

The Gospel this morning presents us with Jesus teaching his disciples about forgiveness. It begins with Peter asking Jesus how many times he needs to forgive someone who sins against him. “Jesus, should I forgive them as many as seven times?” The number 7 is a symbolic number in Jewish tradition – it’s the number of perfection. So Peter probably thought it was a perfect answer, an answer that Jesus would approve of, to forgive more times than most people think is reasonable – 7 times. But Jesus takes forgiveness much further. Even perfection isn’t good enough when it comes to forgiveness, Jesus is saying. “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” And then Jesus tells a parable.

So this king was going to sell his slave together with the slave’s whole family and all his possessions in order to make up for the large debt that the slave owed him. 10,000 talents. A talent in biblical times was a unit of weight for gold or silver. A talent of gold averaged around 73 lbs., which today equates to over \$2 million per “talent” x 10,000 talents – over \$20 billion - that’s how much the slave owed the king. The idea that a king would loan his slave such a ridiculously large sum is absurd, as is the servant’s plea that he would pay it all back. Most absurd of all, though, is that this king would forgive such a debt. Well, with parables we have to play along, because the value lies in the truth that is exposed through it and not in the realism or lack thereof.

So after the slave is forgiven his debt, instead of going on to be merciful to others, he becomes a cruel bully to one of his fellow slaves who owes him 100 denarii. A denarius was a day’s pay for a laborer in those days, so 100 denarii was 100 days’ wages. Still a substantial sum, but a much more reasonable one than what the first slave owed the king. We can imagine being able to pay such a sum back, given some time. But the slave in the parable, despite being forgiven an immense sum by the king is not prepared even to be patient, let alone forgiving, over this comparatively small amount. He has his fellow slave put into prison until he would pay the debt. The king finds out, notably from the larger slave community. “You

wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger, the king hands him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. And Jesus says this is how his Father in heaven will treat those who do not forgive their brother or sister from their heart.

In this parable, if we understand the king as representing God, we see that God offers forgiveness first, before the slave was expected to forgive someone else. In our own lives, if we receive the forgiveness that God gives us through the cross, the forgiveness of our sin, but then we refuse to extend forgiveness to others, we have to ask ourselves, why should we be forgiven?

In Matthew 6:12, Jesus teaches his followers to pray for forgiveness in what we call the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Jesus is clearly saying that if we want forgiveness, we must be prepared to forgive others. He continues in Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

In essence, Jesus is saying to us, "don't even think about counting how many times you have forgiven someone or should forgive them. Just do it!" Because if you're still counting how many times you've forgiven someone, you're not really forgiving them at all.

Forgiveness is tough. It's hard work. But forgiveness is the only appropriate response if we are not to become what we oppose. Forgiveness is not about letting people get away with evil. It is right to confront evil. But as with last week's gospel, today's passage leads us to pursue reconciliation with those who sin against us. Jesus' meaning in today's parable is clear: the sin for which we are forgiven by God is of such a magnitude that any sin which another person commits against us is trivial by comparison.

C.S. Lewis said, “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” We do well to remember Jesus’ teaching when we’re struggling to find forgiveness – or when we’re tempted to set conditions on forgiveness, however generous we think those conditions are. Remember the attitude that Jesus took towards those who crucified him, as he cried out, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

The deep challenge Christians face is whether we are prepared to let go of our need for “vengeance.” The world expects the payment of an eye for an eye, and to do otherwise is considered “weak.” When will the world learn that in the end, if we continue to seek justice through vengeance, the result will be a continuing cycle of more pain. As hard as it is, we are called to listen to Jesus, and to offer forgiveness and love even to those we feel don’t deserve it. Because none of us deserve it. We are forgiven by the grace of God.

*Let us pray:* God of mercy, your love overwhelms us with your generous forgiveness. You release us from a debt we can never repay. Open our hearts to extend love and mercy to all, and wherever possible, to work towards dialogue, peace and reconciliation, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.