

September 17, 2023
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 yet another aspect of maintaining community relationship while dealing with less than ideal behavior.

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 he was exemplary by suggesting seven times. 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. The first debtor owed ten thousand talents. The second owed one denari. Six thousand denarii are the equivalent of one talent. The contrast in the amount owed is consistent with the punishment that each could receive. The first could lose 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 great 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 that may not be immediately recognized by most westerners as we reflect on this text.

In our society, offenses and events of the day are most often reported in terms of economic impact. Wars, hurricanes, and the mergers of companies are given a dollar value 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. This society functioned very differently than our own. Think of district attorneys who want to be reelected and 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. Can you recall stories in the Gospel where God is portrayed as being forgiving, and passages where God is portrayed as having uncompromising expectations?
5. What do you think Peter is feeling as he asks his question at the beginning of the text?
6. Are there people you know who seem to have a great ability to forgive?
7. Are there places in your life where you are aware of consequences of living with a lack of forgiveness for an extended period?
8. Can you talk to 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 written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. 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 fr.paul.gallagher.ofm@gmail.com.

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscs-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for September 17, 2023, 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

Friends,

Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for September 17th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. In the Gospel from Matthew, Jesus responds to Peter's question, "If my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus' answer is, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Then Jesus tells the parable where a servant is forgiven a debt he owes to his master, but then that servant has a fellow servant imprisoned instead of showing the same form of mercy, for a smaller debt. When the forgiving master hears of it, he has the one whose debt he had forgiven instead imprisoned also, until that debt was repaid. Jesus adds, "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

The other readings also have references to forgiveness in place of anger and vengeance, and compassion, and living for the Lord. The first reading from Sirach says, "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? Remember death and decay, and cease from sin! Hate not your neighbor, and overlook faults." Psalm 103 proclaims, "The Lord is kind and merciful, and rich in compassion. He pardons our iniquities, nor does he requite us according to our crimes, so surpassing is his kindness." In the second reading, from the letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "None of us lives for oneself, we live for the Lord. Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living."

This week's Gospel follows directly on the one from last week. Both are from Matthew chapter 18, and both deal with forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation after wrongdoing. Next week the message goes beyond unexpected and undeserved mercy, to unexpected and undeserved generosity.

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!

