

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 17 September 2023 + Rom 14:7-9 + Mt 18:21-35

Last Sunday, we heard Jesus teach us about how to deal with a fellow Christian who has sinned against you—about the proper, that is, most effective way to engage in fraternal correction. Today's Gospel follows immediately upon that teaching, focusing on a similar theme: when a brother sins against you. Only today the focus shifts from the exterior—how to engage with him, to the interior—how to forgive the offense in your heart.

This whole topic of forgiveness is one of the most difficult I think in all of the Church's teachings, because all of us have been hurt; all of us have been sinned against. And a few of us may have even been hurt to a nearly unimaginable degree. So the question may immediately come: is Christ's teaching here reasonable? Do I really have to *forgive and forget*? Even more, how do I know if I have truly forgiven *from my heart*?

Well first, to my knowledge, the phrase *forgive and forget* is found nowhere in the Scriptures. And for good reason! As long as we have memory, we are probably not going to forget an offense. The best we can do is to try our hardest to not dwell on past offenses. The next question, how do I know if I have truly forgiven another, is a little more difficult. One of my favorite spiritual writers, Fr. Jacques Philippe, says this: *Forgiveness means saying: 'this person has wronged me, but I don't want to condemn him...God is the only one who...judges justly, and I leave it to God to weigh this person's actions and pronounce judgment...I want to look at [the offender] with the eyes of hope...I also want to believe that from the evil done...God can draw good (Interior Freedom, 65).*

So the next question is, how can I change my heart to desire the offender's salvation when at the moment I may want him to feel the full weight of his sins? Well, as we know, just as only Christ can judge a heart, only He can change a heart. And that's where our Gospel parable today comes in. All of Jesus' parables were meant to convert hearts, and so today's parable is not just a nice story about the importance of forgiveness. Rather, it is about the unbelievable depths of God's mercy on us. You see, the King in the parable is God, and the servant who *owed him a huge amount* is each of us. I've read different theories on the exact monetary value of the *huge amount* owed, but the point is that it was so much that it was *absolutely impossible* for the servant to pay the king back. It would be like you or I owing the entire amount of the federal deficit to a creditor! And yet the king doesn't just reduce the debt or give him more time to pay back; no, the king simply *forgives it*.

And that is exactly what God has done for us. We owe an infinite debt to God because of our sins, and yet He has forgiven it all on the Cross. Receiving that truth into the depths of one's heart has for centuries turned even the most hardened sinners into the greatest Saints. And yet I don't think it is even a blip on the radar screen for many people today.

Why is that? Well theologically we might say it is due to ‘the loss of the sense of sin,’ and that is true, but I think it can be better understood using the image of the family. Like self-centered grown-up children who neglect or even disown their parents in their old age, people forget their Heavenly Father. Or even worse: many just don’t care. They are simply too busy to consider the Father Who created us and has given us every good and perfect gift. They don’t know it, but our very existence—every moment—depends on His love. Even more, when we chose to walk away from Him, the Father sent His Son to call us back home. The Son’s perfect obedience, even *unto death*, was the only way to ‘undo’ our disobedience. Each of us is that forgiven debtor of the King in our Gospel today. We have been given and *forgiven* so much: more than we could repay in a hundred lifetimes.

But deep down, we might think, ‘*what’s the big deal? I haven’t killed anyone. I’m a pretty good person.*’ And yet we forget the very first commandment—the most important of all the commandments—is not *thou shall not kill*. No, according to Jesus, the most important commandment of all is this: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind*. How many of us can say we love God that much? And God demands our love because like any good parent, He doesn’t want to see us hurt ourselves. He knows that if we love anyone or anything more than Him, this idolatry will be the death of us. Only His infinite love can satisfy our desires to love and to be loved infinitely.

Thankfully, God also knows that we are weak children, and that’s why He sent His Son: not only to forgive us, but to teach us how we can forgive others, whose offenses against us, in the grand scheme of things, are nothing compared to our sins against the Lord. On the night before He gave up His life for us, Jesus prayed over the chalice: *this is the chalice of my blood...which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins*. The price of our forgiveness was the price of His precious blood. So we cannot be indifferent to this sacrifice! Rather, He calls us to imitate it: *do this in memory of me*. Not just keep ‘doing’ the Mass, but also to *live* the Mass! Live the mercy I have given you! In fact, we might even say that we are most like God when we forgive others.

We must never forget that we are forgiven debtors. We are not our own. As St. Paul reminds us in our 2nd reading today from his letter to the Romans, *we are the Lord’s*. And this remembrance of how much we have been forgiven must change us; change our hearts, and make them merciful hearts, like the heart of the Father. The Lord doesn’t ask us to forgive as a form of repayment, because we could never come close to that. No, He asks us to forgive as a *response* of gratitude for His mercy. So perhaps a point for prayer for each of us this week is: *Who do I need to ask the Lord to help me to forgive in my heart, starting today?*