

## **Forgiveness: Freely Received, Freely Given (Matthew 18:21–35)**

**September 13, 2026**

**Premkumar Immanuel Clement**

Today, we confront one of Jesus' most challenging teachings: to forgive— not just seven times, but “seventy times seven.” Does this figure hold any significance? Peter seeks a rule for forgiveness, asking, “How many times must I forgive?” In response, Jesus offers a vision of forgiveness. Peter is looking for a limit, but Jesus essentially says, “Stop keeping track.” Whether we interpret Jesus' expression as “seventy-seven” or, as many scholars argue, “seventy times seven,” the key point is not to forgive exactly 77 or 490 times. Jesus uses an enormous number to illustrate that counting is not the point. Christian forgiveness does not maintain a record; it's about becoming a community shaped by the mercy we have received.

### **1. Forgiveness Begins with What We Have Received**

Jesus tells a parable about a king who forgives a servant. The servant owes an astonishing debt that he could never repay. The king, filled with compassion, releases him from this obligation. However, that same servant encounters another servant who owes him a much smaller sum. Instead of extending the mercy he received, he demands immediate payment. This parable illustrates where Christian forgiveness starts. We don't begin with the mindset of, “I am a generous person, so I will forgive.” Instead, we start from a place of humility, remembering: “I am a person who has received forgiveness.” Before we can extend forgiveness to others, we must recognize how much mercy we have received from God. This is why forgiveness is central to life in the kingdom of God. We receive grace freely, and only then can we give grace freely.

### **2. Forgiveness Does Not Negate Justice**

In his book *\*Seventy Times Seven: The Power of Forgiveness\**, Johann Christoph Arnold shares stories of individuals who have faced incredibly painful experiences—such as murder, betrayal, abuse, bigotry, gang violence, genocide, broken marriages, family wounds, gossip, workplace conflicts, and various other forms of suffering. These stories remind us that forgiveness is not just a response to minor offenses; sometimes the wounds run very deep. Arnold highlights the healing power of forgiveness, even in situations where the offender has not repented. Forgiveness can help the victim break free from feelings of hatred, bitterness, and the desire for revenge. However, we must keep in mind several important points: - Forgiveness does not mean that evil is acceptable. - Forgiveness does not imply forgetting. - Forgiveness does not entail abandoning justice. - Forgiveness does not always lead to reconciliation with someone who continues to cause harm. In Jesus' parable, the king's mercy is intended to transform the servant's life. The servant has received extraordinary mercy, and this should change how he treats others. Thus, Christian forgiveness does not eliminate justice. Instead, it encourages us to let go of vengeance while still upholding justice. We can express this by saying: "What happened was wrong. Justice matters. But I will not allow hatred and revenge to define who I become."

### **3. Forgiveness Calls Us to Become Instruments of Grace: The Witness of Gladys Staines.**

Many of us remember the tragic murder of Graham Staines and his two young sons, Philip and Timothy, in India in 1999. Graham Staines was dedicated to serving people affected by leprosy in Odisha when he and his sons were burned to death in their vehicle. What did his wife, Gladys Staines, do in response? She publicly forgave the killers. Importantly, she did not claim that the crime was acceptable or that justice was unnecessary; she made it clear that the law should take its course. Yet, she refused to allow hatred and bitterness to govern her life. Her ability to forgive was rooted in her Christian faith. She understood that the grace she

had received from God could not be kept to herself. This perspective aligns beautifully with John Wesley's understanding of grace. – “Prevenient grace” is God's grace that reaches out to us before we have done anything to earn it and prepares us to respond to God. – “Justifying grace” is God's gracious act of forgiving and accepting us through faith in Christ. – “Sanctifying grace” is God's ongoing work within us, transforming our lives so that we increasingly become the people He calls us to be. Gladys’s witness helps us see Wesley's understanding of grace in action. We can understand her response through this progression: 1. Prevenient grace prepares. 2. Justifying grace forgives. 3. Sanctifying grace transforms. The grace that comes to us does not remain trapped inside; it flows through us. A person who has received mercy gradually becomes a person who gives mercy. Similarly, a person who has been forgiven learns to forgive. This concept is illustrated well in the parable of the unforgiving servant. The servant has experienced extraordinary forgiveness, yet that forgiveness has not transformed him. His issue is not that he has never received mercy; rather, it's that the mercy he received has not changed him. This is where the witness of Gladys Staines challenges us. The question is not merely, "Can I forgive?" Instead, the deeper question is, "What is God's grace doing in me?"

#### **4. Stop Keeping the Ledger**

Now we return to Peter. Peter asks, “Lord, how often should I forgive? Seven times?” He likely thinks he is being extraordinarily generous. Jesus answers, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven.” Jesus isn’t handing Peter a calculator; He’s taking it away. Stop counting. Stop keeping the ledger. Instead of asking, “How many times have I forgiven this person?” ask, “How deeply has God's forgiveness changed me?” Forgiveness is not a mathematical exercise; it is a spiritual transformation.

## **Conclusion**

Forgiveness is not weakness. Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness is not surrendering justice. Forgiveness is the courage to say, “What happened to me is real, but I will not allow what happened to me to determine who I become.” In the parable, the king says to the servant, “I forgave you all that debt.” That is where our story begins. We come before God as people who have received mercy. Then, Jesus sends us into the world as people who offer mercy. We are those who have freely received forgiveness; therefore, we are called to become people who freely give forgiveness. May the forgiveness we receive from Christ transform us. May God's prevenient grace prepare us, God's justifying grace assure us, and God's sanctifying grace enable us to become instruments of mercy. Let us no longer keep a ledger of forgiveness, but become a people whose lives testify: “The grace I have received from God must not stop with me.” Amen.