

14 FORGIVE AS WE FORGIVE

MARIA: Look, Stephen said he was sorry!

JENNY: Like he's said it 12 times before. No way. I don't want to talk with him. I don't want to see him. Nothing.

MARIA: Jenny, I just don't understand. He got a little upset and he grabbed you too hard on the arm. What's the big deal?

JENNY: The big deal is that he has done it several times before. I'm afraid that one of these times he'll hit me.

MARIA: But he said he was sorry. Doesn't that mean anything to you?

JENNY: The question is, doesn't it mean anything to him? You know, Maria, just saying you are sorry doesn't make everything right.



• Maria and Jenny are having an important talk. It is clear that Maria wants Jenny to forgive Stephen and make everything between the two of them okay again. It is just as clear that Jenny doesn't want to. She feels that there is a limit to the number of times that a person can do something and be forgiven for it. This talk gets right to the core of our relationships with each other and with God. But sometimes relationships can be beyond repair.

3 STATEMENTS

- There is a connection between our willingness to forgive others and our preparation to be forgiven.
- Sin is not a broken rule, but a broken relationship.
- Forgiveness is the act of closing the relationship circle.

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Source

A PARABLE ABOUT FORGIVING

What is forgiveness? What is involved? Why forgive? These important questions are taken up in a parable that Jesus once told to his disciples.

Peter had asked Jesus a question, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" But Jesus answered him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:21-22).

Then Jesus told a parable. Read it in Matthew 18:23-35. When you have finished reading, answer the following questions.

1. How much did the first slave owe the master?

How much did the second slave owe the first?

2. Why didn't the king throw the first servant in jail until he could pay?

3. What did that same servant do to the next servant who could not repay him?

4. When the master heard what had happened, what did he do?

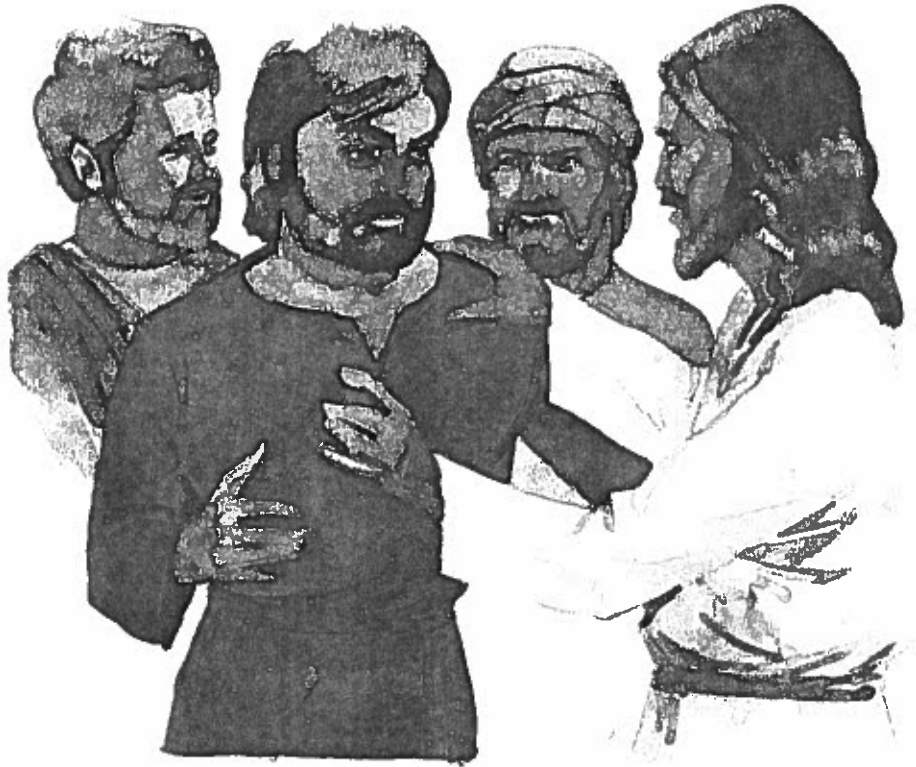
5. What is the message of this parable?

Obviously Jesus believes forgiveness is a critical part of the life of kingdom citizens. It is so important that this is the only petition that directly mentions our own behavior. For more insight into this petition's meaning, find out what Martin Luther had to say.

WHAT DOES MARTIN LUTHER SAY?

Turn to Luther's explanation of the Fifth Petition on page 173 of your book. Read through the explanation carefully.

Luther begins by noting that we ask God not to hold our sins against us and refuse to hear our prayer because of them. Right away Luther has pointed



us to something vital. Without forgiveness, we would also be without God's ear. The door would be slammed shut against us.

Luther also notes that we have to receive this forgiveness through God's grace—that is we can't not sin, so we can't "clean up our act" to get God's attention by deserving it. If we are to be forgiven by God, it will be because God, out of love for us, has decided to forgive.

And what can we do in response? Luther says it this way, "So we on our part will heartily forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us." Our response to God's forgiveness is the readiness to forgive those who sin against us.

THE LINK

Put together the things you have learned from Luther's explanation with Jesus' answer to Peter. Jesus' answer was not intended to simply increase the number of times we forgive someone. The number seven in Jesus' day carried with it a sense of totality. It was actually

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a number derived by adding the four corners of the earth to the three levels of the universe (heaven, earth, and hell). So Jesus' answer really meant that there is no end to the number of times that we are to forgive someone.

The parable (Matthew 18:23-35) also points out that forgiveness is a two-way street. The slave, once forgiven of his debt, failed to do the same for the other slave. This is not simply a case of applying a double standard. It suggests that the first slave was never really ready to be forgiven in the first place! So what happens to him? The master reimposed the jail sentence!

