

The 22nd Sunday after Trinity
November 8, 2009
Matthew 18:21-35

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21 Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.

23 "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 25 And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

We know it by heart.

It's so easy to say.

But none of us forgives as we should.

None of us forgives always and without limit.

None of us forgives as God forgives, and as He requires us to forgive.

Instead we are like the apostle Peter in today's Gospel, seeking attainable goals for forgiveness.

(Is seven times enough? Surely, that's going above and beyond.)

We are like the servant in today's parable, set free from an impossible debt, then seizing our fellow sinners by the neck and exacting every penny from them.

You'd never know it from the masks we put on.

We're good at designing and wearing them.

Fine, upstanding people. Pleasant around others. Sitting here in church, after all. Maybe even busy in service to the Lord and His Church.

But who is it, for you? Who is that person, that brother or sister in Christ, that you just can't forgive, or whose quota of forgivable offenses against you is just about full?

Maybe you're civil enough. Maybe you even get along, on the surface, to the degree that you have to. But time and again some prior incident keeps coming to mind. You were hurt. You were embarrassed. Someone else's will triumphed over yours. And you won't forgive them. Or you tell yourself that you do; but as it plays out, it's certainly not the kind of forgiveness you'd like to receive when you ask for someone else's forgiveness... the kind of forgiveness that Esau gave

his brother Jacob, or that Joseph gave to his brothers in Egypt... the kind of forgiveness that Jesus gave on the cross to those who were torturing Him to death.

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” It’s serious business—this forgiveness of others. After relating how the servant in the parable was ultimately handed over to the torturers until he should pay his debt that was impossible to pay, Jesus concluded,

“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”¹

And earlier, right after teaching His disciples the Lord’s Prayer, with its 5th petition about forgiveness, our Lord added these sobering words,

“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.”²

Martin Luther preached on this Gospel this way:

“Some keep right on sinning after receiving forgiveness, believing that the gospel allows everyone to do just as he pleases. But the gospel is a message for the depressed, for people with a guilty conscience, not for those who keep on defending their sins, nor is it for those who deliberately sin against a gracious God.”

And writing about 50 years ago, the Swedish Lutheran Bishop, Bo Giertz, wrote about this Gospel,

“To refuse to forgive is one of the clearest evidences that a man himself has not received forgiveness and is not able to receive it. The faith he thinks he has is only an imaginary faith. It is of the head and not of the heart.”

Then Peter said to Jesus, *“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”* Jesus said to him, *“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”*

Dear friends in Christ, our own sins—of not forgiving others, of holding grudges and being mean, of placing other priorities above hearing the preaching of God’s Word... our own sins which are many, but which ultimately ooze from our human nature corrupted by sin... this sin makes us all debtors to God of an impossibly massive debt that we can never pay off, no matter how much time God might give us, and no matter how hard we might try to work off the debt by ourselves.

But, in His mercy, God has had “pity” for us, just like the master of that servant had pity for him. The Greek word is *splanchnizomai*, “to have your heart go out to someone; to love on a gut level, with all your inner self and emotions.” God has *“splanchnizomai-d”* us! He has had profound pity on you and me because of our massive debt of sin. And He has not merely given us more time to work it out, or whittled down His holy and just will into the realm of possibility for us to

¹ Matthew 18:35

² Matthew 6:14-15

manage ourselves. No, He has completely forgiven our damning debt of sin! He has paid it in full and destroyed all record of it, by transferring it all to His own dear Son, Jesus Christ, who paid the entire debt for every single person in the world—past, present, and future—with the priceless currency of His own sinless life, His precious blood, and His innocent death.

While we were still sinners, our merciful Lord reached out to us in Holy Baptism, and called us into the freedom of the Gospel. And in His Church—through His forgiving Word and through His body and blood given for you—your merciful Lord richly and daily wipes clean the record of your sin, and cancels your debt. He continues to have pity on you, and to cover your sin with the righteousness of His own dear Son.

Because of this redeeming work of Christ, you and I are now completely free of our debt to God! No more can Beelzebub the bill collector legitimately harass us. No more damning statements! No chance of getting upside down on the mansions that God is preparing for us in heaven! You are free! You are loved! In Christ, you are restored to that no shame, no guilt, uninhibited, perfect communion with the Triune God that Adam and Eve were blessed to know in Paradise.

And being freed from our oppressive debt of sin, and being abundantly blessed in both body and soul, with all that we need and more, we are free to be extravagant with this same forgiveness toward others! We are free to throw fistfuls of dollars—this same lavish forgiveness—to those who sin against us... whose wrongs against us are nothing compared with what God has forgiven us in Christ!

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

May God continually grant you His Spirit and grace to realize the enormity of the debt He has forgiven you, and to love your fellow sinners as you are loved by Christ.

Amen.