

"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt." The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

What's the score? I'd love a dollar for every time those words have been spoken in my house. We always want to be up to date with the score, whether it's cricket, football, tennis or soccer. When kids play games the most important role is "scorer" and they'd better get it right or the others will soon let them know!

But it's not just fun and games where we like to keep score. When it comes to household chores we keep score too. "Whose turn is it to do the dishes? I did them last night!" Sadly we also keep score in relationships. It shows when we say things like: "How many times do I have to tell you..." "You always...." "You never..." "That's the fourth time this week...." We remember the things that have been said and done that hurt and we know if there are more sins on the other side of the relationship than on ours. It's not just the big things that people do that we remember but all the little niggles between people who live and work together add up over time, and we have our limits. We don't forget the score and we think we will feel better if only we can even things up a little, with a cutting word or a hurtful action or some passive-aggressive behaviour, something that lets the other person know that we haven't forgotten the score.

Who's counting? We are, all the time. We know the score and we know if we are behind or in front in any relationship at any given moment.

"How many times?", Peter asked Jesus. **"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times (or seventy times seven).** Imagine how long I'd be married if my wife agreed to forgive me up to seven times but no more! Imagine how long I'd be pastor of this congregation if your forgiveness quota was seven. Churches would be emptying faster than they already are if we only had to forgive seven times!

Forgiveness. Forgiveness is the opposite of keeping score. To forgive means to forgo the right to get even. It means tearing up the score card. It means not keeping a permanent record of past wrongs. It means not counting peoples sins against them in our hearts and minds. I hate scoring in a game. To me it is a pain a burden. I always hope someone else will do it, but then I keep score in my head in case they get it wrong! It is even more tiring and painful keeping score in a relationship, always remembering past wrongs to convince yourself you are the one who is right, you are ahead in some way. Jesus says you don't have to that in a relationship. He hates it too!

Jesus says you can choose to forget the score and enjoy the game. Stop thinking about what other people owe you or what you owe them. That's what forgiveness does. It doesn't keep a record of past wrongs but gets on with life. Forgiveness is not just about the past its about the future. Scoring is about the past – what

happened and who is at fault and who owes who. Forgiveness wipes the score clean to let everyone involved start a new future.

Jesus told Peter a story about a man who owed a king a heap of money which he couldn't repay. (We particularly keep score when it comes to money! And any sin done to us is like a debt in our eyes that someone owes us). Anyway the man couldn't pay the debt and didn't want his wife and kids sold as slaves so he begged for mercy "**be patient with me**" and pitifully offered to pay it all back. The King showed mercy and simply wiped the slate clean, cancelled the debt, forgave him. You could say the king could afford it, but governments are not usually that forgiving!

This week the US government has offered to guarantee up to 100 billion dollars each to two mortgage companies - Freddie Mac and Fannie May – (they sound like 50's comic strip characters rather than mortgage lenders you can trust!) Imagine \$200b in debt suddenly being covered for you! That's a picture of us and God, Jesus is saying. If God kept score of everything we have thought, said and done that was wrong we would all be way behind, we would all owe God something we couldn't repay. The whole world would be not just in economic crisis but going to hell. But God in his mercy chose again this morning to pay for and cancel the debt that would have led all of us to be cut off from his life and love. God's own son Jesus Christ spilt his blood all over the score card, all over the accounts when he died on the cross.

Earlier we read together Psalm 103: "**The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us**" God doesn't say "how many times have you come here for forgiveness? You've exhausted your credit and my patience!" No, he says "I forgive you all your sins". You leave here this morning debt free. Your sins are as far from you as the east is from the west. The books are closed. The debt is paid. The slate is wiped clean. All thanks to Jesus who paid the bills, "*not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death*" as the old Catechism says.

Now that God chooses not to look at the score because of Christ, a new future with him is opened up for us, one where we don't have to live with guilt any more and can look forward to life forever with God in heaven. Now we don't owe God anything except to love. And to love means to forgive, to stop scoring faults and to stop scoring points, to cancel the sum total of what we think other people owe us in a relationship.

You would think that would come naturally, that it would be something we would all want to do because we are forgiven by God, but it doesn't. So Jesus added to his story. The forgiven man wouldn't let go of the debts others owed him. He continued to keep a record of what others owed him even though he had experienced incredible grace. He wanted and demanded payment, throttling another poor sod by the neck. The King was furious and had him put in prison. **'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.**" What the other man owed him wasn't small, don't get Jesus wrong, he doesn't say what people owe you is trivial. But in comparison with what each of us has been forgiven by God we are called to forgive, to cancel the debt, to stop keeping score. The man didn't get it. Neither do we sometimes. We don't get just how much we are forgiven of and its implications for living with other people. No wonder Jesus ended with a strong warning... **"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."** From the heart. When we refuse to forgive as we have been forgiven, we show our heart is wrong. Forgiveness is not easy, the cross says so, but the refusal to forgive, the refusal to share what we have been given angers God. We have misused our own freedom in Jesus, and we and we put ourselves in prison. When we refuse to forgive we are the ones who end up in our own solitary confinement! **"Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors"** says the Lord's prayer in Matthew. We all need help to do that, all the mercy and help God can give us.

So, who's counting? God doesn't count your sins against you, but he is counting on you to use your forgiveness to forgive others.