

I feel sorry for Peter. There he is trying to show that he has been listening and trying to understand Christ's teachings about God's universal and limitless love for us. In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus told everyone that "You must be more godly than the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. If you are not, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." Jewish Law required that you forgave somebody twice and most devout people would add an extra one for good measure. Peter has doubled that and added yet another one for good measure, probably hoping that Jesus would think that he is really trying to be godly; but unfortunately, Jesus shoots his idea down in flames with the "seventy by seven" reply; effectively saying that it should be an uncountable number of times.

As a Scot, I have a certain affinity with St Andrew, and I do wonder what Peter's little brother has been up to that he needs to know how many times he must forgive him. I don't have any brothers, but I did have four sisters and, as children often are, we didn't always behave in a Christian-like manner towards each other; but we didn't go as far as Joseph's brothers did, throwing each other into empty wells and selling them into slavery. In today's Genesis reading Joseph's brothers were worried that Joseph might pay them back for the terrible things that they had done to him. In the end, Joseph was moved to tears, forgave them and provided for them and their families in their time of need.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we plead with God to "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us," but do we really mean that? Do you want to God to forgive you reluctantly? Slowly? Grudgingly? Or possibly, Never? Maybe with strings attached, to forgive you but remind you, over and over, year after year, what you did wrong? Do you want God to forgive you, but then tell everyone else about it, so that everyone knows just what a bad thing you did? Do you want God to forgive you, but decide that he doesn't want anything more to do with you? To keep you at arm's length, instead of welcoming you back into his fellowship? Do you want God to "forgive but not forget"?

No, if we were honest, we would have to admit that we hope God doesn't forgive us the way we forgive others. Because our forgiveness, when it comes down to it, might not be of the best quality. We would prefer that he does not "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

However, in Matthew 6 Jesus said, "But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins". This message is repeated in Mark 11, "When you stand praying, forgive anyone you have anything against. Then your Father in heaven will forgive your sins." And in Luke 6, "If you do not judge other people, then you will not be judged. If you do not find others guilty, then you will not be found guilty. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

Now these verses do not leave a lot of theological wriggle room. They are not just telling us that it is a good idea to forgive, or that it is important to forgive. They are telling us that it is absolutely necessary to do this before we can be allowed to enter heaven. If we do not forgive others then our own sins will, likewise, not be forgiven.

There are many philosophical questions that can be asked about our forgiveness of others, such as... What does it mean to forgive? What do I need to understand? What are the spiritual mechanics of this process? How will it benefit me to forgive? And in more practical terms... How do I forgive? What do I need to do? What do they need to do? But maybe the most important one, in terms of fulfilling the necessary condition for us to forgive in order to be forgiven ourselves, is... How do I know whether I really have forgiven someone?

Maya Angelou wrote "I may forget what you said or what you did, but I will never forget how you made me feel." If you are expecting some form of apology, or for them to understand the way that you felt, then what you are wanting is justice, or at least a little vengeance, rather than forgiveness. If you wait until they ask you for forgiveness, then again you are seeking justice. When Nelson Mandela was released, he forgave those who imprisoned him, without them having to say anything, do anything or even acknowledge in any way that what they did was wrong.

Forgiveness does not mean pretending that nothing happened. Forgiveness is acknowledging that a debt existed but choosing to release the offender from that debt, rather than demanding that they pay it. Forgiveness means that what they did is no longer important to you. When all that happens, then you know that you have forgiven.

We tend to think that forgiveness benefits just the one who is forgiven, but that is not the case. It is just as beneficial to the forgiver, if not more so. As Christians, we appreciate the difference between the hundred pieces of silver owed to us and the ten thousand bags of gold owed to God. We understand the enormous debt we owe to God for our very existence. Consequently, we should live our lives on earth according to his will, as it is in heaven. Amen.