

# Seventy Times Seven



Matthew 18:21-35

Year A Proper 19

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## Parts by scene

■ = large part   ▲ = medium sized part   ● = small part

		1	2	3
▲	<b>Nathanael</b> - Phillip's crass bully of an older brother, who joins Jesus in search of redemption and nobler life	●	▲	▲
▲	<b>Peter</b> - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room	▲	▲	▲
▲	<b>John</b> - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲	▲	▲
▲	<b>Matthew</b> - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	▲	▲	▲
▲	<b>Joanna</b> - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲	▲	▲
▲	<b>Jesus</b>		▲	■

## Scene 1

Joanna , John , Matthew , Nathanael , Peter

*{Peter and Nathanael are in the middle of an argument.}*

**Nathanael**    Look, I said I was sorry.

**Peter**        You *always* say you're sorry! And then you rob me again!

*{John, Joanna, and Matthew enter.}*

**John**        What's going on here?

**Peter**        He stole my food again.

**Nathanael**    I didn't "steal" it! I just didn't realize it was his.

**Matthew**     That's a pretty thin excuse. By my count, this is the fifth time this has happened.

**Peter** It's the tenth!

**Matthew** And I would think you'd know by now. We don't leave food out after our meals. And Peter is the only one among us who sets aside food from dinner to have as a late night snack. So if you see loose food lying around, it's his.

**Nathanael** *[argumentatively]* So I forget. I don't keep track of everybody's personal habits.

**John** Could this be a case of a dispute like the rabbi talked about last week? *[to Peter]* It sounds like confronting him individually hasn't worked, but here we have two or three witnesses. Why don't we try working it out among us like the rabbi said?

**Joanna** I'm not at all sure that what he said applies to us. At least I hope it doesn't. Otherwise, if this failed, we'd have to take it to the "assembly", whatever that is, and if they ruled against Nathanael, we'd have to kick him out of the group.

**Peter** Good! Maybe he'll finally start "remembering" if there's going to be some real punishment.

**Matthew** If we're not going to abide by the rabbi's teaching in this matter, then what do we do?

**Joanna** How about abiding by another teaching of his? Forgiveness.  
*{Everyone pauses in unexpected shock at the suggestion.}*

**John** It's crazy enough that it just might work.

**Nathanael** That's exactly what I've been saying!

**Peter** That's exactly what he wants! A free ticket to steal from me forever!

**Matthew** The rabbi taught us to forgive, but he didn't say what to do if it doesn't work.

**Joanna** What does that mean, "doesn't work"? Forgiveness is not a technique for changing people's behavior. It's just something we're supposed to do.

**John** I agree, and yet: what *about* the behavior? I'm not talking about you, Nathanael, I'm sure you're not purposely sinning against Peter again and again, but there are some people who do. At what point are we just enabling them?

**Peter** And don't we have the right to fight back if someone's doing us wrong?

**Matthew** I think we should ask the rabbi about this.

**Joanna** *[with a sigh]* That ends up muddying the waters more often than not, but sure, I guess we should give it a try.

**Nathanael** Sure, let's ask him. *I'm* not afraid of what he might say.

## Scene 2

Jesus , Joanna , John , Matthew , Nathanael , Peter

*{The group finds Jesus and asks him their question.}*

**Jesus** So your question is how many times you should forgive someone who sins repeatedly against you?

**Nathanael** We're just asking hypothetically.

**Jesus** I see. In that case, does anyone want to make a hypothetical guess?

**Matthew** I'll guess just once. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me."

**Jesus** Nope. Another guess?

**Peter** Seven times! That's about when my patience wore out.

**Jesus** Close!

**John** That was close? So, it's an actual number, and not limitless?

**Jesus** *[sheepishly]* Actually, the "number" I was going to pronounce was seventy times seven.

**Joanna** By which you mean, limitless.

**Jesus** *[lamely]* It was going to be a kind of joke.

**Peter** Tell me you're still joking! Because I don't think I can put up with things the way they are.

**Jesus** I'm sorry, Peter, but I'm deadly serious. More serious than you might imagine. Here, let me tell you a parable I've been developing that explains it all. The kingdom of Heaven is like a

king who wanted to settle all the accounts with his servants. The first guy he brought in owed him ten thousand bags of gold, and because the man couldn't pay, the king ordered that he and his whole family should be sold to pay the debt. Now the man - wait, what time is it?

