

Forgiveness in Perspective

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: The Christian faith is, in one sense, quite personal. It is held by individuals. No one can believe in Jesus for you. We come into the kingdom and become a child of God one at a time. This is all true. And at the same time the Christian faith is corporate. When by the power of the Word and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit a person becomes a believer in the Gospel, they're not left to be an island all on their own. They are joined to and made part of the Body of Christ, the Holy Christian Church. It's a community. We worship together. We receive Christ's gifts together. We confess the faith together. And we live out the faith in community, caring for each other as fellow children of God our heavenly Father and brothers and sisters in Christ.

For the past several weeks in our Scripture readings we've been hearing about various aspects of this life we enjoy corporately as Christians. Last week, for example, we heard again about some of our responsibilities to each other in the household of faith. Specifically, we heard that not only do we have to concern ourselves about our own private sins, but we also need to be conscious of how our actions may lead others to fall. The Lord gets extraordinarily angry when we do things that damage the spiritual welfare of others. Therefore it's necessary that we not do or say things that might entice someone else to sin or that leads them to doubt the truth of the promises of God. We also heard about our duty to brothers and sisters who have fallen into unrepentant sin or unbelief, and how we are to make every effort to restore them to repentance and faith in Christ that they may enjoy the forgiveness of God and be made once again heirs of eternal life. As his children, the Lord instructs to be the keepers of our brothers and sisters, and to do what we can to ensure that all of us together remain in the state of grace.

Today's Gospel takes us a step further along the path. Having established our responsibility to keep each other in right relation with God in a vertical sort of way, the text now turns to our relations with others in a horizontal way. First we acknowledge the need to ensure everyone stands in God's forgiveness in Christ, then we acknowledge our need to forgive each other.

It's Peter who raises the question on behalf of the disciples. "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Think about that for a moment. In hindsight, because we know how Jesus answers this question, it's easy to dismiss Peter's question as being rather foolish. We know that it falls far short. But look at it from his perspective. He doesn't know how Jesus will respond. And forgiving someone seven times for the same offense is actually more than reasonable—it's really astoundingly generous. I mean, recall some occasion when someone knowingly and willingly committed a sin against you. No question about it: their intent was to do you harm. You were hurt and deeply offended. I'll bet all of us can remember a time like that. Okay, now imagine that afterward, the person regretted what they did. They come to you and say, "Look, I know I've done something terrible to you. I feel really bad about it. I'm sorry. Please forgive me." Now, this is difficult. You're still angry, so your initial inclination is to tell'm off ... but you recognize that's only going to perpetuate the rift and probably make matters worse. Besides, you're a Christian, so you know the right thing to do here. So you say, "Okay. I forgive you. We'll forget all about it."

All is well. Your relationship is restored. And then two days later, with wicked intent and malice of forethought, the same person does it to you again. They even laugh about it. And this

time it hurts worse because in addition to the injury you suffered, you feel like a fool for setting yourself up again and for letting them off the hook the first time. But then, once again, the person comes back to you and says, "Boy, I really messed up this time. I feel even worse than before. You must hate me, and I can understand why. But I'm really, really sorry. Please forgive me."

It's harder to forgive this time, isn't it? You're tempted to apply conditions; put them on probation or something. You want to make sure they mean it and it's not going to happen again. But that isn't forgiveness. And you know what's right in the eyes of the Lord. So once again, though it's very hard, you forgive them. But then it happens again. And again. By the fourth time the only thing you want is to get this psychopathic nutcase with their Jekyll and Hyde personality out of your life once and for all. Peter's seven times is more than reasonable. By the eighth time, by any human standard of measure, you ought to be able to say, "No way. We're done. I will never forgive you again."

But then we in the church aren't dealing with human standards, are we? And how many times have you stood here in this sanctuary and confessed the same sins to God saying, "I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them"? Has he ever failed to forgive you? Thus Jesus replies, "Not seven times but seven times seventy." Some translations cast that as seventy-seven. The Greek of the text can be read either way. The number really doesn't matter, the meaning is the same: as a child of God, there is no point at which you are to stop forgiving. As the Father has forgiven you for the sake of Christ who suffered and died for your sins, so you too are to forgive those who sin against you.

And to hammer the lesson home and put things in perspective, Jesus gives us the Parable of the Unmerciful Debtor. A king has decided to settle his accounts, and a man is brought to him who owes ten thousand talents. To give you an idea, one talent was worth 600 Denarii, and a single Denarius was what a typical working man would earn for a day's labor. So, you can figure a talent then was about what a man would earn in two years, gross income. This guy owes ten thousand of them, so the equivalent of 20,000 years of work. It's a staggering debt. In today's terms, it would be about one and a half billion dollars. It makes you wonder how in the world the guy could have run up such a huge debt and wasn't reined in before.

