

I WISH THE PREACHER WOULD TALK ABOUT? *Do I Have to Forgive?*

Matthew 18:21-35

August 30, 2026

A summer evening in the neighborhood. There's a basketball game in the driveway. And it runs hot. It always runs hot.

Here's what happens. Somebody scores. Somebody shoves. Somebody screams. Somebody goes home angry. Have you ever had to extract an apology from the fuming frame of a nine-year-old? Two words. That's all we need here. But his arms are locked, and his jaw is set. He is calculating the cost per syllable.

That kid is me. Maybe you too. He's not mean, but he is clear-eyed. He knows what an apology will mean. It means admitting you were wrong. And admitting that feels like losing all over again.

But I do have to wonder if that kid actually has the easier job. I think everything hard about saying *I'm sorry* is harder when you're the one asked to hear it. Forgiveness asks you to surrender a claim you are entitled to enforce.

Since I put the question in the bulletin, let me answer it now. Do I have to forgive? Well, yes. But I blame Jesus.

Peter assumes this. Peter has spent enough time with Jesus by now that he already knows the answer to the question I put in the bulletin. Of course Jesus would say, "Yes, you have to forgive." So Peter anticipates that answer and instead asks a slightly different question.

Lord, how many times should I forgive? And along with his question, Peter offers a suggestion. *How about seven?* It's a good number, a Biblical number. It shows he's read the text. Seven. More than that, Peter thinks he is being generous. The standard in his world was three. He has doubled it and added one. *How about seven?*

Jesus says, "Well, it's a start. Not seven, but seventy-seven." Or perhaps seventy times seven. The Greek here can be translated either way, which I think is kind of the point. Jesus is not suggesting a larger allowance. Seventy-seven means you lose count. The practice is the point.

But that number isn't random either. Way back in the fourth chapter of Genesis, Cain's great-great-great grandson takes God's protection of his ancestor as permission for vengeance. After killing a man who wounded him, Lamech boasts to his wives, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold." You know the impulse. *You hit me; I bury you.* It's the arithmetic of people and of nations. And Jesus flips the tables. He dismantles the math.

You have to keep an eye on Jesus. Peter asks for a number. Jesus tells a story.

A king is settling his accounts. A servant is brought to him, and this servant owes ten thousand talents. In 2026 dollars, the man owes twelve billion dollars. This is not a debt. It is a life sentence. And so, the servant, with no other options on the table, falls on his knees before the king, and he says, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything." Which is a lie. The man could live ten thousand lifetimes and never pay this debt.

The king knows this. The king does not give him more time. He cancels the debt. Just releases him from it. Just frees him. The servant is given his life back, and then he walks out of the palace doors and forgets it instantly.

He finds a man who owes him a few months' wages and takes him by the throat. The man says the same words. *Be patient with me.* In Matthew's Gospel, the plea is identical. Word for word. *Be patient with me, and I will pay you.*

And the servant, having spoken it, will not hear it. *Throw that man in prison.*

You can call it hypocrisy, but I think it's sadder than that. The king ripped up his debt, and he simply had no category for that grace. Choking people for small change was the only world that made sense. The way of Lamech.

A friend pointed out to me years ago how right it is that we speak of *nursing* a grudge. We treat our slights and our resentments and the harms done to us with more

care than our joys. We wrap them in cloth and protect them for years. I'll show you what I mean.

When I was fifteen years old, I saved eight hundred dollars at six dollars per basketball game running the scoreboard at the Pleasant Garden gym. And with my eight hundred dollars, I bought most of a 1990 Ford Probe. My parents owned the other two hundred dollars worth. That was my debt to pay. It was 1998. I have never been prouder of anything in my entire life. My Ford Probe was red, and it had those pop-up headlights. Well, one of them popped up. The other needed a little help, but I got well-practiced at walking around to the passenger side and sort of helping that one headlight up before I got in to drive the car. I waxed that car for weeks before I had a license to drive it.

Then one night, just after I'd gotten that license, my little brother and I were playing a game in the driveway. The game was this. It was an original—we thought of it all by ourselves. The game was: can Josh jump into the passenger seat while Chris backs down the driveway? You already know. The passenger door is wide open. The driver is not paying enough attention. And there's a solid cherry tree just off the pavement.

Before long, metal on metal, door bent back through the frame. Noise loud enough for Dad to hear inside. Dad shows up on the front porch.

Dad! He should have closed the door.

Chris, he's eight years old.

But, Dad! The game was his idea.

Chris, you are responsible for your car.

Dad, it isn't fair.

And I was right. I was right then, and I have been right for twenty-eight years. And nearly three decades later, I can still feel the heat rising in my chest just standing here telling you that story. That's a Ford Probe in 1998. Let me tell you that if I can hold on to that car door for twenty-eight years, what about the hurt that has come to define your life? What about the harm done that you can't quite release? What about the grudge nursed and wrapped and protected? Yes, not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.

