

One of our most important themes to teach others was about forgiveness. I often recalled what the Teacher said about forgiveness. He spoke about it when He was asked, and when Peter came to Him with the question, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”, Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”<sup>1</sup> How He could forgive those who put Him to death is such a great lesson, and hard for us to fully understand and incorporate into our lives.

The Teacher taught forgiveness prior to that terrible event in other ways as well. Once He warned us to watch ourselves, and said, “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”<sup>2</sup> To forgive the same person seven times a day for possibly many days really stretches our mind to encompass it all. We pled with Him for increased faith to be able to absorb this idea.

It was interesting one day after speaking to a few worshippers in their special place by a nearby river<sup>3</sup>, a man came to me with a variation of these words. He was, as he said, continually accosted by someone who asked for money – ostensibly a loan which was never paid back. The community was involved in helping this person<sup>4</sup>, ensuring that they had what was needed and offering work so that they could support themselves. But this person made the rounds of all those they knew to ask for contributions<sup>5</sup>. It was known that they did not use this money wisely.

So the man expressed his thoughts in a way that followed the Teacher:

“If a brother or sister asks you for alms, taking advantage of your compassion and mercy, should you give to them seven times? Would the Lord, knowing the heart of the one asking, say, “Even if they ask you for alms seven times in a day, you must give to them?””

I thought about what he said and could see the similarity in the situations. I had worked with enough people that I understood the difficulty in determining (without direct help from the Spirit) whether supplicants were in genuine need<sup>6</sup> or just taking advantage in a selfish manner<sup>7</sup>. That Spirit had introduced a plan whereby the fellowship would take care of widows and others in need<sup>4</sup>, and I believe that we should rely on this arrangement. And I knew that we were to be stewards of the resources in our hands<sup>8</sup>.

There was no absolute answer to the man’s question. It was another situation where we needed to pray for guidance on how it should be handled.

## References

1. Matthew 18:21-22; Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Matthew 18:21-22. Some versions use the phrase “seventy times seven”.
2. So watch yourselves. “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you

saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them." The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" Luke 17:3-5.

3. See Acts 16:13, where Paul met Lydia near Phillipi.
4. Consider the ordination of the seven as special servants to widows, and presumably others in need. See Acts 6:16. This is the task that the current church has to deal with as well.
5. This is not the same type of case as Lazarus at the gate of the rich man, Luke 16:19ff.
6. "Give proper recognition to those widows are really indeed." 1 Timothy 5:3-6.
7. It is interesting to compare the deceit by some who continually ask for alms with that of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5:1-11.
8. Our responsibility can be illustrated with the idea of not casting our pearls before swine (those who merely take advantage of others). See Matthew 7:6.