**John** About half past the ninth hour.

**Jesus** Oh dear. Judas told me I had to be in town by ten to speak to some inquirers. I'll continue the parable when I get back.

*{Jesus exits.}*

**Nathanael** *[to Peter]* Hah!

**Peter** You'd better watch yourself around my food!

**Nathanael** Why? If I forget again, you have to forgive me.

**Peter** And if I forget I'm not supposed to hit people and knock you down, *you'll* have to forgive *me!*

**Joanna** I know I was the one who thought forgiveness should be unlimited, but if it invites abuse like this, then maybe it's not such a good idea, after all.

**Matthew** But the rabbi confirmed it. Unlimited.

**John** I'll bet the parable was going to address this somehow. I'll bet there was going to be some wisdom in it that solves the potential problems.

**Joanna** I suppose the king's eventually going to forgive the servant his debt, but what then? What happens if the servant amasses a second debt? Or a third?

**Nathanael** Maybe the servant explains that it was all a misunderstanding, that the debt was really just an error in the books.

**Peter** You'd like that, wouldn't you?

**Matthew** No, if there was never a debt, then there's nothing to forgive. Forgiving isn't the same as acquitting, or even excusing.

**John** What if the servant is so moved by his close call that he reforms his ways and never amasses any more debt in the future, so there's never any need to forgive him again?

**Joanna** It's a nice thought, but isn't it a little far fetched? In my

experience, someone who's been let off the hook is more likely to take advantage of that to push the boundaries even further the next time.

**Peter** *[pointedly]* In my experience, too!

**Nathanael** *[angrily]* You know, I'm sick of your weasely little insinuations! If you want to forget we're not supposed to hit each other, I'm fine with that. Come on! Let's settle this right now!

*{Peter and Nathanael rush at each other and begin fighting.}*

**Joanna** Stop! What are you doing?

**John** Guys! Come on! Break it up!

**Matthew** In God's name, act like grownups!

*{John and Matthew manage to separate them.}*

**John** Look, I know we got all caught up in the theoretical question of forgiveness, but when the rabbi gets back, I think we should bring this dispute to him instead.

**Matthew** I agree. We "two or three" witnesses have failed to resolve it. Now we bring it to a higher authority.

**Nathanael** No way! You're all on his side. I won't stand a chance!

**Joanna** We won't say a thing. You'll each have a chance to tell your story to the rabbi, and he'll decide.

**Nathanael** He'll be on Peter's side, too! We all know he has favorites.

**Peter** Hey, I don't want to bring this to the rabbi, either. I can fight my own battles.

**Matthew** All right, but we can't have you brawling. If you don't want us to tell him, you'll have to promise at the least not to fight.

**Nathanael** Fine.

**Peter** Fine.

**Joanna** I sure hope that parable turns out to be a good one!

### Scene 3

Jesus , Joanna , John , Matthew , Nathanael , Peter

*{Jesus returns and tells the rest of the parable.}*

**Jesus** So, where was I?

**John** The king was about to have the man and his family sold to pay off the debt.

**Jesus** Right. Well, the man fell to his knees and begged the king for mercy. "Be patient with me," he cried, "and I'll pay back every cent!" And the king took pity on him, and cancelled the debt outright.

**Joanna** Okay...but is that the end?

**Jesus** Nope. You see, that servant then found another servant who owed *him* some money: just a few pieces of silver, in this case. But he grabbed him by the neck and said, "Pay me back what you owe me!" "Please," begged the other servant, "be patient with me, and I'll pay back every cent!" But the servant wouldn't listen, and instead, had the man thrown in debtors prison. Well, when the king found out about this, he was furious! "You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you!" he said. And he handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all that he owed. Therefore, forgive one another from your hearts, or your Heavenly Father will treat you the same!

