

Matthew 18:22 Peter asks, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times." Jesus responded, "I tell you, not even times, but *seventy times seven times* (italics added). What did Jesus mean? Most of us immediately check the foot note in our Bible, which says "*Or, seventy times seven.*" We like the fact that 490 is so much larger than 77. So that's what Jesus was saying! Believe it or not, we are still missing the punch line.

The key to understanding Jesus' meaning is embedded in the passage to which He alluded. The phrase "seventy times seven" is found in only one place in the entire Bible - Genesis 4:24, in the ancient song of Lamech. But who was this obscure biblical character? Lamech was a descendant of Cain who had inherited his forefather's murderous instinct, but who, in his shocking lust for revenge, outdid even Cain:

I have killed a man for wounding me,  
a young man for injuring me;  
If Cain is avenged seven times,  
then Lamech seventy-seven times.

Anybody who crossed Lamech would have been paid back big time - not just seven times, but seventy times seven! In Scripture, seven is a significant number. It symbolizes completeness. But Lamech lusted for a vengeance that went far beyond completeness.

Once you catch Jesus' reference, you understand the contrast He is making. He is saying that His followers should be as eager to forgive as Lamech was to take revenge. Just as Lamech was vowing a punishment that far exceeded the crime, we should let our forgiveness far exceed the wrong done to us. We should be Lamech's polar opposite, making our goal to forgive as extravagantly and complete as possible.

Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg. Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus (Zondervan Publishing House, 2009)