

- Open thou these lips, oh Lord, that this mouth may show forth thy praise. Open thou our hearts, oh God, that as a community of worshipers we may together show forth thy praise. Amen. Then Peter approached him with the question, "Master, how many times can my brother wrong me "and I must forgive him? "Would seven times be enough?" "No," replied Jesus, "not seven times, but 70 times seven." Have you ever found it difficult to overcome a grudge? You need not hesitate to confess it. In each of us and in all of us, there is an abundance of the attitude of Shylock, who has likely, many of you can recall, in the first act of the Merchant of Venice gave bold expression to his harbored resentment of Antonio. Listen to his words. "How like a fawning publican he looks. "I hate him for he is a Christian, "but more for that in lowly simplicity, "he lends out money gratis "and brings down the rate of usance here upon us in Venice. "If I catch him once upon the hip, "I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him." Now, minus the Shakespearean idiom and with different motivations likely are we not also perennially employed in nursing and nourishing our hostilities, our jealousies, our resentments? At the end of his speech, spoken as an aside, Shylock concluded, "Cursed be my tribe if I forgive him." Now, there are many of us who would defend Shylock. There are persons who would argue that it is appropriate and necessary for all people to protect their own rights. Hostility in defense of one's rights is no vice. These persons are convinced that one should always keep up one's guard. That to be tough-minded is simply to be plainly practical. These persons are convinced that the way of forgiveness will not work. The forgiving spirit is indicative of weakness. It involves loss of face. It includes making concessions that are hard to make and, indeed, quite risky to make. It is like being chicken and results in encouraging others to push us around and, perhaps, to crush us. Moreover, many of us are aware that there is a limitation to one's ability to forgive. George Buttrick, I believe it was, wrote some years ago, "No man can say I forgive you. "He can only say I forgive you as I ought "within the measure of my power to forgive. "And that measure is not wide. "No wider than one's own dim righteousness and love. "No wider than one's power to trace "and cancel the black legacy of his own righteousness." For some of us, the claim that we possess the forgiving spirit would be sheer hypocrisy and arrogance. We are involved in each other's failures. There are really no innocent parties in a society that cannot solve the problem of war or overcome racial tensions or adequately control the spread of emotional illnesses. Each of us, must we not confess, is implicated to some degree in every act of faithlessness, every scene of violence, every period of apathy, every mood of hopelessness. In some quarters, we have developed a pseudo-forgiveness which has only aided and contributed to our corruption. A British psychologist by the name of W.L. Northridge tells the story of a woman who had a grievance against a fellow church member. The accused fellow member brought to the other an offering of apology, an ample one, and sought forgiveness whereupon the other responded, "I see that as a Christian, "I must not hold resentment against you. "So I forgive you, but remember, "we can never be the same to each other." Here, forgiveness was extended so resentfully that it was not forgiveness at all. Now, are we forced to conclude from all this that we cannot forgive one another? Admitting that we are but corrupting ourselves, if we claim to forgive a neighbor or a nation when we have not and acknowledging the difficulty of making concessions and renouncing our own will and restraining our own resentments, is there more to be said? Well, something more has been said. It was spoken by the man we call Jesus the Christ. What he said was startlingly different. What he said came into dramatic focus in this conversation between himself and a follower called Peter. How many times can I forgive somebody

who has wronged me, was Peter's question. This was in line, I'm persuaded, with a number of questions that friends of Jesus ask him regularly. He seemed to have a profound interest in persons who cannot control their feelings of resentment. Remember that on another occasion, Jesus said if thy brother sinned, rebuke him, but if he repent, forgive him. If he's sinned against these seven times in one day, but seven times turn to thee again saying, "I repent." Thou shalt forgive him. Now, let's not be too interested or get too interested in the mathematics of these statements. How often must I forgive, Peter wanted to know. The answer was an incredible one. As Jesus said, not seven times, as you suggest, but 70 times seven times. In this disturbingly impractical statement, Jesus is not merely indulging in hyperbole. This is no clever use of words for the