

6 Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him, **7** he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, **8** who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. **9** The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim; Israel was in great distress. **10** Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord, “We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals.”

11 The Lord replied, “When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, **12** the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites^[a] oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? **13** But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. **14** Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!”

15 But the Israelites said to the Lord, “We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.” **16** Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer.

Again?

How many times do I have to tell you? I can’t tell you how many times I’ve said that in the greater part of the last decade and or how many more times I will say it in the future. With a tone of annoyance these words freely flow from our mouth directed at our children but have you ever wondered whether or not God asks the same question of us, “How many times do I have to tell you?”

And have you ever wondered how many times is too many? Is there a limit to how many times God has to tell us? How many times should we tell others when they hurt us?

But if there is any indication of how many times God told Israel and they didn’t listen it starts with those dreaded words recorded in the books of Judges, “Again...” *Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines.* They’ve got their bases covered. If anything the book of Judges shows us a motley crew of characters ready to do anything other than serve the one true God. The recurring theme seems to be, “*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit*” (Judges 21:25). Joshua had led them into the Promised Land but it didn’t take long for them to rebel and serve the losers who could not protect their land from the advancing Israelites. Israel failed to drive out... God told them this would happen. It was just a little thing though, who could blame them. God was asking too much.

They have their bases covered. There are seven false gods listed and it’s as if we are being told they had a complete number of false gods they served. They served every one but the one true God. They abandoned him long ago. *And because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him,* **7**

he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, 8 who that year shattered and crushed them. They were crushed and pressured from the East and the West. They were surrounded on both sides and raiding parties were entering the Promised Land and carting Israelites off into slavery. But even more disturbing than those who crushed and persecuted them was how long it took for Israel to wise up and call on the name of the Lord for help. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites.... Israel was in great distress. 10 Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord, "We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals."

It's a sad state in Israel and the situation only gets worse as God responds to their cry for help with, I've already saved you from, *"the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, 12 the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands?"* God has saved them a complete number of times. He saved them from slavery in Egypt. He delivered them into the Promised Land a land flowing with milk and honey. *13 But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. 14 Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!"*

How many times do I have to tell you? God should greet us with the same words every single Sunday.

That's probably the most terrifying thing that anyone could hear. I'm not going to tell you anymore. I'm done. Cry out to the gods you have chosen. The writer to the Hebrews says, *"It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God,"* but it's even more terrifying to fall out of them. We don't recognize the sinfulness and serious nature of sin. When we pursue sin, when we actively seek out sin - we forsake God and serve other gods. We may not be open idolaters like in the days of Old but that doesn't mean we do not worship false gods. Secret Idolatry serves those gods we wouldn't call god. Secret idolatry is trusting in anything other than the one true God to save. What do we trust in to deliver us? There is always guns, gold, and a tree fort in Montana. Or maybe it's our own skills and abilities that we depend on to get out us of any and every problem but when problems creep up that are beyond our control, then what?

But it's not that bad. Often we imagine that our sin, secret idolatry isn't that bad. We might even treat God's law like the speed limit, it's more of a suggestion anyway. Everybody is doing it. It's not really that bad. Certainly not worthy of anyone being crucified but when we see the cross and Jesus hanging there it wasn't because of what other people have done. It is for us that he went there.

We may be good at blaming others or anything else for our own faults. It's the violent video games, technology, this or that political party. It's always somebody else fault rather than our nature. That's because we behave like a bunch of entitled adolescents who have once again maxed out our credit card and then return to our Father in heaven looking for him to bail us out, again. When we

come to him expecting that we deserve forgiveness or that he somehow owes us forgiveness God says something different, “You’ve chosen your gods. Let them save you.”

But there is no where else to turn. *the Israelites said to the Lord, “We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.”* 16 *Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer.*

They repent. Repentance is not just the words we speak, it’s also a life that is changed. Israel, it’s hard to believe, got rid of the foreign gods and served the Lord. God could bear their misery no longer and he did something about it. He raised up another Judge, a deliverer from an unlikely source. The son of a prostitute. Jephtha didn’t choose to be born from a prostitute. It wasn’t his fault. His Father Gilead cheated on his wife. When the other sons came along, they drove him out and told Jephtha he would have no part in their family. It seems that even the elders of their town wanted him gone. His brothers were physically abusive to him to the point that they drove him out and Jephtha fled.

But like any good Western oppressed by the powerful, they turn to an outlaw, a rebel to lead them out. They turn to Jephtha for help and he came back on the condition that he would be their leader. God provided a way out, a deliverer for Israel, again. Just like he did with Othniel, Ehud, Shambar, Deborah, Gideon, Abimelech, Tola, Jair. Jephtha just so happens to be number 9 out of 15. Each with their own character flaw. Jephtha is famous for vowing to sacrifice whatever came out of his door first if he won a war and well his one and only daughter greeted him as he returned home. It’s like the female version of Abraham and Isaac only this time it appears as if he went through with it. The book of Judges is not a book of heroes. You won’t find many heroes in the Bible, that’s because there is only one.

God has not sent us a judge to defeat those who oppress us but he has set up government officials. He does raise up those who defend life. That’s part of the Law written in the hearts of all people. It’s the conscience that makes us feel guilty when we break his law. It’s what curbs the sinful nature and keeps us from killing each other. That doesn’t mean we won’t fall into temptation but when we do, we repent, and do our best to amend our sinful life so that we don’t repeat it again and again.

But how many times will God forgive? How many times will he call us to repentance and forgiveness? That’s not a wise question to ask especially when you are planning on sinning. The picture we find in scripture is one that God is always ready and willing to forgive. He is like the prodigal Father looking off in the distance waiting to catch a glimpse of his son and rush out to greet him. He is the God of Israel who continues to speak to his wayward children even after they have forsaken him and served other gods. He is so much different from Jephtha. Jesus was not the son of a

prostitute, although many have claimed that Mary was unfaithful, he is the Son of God. Jesus was in control the whole time. He was no helpless victim of his Father's foolish vows. He volunteered to step in and saved. He suffered what we deserve. He was cut off from God in our place. He forgives our every sin, even those sins we think aren't worth forgiving because they don't seem that great.

The Father has taken the entitled adolescents credit card and paid the debt for us and in our place. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. He treats us as sons. He doesn't want slaves. He wants a son. He gives us the full rites as an heir. How could we even consider going back and wallowing in our own sin?

Give thanks to God that our question, "How many times do I have to tell you?" is not filled with the tone of annoyance from an angry God but with love and concern. How many times do I have to tell you - you're forgiven, freely, for my sake. He tells us in multiple ways. Through brothers and sisters in Christ. Through our baptism when we recall it on a daily basis. Through God's Word and Sacrament. All of these things point us back to God's Work for us.

How many times? Again and again and again. I'm sure I'll have to tell my children again and again. They need to be reassured even when they try my patience. We too need to be reassured when we try God's patience. And he forgives us again. Amen