

I've never really had a "lucky" number- figured those were for folks who like to gamble. I haven't really even had a "favorite" number- it seemed kind of pointless, I suppose. While I still don't have a "lucky" number, I do now have a "favorite" one! It has taken me roughly fifty years to decide that 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, Genesis 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, Numbers 14:34. 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/toes).

What does God's use of numbers in the Bible have to do with my newfound favorite number? Consider Matthew 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 (in 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 three times. Peter, in his question to Jesus, has evidently doubled this requirement, and added one more time for good measure. But he surely didn't expect the answer he received from the Lord in v.22, "*But Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'*" If you're following the math,  $70 \times 7 = 490$ .

Think about what Jesus is saying. If your brother (physical, 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 in that it is limitless. I don't think Jesus meant that although we are expected to forgive a sinning brother 490 times, at 491 times he's out of luck!

Think about that: How many of us would be willing to forgive someone who *sinned* against us- not just hurt our feelings, or said something that we felt was insulting, but sinned against us either *seven times* in one day, or *490 times* overall? However, I've been married for almost 32 years now, a little over 11,000 days. While I'm not sure about seven times in one day, I'm fairly sure I've needed forgiveness of some sort more than 490 times! Likewise, I've been a Christian for about 15,000 days. I am absolutely certain 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 these exorbitant numbers of times, how can we 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*," James 2:13.

One of the greatest blessings of being a Christian is the *limitless* forgiveness of God that is available to those who humbly confess their sin(s) to 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; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at [southportcofc.org](http://southportcofc.org); email to [mrpcstrong@hotmail.com](mailto:mrpcstrong@hotmail.com))