

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Twenty-second Sunday after Trinity (2022)

Is There a Limit to Forgiveness?

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“Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”” (Matthew 18:21, ESV)

In the Gospel Reading for today Jesus shows us the greatest gift known to man, God’s forgiveness of our sin. There is little doubt, none of us are worthy of this great gift, but God out of His merciful grace, for the sake of His beloved Son, without any merit or worthiness on our part, forgives the sins of all who are repentant and who believe that the atoning sacrifice of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, on the Altar of the Cross paid the penalty for our sin and thereby secured our forgiveness. Therefore, as children of corrupted humanity, living in a fallen and corrupt world, the whole issue of forgiveness is not only a subject of great importance, but also a subject of great difficulty. This is apparent as we see the beloved apostle Peter struggling to understand forgiveness.

St. Peter comes to Jesus and asks, ***“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21, ESV)*** Gee, Jesus, can I place a limit on the number of times I forgive? Indeed, his question carries an even deeper uncertainty. Peter is asking, “Do I have to forgive? What if I’m not willing to forgive? Is it wrong for me to remain in personal conflict and open hostility with my brother in Christ, carrying a grudge and living in continuous anger? Do I really have to forgive him?” Truth is, Jesus had already answered this question, but it seems that St. Peter had forgotten. When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, St. Peter listened as our Lord taught the apostles to pray the Lord’s Prayer, and St. Peter heard Jesus say, ***“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matthew 6:14–15, ESV)***. Furthermore, throughout his travels with Jesus, St. Peter had witnessed forgiveness firsthand, but now he comes and asks, *Is There a Limit to Forgiveness?* To this question Jesus responds, ***“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Matthew 18:22, ESV)***

Yes, St. Peter had heard Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount, that he was to forgive. Moreover, he also heard Jesus say, ***“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . . For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” (Matthew 5:44, 46, ESV)*** As His apostles were gathered around Him on the mountain, Jesus grants them the present and future blessedness of the kingdom of God in Himself, instructing them in a new vocation, a vocation that calls them to be both salt and light to a world dying of sin. As true children of God they are to make themselves known by their gracious relationships with those who are around them in the world. However, our Lord also tells His apostles that having been called to be followers of His, they are to be different than the world. Although they live in this world (John 17:11) they are not of this world (John 17:16). Therefore, they are not to act as the worldly do. But how many who call themselves followers of Christ, act just as the world acts, especially concerning forgiveness. Too many, I fear.

Prior to St. Peter's question Jesus had been teaching His apostles just how they are to be different from the world, how they are to be gracious not only to the worldly, but especially regarding each other. But too often worldly thoughts lead the people of God rather than the gracious words of Christ. Thus, they begin to think in terms of "Who is the greater."

Those who are followers of Christ are all members of the kingdom of God, thus, in His conversation with His apostles Jesus answers questions such as, who is the greatest in the kingdom of God, saying, "***Whoever humbles himself like [a] child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.***" (Matthew 18:4, ESV) Humility, not arrogance, makes one great in the eyes of God. He speaks of those who would tempt others to sin, saying, "***Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!***" (Matthew 18:7, ESV) Sin can come in many forms, but one way it comes is when arrogance leads to hostility and anger against a brother or sister in Christ and causes the subject of that anger to react in the same way. Woe be to the one who causes the sin. Jesus warns against despising a brother or sister in Christ, saying, "***See that you do not despise one of these little ones . . . It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.***" (Matthew 18:10, 14, ESV)

God's heart is open to all who are in need, who cannot provide for themselves, who are even weak in faith, these, too, are children of His through Baptism. They are those who are "***poor in spirit***" (Matt. 5:3) but equally in need of God's blessings. Knowing this, a follower of Christ cannot lose sight of the fact that Jesus reminds His apostles of this truth, warning them against considering themselves to be better or greater Christians than other children of God. They are not to compare themselves or their faith to other brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus clearly says, do not despise those whom God has called to Himself. An unforgiving attitude does not fit into God's plan of salvation.

This worldly, comparing, and judging attitude is shown to be a fault of the disciples in their question of "***who is the greatest***" (Matt. 18:1). This attitude wreaks spiritual havoc upon the Church. Not only do you have the ugliness of brother against brother, but these unforgiving attitudes rub off on others within the congregation, and the congregation is subjected to sin as they mourn the sinful ways of their warring brothers, becoming infected with the values of the old evil age from which they have been called, stumbling into despair, ruin, and disbelief.

