

## **Sermon: Forgive as God has forgiven us**

Have you ever considered your attitude toward mercy and justice? I don't think I can speak for everyone here, but I think the way it naturally plays out in my mind is something like this: when someone does something wrong, I think that most of us want justice!

I guess we want people to be held accountable! Especially when someone has wronged us, mercy just seems so weak. But, when we do something wrong, we cry out for mercy! We can't be held accountable; it just wouldn't be fair! Please have pity on us.

That's quite the double-standard, isn't it? If it is justice against someone else, the full force of that justice should come crashing down on the person, but if it is justice against me, then I desire mercy to prevail.

This justice vs. mercy contradiction is the subject of Jesus' teaching in the famous parable before us today. It is my prayer that the Holy Spirit will use Jesus' words to reign in our natural inclinations towards justice and mercy and move our thoughts and hearts toward God's view of them both.

It's important to note that our Gospel takes place immediately after the Gospel we had last week. You remember that Jesus has some pretty important things to teach about our responsibility to our brothers and sisters in faith last week. "If your brother sins against you," Jesus had said, "go and show him his sin just between the two of you".

The goal of that difficult work as individuals and even including the church if need-be was to bring someone to repentance, to get them to acknowledge that their sin was wrong and harmful to them, and that they desire to turn away from it. The final goal is being able to share the certainty of Jesus' forgiveness with that person, thus regaining our brother or sister.

But right after Jesus' brief teaching about this, Peter comes to Jesus with a question that begins our Gospel for this morning: "Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as seven times?" We might speculate on what would've motivated Peter to ask this question. Was he concerned about how much time the work Jesus had just outlined would take?

Was there perhaps someone that Peter had forgiven seven times but now had just wronged him an eighth time and he wanted to feel justified in cutting off that person from forgiveness? Did he want some acknowledgement and praise that he had been ultra-patient and forgiving by going so far as to forgive someone seven times?

We're not told Peter's motivation behind the question, but Jesus shoots down any selfish motivation Peter might have had and corrects any misconceptions that might have been floating in Peter's mind: Not seven times, but I tell you as many as seventy-seven times (or perhaps even seventy times seven).

Do not mistake Jesus here. He's not putting a limit on the number of times someone should be forgiven. Jesus is effectively saying, "There is no limit to the number of times that you forgive someone."

But why? Why is there no limit on forgiveness for us when dealing with others? Jesus tells a parable to answer that question.

A man owed the king an impossible sum of money—10,000 talents. A talent is a weight measurement, and a single talent of gold could be worth upwards of 20 years' wages. Jesus is setting this debt up as a ridiculous sum that could never, ever be repaid by an individual, let alone a servant.

The man begs and pleads with the king, and the king has compassion on him, the master of that servant had pity on him, released him, and forgave him the debt. There would be no debtor's prison, slavery, or lifetime of payments. That impossible debt was gone.

But then this very servant leaves the king and sees a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii. A denarius was roughly a day's wage. Not a small amount, but also not even worth comparing to the debt the first servant had just been forgiven. But how does he treat this fellow servant? He grabbed him and began choking him, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!'

The comparisons between Jesus' parable and our lives are probably obvious, the king is God, the first servant is us and that impossible debt is our sin. The other servant is our fellow Christian or even simply fellow person, and the much smaller debt is a sin or sins they have committed against us.

Note that the debt they owe us, the sin against us, is not nothing. It's real, and it's painful, and it difficult. But, when we compare the debt of the two scenarios, when we compare that God has forgiven us for all of our sins against him, what is one, or seven, or 77 sins against us from someone else?

As we consider how we should respond to someone who hurts us, the words that Jesus put into the mouth of the king should resonate in our minds as well: "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt when you begged me to. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?"

How has God treated us? Has he held us accountable for our sins, those sins that deserved not being sold to pay the debt but suffering death in hell? Has he left some lines on our ledger that we need to clear up and get rid of? Has he allowed us to simply defer payments to a later date? Has he left us even a single denarius, or even a single penny worth of sin to deal with ourselves?

No! God has had pity on us, mercy on us, and forgiven our debt totally. Jesus' death was complete and did everything we needed him to do. We could not pay off any of that debt so Jesus did it for us. Our God and King has declared us forgiven and justified; our debt is completely gone.

It's interesting, then, that Jesus would teach his disciples to pray about this in that model prayer he gave them, "Forgive us our sins as we also forgive everyone who sins against us".

Think carefully about that petition of the Lord's Prayer before we get to it later in the service. What are we really asking God to do there? We're asking God to forgive our sins (or debts) in the same way that we forgive others that sin against us (or our debtors).

Jesus concludes his parable with a similar warning, "His master was angry and handed him over to the jailers until he could pay back everything he owed. This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart."

Refusing forgiveness for someone else is a sin. We might find ourselves working toward forgiveness, not quite done, but the progress should always be forward-facing. The problem comes when we dig in our heels and say, “We will never forgive this person for what they’ve done to us!”

Unfortunately, that isn’t what Jesus was telling us to do. It is a sin, and like any other sin that we hold on to and coddle, it separates us from God. In our refusal to forgive our brother or sister in faith or anyone else, we are refusing God’s forgiveness for our sin. As we desire to hold our fellow people accountable for their sins, we are at the same time telling God that we want to be held accountable for our sins.

So what’s the solution? Well, it starts by bringing our sin—even our refusal to forgive—to God. We fall on our knees before him and we plead for his mercy. We ask God for his forgiveness for our many, daily sins against him. And because Jesus lived and died in our place, the debt is canceled. We are fully and freely released from our debt we owed to God! There is nothing left; Jesus paid every last cent.

But we don’t want to just know that, we want that to change the way we live. Knowing what we have been forgiven means we will treat people who wrong us differently. It doesn’t mean ignoring sin; Jesus was very clear last week that we need to address sin with people who wrong us, especially our fellow believers. But, it does mean that we can forgive that sin, just like God has forgiven us. We can rejoice in wiping the small wrongs someone owes to us off the slate because we know that God has wiped our innumerable wrongs off of his slate.

This isn’t always easy, though. Whether it’s the sinful nature that wants to hold someone accountable for their wrongs against us, or simply the real hurt—emotional, spiritual, or even physical—that someone’s actions have caused. That hurt might be to the point that we don’t trust that person again, that we can never go back to the way things used to be. But God’s forgiveness for us also means that we don’t hold it against the person; we’re not fostering anger and grudges in our heart. We forgive like God has forgiven us because God has forgiven us.

Lord, you know how often we struggle with this. Keep us ever mindful of the debt you have forgiven us, even our sin of not wanting to forgive others. Use your forgiveness to empower our forgiveness for those who sin against us. Amen.