

## TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

*Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

Matthew 16:21-27

September 17, 2017

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Wichita, Kansas

In the name of the Father, and of the ✚ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week we heard Jesus' instructions on how to go about reconciling with a sinner — with an erring member of the Church. Today the Gospel continues, and Peter inquires about what are the *limits* to be imposed on his generosity, especially if the sinner continues in their wrongdoing. And so he asks Jesus, “Lord...how *often* should I forgive... as many as *seven times*?” Peter probably thought he was being unusually liberal and generous in proposing such a measure of forgiveness. Seven is the number of *completeness*, and our Lord himself refers to it in St. Luke's Gospel, when he says:

*If your brother sins, rebuke him,  
and if he repents, forgive him;  
and if he sins against you **seven times** in the day,  
and turns to you seven times, and says, ‘I repent,’  
you must forgive him. (Lk 17:3-4)*

Some rabbis had settled on this number seven from their interpretation of the scriptures. And so, from Peter's cultural and theological background, seven times was more than enough to forgive someone.

But Christ Jesus *demolishes* this attempt to *define by law* the measure of grace. In Jesus Christ, the Lord *freely* forgives sinners. And now, we who call ourselves Christians, we who call ourselves disciples of Jesus, we have the *privilege*, and indeed we have the *duty*, to be *people of forgiveness* — to share the forgiveness Christ has given us.

Jesus tells Peter that he must be prepared to forgive *not just* seven times, but *seventy times seven*, or *490 times!* In effect, Peter's forgiveness of others should *not be* limited! It should be *un*-limited. Forgiveness should be practiced *whenever* and *wherever* the need arises.

Corrie Ten Boom, who survived the holocaust, shares a personal story of forgiveness in her book, “*The Hiding Place.*”

*It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him,  
the former SS man who stood guard at the shower room door  
...at Ravensbruck.*

*He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen  
since that time...*

*He came up to me as the church was emptying,  
beaming and bowing.*

*“How grateful I am for your message, Fräulein,” he said,  
“To think that, as you say, **He washed my sins away!**”*

*His hand was thrust out to shake mine.  
 And I, who had preached so often...the need to forgive,  
 kept my hand at my side.  
 Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me,  
 I saw the sin of them.  
**Jesus Christ had died for this man;  
 was I going to ask for more?**  
 Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.  
 I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand.  
 I could not.  
 I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity.  
 And so again I breathed a silent prayer.  
 Jesus **I** cannot forgive him. Give me **your** forgiveness.  
 As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened.  
 From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand  
 a current seemed to pass from me to him,  
 while in my heart sprang a love for this stranger  
 that almost overwhelmed me.  
 And so I discovered  
 that it is **not** on **our** forgiveness  
 any more than **our** goodness  
 that the world's healing hinges, but on **His**.  
 When [Jesus] tells us to love and forgive our enemies,  
 He **gives**, along with the command the **love** and **forgiveness** itself.*

Corrie Ten Boom learned a lesson and shares with us a great spiritual truth. Genuine forgiveness runs deep. And it comes **not** so much **from** us as **through** us. **From** Christ himself, **through** us. We can forgive only when we truly appreciate how much God has forgiven us.

A genuine faith in Christ enables us to freely forgive those who have offended us. Who is the person in your life that you need to forgive today? You can **free yourself**, by **freely forgiving them**.

In today's parable, Jesus talks about the need to be forgiv-**ing** and also about our need to **be forgiven**. He states his point quite clearly at the end of the story.

The debt owed by the king's servant was inconceivably large: ten thousand talents. Today it would take a personal debt of at least a billion dollars to give one the feeling of just how deeply in debt this man was.

The king orders the man sold, together with his wife, and children and all his possessions. It is a response of wrath and judgement.

But the servant threw himself at the king's feet in total submission. He promised to repay everything. He didn't ask for forgiveness, but for more time. But to pay this amount back to the king would have been virtually impossible.

The king was moved with compassion. And he released the servant from his *entire debt*. Asking only for more time, the servant received much more than he dreamed was possible.

This picture of God's grace and forgiveness in Jesus is overwhelming! And it is available to everyone who calls to God for mercy. For the Lord looks on all with love and compassion — as people for whom his Son died.

The servant was given a new lease on life. Suddenly he was *debt-free!* No more burden!

Unfortunately, his new-found *financial* freedom did not translate into *spiritual* freedom. Inside, he was just the same as he had always been. He was unable to pass on his good fortune to his neighbor. Another servant who owed him much less money, was ordered by this recipient of grace to pay back what he owed immediately.

What a picture of the Christian who refuses to forgive others, even when the wrong or injury is not serious. We who have received unlimited forgiveness from God, *surely we should be free to forgive others!* But like the unforgiving servant, we too sometimes see little value in others. And in not forgiving our neighbor, we show that we do not truly value the forgiveness that we have received.

The forgiven servant is declared to be a "*wicked servant.*" And he receives that title *not* because of his former great indebtedness/ No. But simply *because he is unforgiving toward others.*

God is unimaginably merciful, but his judgement is upon those who are themselves *un-*merciful. The Lord will "*deliver...to the jailers...every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*"

Being forgiven by God, *must* lead to forgiving others. For if not, the unmerciful person *incurs judgement* once again. God takes great delight in forgiving us. He takes great delight in reconciling us to himself. Even so, forgiving a bother or sister should be a genuine *delight* for us.

Finally, the measure of our forgiveness of others is the measure of our faith. Because *faith produces forgiveness*. A forgiving heart is the natural — indeed even inevitable — fruit of a heart which trusts in God.

In Second Corinthians, we are reminded that in Christ all *old things* have passed away: "*if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation*" (5:17a), Paul declares. In Christ there is a *new spirit* — wanting and willing to forgive. Likewise, in Ephesians the apostle urges Christians to keep on forgiving one another graciously. He writes, "*be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you*" (4:32).

Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. This doesn't mean that our relationship to God depends on *our* works. But the truth is that when we genuinely experience God's forgiveness, we will in turn *be forgiving* toward others. Because God's love and mercy is

infectious. When it gets into your system it spreads and overflows to others. Whenever you stop and truly recognize how much God has loved and forgiven you, you cannot help but love and forgive others.

There is no other way for the Christian.

Mercy truly received *makes one merciful*.

Forgiveness truly received *makes one forgiving*.

In the name of the Father, and of the ✝ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.