

Dear Friends,

Matthew 18: 21-22

We left Moses and his people celebrating their freedom. They have crossed the sea. They will never again see the chariots and soldiers that frightened them. Pharaoh and all that he represents is now in the past. We will be back next week to find out what their new life is like and how they adapt to it. For this week we are going to spend some time with Jesus and his close friend, Peter.

Peter has been learning from Jesus. He is responding well to the experience. One of the things he has learnt is to be forgiving. What he's unsure about is how many times he needs to forgive the same person.

What Peter reveals is what today we might call his mindset. His mindset requires life to be reduced to a tidy set of rules. Each rule needs to have its fine print set down in detail. Every eventuality must be covered. The headline rule, in this case, is "You must forgive". In the fine print he wants to be able to see exactly how many times he must forgive. With everything itemised in this way he will be able to make sure that he lives a good life which is acceptable to God. Peter was not alone. This mindset was common. Maybe you would quite like to have a list of all the rules so that you know exactly what to do in every situation.

In Peter's day many taught that you should forgive once, twice, three times, but you were not required to forgive a fourth time. Peter knew this, but he wondered what Jesus would say. Jesus, he thought, would likely go further than others, so how about doubling it. Instead of forgiving three times then he would be forgiving six times. That felt pretty good, but still maybe not quite enough. So, he added one more, that made seven. Seven was also the number of fulness. It felt like a good choice.

With this in mind he went to Jesus, got his attention and said, "How often should I forgive, as many as seven times?" Was he expecting to be praised? Did he want Jesus to be pleased with him, for Jesus to see that he was on the right lines, that he was learning well from the teaching Jesus was giving. If he did want that, he was disappointed. Jesus points out that Peter is not going nearly far enough. Jesus says not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times", or it could be translated "seventy times seven times".

Jesus is saying "Change your mindset. Life cannot be reduced to rules and their fine print. Life is not about coldly following a set of detailed instructions that can be applied in each and every situation. What you need actually is less of a mindset and more of a heartset. When your heart is set on God, when your heart is bathed in your relationship with God, when you love God with all of your heart, then living God's way will come freely and naturally".

God is not counting our offences. God does not keep a record of our wrongs and how many times we need forgiveness. There are no limits to God's forgiveness.

You frequently need to say "Forgive us our trespasses", you frequently hear the words of grace "Your sins are forgiven". Know that deep in your heart and let that understanding feed into your attitudes and the way you live out your relationships.

Jesus goes on to tell a cautionary tale about someone who receives, but does not allow what he receives to feed into how he lives. By contrast we are called to receive grace from God. This grace is not just for decoration, but for putting to use in our lives and relationships.

God bless you,

Tony