

Forgiveness is our topic today. You heard the Gospel reading. We need a right understanding of the forgiveness we have in Christ—and the forgiveness we are to offer one another. And we are going to deal with some of the difficult things that Jesus says here—especially His conclusion.

C.S. Lewis will help us get started with a definition. He says it this way, “Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it.”

This is true of how God handles us. He takes the weight of our sin upon Himself. He restores relationship. He deals with us graciously. And our Gospel reading calls for the same from us.

Last week, we heard Jesus conclude our reading with what to do when “your brother sins against you.” This shows that the topic is *sin* as we come to our reading. We are not just talking about hurt feelings—or being overly sensitive—or trivial complaints—but real human sin.

And of course, let’s not get our feelings hurt so easily. Let’s not be so sensitive. And don’t complain. But Jesus tells us how to address sin.

And here, the goal isn’t to be right—it is to win your brother. It is to restore relationship. This conversation leads to Peter’s very interesting comment in our Gospel reading today. “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

Now, Peter thinks he is being overly generous. In the oral tradition of Judaism, forgiving three times was adequate. There were limits for how much grace you needed to show before you were right in holding onto your bitterness and resentment.

But Jesus calls us to a different way. And His words are clear. “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” Now, there is disagreement whether Jesus says 77 times—or seventy times seven—490 times. But if this is our question, we are missing the point.

Jesus is expressing that we are to forgive without limits. Seven is the number of creation and divine fullness. Ten is the number of completeness and human responsibility. It’s not like we are allowed to hold a grudge—give people the silent treatment—or live in bitterness when it gets to the 78th offense. Although that still might be a good start—often it only takes one offense for us to be angry.

Jesus calls us to unlimited forgiveness for others. And for all kinds of offenses. When someone borrows money and never pays it back. When someone takes days to answer your text. When the Amazon box disappears from your front porch. When the referees get the call wrong. When someone dares to disagree with your deeply held religious idea. And even when your brothers sell you off into slavery in Egypt—as we hear in our Old Testament reading.

It is an extraordinary demand. And think about how you relate Jesus here. What do you do with the things Jesus says? We can just ignore this expectation. We can see it as

inconvenient. Or we can accept it for what it is—the Word of God. I guess my question today is, how will you respond?

In our reading, Jesus goes from His maxim—not seven times, but seventy times seven—to the *Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*. Jesus is deep within the wisdom tradition in His comments. Parables invite our careful consideration. And like with every parable, there are shocking details.

The story is rather simple. “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.” A king examines his finances and notices a huge debt—ten thousand talents—with one of his servants. A talent takes about 20 years for a laborer to earn. The Super Bowl champion Seattle Seahawks just sold for over nine billion dollars. It’s a little crazy. But the debt was something like that—almost infinite.

The servant could never repay this amount. And yet, the servant merely asks for time. “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” The request is ridiculous. More time is not going to solve his problem. It would take him two hundred thousand years to pay it off. Most of us don’t have that much time.

But then the most amazing thing happens. “And out of pity for him, the king of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.” The king takes the whole weight of the debt upon himself. As we begin to interpret, notice what this says of the debt of our sin before God—and the miracle that is forgiveness.

Since God is infinite, to sin against Him is an infinite offense. Our best efforts cannot bridge such a debt—and we don’t do our best anyway. The cost is Christ. He alone can redeem us.

And so, as we fall on our knees before Him in faith in His character—and hope in His promise—we recognize that we have been forgiven much. Your sin is a nine-billion-dollar debt before God—cancelled in Jesus Christ. We can never understand Christ’s redemptive work until we see the depth of our sin and the cost of our redemption.

It is as Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ.”

But here, in the story, things go south. The servant is freed from his debt. He and his family are set free. But immediately, he goes and finds a fellow servant who owes him money. It’s not nine billion dollars—but it is enough to make a difference. We would probably do something about it.