Even in Luther's explanation, our readiness to forgive others is based upon our relief and gratitude for having been forgiven first by God. But what if we weren't really sorry for our sin and simply went through the motions of asking forgiveness in order to get off the hook with God? We will probably end up like the unforgiving servant. There will be no gratitude in our hearts to motivate us to release the next person.

Forgiveness is not a simple matter of saying the right words. It is a matter of having the right heart. *There is a connection between our willingness to forgive others and our preparation to be forgiven.*



SKJOLD

A QUESTION OF RELATIONSHIP

One of the most important ideas for you to grasp about sin and forgiveness is that they both have to do with relationships and not rules. We have noted before that *sin is not a broken rule, but a broken relationship.*

Again and again throughout the Small Catechism, one fact about God remains consistent. Our God is a God of relationships. God is intensely focused on keeping us in relationship with God. The coming of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection all had to do with this relationship. Even the coming of the Holy Spirit, which you will study more about later, has as its primary benefit the maintenance of this relationship.

Sin is when we break the relationship circle. All relationships are like circles that keep going around and around. What powers the relationship is trust. The relationship circle is broken when trust is broken. The relationship is repaired when the trust is restored.

Rules are a part of relationships. In our relationship with God, there are rules. The Ten Commandments, for instance, are rules. But these rules serve the relationship between God and us. They are not there as a series of tests, but rather as a pattern for how a healthy relationship between ourselves and God can be maintained. When we sin against God or a neighbor, it may show up as a broken rule, but it is actually a break in the relationship.

When a relationship is broken, what is needed for its repair is not rededication to a rule, but recommitment to the relationship.

ALWAYS?

Review the important conversation between Maria and Jenny on page 74. Maria had taken to heart Jesus' teaching that we should forgive seventy-seven times. Jenny wasn't so sure. Read the following statements and check any you think apply.

Shaping



— Jenny was simply too angry to know the right thing to do.

— Jenny was right in thinking that Stephen's apologies in the past were not really apologies since he kept doing the same thing again and again.

— Stephen was something like the unforgiving servant who said the right words, but didn't have the right heart.

— Jenny should follow Maria's advice.

— Jenny needs to protect herself and realize that some relationships can't be repaired.

Those who have the right heart—the heart that truly wants the relationship restored—should be forgiven seventy-seven times. But those who have shown repeatedly that they do not truly have a yearning to close the relationship circle are not actually asking for forgiveness, are they?

Those who ask forgiveness from us should *always* be given the benefit of the doubt. The very difficult decision not to forgive someone must never be made lightly or without much prayer.

This is especially true in cases like Maria and Stephen where personal safety is threatened. Some people stay in relationships that hurt them again and again and think that they must continue to forgive the person who continues to hurt them. But remember, *forgiveness is the act of closing the relationship circle*. In such situations we must seriously ask whether the abusing partner is seeking a restored relationship each time.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Below are three brief situations. What do you think should happen in each one? Discuss your responses with your classmates.

● Ron and Eddie really wanted to go to the concert, but Ron didn't have enough money. Desperate to get it, he found his dad's wallet and took \$20 from it. What relationship was broken? If Ron apologizes to his dad and explains the situation, what do you think his dad should do?

● Fran didn't think she had a chance on Ms. Bishop's English exam. She pleaded and pleaded with Paula until, out of friendship, Paula agreed to help her cheat. What relationship or relationships were broken? Are they broken even if Ms. Bishop never discovers that Fran and Paula cheated?

● Ben's dad has a very hard and demanding job. Sometimes when he comes home from work, he seems to take it out on his son. Ben understands how hard things are for his dad, but he also knows that he is growing to resent him for this. His mom always steps in to try to smooth things out between the two. She usually takes Ben aside and reminds him how hard things are for his dad and urges Ben to forgive him.

What relationship or relationships have been broken? What should be done to help everyone in this family?

Forgiveness is the act of closing the relationship circle.



RICHARD WEST

FURTHER

opportunities

Bible Reading and Reflection

Read the following Bible passages and reflect on the meanings for your life.

- Romans 13:8-10
- Matthew 6:14-15
- Matthew 18:15-17
- Galatians 6:1-5
- 1 John 1:5-10

Memory

This week, work to memorize Luther's explanation to the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer (see page 173).

Activity 1

Turn to the Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (page 56). Rewrite the confession in your own words, working in what you have learned about relationships, trust, and forgiveness in this session.

Activity 2

Write a short story about forgiveness. You can either make it up entirely or use one of the situations under "What Do You Think?" as a starting point. Include these elements:

- Why the characters did what they did.
- Why they got themselves into a situation where forgiveness was needed.
- Whether the relationship actually was restored and why.

Activity 3

Seven key words from this session are hiding in the letters below. Find and circle them.

WHATHELEVATORSIN ACTION
 OREPLYEARTEARULEVERY
 DIRECTIMEVERRELATIONSHIP
 MENTHEREXACTIONIONS
 WAFFLEGRATITUDE
 MANDEWEYESICKYOUTHISTORY
 ARDORDERROPERSON
 CERTAINTERESTAURANTEATER
 MAPGABROKENNETHIEFORGIVE
 RYEARCIRCLEANOTHERMAL

FOCUS

ON CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS IN LBW

Did you know that there is more than one order for confession and forgiveness in *Lutheran Book of Worship*? Most of us are familiar with the Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness, which is printed three times—on pages 56, 77, and 98.

But there are two others as well. On pages 193-195 is the Order for Corporate Confession and Forgiveness. Look it up. What is different?

Did you know that Lutherans also have a service for private confession? That service is called the Order for Individual Confession and Forgiveness. It is printed on pages 196-197. Look that one up, too. What is different about it from the other two?