

**Sunday, September 17, 2017 – 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**“Forgiveness”**

Matthew 18: 21-35

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Definition Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

It is football season for better or worse – to the joy or sorrow of many. There is something about the intensity of the game that can get in your blood and have you screaming from the sidelines or even from your living room. EA Sports is a video game company that tries to capture that intensity in their annual Madden releases. Their commercials show all kinds of moves and grooves and trash talking of the top players and then, until the last couple of years would conclude with – “If it’s in the game – it’s in the game” suggesting that the video version is as close as you can get to the real thing.

That’s what you’d have to say about being a Christian, when it comes to forgiveness – it’s in the game. That’s what it’s all about. If you don’t get forgiveness – then you’ve missed the whole point.

Last week Jesus was telling the disciples that if they see a fellow disciple, a fellow believer messing up they need to go to him out of genuine love and concern to help him see the error of his ways. We’re supposed to hold one another accountable, to truly care enough about one another that we’d risk the discomfort of confronting someone about their words or actions. And it’s not to a one shot deal, if the first attempt wasn’t successful then try a second and a third. I don’t know about you, but that was a hard lesson for me last week.

Now you’ve got to hand it to Peter again today. His mind was working. His brain was doing some figuring. You can almost hear the wheels turning in his head. “Ok, Lord, we’re supposed to help one another be faithful, to encourage confession when we’ve done wrong and then forgive one another. But surely, there is a point (and this is the question from today’s text) at which we can say ‘enough is enough.’”

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” And I am sure Peter thought he was being generous. We’d be more comfortable with a “hurt me once - shame on you - hurt me twice shame on me” approach. So Jesus words come as a shock to us too. “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times,” which does not

mean keep track so that on number 78 you can let 'em have it. No, I sorry to have to tell you that forgiving 77 times means forgiveness without limits.

In Luke's gospel, when Jesus taught the disciples this difficult lesson about ongoing, unending forgiveness the disciples responded, "Lord, increase our faith!" (with a big fat exclamation point).

And that's what it's going to take for us too - greater faith. We are just not capable of this by our own will and determination. No, what we are good at is keeping a record of wrongs stored up in our heads and hearts so we can cut loose on one another when we feel we've reached our limit.

Before I go on, though, I need to make a little side note – by unlimited forgiveness I am not talking about letting yourself be abused. Forgiveness does not mean passively letting someone take advantage of you. This is not about letting someone who has learned the fine art of manipulating and lying to repeatedly do the same thing over and over again. Common sense and the Bible both clearly teach what has come to be called "tough love." Requiring someone to seek help for an abusive behavior is not being unforgiving.

Now be careful, because as soon as I give you a little wiggle room you will try to squeeze into it to justify why you are still carrying a grudge against somebody. Even tough love requires forgiveness. The problem is that people have equated forgiveness with excusing someone's behavior. No, when you boil it all down forgiveness is not letting people get away with anything they want, forgiveness is letting go of the need to get even. Forgiveness is saying, "I choose not to collect on the emotional debt you have incurred against me by what you've said or done."

And that, my friends, is hard. You know how I know when I not there? When I find myself lying awake at night, or even dreaming while I am asleep of ways to make you pay. When I find myself becoming more and more aware of all the little things you do that irritate me. When I find myself reading into just about everything you say and do more reason to be angry with you. When I find myself trying to rally support from others – gossiping about you (but I'll say it's ok because I'm just "venting" – building my case by repeating it over and over again. That's what I'm good at – and you know the funny thing is nobody had to teach me how to be that way.

It's one of those things that happened in the Fall into sin way back in the Garden of Eden. Satan convinced Adam and Eve that if they disobeyed God, if they took control over their own lives and situation then they could become like God themselves. They fell for it, they listened and sure enough every single person since then has found himself being judge, jury and executioner toward one another. When everybody is trying to be God for themselves there is no room for God to be God. Forgiveness requires perfect trust that God is much better at His job than we are.

No wonder the disciples cried out, "Increase our faith." Corrie Ten Boom is a Christian who survived the Nazi concentration camp at Ravensbruck. She and her sister Betsie were sent because their family had been helping people hide and escape from the Nazis. Her sister died there. Now it was 1947. She had returned to Germany and was speaking publicly about the need for healing through forgiveness.

You have to hear her describe what happened, *"The solemn faces in the crowd stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. It came back with a rush – the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. The man who was making his way forward had been a guard - one of the most cruel guards.*

*He did not recognize her. How could he? She was only one of countless prisoners. But there he stood hand outstretched confessing that he had been at Ravensbruck and done many horrible things – asking her to forgive him. She could not even raise her hand from her side. It was too horrible. "I stood" there she said, "with coldness clutching my heart."*

Now listen to this they are her words: *"But forgiveness is not an emotion - forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. Jesus, help me! I prayed silently. I can lift my hand. I can do that much. And so woodenly and mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.*

*"I forgive you, I cried. I had never known God's love so intensely, as I did that moment."*

Now here's the kicker, be sure you hear this part of the story: *"It was then I realized that it was not my love for God but His love for me. I had tried to forgive and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit."*

Here is the lesson for today. Forgiveness is not an option for the believer. It is a requirement. But God never requires anything of us that He does not provide the power to do! Forgive as you have been forgiven, but there is only one way that can happen. At the cross of Jesus, crucified, dead and buried the power of forgiveness is unleashed in your life. Faith to believe in His life death and resurrection is given to you as a gift again today - through these words, through this fellowship, through the meal that awaits you at the altar. Faith is working in you the power to act even when your heart is cold and your hands are tied to your sides.

Forgiveness is hard work! But you don't have to do it alone - you can't do it alone. Although it can come all at once - in a mighty rush like Corrie Ten Boom described – my experience has been much more gradual. Remembering that God has forgiven me a debt beyond measure I am motivated and inspired to forgive. I pray, Jesus help me, I can't do this. Woodenly and mechanically I try to put the hurt and anger away. Then, fifteen seconds later the devil whispers, "You are a fool, they're only going to do it to you again, strike back, get even, make them pay."

I hear the words, "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And the motivation and desire to forgive as I have been forgiven flickers back to life so that once again woodenly and mechanically I go through the conscious motions of putting the hurt and anger away. And this time I make it thirty seconds before it springs back into my mind.

And so it goes for me. Forgiven and struggling to forgive. How goes it with you? In Jesus' name, Amen.