

Lesson 33

Forgiving Believers Who Repent

Group Icebreaker:

What is the difference between the two sayings, “I’m sorry” and “I repent”?

Introduction:

When Jesus finished telling the disciples the process for reproving an erring believer Peter approached Him with a question that lies in the heart of every believer. *Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?* (KJV) In this lesson we will cover Jesus’ reply to Peter’s questions and the instructions He gave the disciples on the same issue a few months later.

Reading the Scripture:

Matthew 18:21-35, Mark 9:49-50, Luke 17:1-10

Forgiving Believers Who Repent

Matthew 18:21-35, Mark 9:49-50

Scripture excerpts from “Follow Me: A Message from God”

"Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. And when he had begun to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him **ten thousand talents**.¹ But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii;² and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?' And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart. For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

The Commands:

- ❖ Have salt in yourselves.
- ❖ Be at peace with one another.

¹ **Ten thousand talents.** About 461,500 years wages.

² **A hundred denarii.** About 1/3 of one year's wages.

Group Discussion:

1. What is the most number of times that you have forgiven the same individual for the same sin against you?

The Lesson:

When Peter approached Jesus with his question concerning the number of times that he should forgive he added a second question, “*Until seven times?*” (KJV) Peter’s use of the number seven in this manner wasn’t just arbitrary. In Hebrew the word for what he said is *shaba* and refers to something that has been “sevens” or multiplied by seven. It carries with it a double meaning: 1) an oath and 2) the number seven. The word *shaba* literally means, “to be complete” and refers to something that cannot be altered or broken. It references the idea that when a person makes an oath he repeats it seven times.

So when Peter used the term “seven times” (*shaba* or *sevens*) he was seeking clarification from Jesus. In English, Peter might have phrased the question this way, “Is it okay to forgive someone who says he repents up to seven times since in fact he has not made it an oath yet?”

Jesus replied to Peter’s question in this manner, “*I say not unto thee, until³ seven times: but, until seventy times seven,*” (KJV) In English we hear His statement something like this. A person should forgive four hundred ninety times and since the number is so large he can’t keep track of it ... so he should just keep on forgiving. This way of thinking is okay, but Jesus’ somewhat cryptic reply has more depth to it than that.

In Hebrew what Jesus said is, “*I say not unto thee, seven: but, until seventy sevens.*” This is a clear reference to the prophecy of Daniel 9:24. *Seventy sevens⁴ have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place.* In this case, Jesus is telling Peter that he must continue to forgive fellow believers until the things stated in Daniel’s prophecy come to pass.

To reinforce His point, Jesus couples it with a kingdom parable. In the parable a certain king (God) forgives a man his debt⁵ (sins). But that man does not forgive the debt⁶ (sins) of another. Because he withheld forgiveness from another, the king (God) turns him over to the torturers until the debt is paid. The purpose of the parable is to illustrate how much God has forgiven us in relation to how little we have to forgive others.

Jesus concludes the parable with the statement, “*For everyone will be salted with fire.*” The term “salted with fire” is a reference to sacrifices made to God. In the Old Testament all sacrifices were required to be salted before they were burned with fire. Salt served as a reminder to both

³ Here I have switched to using the King James Version of the Bible as it more accurately reflects the meaning of the Greek word “*heos*”. The KJV translates the word “*heos*” as “**until**”, which represents a point in time. Most other translations tend to use the phrase “**up to**” for the word “*heos*”. When the term “up to” appears the reader tends to focus on the idea of counting up to a certain number, while disregarding the concept of a point in time, which the term also means.

⁴ Many translators substitute the word “weeks” in place of the word “sevens”. This can be misleading as the Jews use the word “sevens” to indicate several periods of time. It can represent one week, the Feasts of Weeks (Pentecosts), a “*Shemittah*” (7 year period) or a Jubilee.

⁵ Equivalent to 461,500 years worth of wages.

⁶ Equivalent to 1/3 of one year’s wages.

