

If you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you (Matt 6:15).

This passage comes directly after the Our Father, in which

Jesus teaches us to pray like this:

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us (Matt 6:12).

Out of all the petitions that are in the Our Father, Jesus reinforces only this one about forgiveness. Jesus would have us be merciful, if we wish to receive mercy.

The dilemma that this often poses for us is in the difficulty of actually forgiving those who have sinned against us. On the one hand, at times, this difficulty is due to us, to our own disposition, a hardened heart that is unwilling to forgive. On the other hand, sometimes, we may *feel* as if we cannot forgive, but this is due to a misconception of what it actually means to forgive someone.

How might we come to terms with these two things and resolve our dilemma concerning forgiveness? In the first case, then, why is it that we have such difficulty forgiving others?

Why do we not want to forgive?

Last Sunday, we reflected on our need to repent, that is, to seek the Lord's forgiveness. He loves us and wants us to come back to Him, like the father who longed for His prodigal son to come back. This Sunday, Jesus explains that we will receive this forgiveness so long as we forgive others. Why does Jesus lay down this condition for our forgiveness? Refusing to forgive, as the Lord has forgiven us, shows that we are not truly repentant of our sins.

The parable of the unforgiving servant illustrates this. The context of this parable is Peter inquiring of Jesus how often each day he should forgive someone who sins against him. Peter asks, "Is it as many as seven times" (Matt 18:21-22; also, Luke

17:4)? In reply to Peter, Jesus tells this parable of the unforgiving servant. In the parable, the financial debt that the servant owed to his lord, represents our debt of sin. And so, the unforgiving servant is called to render an account of his life. Faced with the prospect of him and his family being sold into slavery, the unforgiving servant, falls on his knees, imploring his lord, saying to him:

‘Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So, his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. [...] Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. (Mt 18:26–34).

The unforgiving servant’s debt, being ten thousand talents, was so utterly great that he could never repay it, and thus, would never be released from the jailers. What is the point of this parable? Jesus tells us:

So also, my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt 18:35).

The unforgiveness in the servant’s heart toward his fellow servant meant that he was not, himself, truly repentant. He was not sorry for his sins; he only sought to escape being punished. His was not a heart of repentance in which he admitted that what he had done was wrong. He had not had a change of heart, in which he wished to better his life and sin no more. Rather, he was filled only with regret. And this regret was that he was being called to account for his sins and was about to suffer the consequences. Since he was unrepentant, he was, thus, ungrateful for the immense mercy

and generosity that had been shown him. This is revealed by his treatment of his fellow servant who owed him a small amount, a hundred denarii, which was a day's wage for a laborer. Unlike his lord, who took pity on him and forgave his massive debt, the unforgiving servant seized his fellow servant by the throat and had him thrown into jail.

Now, although this is a parable, a fictional story, it's fair to say that this unforgiving servant character, if he had the opportunity, and thought he could get away with it, would do it all again. He cares nothing about real mercy and forgiveness, either receiving it or giving it, but simply getting what he wants. Only if we have true repentance in our heart, and thus, genuinely receive the mercy of God, can we relate mercifully to our fellow sinners and forgive them.

The unforgiving servant, then, in condemning his fellow servant, whose sins were far less than his, unwittingly

condemns himself. If, in justice, his fellow servant deserved to go to prison for his debt, then, how much more does the unforgiving servant, out of justice, deserve his due punishment? The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans says:

You have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. [...] Do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed (Rom 2:1–5).

Jesus warns us:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? (Matt 7:1–3).

Can we begin to see now why his lord becomes angry and calls him, a “wicked servant”? The unforgiving servant did not care

that he owed such a massive debt; it did not bother his conscience. Otherwise, he would, himself, have come to his lord about the debt. It is only now, having been called to account, does he care about what he owes and wishes to repay it. He only wants to avoid the consequences that he deserves. Thus, he had no love, or even just a little gratitude, toward his lord who had shown him such great mercy. His hardened heart did not allow him to show mercy to his fellow servant or anyone else. We must all be on guard against doing the same sort of thing. We must not forget the gravity of our own sinfulness, the ugliness of sin, and the infinite love and mercy that God has shown us.

