

Voices: Forgiveness: 70 times seven

December 2, 2025

I am changing the story to protect identities.

Richard and Gina are two precious church members. They both work hard to make a living, to cover their bills and to give their offerings to the Lord each week without fail.

Richard lost his job. Gina works in the mailroom for a local oil and gas firm.

To help cover expenses, Gina, a great cook, bakes a load of goods each week for Richard to sell during the week to make ends meet. They needed a good central location. So, I let them sell their goods at church during the week until Richard gets a good job.

This is where mission creep sets in.

One thing leads to another

Before long, more and more come to the church parking lot to buy Gina's baked goods.

Gina has built a great reputation for her cooking. Richard is a kind man who helps everyone who stops by. If people can buy the goods, he gladly sells them. But whatever is left, he gives to those in need.

Soon, their baked goods began to sell out. So, they added boxed lunches to their product line. They needed extra space to do all this, along with warmers, tables, take-out containers, utensils, bags, signage and chairs for those who want to eat on-site.

The sweet couple did not have all these things. So, they started using church equipment during the week to accommodate their customers.

They got tired of hauling things from their home. So, they started storing them in the church. Storing things in church takes away from the storage the church needs for its normal needs.

The couple started to put church stuff out behind the building, because they didn't want their items to be stolen. The result? Church things were exposed to the elements and stolen.

When I found out, I asked Richard and Gina to please stop putting the church things out in the parking lot.

I knew they needed storage, but the church doesn't have room to store personal items. This also was complicated when other church members asked if they could store things at the church because they didn't have money for storage.

When I said they could not, the members would ask, "Why do you let Richard and Gina do it, if we can't?"

Do you see the problem?

Pushing

Richard and Gina were so kind to accept my guidance. They did what I asked ... for about two weeks.

Then, their things began to pile up inside the church again. They even began to use classrooms for their items, which meant on Sunday mornings, some of our Sunday school classes had nowhere to meet.

When I found out, I asked Richard and Gina, as kindly as I could, to please

remove their items, to stop storing in the church, or I would not be able to let them use the church grounds for their business.

They agreed. Their business was booming.

Even so, they continued to abuse the privileges we gave. Nine times they abused the privileges, even sneaking around trying to do what they wanted where I would not catch wind of it. But our sins always find us out.

On a recent Sunday, I called them into my office to tell them they no longer could use the church for their baking/catering/dining business.

It is hard to be hard on people, but those who mistake kindness for weakness, who try to game the system—especially in the Lord's house—must face consequences.

Forgiving

Monday, Gina asked for a private meeting.

It doesn't matter what conflicts we've had. I always want our relationships to continue, never to stop worshipping the Lord together.

So, there was Gina in my office. She began to cry.

She said: "Pastor, we lied to you. We have abused the church. You gave us chance after chance, and we took advantage of you and the church. I am asking you to forgive us.

"Do you remember when Peter asked Jesus how many times he was to forgive?" she continued. "He wondered if seven times was too many. Jesus told Peter, not seven times but 70 times seven. Pastor, will you forgive us 70 times seven? Will you give us one more chance?"

She began to cry some more.

She got me. She was right. Because she admitted their sin. Because she was broken. Because she reminded me of the Scripture about forgiveness.

And mostly because I remember how many times I ask God to forgive me for the same sins I commit over and over, I could not *not* forgive. I could not help but give them another chance. And I have.

There is a note to make with regard to forgiveness. The Lord says we must be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. We can forgive, but we also should do all we can to protect ourselves and prevent recurrence.

As a result, I forgave, but I had them sign a document stating they would not take advantage of the church again. If they broke their word, there would be no further discussion. With the next offense, all their things would be moved out without one plea.

I cemented it by having the couple come before the church as I stated our agreement publicly, since their offense had been public.

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