Jesus math: Matthew 18:21-35

# Four hundred ninety times? Do we really have to do this?

by In-Yong Lee in the September 6, 2005 issue

Only a few of the 365 days in each year are associated with extraordinary events, but for those who experienced the events, the dates arouse great emotion. For Koreans, August 15 commemorates the restoration of the country's independence after a Japanese occupation of 36 years. June 25 marks the outbreak of the Korean War. And for those of us who live in the U.S., September 11 will always be the day America was attacked. I was on my way to school that day, listening to the radio in my car, when the announcer said that planes had crashed into the Twin Towers in New York and destroyed the majestic skyscrapers. I will never forget that moment. Yet I know that somehow I must forgive.

Peter asked Jesus, "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter thought he had grasped the ethical core in Jesus' teachings, and probably expected Jesus to nod and give his approval to Peter's comment. But Peter, along with the other disciples, did not understand the radical nature of the commandment that his lord was giving them. Seven times? No, said Jesus, 70 times seven times.

Four hundred ninety times? Must we really forgive the Japanese imperialists who with unspeakable violence robbed the Koreans of their land, their properties, their lives, their names and their language? What about the North Koreans who invaded the South, home of their own brothers and sisters, breaking the restful darkness before dawn on a Sunday in 1950? What about al-Qaeda terrorists, who continue to plan violent and disruptive attacks on innocent people?

Jesus clearly knew the limits of perfect forgiveness as imagined by humans. He knew that we easily relativize our idea of forgiveness in difficult situations. He knew that we justify our failures to forgive in the face of another person's unreasonableness. He knew that we give up on our concept of forgiveness too quickly. Jesus' response rejected our excuses and expanded the limits of forgiveness beyond any horizon.

As we read the parable in Matthew 18, we find ourselves identifying with a servant who is thrown into prison for his debts by a “first servant” who has received the opposite treatment—his own debt has just been forgiven by a compassionate king. The first servant’s behavior is particularly scandalous because his debt was about 600,000 times greater than that of the man he’s punishing. Why does the first servant show no emotion, no sign of deep gratitude, no empathy? How can the experience of “unprecedented” forgiveness of his debt have no influence on his attitude toward his colleague? We find ourselves resenting the ungracious servant’s response, and we approve of the king who revokes his leniency with this man and sends him to be tortured.

Jesus echoes the king’s reproach—“You wicked slave! . . . Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?”—and he turns our attention back to us: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother and sister from your heart.” All of a sudden, we are expelled from the comfortable seats and find that this evil servant’s story may well be ours. We feel the kind of discomposure that David must have felt when he realized that Nathan’s condemnation of the rich man was directed toward him (2 Sam. 12:1-14). There is something about this that doesn’t seem right, and we protest. Jesus commands us to forgive our brother and sister “as God has forgiven us,” and then says that if we do not forgive, “God will not forgive us.” Can God’s forgiveness of all human sins be (at least partly) nullified by the lack of human forgiveness? Is God’s gift of grace revocable by human disobedience?

We remember other biblical texts written in the same vein: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12); “With the judgment you make you will be judged” (Matt. 7:1-2); “In passing judgment on another you condemn yourself” (Rom. 2:1); and “Who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:12). In the last analysis, what is at stake is human forgiveness, which is preceded and empowered by God’s forgiveness, but which at the same time solidifies God’s forgiveness. As Ulrich Luz has said, this costly grace, made real in the everyday life of a Christian, is the way God lets human beings encounter God’s grace revealed through Jesus. God calls us to remain in grace, as a forgiving people, as a reconciling people.

Yang-Won Son (1902-1950), one of the great martyrs in Korea, made grace real. Almost all his ministry was centered on the spiritual and material care of the residents of leper colonies. He resisted bowing down to the Japanese emperor, and

suffered six years of imprisonment and cruel treatment. Three years after the 1945 liberation of Korea, the communist insurrection ravaged the country. Son's two teenaged sons were shot to death by the communist rioters when they witnessed to their Christian faith and rejected communism. Instead of being engulfed by hatred and revengeful thoughts, however, Son forgave the shooter, petitioned for his release from the death penalty, and adopted him as his son. We know how hard it is to forgive others. We are also afraid that our unconditioned and repeated forgiveness may encourage evil people. To such protests, to even the hint of a suggestion that we cannot forgive, Jesus still responds, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26).