God and man that a covenant relationship⁷ existed between the two parties. So it is entirely appropriate for Christians, who are to offer themselves as living sacrifices,⁸ to be salted with fire.

It is truly a sacrifice to forgive another his sins, especially when everything in us is crying out for retribution, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Jesus recognized it and that's why He used the illustration of salt. It was to remind His disciples that they were in a covenant relationship with God. *"For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."* (Matthew 6:14-15)

In addition to covenant use, salt has two primary uses:

- To **season** or make palatable - *Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.* (Colossians 4:6)
- To **preserve** or save from decay - *My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.* (James 5:19-20)

When Jesus commanded the disciples to have salt in themselves and to be at peace with one another, He was essentially saying, "Speak to the offending party in a kind way with the thought of preserving his life while establishing a better relationship between the two of you."

Reading the Scripture:

Luke 17:1-10

Scripture excerpts from "Follow Me: A Message from God"

"And He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks should come, but woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you. But which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me until I have eaten and drunk; and afterward you will eat and drink'? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"

The Commands:

- ❖ Be on your guard.
- ❖ Rebuke him.
- ❖ Forgive him.
- ❖ Say.

⁷ Numbers 18:19, Leviticus 2:13 and 2 Chronicles 13:5

⁸ Romans 12:1 - *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.*

The Lesson Continued:

Sometime later Jesus spoke to his disciples again about the necessity of forgiving an erring believer. This time He began His instruction with the words “Be on your guard.” They seem like odd words to begin a teaching on forgiveness with. However, this short phrase is very powerful and can be interpreted to mean any of the following: 1) stay alert, 2) be watchful, 3) pay attention, 4) keep on the lookout, 5) don’t be fooled, 6) take an appropriate defensive stance, 7) don’t let yourself be attacked.

The phrase and all of the interpretations indicate a **defensive** posture. Each of them begs to have the question answered, “Defend against what?” The answer is twofold. The first is to guard one’s self from being sinned against in the first place ... wise as serpents. And the second is to not harden one’s heart so as not to forgive a believer who sins but then repents ... innocent as doves.⁹

The instruction, “Be on your guard” is meant to be both reflective and instructive. After a Christian has been sinned against by a fellow believer he should reflect on **how** the events came to pass. In other words, “How did I get myself into this position?” Secondly, he should take the time to discover the **steps** he needs to take in order to avoid being sinned against in the future. Many times Christians naively put themselves in the same position of being sinned against over and over. Some would describe this as insane behavior.¹⁰

Group Discussion:

2. What does this old adage mean? Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.
3. Name one way a believer can be hurt by the sin of another believer?
4. What did the offended believer do that allowed himself to be sinned against?
5. What are some steps he could take to avoid being sinned against in the future?

The Lesson Continued:

In rapid-fire succession, Jesus lists the steps that a believer should take when another believer sins him against. “*Rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.*” It is always the responsibility of the offended believer to bring the first rebuke against a sinning believer! It is also always the responsibility of the offended to believer to forgive the offender if he says he repents.¹¹

Lest the disciples should misunderstand His earlier statement on the number of times they were to forgive, Jesus reinforces His point. Not a mere 490 times as some think but, “*if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.*” The disciples are flabbergasted at this command. In a seventy-year period it would total of 178,850 times.

But Jesus doesn’t see this command as being unreasonable. To Him its not how often a believer forgives it’s just how His disciples are to be ... merciful as their Father in heaven is merciful. To support this idea He finishes the teaching with this statement. *So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, “We are **unworthy** slaves; we have done only that **which we ought to have done.**”*

⁹ Matthew 10:16

¹⁰ A popular definition for an insane person is one who continues to do the same thing repeatedly expecting a different result. In other words, “How many times do you have to put your hand in the fire before you realize your going to get burned?”

¹¹ Repentance indicates a change in direction. So when a person says he repents it means that he will change the course of actions or steps that brought him to the point of sin.

The Point of the Lesson:

Be ready to forgive.

Application:

If someone sins against you take the time to reflect on how it happened and what steps you will take in the future to avoid the experience again.