

Forgive us as we Forgive

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Mt 18:21-35

Ave Maria Catholic Church, September 17, 2023 - Fr. David M Vidal

The gospel of this Sunday liturgy presents Jesus as our Master and Teacher. Peter asks Jesus: *“How often must I forgive?”* Peter’s question is our question. Unfortunately, sometimes, we do not wait for Jesus’s answer and respond with resentment or even hatred.

Resentment and hatred cause tremendous problems in families, societies, and the world. What is the solution to these problems? In a homily in Cologne 2005, Pope Benedict XVI offered the answer: *“Jesus Christ! Let us seek to know him better and better.”* Let us go to Jesus! Let us listen to his words!

Once, a disciple asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Jesus’s answer became the “Our Father” prayer. Here, Jesus teaches us to say: *“Forgive our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,”* (Mt 6:12). Then, He reaffirms the need for forgiveness by saying: *“If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions,”* (Mt 6: 14-15).

Jesus’ prayer raises the moral bar to a very high standard!

We know that we are weak; we know that we are prone to fail. For this reason, we ask our heavenly Father to be merciful with us. We ask Him to see that we are just clay, very fragile and breakable. However, Jesus unites this petition to a present condition: *“As we forgive those who trespass against us.”* Our forgiveness is required, and it is needed now.

The Gospel parable of this Sunday liturgy is like a representation of the words of the “Our Father” prayer.

In the Gospel parable, this request is presented twice: *“Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full,”* (Mt 18:26).

The first time, it is made by the servant who owes a very large amount to his master. The second time, it is made by another servant, but this time, to his fellow servant. Both say the same words; they ask the same petition, but the debt is not the same. The debt of the second servant is only a tiny fraction of the debt of the first one.

This is our time to compare: How much do we owe to God? In justice, what do we deserve? Is our moral account flawless? Are we not still in debt? We know that we are far from having a perfect balance sheet! And for that reason, we need to pray! Father, forgive my trespasses!

Now, our prayer must become a commitment. The Gospel parable draws a picture for our contemplation. We must see in that picture the person who took precious gifts from us, the person who insulted us, the person who deceived us, the person who abandoned us. We must see that person in front of us. Then, we must ask: What shall we do?

Knowing all the evils that occurred, we want justice, and that is quite right. If an injustice has been committed, justice must follow. But we must also hear that person's response: *"Have patience with me, give me time, and I will pay you back in full."* Then, what is our answer?

We cannot stop at justice alone. Justice without love becomes blind. Justice without love becomes injustice. For this reason, in his Encyclical Letter on the *Mercy of God*, Saint John Paul II teaches: *"In every sphere of interpersonal relationships justice must, so to speak, be 'corrected' to a considerable extent by that love which, as Saint Paul proclaims, is patient and kind or, in other words, possesses the characteristics of that merciful love which is so much of the essence of the Gospel and Christianity"* (*Dives in Misericordia*, 14).

We must correct our judgments and actions with that merciful love that we see in and experience from our merciful Father. That is Jesus' message: *"Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful,"* (Lk 6:36).

We now understand the standard and the level of the moral bar. However, we can become impatient. We forgave once. We forgave twice. And we have now reached the point of forgiving seven times. Should we forgive again?

That was Peter's question: *"When my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times? [But Jesus answered] "No, not seven times; I say, seventy times seven times"* (Mt 18:21-22). In the symbolic language of the Bible, this means that we must be ready to forgive everyone every time.

We then might say: This is impossible! However, if Jesus commands this action, it could not be impossible. He cannot command us to do what is impossible! And to prove it, Jesus himself becomes our model to follow.

We must remember that He said: *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you,"* (Jn 13:34).

Shortly after Jesus spoke these words, He received the kiss of a traitor, the abandonment of his friends, the insults of religious leaders, the injustice of civil authorities, the scorn of the viewers of his crucifixion, and the rejection of many, even our own transgressions were in his mind. Then, Jesus' words were recorded: *"Father, forgive them, they know not what*

they do,” (Lk 23:34). And those words of forgiveness are repeated in every absolution, when the priest, in the Person of Christ, says: *“I absolve you.”*

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass teaches us to forgive.

The Eucharist we are celebrating reveals the truth of Jesus’s words. Each time we participate in the Eucharist, the words of the parable of today's Gospel are reenacted. In a sacramental way, in a mysterious manner, Jesus offers himself for the forgiveness of our sins again and again.

This is why the Psalmist teaches us to pray: *“Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name. Bless. . . and forget not all his benefits,”* (Psalm 103:1-2).

We must not forget the gifts of God! We must not forget what we have received! God has been generous with us! Then, we must imitate the divine generosity and live according to the divine standard of love.

To do that, we must pray and ask: *“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,”* Amen.