Jesus says it’s a hundred denarii—what someone would earn in a hundred days of work. Maybe something like twenty thousand dollars. A debt we are not likely to overlook. But nothing compared to the debt the king just forgave.

The fellow servant he confronts begs for time, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” The words are almost identical to the words he used before his king. We hear the similarity—but evidently the servant does not. He chokes his fellow servant. And he has him put in prison until he can pay it back—a self-defeating plan—as unforgiveness always is.

Now, to fast-forward to the end, other servants report the whole affair to the king. And the king calls this servant to account a second time. He confronts the servant, and he says, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” And in the final verdict, “his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.”

And just in case we have any doubts about the meaning of the parable, Jesus tells us. “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” It’s a heavy conclusion—something we might not expect from Jesus. But here it is—for us to wrestle with. And that’s what I invite you to do today.

When we hear a story like this, we have two impulses. The first is to identify with someone in the story. Second, we evaluate the story. We approve or disapprove of what the characters do in the story.

Overall, it is easy to evaluate. We know what this means. The king is fantastically generous. However, he is also strict at the end. For us, the behavior of the servant is repulsive. The king forgives his vast debt. Then the servant throws his fellow servant in prison—for an infinitely smaller offense.

But with whom do we identify? Not the king. We are not multi-billionaires. We have never forgiven a debt of this kind. And besides, Jesus makes it clear that the king is God the Father Himself.

This leaves only two characters. The servant who chokes—or the servant who gets choked. And I believe that Jesus wants us to identify with the unmerciful servant. Not that we are to be like him. But we are to learn something about ourselves from him.

We can see why Jesus tells this parable. Jesus describes what happens when someone sins against us. When we are hurt, offended, angry. And it happens—in the family, in the Church, in the world. We think we have the right to respond to the sins of others however we please—whatever fits the offense. Generally, we would rather choke and imprison than forgive. But that is not the path that Jesus has for us.

He intends us to forgive as we have been forgiven—to love as we have been loved. To see our sins—to receive God’s mercy—and then be merciful to those who sin against us. Grace is never something we deserve—and so we cannot demand that others deserve grace from us. We give it freely—as it has been freely given to us. And this concept is all over God’s Word.

In 2 Samuel 22, David prays, “With the merciful you show yourself merciful.” In Luke 6, Jesus says, “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

In Matthew 5, Jesus says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” In the Lord’s Prayer, in Matthew 6, we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” You get the idea.

But in this context in Matthew 6, Jesus also gives the same warning we see in our Gospel reading, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

I invite you today to take all of this seriously. Forgiveness is not optional. But it starts with the amazing good news that makes the rest of it all right. Grace is something we need from God. And we find it in the cross of Jesus Christ. A great debt has been paid on our behalf.

But if we want His forgiveness—the kind of forgiveness that ushers us into eternal life—we respond with the same for others. There is no other way. We can even say that God recalls His forgiveness if we are unwilling to forgive. Unforgiveness pulls us away from Christ.

I always think it is good for us to be specific here. Think of the people who have wronged you. Maybe someone blew up at you at work. Maybe someone betrayed a confidence. Maybe they just told you that you were wrong.

We leave the Church over such things. We quit our jobs. We divide families. But don't. Christ has a better plan for us.

We can't force grace from others—but we can offer it ourselves. And don't wait for an apology—just give it. Be reconciled. Take the burden of others' sins upon yourself. Give them a clean slate and a new start. Even seventy-seven times or four hundred and ninety times. Freely you have received—freely give.

God has forgiven us an eternal debt. I hope we have come to terms with that today. I hope we rejoice. But as a result, we also reflect His grace back to one another. It's a privilege if you think about it. And it shows the depth of our perspective—and our character—not to mention our emotional intelligence.

Forgiveness is gratitude. Since God has had such mercy on us—if that mercy has touched us at all—we must have mercy and forgive others. There is no other way. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+