

How Many Times?

A Modern Day Parable inspired by Matthew 18:21-35

Patrice stepped out of the chilly, rainy night and into the damp basement of the Community Center. She took a seat in the circle of women making tonight's attendance an even dozen. New to the support group, she sat quietly for the first hour and listened to stories of falling, rising, and falling down again. After a short coffee break, Patrice was invited to speak. She stood up, took a deep breath, and looked around the circle. These women were strangers, but deep in their eyes Patrice saw trust, experience, and empathy.

All the fear and frustration she had suppressed for so long suddenly escaped as a single, burning question. "When my brother spends our parents' grocery money on alcohol, how often must I forgive?" she asked. "As many as seven times?"

An answer came immediately from Jessica, a long-time member of the group. "We forgive them, not seven times but seventy-seven times," she said. "But forgiveness does not mean acceptance," she added. Patrice plopped back down in her chair. She wasn't sure if she felt defeated, confused, intrigued, or just plain exhausted. Everyone gathered close to Patrice in a show of support and sisterhood. "We have all traveled the road you are on," Belinda said. "We are so glad you're here. We can help. You are not alone."

Jessica scooted her chair up closer to Patrice and began to unfold her own story. "I want to share my journey with you." she said. "When I decided to settle things with my husband, I presented him with our bank statement. He had withdrawn a huge amount and left us without enough money to pay the bills. I knew he had gambled it away again." Patrice sat up. The heaviness she had carried into the room was beginning to feel lighter. Jessica continued, "Since he lost the bets, he had no way to repay the debts. I stood before him and said, 'I am your wife and I will always love you. But, this is too much.' I told him I was taking the children to my parents' cabin, and selling the house, the boat, and the motorcycle to pay his debts. I stood in the truth of what is good and right." she added.

"When I said that, my husband fell down and begged me to change my mind. He said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay all the bills in full.'" Jessica held Patrice's hand and her voice softened. "I was moved with compassion, but I had to let go. I forgave him, but I could not tolerate his excessive gambling. And, sure enough, when my husband went to the clubhouse later that day, he found one of his betting buddies who owed him a little money. My husband seized that man and started to choke him, demanding, 'Pay back what you owe me!'"

"Falling to his knees, the friend begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But, my husband refused. Instead, he banned his friend from the club until he paid back his debt. One of our close friends saw what happened, she was deeply disturbed, and came to me and reported the whole affair. So, even though I forgave my husband the huge debt he brought on our family because he begged me to....should he not have had pity on his friend as I had pity on him? I was so angry and I knew then that I can't take my husband back until he gives up his addiction, and he pays back the whole debt."

At this point, nearly every woman in the group had tears streaming down their face. Jessica handed a pack of tissues and a water bottle to Patrice. She said, "So it will be for your parents unless you forgive your brother from your heart and stand up for what is good and right."