literal translation is that it is impossible for them NOT to come. It’s inevitable; it will happen. Somebody somewhere is going to sin against you. Someone will be mad and call you a nasty name. Someone will criticize the work that you have done to the best of your ability. Someone will cause you physical pain by carelessness or oversight. There will come times when somebody will hurt you by sin.

But perhaps that’s not the most challenging part about this. The most difficult aspect of forgiveness comes not from an occasional unfortunate accident, a one-time sin that causes emotional distress for a time, or even the angry outburst that brings some deep heartache. No, I think the most challenging part about this command of Christ comes in verse number 4: **“Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent, ’you must forgive them.”** When someone sins against you over and over again, and they repent of it, you are to forgive them over and over again.

And I think that the people who are most likely to do this are the ones who are closest to us. Our coworkers, our neighbors, our relatives, our family, and our spouses. These are the people we come into contact with much more regularly, and by our sinful natures and the assaults of Satan, and the pressures of the wicked world, we have much more opportunity to sin against us.

And if you are like me, I don't even make it to seven. By about the 3rd or perhaps even the second time in a day that someone does something that irks or hurts us, we don't want to forgive. Why would I forgive you now? If you already knew, you already did something to me today. Were you really even sorry? You know what? I don't have to forgive you, and I know I don't want to. I want to hold on to this anger and this vengeance. I mean, I'm the one who was wronged here, not once, but multiple times. I deserve to hold out just a little bit; maybe then they'll learn their lesson.

It's extremely difficult. When sinned against over and over again, by those who claim that they care about us and love us, and being hurt over and over time and time again. And when Jesus tells us to forgive and forgive again, we have to cry out along with those disciples: “Lord, increase our faith!”

Because over time, this bitterness and resentment take root. It becomes a blockage in our spiritual life and disrupts our relationship with others, but more importantly, it disrupts our relationship with God. It affects our relationship with worship and with prayer. Hebrews 12:15 Adds to the truth with these words. **“See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”**

How does Jesus respond? When the disciples see the task that has been laid out by the Savior to be impossible when we are hurt and bleeding for the thousandth time when we are metaphorically beaten and bruised, how do we get enough strength? How do we get enough faith to utter those words: “I forgive you”?

You've already got it. Jesus says that you've already got the faith to do this. You've already got a far more powerful faith than you could imagine. Luke 17:6 **He replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea, ’and it will obey you.”**

Why can even such a small amount of faith do such great things? Well, you see, because your ability to forgive is not founded on your patience, your kindness, your ruggedness to endure hardship, your knowledge, or your attitude of unbounded optimism. No, your ability to forgive comes from your faith, which is attached to the very Son of God.

It is a faith that was given to you, created in you, by God himself. It is a faith that grasps the grace of God. A powerful grace, a relentless grace. A grace that is given to us by God, who, even though we have sinned against far more than seven times in a day, every single day, he says, I forgive you. For the sake of my son, who was sinned against even though he was perfect, his blood purifies you from all sin.

That is why your faith is so powerful; that is why we can forgive. It is because our faith is connected to the very grace of God. It has the perfect forgiveness as its foundation. It has the ever-loving God as its object. It is a faith that trusts in our Savior, Jesus. It's a faith that can move mountains, a faith that can uproot trees; it's a faith that... forgives.

That doesn't mean that the disciples' utterance is an unworthy prayer. While we have faith that it is created in us, sustains us, and gives us the power to do things that are impossibly difficult without it, We can always pray for God to Increase our faith. We can pray for God to increase our faith when we have been hurt again and are struggling with forgiveness. We can pray to God to increase our faith when we can't possibly see how my forgiveness will help the other person and me spiritually. And through God's Holy Word and his Sacraments, he answers those prayers.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, perhaps you are holding some resentment at this moment against someone who has sinned against you for the seventh time today. If not, Jesus promises that someone will sin against you soon. It's impossible for it not to happen. And whenever it does, because of the faith you have, you are able to say: "I forgive you because my Savior forgave me." Amen.