But here's the thing about forgiveness. You can't do it just once. You forgive them on a Sunday morning. Tuesday night it is all back again. You are not failing. You are finding out what forgiveness is. It's a practice. It might be the practice that makes all the other practices possible.

Henri Nouwen said that forgiveness is the name of love

practiced among people who love poorly. Those people? Who love poorly? That's us.

But I want to tell you what else I have seen in my driveway. I want to tell you, because it undoes me every single time I see it. A kid gets wronged out there on the driveway basketball court. Shoved to the ground. Pushed aside. Called a name. Genuinely wronged. And no adult shows up. The two of them are just standing there in the middle of it. Noses running. Tears forming in eyes.

And one of them says the words. He forces it through his teeth, looking down at the pavement. *I'm sorry.*

And here's the miracle. The other kid does not make him wait. Does not demand penance or a written statement. No adult intervention is called for. He wipes his nose on his sleeve and mutters, "You're good. Let's go." (Now, you need to know that's nine-year-old-boy for *I forgive you.*)

It's a liturgy. It's a practice.

Thirty seconds later they are on the same team, and somebody is laughing, and the ball is back in the air, and whatever it was is simply not there anymore. It's gone. The ledger is dropped. The debt is forgiven. And I'll stand in the corner of the garage and watch and think: I have no idea how to do that. The kid doesn't need his injury to become the whole story. And so, the game goes on.

Years ago, in another congregation, we held a service of communion on a weeknight in October. Small crowd. We were in the chapel, and we were serving communion that night by intinction. And just before the service began, I realized that one of the elders who had agreed to serve was missing. He hadn't shown up.

So I found another elder who happened to have arrived early. She was sitting in the pew by herself, and I asked if she'd be willing to serve. She looked at me and surveyed the chapel. And then through clenched teeth she said, "I can't."

The prelude was already playing. I was desperate. I waited long enough. I looked at her. She looked at the floor and said, "Okay. I'll do it."

Moments later at communion, she stood holding the chalice next to the other elder, and tears ran down her face the entire time. When everyone had been served, the two of them turned toward each other. She took the bread from his hand and served him communion. He took the bread and the chalice from hers and served her. Then he set the cup on the table and set down the bread, and they stood there weeping.

I had no idea what I was watching.

After worship she stayed in the pew. I sat down next to her, and she told me. The two of them had been on opposite sides of a bitter fight in the church six years before. For six years they had not spoken. For six years, they chose opposite sides of the sanctuary in a silent negotiation. For six years, each of them checked every room before walking in.

For six years, they kept showing up. Six years in that sanctuary. Six years at the table. Six years in prayer. And on an ordinary Wednesday night in October, holding the bread and the cup, something that they had held onto tightly finally broke loose.

So. How many times? Seventy-seven. Which is Jesus's way of *saying put the poison down and stop counting*.

The Psalmist tells us what we should count instead. "Teach us," he prays, "to number our days. Teach us to count our days so that we may gain a wise heart." Number your days. Count your days. Why? Because you'll get seventy years, he writes. Or maybe you'll get eighty. But then, after that, gone like a sigh. Gone like grass that grows in the morning and by evening is cut away, swept aside. Gone like a sigh. Count your days.

I turn forty-four this Tuesday. Last year our son Samuel told me not to feel bad, because I was only halfway done. I said, "Son, you think I'll make eighty-six?"

He looked at me. "Yeah, Dad. I think you'll make it. You seem like you'll make it."

Number your days. Because here's the thing. That grudge you are nursing assumes there will always be more time. You can be angry now and gracious later. There's still time. There's still time to hold the debt through one more Thanksgiving, one more year, one more decade. You'll get around to it eventually. There's still time. But here's the thing. It doesn't take very long to live a life. Like grass swept away at the end of the day.

Resentment will poison those days. It spends them down. It takes this precious gift of grace we have been given—these precious, numbered, unrepeatable, finite days—and it burns them.

Do I have to forgive? That's the question I put in the bulletin, but it is the wrong question. The question is not what you owe the person who wronged you. The question is who you want to become.

Jesus is not giving you a checklist. He's trying to make

you into someone. Slowly. By practice. And repetition. Forgiveness is not absolution, but it is release. It is surrendering vengeance to the God who can handle it far better than you.

You have to start somewhere. So say their name to God. Do it now. You know the person I'm speaking of. It was last week. Or last year. Or when you were a kid. You don't have to feel anything, or bless what happened, or want them back in your life. Just say the name and go on with your day.

Then do it again tomorrow.

In a few moments we will pray the words Jesus taught us. *Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*. Maybe you've prayed those words for years. This morning, listen to your own voice.

Seventy-seven times. Until the counting is no longer the point. Amen.