

The Parable of the Wicked Servant Gospel Reading

Lectionary: 130 (24 OT A)

Matthew 18:21–35

Peter approached Jesus and asked him, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.

“That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt.

“At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.’ Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan.

“When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison until he paid back the debt.

“Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. His master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?’

“Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.”

Discussion Questions

1. A standard rabbinic tradition attested in the Talmud established three times as the ordinary measure of forgiveness. After Cain murders Abel, God places a protective mark on Cain to limit the spread of evil and declares: “If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” (Gen 4:15)

What is Peter getting right when he asks about forgiving as many as seven times? What is he still missing?

2. Several generations later, Cain’s descendant Lamech, who murders several people with impunity, brags “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” (Gen 4:24)

Obviously the number seventy-seven communicates forgiveness without limit. But it also echoes Lamech’s boast. Besides limitless forgiveness, what else is the Lord’s response inviting us to?

3. In the Greek text, reflected in the RSVCE translation, the debtor owed “10,000 talents.” This is translated in the NABRE and the Lectionary as “a huge amount.” One talent was equal to 6,000 denarii, or days’ wages. Thus, ten thousand talents is approximately equivalent to

200,000 years of labor—an impossible debt to repay.

The “much smaller amount” (NABRE) owed to him in turn was “100 denarii” (Gk., RSVCE)—about four months’ wages, by no means an insignificant sum, but payable.

What is gained and what is lost in the RSVCE and NABRE translations, respectively? Why do you think the Church uses the NABRE translation for the Sunday Lectionary?

4. The king is “moved with compassion” or “pity” (*splanchnistheis*). What are other passages in the Gospels when a parable character the Lord Himself is moved with compassion?
5. Jesus says that we must forgive “from the heart.” What does it mean to forgive in this way? Does it mean forgetting the wrong?
6. Read the Living Tradition section. Why is it impossible to receive God’s forgiveness if we have not forgiven others? What is the relationship between forgiving, being forgiven, and holiness?

Living Tradition

“It is, therefore, by all means just that they [those who show mercy] be forgiven, because they have forgiven others, and that what they need be given to them, because they have given to others. For God uses mercy when He judges, and uses judgment when He shows mercy.”

—**St. Augustine, *Letter 167 to St. Jerome* (AD 415)**

“It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.” —**St. Francis of Assisi (attributed)**

“This outpouring of [God’s] mercy cannot penetrate our hearts as long as we have not forgiven those who have trespassed against us.... There must be a vital participation, coming from the depths of the heart, in the holiness, the mercy, and the love of our God.”

—***Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 2840–2**

“When one forgives, one does not calculate.”

—**Pope Francis, *Angelus* Address (17 September 2023)**

Weekly Challenge

Choose one concrete person or situation in which you have been wronged and you are carrying resentment, anger, or hatred. Bring that person or situation before Jesus in prayer. You should not deny the wrong or pretend that it did not hurt. Instead, ask for the grace to release your claim for vengeance and entrust justice to God. Ask for holiness instead.

Take a concrete step: acknowledge your role in the situation; apologize; stop rehearsing the grievance in your mind; and pray sincerely for the person’s good.

When resentment returns, simply begin again: “Jesus, I forgive. Help me to forgive from the heart.”