

Trinity 22

I take as my text today from the 18th Chapter of St. Matthew:

PETER said unto Jesus, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

This Gospel passage from St. Matthew reminds me of an old saying, ***To err is human; to forgive, divine.***

Not many years ago, this saying would be frequently heard when people, as they're inclined to do, make mistakes here and there during the course of their lives.

I would dare say that we have each used this saying on occasion; but, how often have we really stopped to consider the full significance of those few words, and how they relate to us in our relationships with our fellow human beings and with God? ***To err is human; to forgive, divine.***

That we all make mistakes is, indeed, part of our human nature; that we find it difficult, all too often, to show forgiveness is also part of our human nature.

Yet, as Christians, that is exactly what we're supposed to do: to show forgiveness. It is a divine responsibility we inherited when we became ***Children of God*** through Baptism.

The Gospel passage from St. Matthew focuses our attention on this responsibility by recounting our Lord's parable of *Forgiveness and the Unmerciful Servant*.

The parable is the story of a king who calls in a servant who owes him a tremendous debt. The servant unable to pay asks for mercy and more time to pay back the debt. The king moved to compassion forgives the entire debt.

Now, this same servant calls in a fellow servant who owes him a trifling in comparison and demands payment. Unable to pay, the fellow servant is cast into debtor's prison until the debt is satisfied.

When the king hears about this, he calls in the first one servant, chastises him for the way he treated the other servant, and then takes the most extreme action he can against that servant for failing to meet his original debt.

Sounds like a simple story, yet the Parable speaks directly to us if we take the time to look more closely to discover a deeper meaning.

First, we find the parable to be a commentary, of sorts, on that familiar petition in the *Lord's Prayer* where we ask God to *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*.

We see that with the unmerciful servant who begged forgiveness for himself but could not forgive others. He approached life within a frame of reference we call a double standard — one standard for himself, another for his fellows. This double standard proved to be his undoing.

He never related the forgiveness he received with any obligation to be himself forgiving, a painful reflection today on individuals, the double standard, exempting ourselves from the same rigorous requirements imposed on others.

Remember, at the beginning of the passage, Peter asks our Lord, how many times should a person be forgiven — *Seven times?*

A favorite for discussion among rabbis, who, for the most part, supported the tradition of three offenses being the limit, Peter, perhaps thinking he was being more than twice as considerate as the rabbis, proposes seven as a more appropriate number. However, our Lord responds with seventy times seven.

Now, in the context of the teaching of our Lord, this translates into there must be no limit to human forgiveness as there is no limit to God's forgiveness.

What an awesome responsibility; a seemingly impossible requirement for us mere mortals!

Secondly, we find in this parable, on another level, a commentary on the *Kingdom of Heaven*. What it serves to illustrate is how God deals with Christians, not with the world.

Through this story of the unmerciful servant, we can see that God has forgiven us the great and unpayable debt that we, as sinners, owe him. Thus, in consideration of this forgiveness of our inconceivable debt, we have a responsibility in turn to forgive the trifling debts of those who sin against us.

Now, a closer examination of the parable can give us a greater perspective of what Jesus is trying to teach us.

In this regard, the certain king symbolizes God and we are the servants; the accounting is not the final reckoning, but more a summoning before God as David was summoned by the word of the prophet Nathan.

The huge sum owed by the unmerciful servant, the ten thousand talents, illustrates, by its enormity, the absolute impossibility of man making atonement for his own sin. We are in debt far beyond our means; we are mortgaged up to the hilt by our sins, thus only Christ could pay the price for our redemption and set us free.

Let's pause for a moment and do some arithmetic to put the two debts into a better perspective: 10,000 talents versus 100 pence, most probably in silver coins. There were other low value coins, such as the *mite*, much like our pennies.

At that time, one talent would be equal to 6000 denarii or pence. Moreover, one denari, or pence, would be the equivalent to a day's wage or about \$87 by today's standards.

An annual wage in that day would be 300 denarii — the equivalent to \$26,100 by today's standards — while one talent, or 6000 denarii would be the wages for 20 years and by today's standards the equivalent of \$522,000.

