

Proper 19 (24) - September 13, 2026

- Exodus 14:19-31 - Genesis 50:15-21 - Romans 14:1-12 - Matthew 18:21-35

“The Math of Forgiveness”

1. When I was the pastor at First Presbyterian Church in St. Anne IL our two daughters we're learning how to drive.
 - a. Our oldest daughter Juanis got her license first she had been able to save some money from a part time job and was able to buy a used little white Ford Escort. She was so proud of that car.
 - i. The way we parked our vehicles we used the church parking lot that was in between the church and the manse (the house which the church owned where we lived).
 - ii. That is where our daughter parked her car.
 - b. One evening while I was in a board of trustees meeting in the church, our daughter Juanis burst into the meeting room to get my attention, and I stepped out and she told me a story all in a panic.
 - i. There was poor lighting in the parking lot and while backing up her vehicle to go on an errand, she felt the vehicle stop,
 - ii. So she drove forward a few feet in her parking spot and tried backing up again, and once again got stopped.
 - iii. She got out of her car only to discover that she had put quite a dent on a car that was parked right next to her and she had done it twice.
 - iv. She rushed to tell me and I went back into the meeting room and I said to the group: I think my daughter hit one of your vehicles.
 - v. We looked out through the window and the chairman of the board of trustees, his name was Mike Johnson, said “Oh yeah that's my car.”
 - vi. Juanis and I both froze. Then he did something totally unexpected: Mike let out a big laugh.
 - vii. I was very apologetic, so was Juanis, but Mike said “it's fine! My wife Jean is gonna have a bigger laugh.”
 - viii. We could not understand what was happening.
 - ix. Mike explained that only the previous week while backing up his pickup truck from his garage out on the farm he had hit Jean's car.
 - x. He himself had done what my daughter had done: she with a few months of driving experience, he with decades of experience.
 - xi. Again he laughed and he shook his head and said kind of under his breath: “Jean is gonna have a field day with this!”

- c. Mike could have been hopping mad because his truck now had a brand new dent on it that had been 100% preventable.
 - i. But he also knew that he himself had made the same mistake and that his wife Jean was not about to let him get mad at an inexperienced driver who had done the very same thing he had done.
 - ii. Mike shrugged it off realizing that his working pickup truck would gather more dents along the way just from the reality of doing farm work, and my daughter learned a lesson both about driving and about grace and forgiveness.
- 2. In a way both of our passages today try to ask a question about forgiveness and grace, but they do so by focusing on the relationship between people without first acknowledging the relationship God has with us.
 - a. In both of these passages what we see is a desire to control the relationship with others without recognizing the way in which we have first benefited from how God loves us.
 - b. Take for example the passage from Romans.
 - i. In a letter to churchgoers, Paul was giving them practical advice about divisions in their midst that he had heard about.
 - ii. Paul told them not to judge those in their congregation who did not eat meat (because it usually was sold after being offered as a sacrifice in pagan temples).
 - iii. Paul argues that it wasn't unfaithful to eat that meat, but if some in the church avoided it, it was no harm. Don't judge each other.
 - iv. His advice focuses on how we are to treat one another.
 - v. But as much as we want to make life about "us," Paul tells them it's not. Dealing with each other in this gracious way is because of our relationship with God
 - 1. 14:8 If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.
 - 2. 14:10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?
 - 3. 14:12 each one of us will be held accountable to God.
 - vi. And a few chapters earlier Paul had written that nothing can separate us from the love of God. NOTHING!
- 3. In the gospel passage, Jesus had just taught the disciples that if somebody sins against them they should do everything possible to heal that relationship and set the person on the right track.
 - a. Peter (always Peter) asks Jesus: how often should I do that?

- i. I mean, if somebody's going to try to hurt me over and over again and you're asking me to reconcile and forgive, how often should I do that?
 - ii. Peter, trying to sound big-hearted, said "7 times?"
 - iii. 7 is a symbolic number (the story of creation says that's how long it took God to create everything that is)
 - iv. Jesus says: "no, not seven times but 77 times" (meaning a big number times a big number of times... do it non-stop)
 - b. Peter I'm sure made a face because what he wanted was the limit of his responsibility towards his fellow followers of God.
 - i. How much patience should I have with them?
 - ii. Because they get on my nerves and I just can't be their door mat!
 - iii. Which is when Jesus switches the perspective of the argument: It's not about how forgiving humans are, but for them to remember first how forgiving God is.
 - iv. The parable is a story of people in debt
 - 1. The one who owed so much is forgiven and yet when it came time for him to forgive someone else's debt, all he could think about was getting payback.
 - 2. He had forgotten that his debt had been forgiven. I don't how you forget that, but he had.
 - v. If this references God's forgiveness of us, there is something incredibly audacious and foolish about God forgiving us so graciously
 - vi. Foolish from a human point of view.
 - vii. Jesus is teaching that there is no limit to God's willingness to forgive us, and so we should try to follow God's example with each other
 - viii. It feels impossible (and foolish) for us to match the grace, forgiveness, patience and love which God offers us when we deal with our difficult neighbors
 - ix. But trying to hear what we have received helps us be able to treat others with grace.
- 4. We live in anxious and divisive times.
 - a. On the one hand we live in a time when resources are so incredibly plentiful and technology so advanced, that it seems like progress will continue on forever.
 - b. But we are in denial about the cost of that progress
 - i. There is reckless abuse and misuse of our natural resources, not worrying about the consequences for next generation

- ii. We have chosen to consolidate power in a few countries and at that in just a few people
 - iii. With enough food to feed the world and enough medicine to heal it, we hoard it instead in the rich countries.
 - iv. There is migration from poorer to richer countries when life becomes untenable because of war and famine
 - 1. But we only look at today's migration as a problem.
 - 2. Somehow we see it as honorable and courageous when our ancestors migrated to this continent for the very same reasons.
- c. I imagine Peter's reaction when he was told that he had to forgive endlessly was that it would lead to chaos!
 - i. People will know that I will forgive them and that's just going to make them even bolder in sinning against me and hurting me.
 - ii. If there's not a limit to forgiveness what's even the point of having rules and expectations?
 - iii. And yet, we live under the grace of a God who is always ready to love and forgive.
- 5. I have said recently that is not easy to be a follower of Jesus.
 - a. Every day I seem to get confirmation of that in the scriptures we read and in the way in which we try to live in these days.
 - b. What I want to do is remind us of the math of God's forgiveness for us, a forgiveness which is always ready to be granted
 - c. Peter didn't ask: how many times will God forgive me? That's not the math he was interested in.
 - d. Ultimately it is our best hope that the love we share will be God's love flowing through us, and the forgiveness we offer will be God's forgiveness taking hold in our hearts, and the grace we live in will be God's grace calling all home.
- 6. The math of forgiveness doesn't work from a human perspective. It only works if God is doing the calculations.

Reflection questions

- 1. Share a story of when you were surprised by someone's forgiveness.
- 2. How do you connect with the parable in Matthew 18:21-35?
- 3. What would help you lean into God's forgiveness to offer that forgiveness to others?