No matter. At first the king is all law. The guy owes it. He can't pay it. So the king orders that the servant and his family be sold into slavery and all his assets liquidated. That won't begin to cover his loss. And the king knows that nobody's going to pay very much for a slave like this who's so adept at losing money for his master. But at least, he figures, it'll stop the financial bleeding.

But before he's dragged away, the man falls on his knees before the king and pleads for mercy. "Give me time", he begs, "and I'll repay all that I owe." Right. Like that's going to happen. The king knows it's impossible. But he *is* moved with compassion. He feels sorry for this pitiful excuse for a servant, so he cancels the debt outright; which means, of course, the whole debt is entirely the king's loss. The servant even gets to keep his house and job. Those standing around the court must be flabbergasted at the king's magnanimous liberality.

And off the servant goes, no doubt feeling immensely relieved that this huge debt that he had hanging over his head that must have known would be called to account one day – and trembled at the prospect – that it's all gone. "Can't believe my luck! What a load off my mind!"

And strutting down the street on top of the world, he spies a fellow servant whom he remembers owes him 100 Denarii. That would be four month's worth of wages, something on the order of 15 to 20 thousand dollars. It's a sizeable sum. And by golly, he's going to pay it, too. He grabs the guy by throat and begins choking him while he demands immediate payment. And just like *he* did before the king, this fellow servant begs for time. The difference is that it's reasonable to assume he'll be able to come up with the money. But he won't hear it. He has the guy thrown into a debtor's prison. There he must stay until pays what he owes.

When word of this gets back to the king, he's none too happy. He has the servant whose debt he cancelled brought back before him. This time he lowers the boom. "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And you couldn't have mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?"

You see, the king's expectation is that this servant would see things in perspective; that having been forgiven an astronomical debt that could never be repaid, he could easily forgive the far lesser debts of those who owed him. The point is, of course, this is what God expects of us: that having been forgiven in Christ Jesus so freely and completely from the countless billions of sins we have committed – and indeed are continuing to commit daily – that forgiving the sins that others commit against us should be the easiest thing in the world.

But it's not, is it? And it's because we lose perspective. We so easily forget the huge debt we have been forgiven; after all, it's already paid for – paid for by Christ whose passion and death on the cross we don't appreciate because we don't have to feel or experience it. Ah, but the comparatively trifling sins that are committed against me, those are the ones that really matter. They are the ones that must be reckoned with to my satisfaction. It's pathetic.

Early this week when I started working on this text, I saw that the moon was truly spectacular. It was completely full, and especially when it was rising or setting, it was gigantic and glorious on the horizon. But I found that I could take a quarter, hold it at arm's length, and obscure the moon entirely from my sight. That's what we do with the sins others commit against us. They are like that tiny quarter hiding the whole moon. It's all we can see. And with it we block out the glory of the Gospel. When sinned against, we need to change our perspective. We need to turn it around. Imagine that you're an astronaut who landed on the moon. It's the solid ground upon which you stand. Its massive mountains tower around you. The brilliance of the reflected light nearly blinds you. And way off in the distance you can see the earth. And someplace on the earth, you don't know where, someone is holding up a quarter. That's how you should see the sin committed against you: from where you're standing, on the forgiveness and mercy God gives you in Christ, that sin can't be seen.

And it's vital that we change our perspective on forgiveness and see things this way, because Jesus makes it clear in today's lesson that our refusal to forgive others is itself a sin that may disqualify us from God's kingdom. In the parable, the man who refused to forgive as he had been forgiven had his original debt reapplied by the king. He was then delivered to jailers to be tortured until his debt was paid in full. Jesus says, "So my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

About this two things need to be said. The first is that you don't get to excuse yourself from forgiving if the person who sinned against you is unrepentant. Yes, in the scenario I presented earlier, I had the person coming back, saying he was sorry, and asking for forgiveness; but that wasn't part of Peter's question. He only asked how many times should I forgive my brother who sins against me. He didn't say anything the brother's change of heart.

As Christians, our forgiveness is to be like Christ's: it's there even before we confess our sins. We confess our sins not to be forgiven, but so that we may hear Christ's words of forgiveness and believe them. Likewise your forgiveness for those who sin against you is to come before any action on their part. It's automatic. You hope that they will repent so that you can speak your pardon and that the relationship will be restored, but your forgiveness is to be already there.

Secondly, we must understand that the kind of forgiveness we're talking about today is not something we can generate in ourselves. It comes from Christ. And when we see that we don't have it, that we're holding a grudge against someone for something they did that hurt or offended us, we must confess it to God for the sin that it is. In such a case, each one of us needs to see the unmerciful debtor is me. I'm the scoundrel in the story. And that by not forgiving, I'm despising God's grace in Christ and running up another astronomic debt that eclipses the comparatively minor offense committed against me. We must put forgiveness in perspective and keep it there. And confessing our sin when we lack it, and receiving again Christ's sure Word of mercy, he will enable and empower us to do unto others even as he has done for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!