

6.62

Matthew 18:21–22—Seventy Times Seven

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has a conversation with his disciple Peter: "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?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times'" (Matt. 18:21–22).

Although the NRSV and other modern versions render the saying "seventy-seven times," the more traditional reading in Bible translations (including the Latin Vulgate and the King James Version) has been "seventy times seven times."

Interpreters throughout history have stressed that the number is symbolic for an indefinite, inestimable number of times—the point is not to forgive someone 77 times or 490 times, but to forgive them so completely as to not keep count.

Nevertheless, novelists as noteworthy as Emily Brontë and Sinclair Lewis have gotten mileage out of taking Jesus's words literally and wondering if especially irritating people might not transgress the supposed limit. In both of the following instances, it is preachers who go too far, one by preaching against sin, and the other by living in it.

***Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë (1847):** Nelly the housekeeper says to a preacher who yearns to denounce every sin known to humanity (from chap. 3):

“Sir, sitting here within these four walls, at one stretch, I have endured and forgiven the four hundred and ninety heads of your discourse. Seventy times seven times have I plucked up my hat and been about to depart—Seventy times seven times have you preposterously forced me to resume my seat. The four hundred and ninety-first is too much.”

***Elmer Gantry* by Sinclair Lewis** (1927): The dean of a theological seminary at which Elmer Gantry is employed delivers a verdict against the outrageous hypocrite (from chap. 10):

“The faculty committee met this morning, and you are fired from Mizpah. Of course you remain an ordained Baptist minister. I could get your home association to cancel your credentials, but it would grieve them to know what sort of a lying monster they sponsored. Also, I don’t want Mizpah mixed up in such a scandal. But if I ever hear of you in any Baptist pulpit, I’ll expose you. Now I don’t suppose you’re bright enough to become a saloon-keeper, but you ought to make a pretty good bartender. I’ll leave your punishment to your midnight thoughts.”

Elmer whined, “You hadn’t ought—you ought not to talk to me like that! Doesn’t it say in the Bible you ought to forgive seventy times seven—”

“This is eighty times seven. Get out!”