

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

"Forgive me...as I forgive"

1st Reading: Sir 27:30—28:9

Psalm 103

2nd Reading: Rom 14:7-9

Gospel: Mt 18:21-35

Our Gospel today begins with a question Peter asked Jesus, *"Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?"* Peter was trying to be generous. But he put a limit to the number of times we would forgive someone who sins against us.

We, ourselves, are always offending God: we fall short of the great commandment to love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as our self. God never stops forgiving us, provided we are sorry for offending him. We are forever living in the forgiving love of our heavenly Father. And we must reflect that forgiving love to others.

Jesus answered Peter's question with, *"I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times."* (Some translations have seventy times seven times.) Either one symbolizes an unlimited number of times. Jesus is going to explain his answer in the parable of the unforgiving servant: it illustrates that living in the kingdom means experiencing the immeasurable forgiveness of God, and those who belong to the kingdom must reflect that forgiving love in their relationships with others.

Jesus said, *"The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants..."* such as provincial governors or financial administrators. We are reminded here that judgment day is coming. We will have to face the King and give an account of how we handled his business. We are accountable for the way we treat others and for the proper management of our lives. We will have to face the consequences of mismanagement and mistreatment of others.

The parable continues, *"A debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount,"* (literally 10,000 talents). This would be equivalent to \$10 million. *"Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt."* The circumstances of this parable are pagan, for in Jewish law, the sale of an Israelite for debt was forbidden, as well as the sale of a wife for any reason. The sale of the official, his wife, and children would not realize more than a fraction of the debt; it is therefore a form of punishment.

At the threat of being sold, *"The servant fell down, did him homage, and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.'"* Although the official asks for patience to pay everything, it is clear that he cannot possibly do so. This symbolizes the sin of man against God; it is a debt which cannot be wiped out by man; and if it is not wiped out, it involves the debtor in eternal bondage.

"Moved with compassion [at the servant's plea] the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan." The king does not take up the promise of repayment; he forgives the debt completely: the fantastic sum of \$10 million, which represents our debt toward God—wiped out completely out of sheer mercy and generosity.

"When the servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount" (literally 100 denarii). This would be equivalent to \$20.00. *"He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, 'Pay back what you owe.' Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison until he paid back the debt."*

The king, who represents God the Father, has forgiven the servant his huge debt; but he is unwilling to forgive his fellow servant. Rather, he insists on putting him in prison until he pay him back. He does not extend the mercy shown him to another. If God has forgiven us all, equivalent to \$10 million, how much more should we be ready to forgive the petty sins, equivalent to \$20.00, of those who have done wrong to us. Repeat them as he will, our neighbor's offenses against us can never compare with ours against God—and still God forgives. Nevertheless, our forgiveness of neighbor is the condition of God's pardon of us.

If man does not forgive, he cannot expect forgiveness; if he does not renounce his own claims, which are small, he cannot ask God to dismiss the claims against him, which are enormous.

When the king heard of the matter, he summoned the servant and said to him, "'You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me too. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?' Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt." The king proceeds to exact the rigorous justice, which the merciless servant has just demanded. The unhappy man is handed over to the torturers who will perhaps force him to disclose some hidden reserves. He is handed over "until he should pay". But he will never be able to raise so large a sum; therefore, his imprisonment and suffering will never come to an end—and that's the equivalent of hell.

Jesus concludes the parable with, "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart." Acting in forgiveness is the way of the kingdom. To refuse to forgive puts us outside the kingdom and, consequently, outside the realm of God's forgiving love. The sovereignty of God demands that divine mercy be the measure of forgiveness in our relationships with each other. God pardons those who pardon others.

The parable forms a kind of commentary on the petition of the Lord's prayer, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Mt 6:12). The first reading adds, "Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven." Moreover, it gives us the motivation for the extraordinary spirit of forgiveness, which is expected of us and which has just been commanded to Peter. We must forgive our brothers and sisters their trifling offenses because of the far greater offenses which God has freely forgiven us. The greatest injury or offense that we can suffer from another is as nothing compared with what God has pardoned us.

The divine forgiveness demands that we exercise toward our neighbor something of the generosity and spirit of forgiveness which God shows toward us. Unless we are willing and ready to forgive those who are indebted to us, we ourselves cannot hope for forgiveness.

Unforgiveness can easily turn to bearing a grudge, a deep-seated resentment and stewing anger that would make us hostile and incline us to seek revenge. Such a disposition puts us on edge and spills over unto everyone around us. The first reading tells us, "Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight. The vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance... Remember your last days, set enmity aside; remember death and decay, and cease from sin! Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor... overlook faults."

The first beneficiary of forgiving the person is our self. In this way, we let go of the injury and the accompanying hurt so that it no longer preoccupies us. Otherwise, the fixation on our wounds would replace our focus on our indwelling God. We would lose the source of life, love, power, and well being. Hate would arise in our heart and displace our love for God and others. We must carefully guard this holy disposition of love and not let injury destroy it. That is why it is so important to let go of it through forgiveness. In this way we dispense harmful tension and stress, so detrimental to our health and happiness. Unforgiveness is self-destructive.

Our need to forgive does not mean that we need to remain in the presence of the one who insults us or abuses us. Jesus did to remain in the company or befriend the Pharisees. He related to them, but at a distance. And although he had a special call to suffer for us in his passion and death, he maintained his dignity and stood up to the one who struck him during his trial. Jesus faced his abuser and said, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" (Jn 18:23). The only adequate way to relate to another person is love.

Sometimes people say, "I forgive but I can't forget." The hurt of the injury may be so severe that it tends to linger in our memory. That is understandable, but it need not be detrimental. We can use the memory to intercede for the one who harmed us. The thought of the event will remind us to flee to God for healing and love. It is said that "it is human to err, but divine to forgive." We draw divine mercy from God to be able to forgive. Such communion with God will force us to live out of ourselves and in God, who is love. Then we will have the love needed for mercy and forgiveness.

For mercy is love unlimited; it is love leaping beyond itself, reaching out heroically to others. Such love and mercy may very well one day erase the memory of the hurt; at least, it will remove the bitterness of the memory; it will be replaced by the memory of the loving and forgiving Jesus on the cross, who was praying for his murderers, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). The violation and damage suffered will have been repaired and healed and occasion our being transformed into the image of the loving and forgiving Jesus; for, Good Friday will have become Easter Sunday for us.