

Seventy Times Seven

Source: Genesis 50:15–20, Psalm 103:(1–7), 8–13, Romans 14:1–12, Matthew 18:21–35

I'm going to pick up where we left off last week.

Last week we talked about the wrestling. We said the loving thing is not to keep the peace, it's to make the peace. We said go to them, just the two of you, not to win, not to be right. And a lot of us walked out of here last Sunday thinking, okay. I can do that. I can go and do this.

But then this week Peter walks up to Jesus with the follow-up question, and it's the same question a lot of us are already secretly asking. "Lord, how many times do I have to forgive somebody? As many as seven?" And Peter thinks he's being generous. Seven is already more than most of us manage. And Jesus says, not seven. Seventy times seven.

Now hold on. Before you go reaching for your calculator, that's not a number. That's Jesus telling you to stop counting.

The Debt We Can't Pay

Because here's what Jesus does next. He tells a story about a servant who owes the king ten thousand talents. Friends, that is not a number you pay off with a payment plan. That's generations of wages. That's a debt so large the storyteller wants you to laugh at how absurd it is, because nobody, ever, could pay that back. And the king, when the servant begs, doesn't restructure the loan. He cancels it. Wipes it clean. Gone.

And then that same servant walks out the door, finds somebody who owes him pocket change by comparison, and has him thrown in prison over it.

We know how that story lands on us. We've been forgiven the ten thousand talents. Every single one of us. And somewhere out there is somebody who owes us a hundred denarii, and we are still, right now, holding the ledger open. They owe me.

That's the wrestling from last week catching up with us. Because going to somebody and naming the hurt, that's the first move. But this parable is asking a harder question: after you've named it, after the truth's been spoken, what do you do with the debt? Do they still owe you?

Turning It Over to Someone Bigger Than the Wound

This is where Joseph helps us, because Joseph already lived this one out. His brothers sold him. Left him for dead in a pit, and then lied to their father about it for years. Real debt. Real wound. They really owe him.

And now their father's gone, and the brothers are terrified, because they think, without Dad around to keep the peace, now Joseph's finally going to collect on that debt.

Listen to what they do. They don't even trust their own memory of reconciliation. They send Joseph a message pretending it came from their dead father, because they don't believe forgiveness could possibly have been that real.

And Joseph weeps. And then he says the line that undoes the whole story: "You meant this for evil, but God meant it for good, to preserve a numerous people, as we see today."

Notice, please, Joseph does not say, it didn't hurt. He doesn't say, it wasn't evil. He calls it exactly what it was. But he refuses to be the one holding the ledger. "Am I in the place of God?" he asks them. That's the turn. That's a grown soul saying, the accounting is not mine to keep.

And that's exactly what the psalm has been teaching us to pray toward this whole time. "As far as the east is from the west, so far God removes our transgressions from us." Not filed. Not stored for later. Removed. And the psalm says God does this the way a parent, a good one, has compassion on a child. Slow to anger. Not going to deal with us according to our sins, not going to repay us according to our iniquities. If that is who God is toward us, then that ledger we're keeping on somebody else, it's borrowed from a God who doesn't even keep one.

The Table Doesn't Ask Who's Right

Now Paul, in Romans, is dealing with a church that's fighting. Some of them think you can eat anything. Some of them think you'd better not. Some keep one day sacred, some keep every day the same. And you can feel Paul getting ready to referee it, and then he doesn't. He says something else instead. "Who are you to judge the servant of another? It is before their own master that they stand or fall."

That is Paul saying, this ledger you're keeping on somebody else's faith, on somebody else's practice, on somebody else's way of getting it right, that's not your ledger to keep either. "Why do you judge your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." Which means every single person at this table today, you included, is somebody Christ died for and is still working on. Same as you.

And I want to say something plain here, because it matters this morning. This table we're about to come to was never sorted by who deserves to be there. It was never sorted by who's been right this week and who's been wrong. Paul's whole point is that the table holds people who disagree, people who are still growing, people who see it differently, and it holds every single one of them as beloved.

Coming to the Table

So here's where all four of these pull together. Last week we learned to go, to speak the true thing, to leave the table set even when somebody won't turn. This week we're being asked what happens after. And the answer, from Joseph, from the psalm, from Paul, from Jesus, is the same answer, every time: the debt gets released into hands bigger than yours.

Not because the hurt wasn't real. Joseph never once says it wasn't. Not because you have to pretend the wound didn't happen. But because seventy times seven was never a math problem. It was Jesus telling us that grace isn't something you ration out until it runs dry. It's something you keep drawing from a well that never can run dry, because it was never yours to begin with.

And that, friends, is exactly what we're about to do at this table.

This bread, this cup, this is the whole story we just walked through, made physical. This is a King who didn't restructure the debt. He cancelled it. This is a table set by a love that was never keeping score to begin with. When you come forward this morning, you're not coming because you settled every account this week. You're not coming because you finally forgave that person completely, or because they finally turned back toward you. You're coming because that same love is already here, wide open, setting the table anyway, for every debtor in the room.

So come. Bring the hurt if it's still there. Bring the ledger, even the parts you haven't closed yet. Lay it down at a table that was never about who's earned their seat. As far as the east is from the west. Seventy times seven. A door that was already, always, standing open.

Turn our hearts, O God. With renewed resolve, and rekindled assurance that love will last and light will lift.
Loose what we've been holding onto, and let us come, all of us, unworthy and welcomed all the same, to your
table.

AMEN