

Forgiveness

Sirach 27:30-28:7

103

Romans 14:7-9

Matthew 18:21-35

Everyone always asks, “Where were you when you found out?” I actually had an appointment at a motorcycle shop in North Little Rock. It was a Tuesday, my day off. I left Fort Smith early in the morning so that I could be at the dealership in time for my appointment. On the motorcycle, there was no way to listen to the news or get phone calls; I spent over two hours just listening to the sound of air rushing past my head and enjoying my day off. When I arrived at the dealership, all of that changed.

I walked into the small showroom and the owner was sitting on a folding chair in front of a small television watching news of the terrorist attack. I sat down beside him and watched the story unfold. I found myself filled with deep sadness and anger. It was a moment that deserved silence, but instead, the owner made callous comments about who might have deserved such a death. My anger began to shift toward him and I finally had to get up and leave. As the months and years have passed since 9/11, all of us have had to deal with various levels of anger and hurt over how our lives have been impacted and changed because of the terrorist attacks. Forgiveness is not easy.

Today’s Gospel reading offers us two very difficult lessons about forgiveness. First, it teaches us that ***God’s forgiveness is limitless***. Then, it teaches us that ***our forgiveness must be limitless***. This second lesson is difficult for us to accept because all of us have been deeply hurt by others and we have struggled to forgive them. We have been hurt in *very personal ways*, through such things as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, abandonment, slander, being bullied, discounted, hated, etc. We have also been hurt in *social ways*, through such things as racism, sexism, prejudices, economic inequality, corrupt governments, and terrorism. The more we live with or even accept unforgiveness in our lives, the harder it is for us to accept the first lesson—that God’s forgiveness is limitless.

In ancient Judaism, some rabbis did not believe that forgiveness should be limitless. Some considered *three times* to be sufficient for forgiving someone for the same offense. Therefore, when Peter suggested to Jesus that one should forgive *seven times*, he might have understood his suggestion to be quite generous. However, Jesus challenged Peter to an even greater generosity—seven-seven times. It’s important for us to understand that Jesus was not merely increasing a *mathematical limit*, but He was offering a *hyperbole* that means *limitless forgiveness*. Then, Jesus told a parable in order to teach the two difficult lessons about forgiveness.

In the parable today, we are told that the first servant owed the king a “huge amount” that was equivalent to the earnings of about a half of a lifetime! Because of the servant’s humility, the king was moved with compassion and forgave the servant the whole debt. The second part of the parable involves another servant who owed the first servant only about one hundred days

wages, roughly 600,000 times less than the first servant had owned the king! Yet, the first servant did not deal mercifully and compassionately with his fellow servant and he paid the price—the king had him handed over “to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt” (Matthew 18:34).

God’s forgiveness is limitless. Our forgiveness must also be limitless. How can you and I begin to accept these two difficult teachings? At the risk of oversimplifying the answer to that question, I suggest that we simply adopt a new perspective—an eternal perspective. God is able to forgive us limitlessly because He sees us with an eternal perspective—He sees us for *who we truly are*, not for simply *what we’ve done*. He knows that we are His beloved sons and daughters—which is an identity that is not based on what we do or fail to do, but rather, it is based on our being created and redeemed. He also sees how He can transform the most painful of situations into avenues for helping us to grow spiritually and saving us.

An important key to our forgiving those who have hurt us is our adopting a new perspective; one that allows us to view those who have hurt us with compassion—more deeply aware of *their* hurt, mental incapacity, ignorance, skewed upbringing, etc. And, to see how God can use even the most painful of situations to do what He most wants to do—draw us into His eternal love. Such forgiveness does not necessarily require us to be reconciled with the person who hurt us, which is really good news, especially if the person who hurt us is already deceased or if we would only be hurt again if we tried to rebuild the relationship.

This week, I encourage us to spend some time in prayer being mindful of God’s limitless forgiveness and aware of how He is inviting us to expand our forgiveness for those who have hurt us.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

✚ Here are some Scripture passages that remind us of God’s limitless forgiveness:

- Psalm 103
- Isaiah 6:1-8
- Ezekiel 36:24-28

✚ Here are some Scripture passages about our need to forgive others:

- Matthew 5:7
- Matthew 6:9-15
- Matthew 18:21-35