Now, at times, we may truly want to forgive but *feel* as if we cannot. In this case, it may be that we misunderstand what it means to not judge others but forgive them. Judging others is not about drawing certain negative conclusions

about a person. We must make certain kinds judgments. If you are hiring someone, you may need to make a judgment about the applicant's character. If someone comes to your door, you must make a judgment about the trustworthiness of this person. Should you open the door or not? Meeting someone, you must judge whether or not you should trust him with your friendship. Who would fault a parent who makes a judgment about the friends with which their children spent their time? Are we not morally obligated to make certain judgments about others for the sake of protecting the good of our family, our own good, and that of society? We could hardly function in life without making these sorts of judgments. Might we make mistakes in doing this? Yes, we are not perfect. Might we be unfair, at times, in these judgments? I am sure we have all done this, even without meaning to do so. And we may feel bad about it, and need to apologize.

The judgment described in the NT, however, is not about these sorts of things. We may judge behavior as good or bad or sinful, and we must, at times, make certain judgments concerning other people. But this is not the same thing as sitting in judgment over another and handing down the sentence for their sins. There is but one such judge, the Lord God Almighty. We must not act as if we are God, and judge others regarding their sins.

There is another reason that we may want to forgive, but *feel* that we cannot. When someone sins against you, and I mean, in a serious way, they wound you. This wound can be to our mind and heart, but also to our bodies. It may take a very long time to heal such wounds, and some wounds will not be fully healed in this life, but in the next. If someone injures you, such that you must deal with emotional or physical pain, this does not mean you cannot forgive the

person. It does mean that you will probably not feel good about this person or like this person for what he has done to you. You might not want to associate with this person, and perhaps you shouldn't. Nevertheless, you can forgive, even in the midst of the suffering this person has caused you, whatever that suffering may be. You can choose to forgive and not condemn them in their sins.

But forgiveness is more than not wishing condemnation on someone. If we forgive, it means that we want what is truly good for the person who has sinned against us. Forgiveness means such things as praying for this person's conversion, that he would have a change of heart, repent and one day, enter heaven. In forgiving another, we not only withhold judgement concerning their sins, but we also seek their true good. There is no greater good that we could want for someone than eternal life, heaven.

One of the most inspiring examples of this is a twelve-year-old girl, St. Maria Goretti, who was born in 1890. The Goretti family were farmers. Maria's father, however, died when she was only nine years old. Maria and her family, then, struggling to make ends meet, moved in with another family, the Serenellis. Maria would stay home and take care of the household chores, while the rest of her family worked in the fields. The Serenellis' 20-year-old son, Alessandro, would make advances toward Maria but she would refuse him. One day, when Maria was at the house alone, and her family out in the field, Alessandro attempted to violate her. When she resisted, he stabbed her 14 times. As she lay dying in the hospital, she forgave Alessandro, saying that she wanted him to be with her in heaven. Alessandro was arrested and imprisoned. He denied having done anything wrong and blamed Maria.

One night, however, Maria came to Alessandro in a dream and handed him a flower for each time he had stabbed her. As he took each flower, it turned into a shaft of light. Waking from his

sleep Alessandro was a changed man and repented. He spent twenty-seven years in prison. After his release, he went one evening to Maria's mother to beg her for forgiveness. She said to him, "If Maria forgave you, how could I not forgive you?" Alessandro became a lay brother in a Capuchin monastery and died in 1970.

Maria was true to her word. She had forgiven him. She wanted Alessandro to be converted, repent, and be with her in heaven. This is precisely how we should think of our fellow sinners in this life. Even those who do us evil, even our enemies, we should want them to convert, to repent and to be with us in heaven. Isn't St. Maria Goretti a true example of what it means to forgive? Despite her trauma and extreme suffering from her stab wounds, and despite how she must have felt about Alessandro, she forgave him, even as she lay dying. Forgiveness is an act of the will; it is a choice, a decision that we make, not to condemn those who sin against us but to choose their true good.

If there is unforgiveness in your heart, then, remember St. Maria Goretti. In forgiving her attacker, she was imitating our Lord Jesus on the cross, who forgave those who tortured and crucified Him. It was for us that Jesus suffered and died. It was our sins that He bore on the cross so that we might be with Him in heaven. We see this same image in little, twelve-year-old Maria Goretti.

Leave the judgment of your fellow sinners to God, whose rightful place it is to judge. Instead, pray for those who have sinned against you; pray for their conversion and repentance, and that they, one day, would find their way to heaven. There is no greater good that you could possibly want for them than eternal life. If you do this, you will most certainly have mercy and forgiveness for them in your heart. Let us, then, make that choice, to forgive just as the Lord has forgiven us.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us (Matt 6:12).