

# Gleaning In The Fields Of Light

## The Weight Of Forgiveness

By Ken Woodley

*Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."*  
—Matthew 18:22

Man, that's a ton of forgiveness.

Not sure I can carry all of it.

Or how far I can carry even half that much.

Peter had wanted to know how many times he must forgive someone who sinned against him. Probably thinking himself extravagantly generous, Peter suggested seven times. Forgiving someone a single time can be a struggle. Sometimes even once can feel like it is one time too many.

But seven times is not enough, Jesus made clear to Peter, and so to us.

Seventy-seven times, Jesus answered.

Seventy-seven times? Turning the other cheek that often could give us whiplash, couldn't it? But that is what we must do.

It's instructive to return to a point Jesus made in last Sunday's Gospel lesson. If a brother sins against you, Jesus said, and refuses all attempts at reconciliation, then treat that individual as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

If Jesus is to be our guide, our Good Shepherd and our Savior, let us ask ourselves how Jesus treated tax collectors. Did he condemn and shun them, make an example out of them as evil and worthy of our disdain?

No, Jesus did not.

Jesus forgave them. Jesus loved them. Jesus opened his heart and God's grace to them. Jesus, in fact, brought one of them into his inner circle of disciples.

How ironic that the Gospel of Matthew tells this story because Matthew, himself, was a tax collector when he first encountered Jesus.

So, how perfect that Matthew tells us this story because he knew from personal experience how Jesus treated tax collectors.

If we are to treat those who sin against us as pagans and tax collectors, that means we are meant to forgive them. It means forgiveness is for everyone.

Even for us.

Forgiveness is one more example of the narrow gate that opens up to the wide place of God's love and grace. But how very hard it can be to fit feelings of forgiveness through the small opening in our heart when someone harms us. How difficult to squeeze forgiveness through the shrinking passageway in our wounded feelings.

But how far our hearts can travel when we do because forgiveness is a road with two lanes: forgiveness is for the person being forgiven but it is also for the person offering the forgiveness.

When we offer forgiveness—whether it is accepted or not—we free ourselves of the soul-harming burden of carrying that piece of pain forward day by day, like a heavy and ponderous chain dragging down moments of possible joy.

Seventy-seven times is a lot of repetitions, a whole lot of exercise. If forgiveness were a muscle, seventy-seven repetitions would strengthen it until we could forgive even the heaviest hurt.

By the seventy-seventh time, as we wrestled with the angel of absolution, forgiveness would have become a reflex action in our heart.

Whether seven times or seventy-seven times, forgiveness becomes less difficult when we understand what Jesus understood:

God loves us all and that necessarily includes those who have sinned against us.

We know that to be true because God keeps loving us even when we sin against someone, even when we sin against the love of God, itself.

As he hung dying on the cross, Jesus forgave those who hammered the nails. He set the standard for forgiveness. He walked his talk. But, I wonder if Jesus struggled to speak those words of mercy. If so, how many times did Jesus swallow his pardon into silence before declaring his exoneration for all eternity?

Forgiveness is not always easy but it is always worth the effort because it opens up the wide space where redemption may gather us in its embrace.

And where healing, too, may find us.

Redemption and healing for the forgiven *and* the forgiver.

A ton of each seems about right.

Reckon it's time to take first one step forward and then another.

No matter how heavy.

