

“Forgiven and Forgiving”

“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” You know what that’s like – when someone just keeps sinning against you over and over again. How many times? When can I stop? When am I justified in not forgiving?

The rabbis of Jesus’ day said three times – that’s enough. Three times you must forgive your brother the same sin, but not the fourth time. Peter goes way beyond that. Seven times should be enough, right Jesus? That seems generous – going the extra mile – once for every day of the week.

No, says Jesus. He kicks it up a notch – blows Peter’s number out of the water. Not seven, but “seventy times seven.” That’s 490 if you’re counting – but who can keep track of that many times? You’ll lose count well before that – and that’s the point – forgiveness doesn’t keep track of sins.

Bookkeeping is the way of the Law – and oh how we love to keep track of the sins committed against us! “He cheated on me, she slandered me, they ignored me.” Grudges are nursed, cultivated like a well-kept garden. “I’m never speaking to him for what he did to me.” And even if you can’t remember what he did to you – you remember that you have something against him, and you’re never speaking to him again.

Forgiveness keeps no record of wrongs. Freely we are forgiven, freely we forgive. Jesus tells a parable that destroys our way of handling sins. A king forgives his servant a huge debt – one that could never be repaid. The servant deserves to be thrown in prison – but instead, by sheer grace – he’s let off, scott-free.

And what does he do with his freedom? He goes out and finds his fellow-servant, grabs him by the neck, and demands the hundred denarii that he owes. He’s just been released from a massive debt himself – but he, in turn, will not let go of the comparably insignificant debt of a fellow-servant.

When the king hears about it – it changes everything. He throws the wicked servant into prison until HIS debt is paid in full. “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart,” Jesus says.

God hates unforgiveness – absolutely hates it. He’s like the king in the parable who discovers that HIS grace is being used to extract the last dime out of another servant. This is not how it is to be for those who call upon Him as “Our Father.”

After teaching us to pray “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” – Jesus expands on the Fifth Petition, saying – “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Father in heaven will forgive you; but if you do not forgive, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Now folks, don’t try to turn this into some kind of transaction with God – as if He will forgive us, only if we first forgive others. Remember the parable? The king forgives first. He is the gracious One. We won’t get this *forgiving our brother* right until we understand that it is God who first forgives us.

We are the ones who have the insurmountable debt. What others owe us is pocket-change compared to what we owe God. That’s one of the problems with our failure to forgive others – we forget, or deny, how much God has forgiven us.

Another problem with not forgiving others – is that it puts us at odds with God. He’s in the forgiveness business. He sent His Son to die and rise again in order to forgive the sins of the world – and to hold others hostage with our unforgiveness – is to deny God’s forgiveness. Worse than that, we make ourselves to be God.

His kingdom is one of grace – and denying grace to others is a rejection of God’s grace given to us in His Son. That is why everything in the Church is so ordered that the forgiveness of sins won by Christ’s death and resurrection – might be freely given to all sinners. Refusing to forgive those who have sinned against you – puts you at odds with Christ and His Church.

Consider Joseph in our Old Testament reading. Remember how his brothers first wanted to kill him, but ended up selling him to the slave traders? He was hauled off to Egypt where he ended up a servant in Potiphar’s house – and after a close brush with Potiphar’s wife – he ended up in an Egyptian prison.

But the Lord was with Joseph. He ends up in charge of all the prisoners – and eventually – in charge of the whole grain supply of Egypt. So, when the famine threatens Israel – Joseph “just so happens” to be in the right place at the right time. He ends up saving the lives of his father, his brothers and their families.

Now, after his father Jacob has died – Joseph’s brothers fear that he will now exact his revenge for all their sins. They beg Joseph to forgive them – even offering to be his slaves – but he will have none of that. “Am I in the place of God?” he asks. How can I NOT forgive – when my God is a forgiving God?

And then comes that memorable line we need to hear over and over again. “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” You meant it for evil – God used it for good.

That’s how FAITH talks. Even the sins committed against you, the Lord uses for good. He intercepts the evil intended for your destruction – and redirects them for your good. Faith sees all sin and evil in light of the crucified Christ – whose blood is poured out to make peace between God and the world – and with you, His baptized child.

The crucified Christ declares, “It is finished” – your debt is paid in full – every sin is forgiven. And if your debt is paid in full – how can you not forgive others? How can you not let it go? How can you not die to all the evil done against you – knowing and believing that God, in Christ, has worked it for your good?

So, forgive the brother, the sister, the neighbor, the enemy – not just three times, or seven times, but seventy times seven. Live in the freedom that comes with being a child of God – free from sin’s bondage – free to live in peace with your fellow man – free to live with God forever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.