

## My Favorite Number

I've never really had a "lucky" number. I figured they were for folks who like to gamble. I haven't really even had a "favorite" number. That, too, seemed kind of pointless. While I still don't have a "lucky" number, I have had a "favorite" one for a few years now. Are you ready for this? My favorite number is **491!**

In the Bible, numbers are sometimes significant. For instance, God specified *exactly* how many of each type of animal Noah was to take into the ark, Gen.7:2-3. He also used numbers in *representative* ways. For instance, He specified that disobedient Israel would wander in the wilderness for 40 years; one year for each day the faithless spies were in the land of Canaan, Num.14:34. Then in the book of Revelation, numbers are also used in a *symbolic* way: the number **one** symbolizes *unity* (as in *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, etc.); **three** symbolizes God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit); **four** symbolizes the world (north, south, east, and west); **seven** symbolizes as the *perfect* number (the combination of the divine number, three, and number of the world, four); and **ten** symbolizes *completeness* (as a *complete* set of fingers or toes).

What does God's use of numbers in the Bible have to do with my favorite number? Consider Matt.18:21, "*Then Peter came and said to Him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?'*" Jesus had previously (cf. vv.15-17) been teaching the disciples about how to treat a brother that sins- some versions include "*against you,*" which if accurate, better explains Peter's question. The Jewish rabbis of the time taught that one was obligated to forgive a person that sinned against them only **three times**. In his question to Jesus, Peter has evidently doubled this requirement and added one more for good measure to get "**seven.**" But he surely didn't expect the answer he received from the Lord! "*But Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to **seventy times seven,**'*" v.22. Now if you're following the math,  $70 \times 7 = 490$ . Now...

Think about what Jesus is saying. If your brother (familial, spiritual, or worldly) sins against you 490 times (or "*seven times a day,*" cf. Luke 17:3-4), and returns saying, "*I repent,*" Jesus says to "*forgive him.*" The point seems to be that our willingness to forgive should mirror God's. I don't think Jesus meant that although we are expected to forgive a sinning brother 490 times, at 491 he's out of luck!

How many of us would be willing to forgive someone who *sinned* against us either *seven times* in one day, or *490 times* overall? But turn that around for a moment. Have you ever sinned *against God* seven times in one day? Or even after becoming a Christian, are you past 490 sins *against God* now? I've been a Christian for 46+ years. If I ~only~ sinned once a month that would put me at 552! I do know about you, but I'm pretty sure I've petitioned God to forgive me **far more than 490 times!**

The point is that if we expect others to forgive us, and more importantly, if we ask God to forgive us such exorbitant numbers of times, how can we possibly refuse to forgive those who sin against us? Even those who do so repeatedly? "*For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment,*" Jas 2:13.

One of the incredible things about God is His willingness and capacity to pardon His *mercifully forgiving* children who humbly confess *their* sin(s) against Him, and sincerely

ask for His merciful forgiveness. *“If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,”* 1John 1:8-9. While this truth surely should not be taken as some sort of *license* to sin, cf. Romans 6:1-2, what a great God of love, mercy, and forgiveness we serve! The number **491** reminds me of these things, which is why it is my favorite number- and probably will be so as long as I **live**. (Philip C. Strong; Viking Drive Church of Christ; 3791 Viking Drive, Bossier City, LA; online at [vikingdrivechurchofchrist.com](http://vikingdrivechurchofchrist.com); email to [mrpcstrong@hotmail.com](mailto:mrpcstrong@hotmail.com))