

How many times?

A sermon by Bob Mendelsohn
Given at Yom Kippur 5772
9 October 2011
Sydney Australia

INTRODUCTION

We've been here before, haven't we? We've been together for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. We've celebrated Passover and eaten lamb and drunk four cups of wine. We've read the Al Chet and repented of our sins, year after year. We've sung the Avinu Malkenu (which is usually not sung on Yom Kippur when it falls on Shabbat until the Neilah service), and asked God to be gracious to us. We have done this before. And you have to wonder... did it work then? Will it work this year? When the shofar sounds at the end of our services, will we be forgiven? Will the sounds be muffled and repetitious like the voice of Charlie Brown's teacher in the television show or will we actually hear steadfast declarations of hope from the Almighty?

How many more times do we have to do this?

When I first pondered the title, "How many times?" I flashed on "How Many More Times," the song on English rock band Led Zeppelin's 1969 debut self-titled album. I used to listen to that with great frequency back in the day. Then I thought of Bob Dylan's song, *Blowin' in the Wind* to which I gave myself even more often back then and throughout the decades. His anti-war ballad of the 1960s Flower Children was almost our neo-national anthem. "How many times must a man look up before he can see the sky? Yes and how many deaths does it take till..."

Bob Marley sang, "How many times have I told you I love you," but his disappointment of her departure is very evident.

You might however be younger than Dylan, Marley or Page and for you the Pussycat Dolls wrote, "How many times? How many lies? How long you been sneaking? How

long you been creeping around?" Their lament of faithfulness in the bold-faced unashamed-ness of her boyfriend's sneakiness made her to "go[ne] and thrown out all the records. All the ones that ever reminded me of you I've gone and tore up all the pictures 'Cause there was not one shred of truth"

So when I hear "how many times?" used to introduce a song, I would need to ready myself for a song from the past decades and more importantly one of disappointment. I'm sure to hear that although I've been good, and brought good things to a relationship or to a job or to someone else's life, that it was not met with good, in fact, it was mocked and ridiculed. I'm going to be shown to be ignorant of their unfaithfulness and disappointed.

However, I hope you aren't readying for such just now as you read the title of the message in the program or here online. In fact, I want you to hear something very different, in fact, a message of hope and one of outreach from heaven to you. A message of tireless fidelity and awesome love. That's what's in store for you for the next few minutes. See if this makes sense to you.

DOES REPENTANCE WORK?

This season called the Ten Days of Awe are all about reconciliation. We get right with neighbours. We get right with God. We get right with anything and everything we can. Or at least we are charged to do so. And once a year, this is a very good thing to do, you know? We have already chanted Kol Nidre. We have already confessed in Avinu Malkenu that we have no good works of our own. We have admitted with our souls painfully exposed the sins of our lives the last year if not the last few days. Is that enough?

I imagine if we asked after services tomorrow in synagogues around the city, around the country, around the world, that we would find most Jewish people not very

confident about our reconciliation. We would wonder, “Did it work?”

I remember my grandmother passed away in 1995 just hours before Rosh Hashanah. My mother rang me to tell me of Bessie’s passing away, and told me, “I guess her prayers last Yom Kippur didn’t work.” Wow, the popular interpretation, at least in our worldview, was that the prayers we offered during the Holidays were intended to renew our contract for another year with the Almighty. This annually-renewable contract is a very limited view of the Bible and of the covenant God has with us Jewish people, but it’s one held by many. No wonder we scratch our heads and wonder, “*Did our prayers work this year?*”¹

FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING

That’s why this story we read tonight in Matthew chapter 18 is so significant. Within the story is the assurance of the love and forgiveness of the Lord to all people, good guys and bad guys, grandmothers and rabbis, crooks and neighbours. This is a story of good news for all people. And please, notice with me the beginning, the story line, the question that began Y’shua’s reply.

Matt. 18.21 Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

By this, Peter is being very generous. Jewish tradition limited forgiveness to three times, perhaps based on Amos 1:3, 6, 9 and Job 33:29-30 (also Luke 17:4). Peter thought his willingness to forgive seven times was much more generous than the rabbis required and thus surpassing the

¹ According to the rabbis, this season is divided into three parts: “On the day before the New Year, He cancels one third of Israel’s sins, on the New Year’s Day another third, and similarly on the Day of Atonement” (Tanhuma, Emor, 22, quoted on page 332, Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching 1200-1800*, citing Jonathan Eybeschueetz’s sermon on Yom Kippur 1744)

righteousness of Pharisees and teachers of the law (Matthew 5:20).

Maybe Peter was aggravated by his brothers, the other disciples. Maybe he had forgiven them before and was done with it all. And sometimes, don't you feel like that also? Don't you feel like you've given enough... forgiven enough... dropped your expectations so low that they are in the basement already and yet people still disappoint you? So maybe Peter is generous; maybe he's weary. Either way, he's confronted by a challenging answer of great disproportion. Y'shua tells him 70 times 7 times (or 490 times) he needs to forgive.

What that says is that Peter needs to quit keeping score of how generous he is. Peter needs to stop thinking of himself in social situations. Peter is being told that generosity goes well beyond human comforts and human calculations. What it says to me is that God, who is well represented in the story as the king, does not want us to keep score.

This expression of 70 x 7 may be a deliberate allusion to Lamech's vengeful and bitter words in Gen 4:24: "If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times." Now in Y'shua there is the possibility of a radical reversal from seventy-sevenfold vengeance to seventy-sevenfold forgiveness.