purpose of making an impression upon Peter and upon succeeding generations. Here Jesus is proposing a new dimension for living. Here Jesus is turning a spotlight upon men's potential for greatness. Here Jesus is dramatically proclaiming that man can move beyond himself, beyond the limitations of his fears, beyond the restraining power of his jealousies, beyond his moods of mistrust and hostility, beyond his pretended forgiveness. Man can move beyond himself into ever expanding regions of risky behavior, of unprecedented behavior, behavior based not upon suspicion but upon respect, behavior based not upon failure but upon the possibilities of restoration, behavior based not upon antagonisms, not upon hopelessness, but upon the very genuine and real prospect of life built upon hope itself. Such an act is in the beyond. It is located at the end of man's limitations. It's in the future. What is passed by way of failure and mistake, what is passed by way of clashing human relationships, what is past is past. This new dimension involves beginning at the extremities of man's failure and defeat, including his resentment, and a new dimension for all the futures. Back of this mathematical exaggeration lies the proposition that man can live in harmony with the will of God. That's the sort of being man is and nothing less than that potential will satisfy. Now, God is merciful. Cannot man also learn to be merciful? Now, God is forgiving. God's forgiveness is multiplied many times, seven times, 70 times seven times and more. In the life of every person God has created, in all his dealings with his creature man, the great creator and sustainer of life must ever possess the forgiving spirit. Now, the question is, cannot man also learn to be forgiving? Christ tried to make certain that the practice of the forgiving spirit is a requirement, a requirement of all persons who would approximate their potential for greatness. To be forgiving, one must keep at it. It must be a sustained practice. It must be unprecedented. It involves risks, but the practice goes on ceaselessly. One time, seven times, 490 times and beyond. In interpreting this point, the late Ernest Fremont Title, long famous as the distinguished pastor of the first Methodist church of Evanston, said our forgiveness of others is not the condition of God's willingness to forgive us. It is the condition of our ability to receive the forgiveness of God. A man cannot be in the fellowship of God if his own spirit of forgiveness is out of harmony with God's spirit of forgiveness. In a shorter sentence, man cannot be forgiven unless he forgives. Now, this does not mean being chicken-hearted. To forgive as Jesus instructs us does not mean to be stupid, so stupid as to be blind to the nature of one we call enemy. We are not asked to deny the realities of human failures and animosities. Let us admit that there is evil in the heart and in the plots of one's enemies. The enemy is full of greed and narrowness and prejudice and selfishness and continue the list of items on indefinitely, if you will. Let us agree that there is cause for being suspicious of him. And it is logical that one should be afraid of him. But this is precisely the reason I must forgive him. I too am full of greed and narrowness and prejudice and selfishness and on item by item to the full extent of your list or mine. Jesus is proposing that when I look at my enemy, I see myself. When I am afraid of him and hate him, I am really looking upon the evils in my own life which produce fear and hatred. What I would like to see in him would, of course, be a change of heart. I

would like to see him make some kind of gesture of friendly regard for me. I would like to see him indicate by some kind of word or gesture that the fearful emotions he awakens in me are unjustified. But what Jesus wants me to see is that, in turn, I must do precisely that for him. I must seven times and 490 times and beyond ceaselessly gesture in his direction, indicating some evidence of my sincere purpose to meet him as a man and to resolve our differences and to develop mutual understandings and trust. And this prompts me to add the thought that forgiveness, as interpreted by our Lord's life and word, must be a spontaneous forgiveness. I do not interpret all this New Testament doctrine in any moralistic sense. This moralistic kind of interpretation, it seems to me, would lead us into preoccupation with symptoms rather than the real disease. Forgiveness of one's fellows does not say do this or leave undone that. It's your duty, therefore, perform it. This is what is required, get at it. No, it seems to me, that our Lord intended that we forgive 70 times seven. And in so doing, we learn how to behave towards all other people naturally and spontaneously. One overcomes his festering hatreds and resentments not because of pressure. One's nature becomes changed through every forgiving thought, through every kindly spoken word, through every impulse to forgive, through