

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the message today is not about how you can have peace with God. It is not about how you can be sure you will be in heaven when your earthly life ends. The message today is about your “walk” as you seek to imitate Jesus. (Ephesians 5:1)

Robert Hoyer, in his book “Seventy Times Seven,” writes: “The primary act of faith is forgiving. It is the characteristic act of God, the Father of Jesus Christ. If we follow him in faith, it is the first thing we do. It is the one thing we do in faith which we would not do if we had no faith. Forgiving is what we do if we want to put meaning and purpose back into our lives.”

It is not easy. I do not pretend to do it well. Nor does anyone else I know! I have experienced the forgiveness of Jesus. I have heard his words. When I forgive, my heart and emotions will experience peace. I will be able to sleep at night. If I don't forgive...then anger and bitterness will fill my soul. Happiness will elude me.... The same is true for you.

Cain did not forgive his brother. God warned him, saying, “...if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door, it desires to have you, but you must master it.” (Gen. 4:6,7)

Cain invited his brother out into the field...and there “rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.” God spoke again and asked Cain where his brother was. Cain, who could not forgive ... Justified himself and said, “Am I my brother's keeper?” God banished Cain from his crops and his family, and he became a wandering nomad.

In his sermon on the Mount, Jesus noted the difference between the world of men in which we live and the world created by those who choose to live in the “kingdom of heaven”. The usual rule is: “love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But Jesus creates the opposite world. His rule: Love your enemies and

Forgiveness: An Act of Grace Matthew 18:21-35 Si Iniquitates Observaveris 2025  
pray for those who persecute you.” Jesus also taught: “If your brother sins against you seven times in a day, and turns to you seven times and says, 'I repent, you must forgive.” Which of course causes Peter to ask, “How many times must I forgive? Seven times...will that be enough?” Jesus said, “No, 70 times 7.”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn notes that we were created differently from animals by God. It is not our capacity to think that makes us different, but our capacity to repent and to forgive. Only human beings can perform that most unnatural act of forgiveness. We forgive because God first forgave us.

One day, Jesus was sitting in the temple courtyard talking to a crowd of people. Some Pharisees brought to him a woman who, they said, had been caught in the act of adultery. They pointed out that their law, from Moses, commanded them to stone such a woman. They asked Jesus what he thought should be done with her.

The story is simple enough. It is well known. The crowd listening to Jesus was the jury. He had been talking about forgiveness. But you can't forgive an adulteress just like that. Adultery was a grave sin.... It takes two people. They wanted an answer. Jesus did not answer immediately. He sat there writing with his finger on the ground until they asked him again. When everyone was listening for a response.... Jesus stood up and faced the accusers. He said: “Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone.” Then he sat down....and went on writing on the ground. He did not look at the woman or her accusers.

That took courage. He had technically agreed with the law of Moses that the woman should be stoned to death. He instructed her accusers to get it done. He was confident nothing would happen.

Note: Jesus did not try to excuse the woman or find a loophole in the law to free her. He did not ignore the law. In fact, he said the law should apply to everyone there. He speaks to the woman and says, “Go and sin no more.”

Forgiveness is a word in the world of “grace”. We do not, technically, forgive sins. We forgive people. Only God forgives sins. It happened on the cross when Jesus was crucified. He willingly gave up His perfect life because our Creator was keeping His promise to Adam and Eve, and to all who have broken His commandments. God provided a Substitute. Jesus, our Substitute, offered His perfect, blameless life in our place. When Jesus said that He, the Good Shepherd, would lay down His life for His sheep, it meant that he would take the punishment we deserved. It means that He carried our broken commandments to the cross and left them there. This was God’s eternal plan. Through faith in Jesus—His death and resurrection—God grants peace, forgetting and erasing our broken commandments to all who believe. This is the “Good News” of Christianity. (Colossians 2:14)

Forgiveness is an act of our will, not our feelings. In time, God will heal our emotional hurt. The Lord’s Prayer does not say “forgive others when you feel like it.” If someone repeatedly hurts you, you are obligated by God to forgive. Still, you are not obligated to keep going back into that relationship to be broken repeatedly. God’s forgiveness is unconditional....in other words we do not have to do something good first to receive His forgiveness, but once received God’s forgiveness, He wants us to change our behavior. To live a life influenced by the Holy Spirit. This is also God’s call to us.... To “keep in Step with the Holy Spirit” and begin to imitate Jesus after we have been forgiven.

Forgiveness is indeed an “unnatural act”. It is not easy. We do not do it well.

I do not pretend to do it well. Nor does anyone else I know! I have experienced the forgiveness of Jesus. I have heard his words.

Once we decide to forgive, what must the offender do if the relationship is to be restored? To restore a relationship, the offender must demonstrate genuine repentance and a change of lifestyle. They must make restitution whenever possible. Thusly, trust is rebuilt by proving trust over time.

Here are three steps of forgiveness. First, I relinquish my “right to get even”. Never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God, for he said that he will repay those who deserve it. (Romans 12:19) You don’t hurt the other person with your resentment... you’re only hurting yourself. If you don’t forgive, bitterness will eat up your soul, your life, your health. Second, we remember that we have three reasons to forgive others - God has “forgiven you.” Bitterness makes you “miserable”. You are going to need “more forgiveness” in the future. After all, don’t we pray: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Thirdly, we respond to evil “with good.” Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. (Luke 6:27-28) Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:21)

“Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me?” “Seven times?” No Seventy times seven. Forgiving is an act of faith. I forgive because I am a disciple of Jesus. As a follower of Jesus, I am expected to imitate Him.

The men and women who witnessed the death of Jesus, those who wrapped his breathless body with a linen shroud, and those who rolled the stone to close the entrance to the tomb, knew it was watched and sealed by Roman guards. Everyone knew that Jesus was dead and buried.

Before dawn on that first Easter morning, the earth shook. The guards fainted in fear. The Roman seal was broken. The stone was rolled away from the front of the grave in which Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had placed the corpse of Jesus. Understand, the stone was not moved to let the living Good Shepherd, Jesus, out... it was moved so you and I could look inside. Something we can only do through the lens of faith and of forgiveness. May we continue to forgive others, just as we have been forgiven. Amen.