Thus, the 10,000 talents would, today, be the equivalent of more than 31 trillion dollars. Some scholars would call this the human estimate that relates to sin in human terms.

Now, if it were a gold talent instead of silver, then we are talking about an astronomical sum which would represent the divine estimate or *sin judged of in the presence of God, and secret sins in the light of His countenance.*

Compare this debt of the unmerciful servant with that of his fellow servant: one hundred pence, three months wages, compared to ten thousand talents — about \$8,700 compared to trillions.

The unmerciful servant, when called to account for his debt, unable to pay, pleads with the king for mercy, saying that he will pay all, an indication of superficial repentance proved in his later dealings with the fellow servant.

The king accepted the servant's plea for time and sets the debt aside, just as God accepts our imperfect repentance in our hope of better things to come, giving us more than we ask for.

Without a doubt, the king would have had the right to sell all the possessions of the servant, including his wife and children, and have him imprisoned until payment could be made, rather extreme measures allowed under the Law.

So too, God has the right and the power to alienate himself from us; the right and power to reject and to deliver into bondage all those who may have come up short of his expectation of us.

Now, the unmerciful servant, let off the hook by the king, proceeds to seek out a fellow servant who owes him a mere hundred pence, just a trifle in comparison.

Without mercy, he demands payment, and, when it is not forthcoming, exacts the most extreme punishment, knowing that this servant would never be able to make restitution. No love, no compassion.

When the king is told, he recalls the unmerciful servant and imposes the most extreme punishment on him for his greed and lack of compassion.

As we look at this parable, we can easily understand what our Lord is teaching us about forgiveness: divine forgiveness and human forgiveness.

We have incurred debt during our lives for which we can never repay God, not in all eternity. But God in his loving kindness grants us full remission of our debt, full forgiveness of our sins. He made it all possible through Jesus Christ.

We are indeed bankrupt before God, just as the unmerciful servant before his king. We are nothing more than his bond-servants; and, even if we did have the wealth to offer, it would not be acceptable because salvation is *without money and without price*.

It is through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ that God can abolish our debt and, through faith in him Crucified, that we can be pardoned of our debt.

Thus, as Christians, how we should forgive the debts of others? Seventy times seven, reflecting the pattern of divine forgiveness.

There is another aspect, too. Forgiveness on our part must be a constant attitude; not a question of celestial arithmetic, but rather our conduct, for divine forgiveness is unlimited and must be emulated.

What if God treated us as we treat others? We certainly would be turned over to the tormentor forthwith.

What desolation we would experience, if God forgave us sin for sin as we forgive those who wrong us.

In teaching us to pray, our Lord gave us the words that reflect this responsibility, this obligation as we can readily see in the **Lord's Prayer**; but it is up to us, with his help, to make those words our own.

As he said in the sixth chapter of Matthew, when discoursing on the **Lord's Prayer**:

For if you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, then the wrongs you have done will not be forgiven by your Father.

God is always ready to give us more than we ask; always ready to forgive those who are repentant.

Thus, we will find that, if we are willing to open our hearts and emulate God in our behavior towards others, he will give us the grace, the strength through faith, through the power of his Divine Love, to have his disposition to forgive and, indeed, be forgiven.

We may very well ask ourselves if we are like the first servant, so engrossed in our own lives that we are not able to realize the true meaning of forgiveness; or can we answer in the affirmative that we are able to emulate the true, divine forgiveness of Jesus Christ?

God has given us an example for our lives in the life and death of his Son, Jesus Christ; he has empowered us through baptism and the Holy Spirit through the *Laying-On of Hands* in **Confirmation**; and he has sustained us through his *Heavenly Banquet*.

God has given us the three-fold gift of his **Love**, his **Mercy**, and his **Grace**.

Now, indeed, it is up to us to reflect that **Love**, **Mercy**, and **Grace** in our own lives as we practice the Faith once delivered to us in love through Jesus Christ — remember that old saying: *To err is human; to forgive, divine.*