

Forgiveness

What do we need more than anything else in the world? More money? Better health? A happier marriage? More friends? Nope. There's something we need more than all these things put together. In fact, it's something we need even more than we need food and clothing and shelter. We need forgiveness. We need to be forgiven and we need to forgive. And the sad fact is we have a problem with both. To be forgiven, we first have to acknowledge that we sinned against someone and need to be forgiven. That should be fairly simple: we just go to them and say "I'm sorry and I hope you'll forgive me." But as it turns out, it's not all that simple, is it? Instead of simply saying, "I'm sorry and I hope you'll forgive me," and letting it go at that, we have a way of adding the magical word, "but." "I'm sorry, but..." "I'm sorry I didn't do what I promised, but I've been soooo busy." "I'm sorry I was rude but I'd had a horrible day." "I'm sorry I slept through your sermon but I was soooo tired." The "but" always leads to an excuse. When we add the "but," we're no longer asking for forgiveness--we're explaining why we don't think we need it. It works the other way around too. Someone apologizes to us for something they've said or done, and we say, "That's ok," but we don't really mean it. We're not forgiving them at all. The truth of the matter is that we don't do a very good job of seeking forgiveness from others or of forgiving others for their sins against us. Which is to say, the greatest need we have in life is not being fulfilled.

In today's Gospel lesson—the parable of the unmerciful servant—Jesus makes this point dramatically. A man who owes a prodigious amount of money to a king—the equivalent of millions of dollars. He begs the king to be patient with him and give him time to repay it and the king takes pity on the man and forgives his debt entirely. Then the man goes out and sees someone who owes him a day's wages and demands payment. His debtor begs for leniency with the same words the first man used to beg the king for leniency, but he refuses to grant it and has his debtor thrown into prison. When the king hears about it he summons the back into his presence, restores his debt and orders him to be thrown into prison and tortured until he repays it. What that means is that he will be imprisoned and tortured forever since it's impossible to pay back a debt while you're in prison. The lesson is crystal clear: we have been forgiven a huge debt which we could never repay by ourselves, and the one who paid our debt expects us to forgive others just as we have been forgiven. If we fail to do that, we lose the forgiveness we've received. In Jesus words: "this is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

This was not the first time Jesus had said that forgiving others was an imperative in a Christian's life. In his sermon on the mount, he warned his disciples: "if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your father will not forgive your sins."

“...your Father will not forgive your sins.” Let me put that in plain language. If you refuse to forgive people who have sinned against you--be they spouse or parent or child or friend or enemy--you are still in your sins. And if you are still in your sins you are headed for the fires of hell and all the good news in the world won't save you. Refusal to forgive others will make your life in this world bitter and your existence in the next world agony.

But wait a minute, you say, how can this be? I thought the forgiveness of sins was a free gift? It is--but it's a gift that we are commanded to share with others--a gift that is intended to keep on giving. And if we refuse to give it, when we die we will go to hell.

So it's very, very important that we learn how to forgive. But what exactly **is** forgiveness? It's not an emotion. We don't necessarily feel like forgiving someone. Emotions have a life of their own: we can enjoy the positive ones and try to control the negative ones, but we can't just produce them or get rid of them at will. On the other hand, forgiveness **is** an act of the will—it's a decision which we who have been forgiven are capable of making.

And forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. When people say, “I can forgive but I can't forget,” they're right. Forgetting is a passive process where things recede from our consciousness and finally vanish from our memory. We have no control over it as proven by the fact that we've all said and done things we would like to forget, but can't. Forgiving on the other hand is a decision--an active choice. Our model is God, who said, “I am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.” When God says that he will not “remember” our sins, it doesn't mean that He loses all awareness of them. God is omniscient, which means that He knows everything that can be known--including our past, present and future sins. What it means is that God chooses to overlook our sins and not hold them against us.

Finally, forgiving is not excusing. It's not saying that the sin someone committed against you is ok, that it's not a sin. In fact it's just the opposite. Forgiving someone is saying that even though they sinned against you, you choose not to dwell on their sin and let it color the way you think of them. Instead you try to look at them like God looks at you: as someone who needs your forgiveness. You try to look at them through the eyes of Christ.

Now if forgiveness is not a matter of feeling or forgetting or excusing the sins of others, what exactly is it? Forgiveness is doing three things that are within your power to do.

The first thing you can do is to refuse to dwell on the offense that was given. Sure, it will pop up in your mind from time to time but you don't have to go over it again and again and again in your mind and work yourself up to a lather.

The second thing you can do is to refuse to talk to other people about it. The third thing you can do is to pray for the offender. These are three things we can all do. Feelings of hurt or anger may remain, but you ask God to forgive them and He will. The knowledge of the sin we are forgiving remains, but we don't give it a place of honor in our memory. Do these things and in God's eyes you will have forgiven them.

Jesus gave Peter some very good advice about forgiving others. When Peter asked Jesus if he was required to forgive a brother who sinned against him, "...even up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times but seventy times seven times." That's four hundred and ninety times. Why is that good advice? Because if you refuse to dwell on the offenses that come your way and if you refrain from talking to other people about them and if you try to look at the person who has offended you through the eyes of Christ, long before you get to four hundred and ninety times, forgiveness will have become such a habit, such a way of life for you that it will come as naturally as breathing. Forgiving will be part of your Christian character. Can you imagine what a joyful way of life that would be? To harbor no ill will, no grudges, no desires to even the score with anyone? To be able to look at someone who has offended you not as an enemy, but as someone who needs your forgiveness? I submit to you that if you came to feel that way you would have a foretaste of heaven. "That's all well and good," you say, "but it's still hard to forgive." Pastors hear this from their flock all the time. "I've tried and tried and I can't get over what that person said about me or did to me. Every time I think about it I get angry all over again." If those words sound familiar to you, you are not alone. But always remember this: If you know that you **should** forgive the person who has offended you, and you **want** to forgive them, and you ask God to help you forgive them, then in God's eyes you will have forgiven them. It's called "repentance"—knowing that something you are doing is wrong and wanting in your heart to stop doing it. And the fruit of repentance is that you will be even more blessed as the one you have forgiven. You will be at peace with God. Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.

Forgive someone four hundred and ninety times? No problem! After the first four or five times, it's a piece of cake. Amen.

