

September 13, 2026
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 18:21-35

Peter approached Jesus and asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. 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. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' Moved with compassion, the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan. When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. 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.' But he refused. Instead, he had him put in prison until he paid back the debt. Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. 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.

So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart."

Background:

Last week Jesus instructed his disciples on how they are to approach another who has sinned. In this week's Gospel, Jesus continues his instruction on another aspect of dealing with hurtful and offensive behavior. It is about not causing harm, but maintaining good community relationships.

The text begins with Peter asking about how many times he should forgive. This leads into Jesus' parable on the importance for the disciples to act out of the same need to forgive others as they themselves have need of forgiveness from God.

Peter asks if forgiving another person seven times is sufficient. The Pharisees, who tried to live in a way that went beyond what was required by the law, taught that one should be willing to forgive three times. Perhaps Peter thought it would be exemplary, to suggest seven times instead. But Jesus insists the members of his community should forgive seventy-seven times. Other translations of this text render it seventy times seven. The point is the same.

Jesus makes his point again through a parable which illustrates the underlying values of acting toward others with the same forgiveness that they have already received from God. The parable also reflects the Near Eastern reality where kings exercised power of life and death over their subjects. From original writings, we know the actual amounts--the first debtor owed ten thousand talents, while the second owed one denarius. Six thousand denarii are the equivalent of one talent. The contrast in the amount owed reflects the punishment that each could potentially receive. The first could lose his wife, children, all his property, and most importantly, his status as a free person. The second is put in prison over an amount that could be raised by family and friends. The response of both to the possible punishment is the same; it is only the outcome that is different. The last line of the text makes the point. God is like the generous king in the parable who is willing to forgive our considerable debt. Jesus' disciples are expected to imitate that generosity in their own dealings with one another.

The parable also is a window into a very different culture. The role that the community plays in bringing their non-forgiving member to the attention of the king, who had just forgiven him his debt, is not out of character.

The social pressure on the king to act if he is going to safeguard his reputation within the community is a powerful force, which may not be immediately recognized by most westerners as we reflect on this text.

In our society, offenses and events of the day are quite often reported in terms of economic impact. Wars, hurricanes, and the mergers of companies are given dollar values, while relationships and people's lives that will be affected are not commented upon. Western culture has a much different value system than that of the world in which Jesus lived. The real damage with sin was what it did to the relationships. In the parable, the king forgives an impossible debt. In part he most likely did so because to put his servant in jail would also mean he would lose honor with the rest of his household—even though the same code of honor would have him jail that servant. This society functioned very differently than our own. We could think of this in contrast to the actions of district attorneys who, in order to get reelected, want to be known as tough on crime.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is your experience of being forgiven by another?
2. What is your experience of feeling you were never really forgiven by another?
3. How does your experience of forgiveness affect your ability to be forgiving?
4. Have you ever struggled to forgive another? Are there also significant occasions when you have been able to forgive others? In your opinion, is there a difference between forgiving and forgetting?
5. Can you recall stories in the Gospel where God is portrayed as being forgiving, and also passages where God is portrayed as having uncompromising expectations?
6. What do you think Peter is feeling as he asks his question at the beginning of the text?
7. Are there people you know who seem to have a great ability to forgive?
8. Are there places in your life where you are aware of the consequences of living with a lack of forgiveness for an extended period?
9. Can you talk with God now about your awareness of God's desire to forgive you, or some other thought or feeling that arises out of this text for you?

The Gospel background and reflection questions are prepared and distributed by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel, as edited from Reflections authored by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for September 13, 2026, the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.
The vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance, for he remembers their sins in detail.
Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.
Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the Lord?
Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself, can he seek pardon for his own sins?

If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath, who will forgive his sins?
Remember your last days, set enmity aside; remember death and decay, and cease from sin!
Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor; remember the covenant, and overlook faults.

The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.
Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name, and forget not all his benefits.
He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills. He redeems your life from destruction,
crowns you with kindness and compassion. He will not always chide, nor does he keep his wrath forever.
Not according to our sins does he deal with us, nor does he requite us according to our crimes.
For as the heavens are high above the earth, so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him.
As far as the east is from the west, so far has he put our transgressions from us.

Brothers and sisters: None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself.
For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord;
so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For this is why Christ
died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive?
As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.
The kingdom of heaven is like a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants.
A debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. He had no way of paying it back.
His master ordered him to be sold, with his wife, his children, and his property, in payment of the debt.
The servant said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' The master forgave him the loan.
That servant found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount.
He demanded, 'Pay back what you owe.' He begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'
But he refused. Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison until he paid back the debt.
His fellow servants were disturbed, and reported the affair to their master. The master said, 'I forgave
your debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant?'
Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt.
So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

Excerpts from Sirach 27:30—28:7; Psalm 103:1-4, 9-12; Romans 14:7-9; and Matthew 18:21-35