

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ ²²Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven* times. ²³ ‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents* was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii;* and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” ²⁹Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister* from your heart.’*

This past spring, during the quarantine, I had many days when I just did not feel good. I would have periods of nausea. I always had a very dry mouth. I had severe pain in my hands. And, many days I was very tired.

I went to the doctor. She said I did not have COVID nor the flu. Instead she gave me an antibiotic to treat me for a sinus infection. In time, I started to take a turn for the better, but I wasn’t 100% for weeks.

I went back to see my family doctor two months later for my six-month med-check, and to have the usual blood work done. When the results of my bloodwork came back to her, she found them to be alarming. That was a huge surprise because they had never been bad before. She called me in for an appointment and explained to me that suddenly I am now a type-two diabetic. I have a fatty liver. I have Sjogren’s syndrome and I have too much iron in my blood. I wondered where all this came from and how am I going to get this stuff under control.

My life changed suddenly. I had to see some specialist, monitor my blood sugar which at the time was 261, and take metformin to help bring down my sugar. She said she wanted me to get it down to 150.

All of this was very overwhelming to me. One day I was talking to my neighbor outside and found out that she recently had become a certified health coach. She declared she could help me, using a non-traditional method of treatment that involved a huge change in my diet. With Don’s encouragement, I agreed to try it.

While continuing my visits with the specialists, but, with her help and no medication my health has been improving. My sugar went down to a daily reading of around 90, and I’m not taking any medication to reduce it. My blood work is also showing a decline in my fatty liver numbers. I’m feeling much, much better. Yes, I lost weight, but I am eating healthy—and a lot—so don’t worry. I could not have done this alone. I give my health coach a lot of credit for my health improvements.

Some people who need to lose weight benefit by hiring a personal trainer. People who hire trainers get to a point in their lives in which they feel their weight and overall fitness has spiraled out of control. A personal trainer can help bring this downward spiral to an end.

Writing in *Men's Journal*, Lauren Steele says that "working out with a personal trainer increases your fitness-goal success rate by over 30 percent, according to a study published in the *Journal of Sports Science & Medicine*. The study found that the influence of direct supervision during workouts had a huge effect on the outcome of training."

A reputable and qualified personal trainer has a varying degree of knowledge about exercise and instruction. He or she motivates clients by setting goals and providing feedback and accountability. Trainers also measure their clients' strengths and weaknesses with fitness assessments— assessments taken before and after completing the program. Trainers also provide education about general health, diet and nutrition.

Let's turn now from the world of physical training and think about spiritual training. There are times in our lives when we may feel spiritually broken and defeated. This morning I'm thinking about this as it relates to us being wronged and deeply hurt, carrying a load of woundedness and anger and unable to let it go, unable to forgive.

What can we do to be freed from this burden? Who will help us? Let me ask it this way, if we want to be spiritually fit, whom would we want as a spiritual fitness trainer? Mentors, pastors and trusted friends could fall into this category. Yet who could be a better personal spiritual trainer than Jesus. He specializes in dealing with brokenness and emotional pain. One of his specialties is forgiveness fitness. Now, I suspect some people doubt forgiveness fitness will work, probably because they feel their pain is too deep and they so the feel justified to not forgive. But, are we?

Scarlett Lewis lost her 6-year-old son Jesse in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. He was one of 20 children killed in that horrific attack in 2012 -- an absolute nightmare come to life. Parents such as Scarlett were devastated. At first, her anger sapped all of her energy and strength. Her rage was directed at the shooter and also at the mother who unwittingly armed him.

But then she **made the choice** to forgive. "Forgiveness felt like I was given a big pair of scissors," she said. These scissors helped her to cut her tie to the shooter and regain her personal power. "It started with a choice," she said, "and then it became a process." At her son's funeral, she urged mourners to change their angry thoughts into loving ones. She saw this shift in thinking as a way to change the world.

Forgiveness starts with a choice and then becomes a process. Jesus urges us to make this choice for ourselves when he responds to Peter's question about the number of times we should forgive. "Lord," asks Peter, "if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? Once ... twice ... three times ... as many as seven times"?

"Not seven times," says Jesus, "but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Some translations of this verse say "seventy times seven times" ... totaling 490 times (vv. 21-22).

However, you count it, Jesus is saying that your forgiveness should be countless. Limitless. Numberless. Jesus is like a personal trainer at the gym, urging us to increase our reps and get stronger every day. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven ... 77 ... 490. "Forgive an infinite number of times," he says. Make the choice to do it, and then turn it into a process. But exactly why does Jesus say this? Forgiving the people who hurt us can be hard to do, much tougher than lifting weights at the gym or riding a stationary bike.

Your spiritual trainer Jesus, strongly recommends forgiveness of those who wronged you because it is good for you. You are not told to do it for just for the benefit of the person who needs to be forgiven, but for you. The person you forgive has his/her own responsibility to repent of their sin. But when you forgive the person you regain your personal power and your spiritual freedom just as it did for Scarlett Lewis.

Unfortunately, many people fail to forgive. Jesus tells the story of a servant -- who owes his boss a large debt. The servant falls to his knees and begs to be given more time to pay. Out of pity for him, the boss released him and he forgave his debt. Sounds like a happy ending, but there's more to the story.

As the servant leaves the boss's house, he sees a fellow-servant who owes him a small debt. He grabs the man -- by the throat and says, "Pay what you owe." The fellow-servant falls to **his** knees and begs the man for more time to settle his debt. But the man refuses to forgive the debt. Although the original servant was forgiven a large debt, he cannot find it in his heart to go easy on his fellow-servant over a few denarii. Clearly, he needs forgiveness training.

The boss gets word of the forgiven servant's refusal to forgive a debt of another...as the boss forgave him. The boss summons his servant and asks him, "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-servant as I had mercy on you?"

The servant knows that he is busted. And we read then that in anger his boss handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. And so, God will do "to every one of you," promises Jesus, "if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart". Jesus demands that we forgive other people, based on the fact that we have all been forgiven. He insists that we make the choice to forgive, day after day, and turn it into a process that makes us stronger and stronger.

When we are unwilling to forgive, we leave ourselves vulnerable to a type of torture, the harassment of the memory of the hurt becoming more than a memory, but it also becomes a controlling power over our ability to enjoy life and to be the full person God created us to be. When we talk about forgiveness, we do not mean you will automatically forget the wrong when you forgive, but you free yourself from the power it has to control your life.

Modern research is discovering that Jesus was on to something about the benefits of forgiveness. It's been proven that those who forgive are healthier emotionally and psychologically.

The solution, Jesus says is to: "Forgive your brother or sister from your heart" You will become spiritually, emotionally and even physically stronger and healthier by making the decision to forgive; and then turning that choice into a process of choosing to forgive whenever memories threaten to rob us of our creativity, limit our ability to do problem-solving ... and even, sucking us into a never-ending feeling of helplessness, like a victim." Jesus is ready to help us forgive—kind of like our forgiveness trainer, challenging us to make that choice repeatedly until it becomes a part of who we are.

Yes, forgiveness is difficult. Seeing ourselves as sinners who have received forgiveness from our loving Lord is also difficult. It is much easier to hold grudges than to feel compassion toward the people who have hurt us. But Jesus knows that forgiveness is good for us -- body, mind and spirit -- which is why he commands us to offer it to our brothers and sisters.

Sometimes we need to be challenged to forgive, just as we need to be pushed by our trainers at the gym, doing the exercises again and again and again. We can wipe the slate clean by forgiving our brothers and sisters. That's a choice that lowers stress, increases personal power and heals the world as well. Amen.