In His discourse regarding caring for one another and forgiving one another, our Lord Jesus is about the business of redirecting and reshaping our thinking. He is teaching us about a heavenly, extreme form of caring, compassion, and concern for our fellow brother or sister in Christ. He is telling us *There is no Limit to Forgiveness*, neither God's nor ours.

Thus, in our Lord's instructions concerning care for the least among us, the question of forgiveness cannot be ignored. We see St. Peter raising the issue in a way that illustrate a smallness of faith and a lack of understanding, a lack that is all too prevalent within the Church today. However, Jesus doesn't dismiss St. Peter's question but answers it in a way that gives a vivid understanding of the blessing of forgiveness, as well as the stark reality of the failure to forgive in His parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

Jesus tells St. Peter that his understanding of the scope of forgiveness falls far short of God's forgiveness. St. Peter is leaning on his human understanding, willing to forgive a little. But Jesus reminds St. Peter and us that his understanding of forgiveness is wanting. We're reminded of what Jesus thinks of those who are willing to withhold forgiveness or to miserly dole it out in His response to the sinful woman who washed his feet and dried them with her hair. When Simon, the Pharisee looked down upon the woman, Jesus said, "***Therefore I tell you, her sins, which***

are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” (Luke 7:47, ESV) He who forgives little, loves little. With these words our Lord summarizes the heart of St. Peter, his love for others was lacking. Yes, Jesus, I’m willing to forgive them at least seven times, but after that, is it necessary? *“Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Matthew 18:22, ESV)* No, Peter, do not think as one who is led by the Law, an eye for an eye, but think of what God has done in forgiving your sin. Turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:38-39). You are to think of what God has done for you in sending His Son Jesus to give His life on the Altar of the Cross for the forgiveness of your sin. Realizing what God has done for you in Christ, there can be no limit to the forgiveness you give or to the forgiveness you receive from a brother or sister in Christ.

Forgiveness is such a loving and blessed word which comforts the one who receives it. Knowing that you are pardoned, that you are no longer being held in contempt or resentment by another, there is no greater relief in this life. How much greater to know that God forgives you all your sins for the sake of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. For those who confess Christ as their Savior, this word carries far more weight than simply compassion. Moreover, it is not just a word, but a command from our Lord which requires adherence. Every day, you who call yourself Christian, recite the Lord’s Prayer as part of your daily prayers. Thus, you pray, Father, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Yet, in praying that which our Lord has taught us to pray, the forgiveness we seek is rarely matched with the forgiveness our Lord requires we give. Truth is, forgiveness is a word with which many struggle, a word with which some find impossible to comply. Yet, when they commit sin, and ask God for forgiveness, they know for Christ’s sake, it is granted. However, when they believe they have been sinned against, their response is. No! I’ll never forgive.

How easy it is to forget what our Lord Jesus came to this earth to do; to win our forgiveness. Never once thinking of Himself, but thinking only of you, He gave up His divine, royal throne in heaven to humble Himself and become a man. He came and took on your flesh, that flesh which was corrupted by Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden. He came, to restore your flesh to the purity it had before Adam’s fall. He did that by living a life of humility, a life which always placed others before Himself, a life whose concern for others was greater than His concern for self. In humility He willingly gave Himself over to sinful men, to be beaten, flogged, and finally crucified on the Altar of the Cross. There, upon that cross He shed His life’s blood which cleansed you of your sin. He came to you and said, “I forgive you.” Can you do any less?

The parable of the Unforgiving Servant ends when the master of the first servant finds out that although he had been forgiven, he refuses to forgive another. So, his master, filled with anger because his compassion, his forgiveness was so easily defiled, pronounces a terrifying sentence upon that servant, delivering him to the jailer to repay a debt that is beyond repaying. Thus, the concluding words of Jesus should strike home to everyone who is unwilling to forgive; *“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:35, ESV)*

There is no question, you, who call yourself a disciple of Christ, are to forgive, no if’s, and’s, or but’s. It is the right thing to do because your Master had compassion on you and forgave you. Thus, an unwillingness to forgive meets with the same fate as the first servant, a prison from which you will never escape. God will condemn all who do not forgive. Thus, we pray, “You have taught us *there is no Limit to Forgiveness*, therefore, merciful Father, save us from unforgiveness, grant us childlike hearts, hearts willing to forgive, hearts that love others because you first loved us, hearts that are pleasing to you and helpful to our neighbor. Holy Father, forgive our sins and lead us to forgive others.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.