*{There is an extended, stunned silence.}*

**Jesus** *[mildly]* Are there any questions?

*{After another pause, a distant voice calls for Jesus.}*

**Jesus** Oops! That's Judas wanting to hear how things went in the town. I'll be right back.

*{Jesus exits.}*

**Peter** *[uncertainly]* Okay, I know I'm not the smartest guy in the group, but...was that kind of messed up?

**Joanna** *[in a subdued voice]* I don't even know where to begin.

**Matthew** Why are you upset? The rabbi confirmed your belief: that we should forgive each other without limit. And he gave us a good reason to do it: because God has forgiven *us*.

**John** *[anxiously]* Has he?

**Matthew** Has God forgiven us? Of course!

**Joanna** What if Peter chooses not to forgive Nathanael? Is Peter still forgiven by God?

**Matthew** Of cour - Oh!

**Nathanael** Ha! I love it. Not only does he have to forgive me, but if he doesn't, he gets the hammer himself!

**Peter** [*sincerely*] That can't be right, can it?

**John** [*uncertainly*] It does seem to be what the rabbi just taught.

**Peter** I guess I'd better forgive Nathanael, then.

**Joanna** Is forgiveness under duress true forgiveness?

**Matthew** Wait a minute! You've said yourself that we mustn't take the elements of parables too seriously. Sure, the king in this parable is harsh and unforgiving, but that doesn't mean that God is. The king's only purpose for the lesson was to forgive the servant the first time, so we could see how he acted once he was forgiven.

**John** Except that the rabbi explicitly called out the harsh behavior of the king: "This is what God will do to you if you don't forgive one another."

**Nathanael** So what? If that's what God's going to do, then that's what God's going to do. *I'm* not worried.

**Joanna** But it's worse than God just punishing us for not forgiving. In the parable, the king doesn't invoke a new punishment for the servant's sin; he reinstates the debt!

**Peter** But I thought he forgave that debt.

**Joanna** Exactly.

**John** Does that mean God will *revoke* his forgiveness of us if we don't forgive each other?

**Matthew** No, that can't be true. The rabbi has taught us that God's forgiveness is absolute.

*{Jesus returns.}*

**Jesus** Sorry for the interruption. Back to the parable. Oh, but before that, there's an issue I've been meaning to address but keep forgetting: Nathanael? Would you do me a favor?

**Nathanael** Of course!

**Jesus** Stop stealing Peter's food in the evenings.

**Nathanael** *[totally discombobulated]* What? I never - I mean, I didn't - I mean...

**Jesus** God gives us all enough food for each day, and all you have to do is ask if you want more.

**Nathanael** *[angrily to Peter]* You snitched! And you said you didn't even want to take to him!

**Peter** And I didn't!

**Nathanael** Then it was someone else! *[to the others]* Was it one of you?

**Jesus** *[compassionately]* Nathanael, Nathanael...Israeli in whom there is no guile: do you think that I who saw you once beneath the fig tree could not see you taking Peter's food?

**Nathanael** *[stammering]* I - I can explain that...

**Jesus** Tell us the truth: you weren't ignorant or forgetful, were you? You stole from Peter knowing full well what you were doing.

**Nathanael** *[contritely]* Yes, rabbi.

**Jesus** Will you renounce your evil and seek forgiveness from the one you wronged?

**Nathanael** I will. *[to Peter]* I'm sorry, man. It won't happen again.

**Jesus** *[to Peter]* And will you forgive him with your whole heart, as God has forgiven you?

**Peter** *[robustly]* What the heck! *[to Nathanael]* It's all right. I'm sorry I blew up at you.

**Jesus** *[to the rest]* Will you who witness this reconciliation do all in your power to support these persons in their life in the group?

**everybody** We will.



**Jesus**

Very good. And now, we can return to our lesson for the day.  
Did anybody have any questions about the parable?

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*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at  
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