Written by Chiara Lubich
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"I say to you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

(Mt 18:22)

Jesus addressed these words to Peter, who, after listening to the marvelous things Jesus was saying, put this question to him: “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus replied: “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

Most likely, Peter had been deeply struck by the Lord’s preaching, and being a good and generous person, he had decided to throw himself into the new course of action that Jesus was advocating. He was ready to do something he considered quite exceptional for him, to forgive “as many as seven times.” Judaism, in fact, accepted the idea of forgiving two, three, at the most four times.

But by responding “77 times,” Jesus is saying that the kind of forgiveness he wants has no limits. We must forgive always.

“I say to you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

This phrase calls to mind the biblical song of Lamech, a descendent of Adam: “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold” (Gen 4:24). Thus hatred began to spread among the people of the world, swelling like a river at flood time into an ever-growing sea of hate.

Against this spreading of evil, Jesus proposes an unlimited and unconditional forgiveness that is capable of breaking the cycle of violence.

Only forgiveness can stem this tide of ill will and offer the human race a future that promises something other than self-destruction.

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We need to forgive, to forgive always. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting, which often indicates a reluctance to face the situation. Nor is forgiveness a sign of weakness; it does not mean ignoring a wrong that we might have suffered out of fear of the stronger person who committed it. Forgiveness does not consist in calling what is serious, trivial, or what is evil, good. Forgiveness is not indifference. Forgiveness is a conscious act of the will, and therefore a free act.

It means accepting our neighbors as they are, notwithstanding the wrong done to us, just as God accepts us sinners, notwithstanding our faults. Forgiveness is not passive, that is, not returning one offense for another, but puts into action what St. Paul urges us to do: “Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good” (Rom 12:21).

Forgiveness consists in offering the one who has wronged you the opportunity to have a new relationship with you. It makes it possible for both of you to start life over again, and to experience a future in which evil will not have the last word.

“I say to you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

How shall we live these words? Peter had asked Jesus, “How often must I forgive my brother?” Peter speaks of “my brother.” When answering him, then, Jesus had in mind above all the relationships among Christians, among members of the same community.

Therefore, we must act in this way first of all toward those who share our faith in our family, at work, at school, and so on.

We know that someone who is offended by some word or action is often tempted to respond with a similar word or action. And we know that even persons who live in the same house often fail in loving because of differences in personality, because they are irritable, or for some other reason. We must therefore never forget that we can maintain peace and unity only by constantly renewing our attitude of forgiveness.

We will always be tempted to think of others’ imperfections, to remember their past, to wish that they were different. But we need to acquire the habit of looking at them with new eyes, and seeing them as new persons, always accepting them immediately and without reservation, even if they do not repent.

You might say, “But that’s hard!” And you are right. This is the challenge posed by Christianity. We are, after all, following a God who, as he was dying on the cross, asked his Father to forgive those who had caused his death. And he was raised from the dead.

Let's take courage. Let's begin to live like this. We will find a peace we have never before experienced, and a joy we have never known.

Chiara Lubich

Read more on this topic:

Joan P. Back, "Spirituality of Reconciliation," in New Humanity Review, n.14

Next month's Word of Life:

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:39).

The Word of Life, a sentence of Scripture, is offered each month as a guide and inspiration for daily life. Its translation into 90 different languages and dialects reaches several million people worldwide, through print, radio, TV and the internet. From the Focolare Movement's beginnings, Chiara Lubich wrote her commentaries on the Word of Life, and after her death on March 14, 2008 , her early writings are now being featured once again. This commentary was originally published in September 1999. If you would like to read experiences of life related to this or to past "Words of Life," they can be found in *Living City*, the Focolare monthly magazine *(livingcitymagazine.com)* or in books published by *New City Press (newcitypress.com)*.

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