

DEVOTIONAL READING

Philip Yancey Devotional

The Mathematics of Legalism

Matthew 18:21-19:12

“How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Matt. 18:21-22)

Although legalists, at first glance, may seem “righteous,” Jesus warned against the subtle dangers of legalism. Oddly, it tends to lower a person’s view of God. If I manage to meet all the requirements of a strict rule book, I may begin to feel secure about my own goodness. I may think that I have earned God’s approval through my own efforts.

People who questioned Jesus in person—both his enemies the Pharisees and his friends the disciples—sought a precise list of rules so that they could strive to meet those obligations and thus feel satisfied. To such people, Jesus shouts a loud “No!” We never outgrow our need for God; we never arrive in the Christian life. We survive spiritually only if we constantly depend on God.

In the first story in this passage, Peter tries almost ludicrously to reduce forgiveness to a mathematical formula: Let’s see, exactly how many times must I forgive someone? Six? Seven? Jesus mocks the question and tells a profound story about God’s forgiveness, so all-encompassing that it defies all mathematics.

Next, the Pharisees try to pin down a formula for divorce. Once again Jesus avoids the answer they want to hear and points instead to the principles that undergird all marriages.

These examples illustrate how Jesus usually handled questions about specific problems. When a pious man asked which neighbors he should go about loving, Jesus told of the Good Samaritan who showed love even to his enemies. Jesus didn’t tell a rich person to give away 18.5 percent of his belongings; he said to give them all away. He didn’t restrict adultery to the act of intercourse; he connected it to lust, adultery of the heart. Murder? In principle, that’s no different from anger.

In short, Jesus always refused to lower the sights. He lashed out at every form of legalism, every human attempt to accumulate a list of credits. The credit goes to God, not us. The chief danger facing legalists is that they risk missing the whole point of the gospel: It is a gift freely given by God to people who don’t deserve it.

Life Question: When has it been hard for you to forgive someone?