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## *Seventy-Seven Times?*

An article from the *Cathedral Times*

by Dean Sam Candler

When the little boy is told by his mother that he has to brush his teeth tonight, he replies, “But I brushed them last night!” When the woman gently complains to her husband that he hasn’t told her that he loves her, he says, “Yes, I did. I told you a couple of weeks ago that I loved you.”

One day, the middle-aged man is proud of himself that his new exercise routine is working so well. Two months later, however, it is long gone. Same with the middle-aged woman. She loves her new diet, even enjoying some of the new foods, and she has lost five pounds. Two months later, however, it is back to the old foods.

Every one of us, at some age or another, learns this lesson: The things worth doing in this life, have to be done again and again. We learn something, something wonderful. We do something, something wonderful. And then we have to do it again, as if it is a practice, over and over again.

The things worth doing in this life are rarely accomplished in just one sitting. The things that count in life, the values that form us, the activities that create our character, the disciplines that form our bodies – all these things become real when they become habits for us, practices, not one-time superstar events.

We have to brush our teeth more than once. We have to say “I love you,” more than once. We have to exercise, we have to eat well, more than once. In fact, we have to do those things regularly, almost daily, really, if we want to have their effects become real in our lives.

Well, it’s the same thing with spirituality. Spirituality is not a one-time miraculous event that changes our lives completely and forever, without our ever having to worry about it again. Effective spirituality is a practice, a habit, a routine.

That is why, when Peter asks Jesus whether he (Peter) should forgive as many as seven times, Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22). Actually, this verse should not be taken literally! Do we really think that once we have hit the magic number of seventy-seven, our forgiving obligations are over? No. Jesus means that forgiveness is an ongoing act, even a perpetual act. Maybe like washing our face, or saying, “I love you.” One time won’t do it. Nor will seven. Not even seventy-seven times.

It helps to understand forgiveness as a kind of release. The word means to release something—maybe even ourselves. And it is the strange nature of humanity that we seem always to be getting tangled up, knotted up, tied up in things. We start the day clear and fresh. But then we get tangled up. Relationships get cross ways. Impatience and anger grab us. Soon, we need release.

To forgive means to release. It is truly one of the major principles of the Christian life. To release. For, when we release others, we suddenly feel ourselves released, too. When we let go of what we believe people owe us, then it is we who feel wonderfully free. The way God sets his people free, is by using people to do it! God uses us to set his people free.

Once? Seven times? Seventy-seven times? Yes. Yes to all those numbers. And Yes to a lifetime of release. It is like washing

our face, like saying “I love you.” When those acts become practices and habits, they become part of who we are. And when forgiveness becomes part of who we are, we are close to the identity of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sam Candler".

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Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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