every deed that supplements and supports the word. Presently, in this extended process, one forgives without prompting. One learns to trust another without any pressure. One learns to deal fairly with the other without some kind of mechanical or forced premeditation. This makes it possible for me and my enemy to meet not merely as equal and fellow sinners, but as persons mutually responsible for our wrong relationships and as equal and fellow travelers moving yet a distance, perhaps, but moving nevertheless toward the fulfillment of our intended and potential selves. Thus forgiveness becomes a creative act. The imaginative mind of Jesus was never more alert than when he responded to Peter's question. "How many times shall I forgive?" Jesus said go beyond the point where you think you should stop. Go beyond your strength. Go beyond your present capacity. Forgive 70 times seven. This makes forgiveness creative, I say. No longer can I regard it as a sign of weakness. It is stronger than my urge to retaliate and my wish for revenge. There is a British team of writers, a husband and wife team, Warner and Lotty Pels, who in a recent book have said forgiveness is the growing point. Note that the growing point of life in togetherness. It is the feeler that reaches out into uncharted space. It is the tendril of the climbing plant. And so Jesus intended it to be. As to Peter and to all others who listen, he said or he presented an impractical proposal that, upon more mature analysis, we recognize to be quite practical. It seems unrealistic at first. It becomes reality in practice. Now, in these final moments, may I propose some implications of what I have tried to say. What are the implications of the Christian demand for the forgiving spirit? This is a question that relates to my professional life. I am a teacher. I am interested in other teachers. The teacher, capital T, I would say, the teacher who challenged Peter was no mere technician and he was not discussing matters of methodology. He proposed a dimension beyond the levels of techniques and status and recognition. To teach creatively, I and other teachers are challenged to master the art of forgiving spontaneously that colleague of whom I am jealous, that student who misjudges me as an instructor, that rival who slanders and that administrator who is unfair or indifferent and the whole situation in which I live and labor that I describe usually as frustrating. Indeed, the whole area and set of wrongdoers toward whom and toward which I am resentful must be reconsidered. Shall I forgive 70 times seven in my professional life? This same question by implication is related to my life as a citizen. I am a native-born American. I need not add the details about the proximity to the Southland in which I have grown up. To live as a loyal American, I am summoned to press toward a new dimension of relationships with political leaders with whom I differ, with opponents of the causes I cherish and for which I labor. I am called also to forgive nations whom I have

called enemies and peoples who spitefully use us and condemn us. This question also applies to my family where the dimension of forgiveness is often avoided. And, finally, this question relates to my religion and to my life as a churchman. There is much to be forgiven of the church in our day. The artificialities, the superficialities, to mention only two. In my personal religious faith, I regularly acknowledge my need of the forgiveness of God for my sins, but the question remains, am I really prepared to say that God cannot forgive my sins until I am ready to forgive the sins of all against whom I am grudgingly related, resentfully related, against whom I harbor these feelings of ill will? We have counted seven statements spoken by our Lord from the cross. I have tried to speculate upon some of the thoughts that he did not express. To be sure, it's an impossible task but among others, perhaps, somewhere in the three-hour period of anguish and torture, our Lord might have recalled the words spoken to Peter about forgiveness. There were more than 490 persons present at the crucifixion likely. He forgave all of them. There were to be unnumbered others to be forgiven. He still remembered. As in the midst of the torture of that hour, he prayed, "Father, forgive." For me as the human person, it's impossible to go as far as Jesus proposed. But still from the cross itself, there comes to me the call, forgive, forgive, forgive. Let us pray. Eternal God who through thy son, Jesus Christ, has called us into hope that our sins may be forgiven, help us to remember that he also called us to forgive one another. Send us forth in his name and in his spirit to face all the irritations of human relationships in the tomorrows determined to be something like the persons Jesus Christ calls us to become. And now may the grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of God, the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.