We look at this story on so many levels. First we see the Forgiving King. And we see the awesome debt the first servant owes, it's 10,000 talents. This amount is so large that it cannot possibly be a personal loan. Even as taxes from a province it is an incredibly huge amount. Ten thousand was the largest number in the first century. The value of a talent varied from six to ten thousand denarii. A denarius was a common laborer's daily wage. A minimum daily here would be approximately \$100. Ten thousand denarii, or one talent, would be the equivalent of \$1,000,000 in today's economy.

Ten thousand talents would be **10 billion dollars**. Needless to say, Y'shua used ten thousand talents as a ridiculously exaggerated sum of money that the servant owed the king.

How long would it have taken the servant to have paid the loan back? Eternity! He never would have been able to pay it off, so what did he do? He begged for mercy. He cried out with a deep longing, and the king was merciful. The king forgave the debt to his own praise and glory. What a king!

That would have been a great story right there, you know? The story would be: SERVANT OWES A GREAT DEBT, KING FORGIVES THE SERVANT-- end of story. That would make the news to be sure.

But the story goes on. We see the servant as someone who is unforgiving. He finds a fellow slave who owes him one millionth of the first servant's forgiven debt. That's nothing. OK, it's something for a slave/ servant in those days, even as a person who lives on Centrelink gifts might view it, but it's nothing by comparison. The 2nd servant owed .000001 the amount of the first servant, approx. 3 months' wages. That was much more payable. That debt was manageable and was probably personal.

And you want the 1st servant to proclaim what he had heard. You want the 1st servant to share the forgiveness of the debt which he had received, but that's not what happens. He is told to get ready for debtor's prison and the 1st tosses the 2nd into jail. Yipes, nothing like you would imagine. It's unthinkable! It's unconscionable. It's just...wrong!

The 2nd servant thinks to himself, 'How many times....' And there seems no answer. The story ends with the fate of the 1st servant, but nothing is told us of the 2nd. At least, nothing more than the debtor's prison sentence. Something aches in you when you hear this, doesn't it?

O, JERUSALEM, JERUSALEM

I have another story, taken from Matthew's gospel also. It's near the end of Y'shua's earthly ministry and he's trying

to get the attention of the Jewish leadership. He wants them to listen to him, all the while knowing they are not listening. The lines are taken from Matthew 23. We read, ““O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. (Matthew 23.37)

Here we have another tale of longing, and aching. We hear another Bible character saying, “How long?” or “How often” or “How many times?” And again it’s an aching for relationship. That’s what seems to drive the biblical writers, and certainly The Biblical author, Y’shua in this case. He wants us to know Him. He wants us to stop living away from Him and to gather as chicks gather to their mother hen. I can tell you as a father and a brand-new grandfather that nothing satisfies me more than being with my family, and being in a good relationship with each one.

What bothers the Almighty, what saddens him, what makes him say, “How long?” or “How many times?” is the reluctance of the people of God to approach Him.

WHAT PREVENTS OUR APPROACHING GOD

Two things prevent our approaching God. One, our thinking that we don’t need Him. We’re doing fine, thanks. No need for God. No need for spirituality. No need for forgiveness. I’m doing fine. A Jewish man told me this week that he didn’t need to pray tonight because he had not sinned this year. Oops, that’s his first one, then.

The second reason we don’t approach God is that we think Him unapproachable. Or we don’t believe He exists. Or we think he’s harsh and unwilling to be kind. Both of these stories in tonight’s sermon highlight the longing and personal desire of the Almighty in fantastic opposition to this view.

Both of these are wrong. In the first case, we don’t know ourselves. In the 2nd, we don’t know God well enough.

Dear friends, be honest about you, and be honest about God. You are a sinner needing God's forgiveness. God is loving, and longs to extend that forgiveness to you.

Y'shua didn't only teach about this. He went to a Roman cross and died for us. God raised Him from the dead on the 3rd day to usher in a new Kingdom with Y'shua as our King.

Receive Him as Lord and Saviour in your life. Start 5772 with a new beginning. It's better than apples in honey. It's better than 10 billion dollars in lottery savings or forgiveness. It's eternity with God and it starts as soon as you say 'Yes, sir.' Don't leave him wondering "how long?" Say "Yes" and it will be eternity with God for you. That's good news, to be sure!

Other uses of "How often" or "How many times" in the Bible:

1Kings 22.16 Then the king said to him, "**How many times** must I adjure you to speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?"

2Chr. 18.15 Then the king said to him, "**How many times** must I adjure you to speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?"

Job 21.17 ¶ "**How often** is the lamp of the wicked put out,
Or *does* their calamity fall on them?

Does God apportion destruction in His anger?

Psa. 78.40 ¶ "**How often** they rebelled against Him in the wilderness,
And grieved Him in the desert!

The story:

Matt. 18.21 ¶ Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Matt. 18.22 Jesus *said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

Matt. 18.23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

Matt. 18.24 "And when he had begun to settle *them*, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents.

Matt. 18.25 "But since he did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.

Matt. 18.26 "The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.'

Matt. 18.27 “And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.

Matt. 18.28 “But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and *began* to choke *him*, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’

Matt. 18.29 “So his fellow slave fell down and *began* to entreat him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’

Matt. 18.30 “He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.

Matt. 18.31 “So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.

Matt. 18.32 “Then summoning him, his lord *said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me.

Matt. 18.33 ‘Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?’

Matt. 18.34 “And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.

Matt. 18.35 “So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”