

Let us pray: Lord, you know how often we struggle with this. Keep us ever mindful of the debt you have forgiven us, even our sin of not wanting to forgive others. Use your forgiveness to empower our forgiveness for those who sin against us. Amen.

“Mercy for Me but Not for Thee”

To have a contented and enjoyable Christian experience one must learn to forgive. Most of us at one time or another have wounded someone with words or have been wounded. And most of the time the hurt has come from someone who is dear to us.

Too often our response has been, if that the way you want it, then that's what you will get. Then we'll say, who cares, and we cut them out of our life. When you offer forgiveness to someone you are freeing yourself from the weight of the offense, even though you may not have been the offender in the conflict.

Have you ever considered your attitude toward mercy and justice? I don't think I can speak for everyone here, but I think the way it naturally plays out in my mind is something like this: when someone does something wrong, I want justice! I want people to be held accountable! Especially when someone has wronged me, mercy seems weak and dishonest. But, when I do something wrong, I want mercy! You can't hold me accountable; it's not fair! Please have pity and ignore the wrongdoing!

That's quite the double-standard, isn't it? If it is justice against someone else, the full force of that justice should come crashing down on the person, but if it's justice against me, then I desire mercy to prevail.

This justice vs. mercy dichotomy is the subject of Jesus' teaching in the famous parable before us today. It is my prayer that the Holy Spirit will use Jesus' words to reign in our natural inclinations towards justice and mercy and move our thoughts and hearts toward God's view of them both.

It's important to note that our Gospel takes place immediately after Jesus has some pretty important things to teach about responsibility. “If your brother sins against you,” Jesus said, “go and show him his sin just between the two of you” (Matthew 18:15). The goal of that difficult work as individuals and even including the church if need-be, was to bring someone to repentance, to get them to acknowledge that their sin was wrong and harmful to them, and that they desire to turn away from it. The final goal is being able to share the certainty of Jesus' forgiveness with that person, thus regaining our brother or sister.

But right after Jesus' brief teaching about this, Peter comes to Jesus with a question that begins our Gospel for this morning: “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as seven times?” We might speculate on what would've motivated Peter to ask this question. Was he concerned about how much time the work Jesus had just outlined would take? Was there perhaps someone that Peter had forgiven seven times but now had just wronged him an eighth time and he wanted to feel justified in cutting off that person from forgiveness? Did he want some acknowledgement and praise that he had been ultra-patient and forgiving by going so far as to forgive someone seven times?

We're not told Peter's motivation behind the question, but Jesus shoots down any selfish motivation Peter might have had and corrects any misconceptions that might have been floating in Peter's mind: Not seven times, but I tell you as many as seventy-seven times (or perhaps even seventy times seven). Do not mistake Jesus here: he's not putting a limit on the number of times someone should be forgiven at 77 or even at 490. Jesus is effectively saying, “There is no limit to the number of times that you forgive someone.”

The comparisons between Jesus' parable we read from Matthew 18 and our lives are probably obvious: the king is God, the first servant us, and the debt is our sin. The other servant is our fellow Christian or even simply a person, and the much smaller debt is a sin or sins they have committed against us. Note that the debt they owe us, the sin against

us, is not nothing. It's real, and it's painful, and it difficult. But, when we compare the debt of \$10,000,000,000 with a debt of \$19,000, that is, when we compare that God has forgiven us for all of our sins against him, what is one, or seven, or 77, or even 490 sins against us from someone else?

As we consider how we should respond to someone who hurts us, the words that Jesus put into the mouth of the king should resonate in our minds as well: "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt when you begged me to. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?"

How has God treated us? Has God held us accountable for our sins, those sins that deserved not being sold to pay the debt but suffering death in hell? Has God left some lines on our ledger that we need to clear up and get rid of? Has God allowed us to simply defer payments to a later date? Has God left us even a single denarius, or even a single penny worth of sin to deal with ourselves? No! God has had pity, mercy on us, and forgiven our debt in totality. Jesus' death was complete and did everything we needed him to do. We could not pay off any of that debt, so Jesus did it for us. Our God and King has declared us forgiven and justified; our debt is completely gone.

It's interesting, then, that Jesus would teach his disciples to pray about this in that model prayer he gave them, "Forgive us our sins as we also forgive everyone who sins against us" (Luke 11:4). Think carefully about that petition of the Lord's Prayer before we get to it later in the service. What are we really asking God to do there? We're asking God to forgive our sins in the same way that we forgive others. I don't know about you, but that doesn't sound like a good idea to me. I often don't want to forgive others when they sin against me; should I pray that God forgives me with the same fickle feelings that I show to others? Jesus concludes his parable with a similar warning, "His master was angry and handed him over to the jailers until he could pay back everything he owed. This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart."

Refusing forgiveness for someone else is a sin. We might find ourselves working toward forgiveness, not quite done, but the progress should always be forward-facing. The problem comes when I dig in my heels and say, "I will never forgive this person for what they've done to me!" That is wrong. It is a sin, and like any other sin that we hold on to and coddle, it separates us from God. In our refusal to forgive our brother or sister in faith or anyone else, we are refusing God's forgiveness for our sin. As we desire to hold our fellow people accountable for their sins, we are at the same time telling God that we want to be held accountable for our sins.

Could there be a worse fate? Not only do we sink ourselves into the depths of hell for eternity because of our sin, but we go there holding grudges and making our lives now miserable with bottled anger and animosity! It's lose-lose, both in the here-and-now and especially for eternity!

So, what's the solution? Well, it starts by bringing our sin—even our refusal to forgive—to God. We fall on our knees before God and we plead for God's mercy. We ask God for his forgiveness for our many, daily sins against God. And because Jesus lived and died in our place, the debt is canceled. We are fully and freely released from our debt we owed to God! There is nothing left; Jesus paid every last cent.

But we don't want to just know that we want that to change the way we live. Knowing what we have been forgiven means we will treat people who wrong us differently. It doesn't mean ignoring sin; Jesus was very clear that we need to address sin with people who wrong us, especially our fellow believers. But it does mean that we can forgive that sin, just like God has forgiven us. We can rejoice in wiping the small wrongs someone owes to us off the slate because we know that God has wiped our innumerable wrongs off of God's slate. We've been forgiven the 10,000 talents; what a joy to forgive the 100 denarii!

This isn't always easy, though. Whether it's the sinful nature that wants to hold someone accountable for their wrongs against us, or simply the real hurt—emotional, spiritual, or even physical—that someone's actions have caused. That hurt might be to the point that we don't trust that person again, that we can never go back to the way things used to be. But God's forgiveness for us also means that we don't hold it against the person; we're not fostering anger and

grudges in our heart. We forgive like God has forgiven us because God has forgiven us. In Jesus Name, amen.