

Sunday, November 13, 2022 – Trinity XXII

Matthew 18:21-35 (ESV) – “We Are Merciful Because We Have Been Shown Mercy”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers,^[e] until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Many courtrooms in this country have been opened up to having cameras record the events that take place in these hallowed chambers. Some might argue that this leads to sensationalism and taking advantage of people during the worst days of their lives, and this might have some truth to it. However, getting a vision of what takes place there can be helpful to us as well. One of the things that has become more commonplace during sentencing hearings, when the defendant has already been determined to be guilty of the crime, and before the judge pronounces what their punishment will be, are what have been called “impact statements” or “victim statements”. This is where the family is given the opportunity to recount just how much the defendant’s actions have changed their family, perhaps forever, in a catastrophic way. Kids growing up without parents, parents having to bury their own children, especially in the case of violent and severe actions, often take center stage. But what often gets the attention of the folks that view the video footage is when the survivor of a heinous crime, or their close family member, is empowered by God Himself to forgive that person in front of them, publicly and sincerely. This kind of forgiveness is only possible by the Holy Spirit working in that person; it doesn’t have its origin in the will or mind of man. Most people would be inclined to ask the judge to impose the maximum penalty; forgiving the criminal that caused such a loss in their lives would be outrageous to most of us. However, that’s what our text is urging us to do – to forgive those who sin against us, because we’ve been forgiven so much by God ourselves.

Even if we haven’t committed a crime that is so dastardly and evil as to wind up on the pages of the daily newspaper or on the evening news, God doesn’t rank sins. Sin is sin is sin! Whether we curse or swear, whether we commit adultery (or even consider it in our heart), or murder someone, in the sight of God it’s a sin, and it’s punishable by death. There is no hope for us sinful men under the Law of God – He demands perfection! We often don’t think this way and try to rank ourselves on the spectrum of bad to worse when it comes to what sins we commit on a daily basis. “At least I’m not as bad as...” This rationalization doesn’t go far in the court of God’s justice. We just confessed a few minutes ago

that we are BY NATURE sinful and unclean, that there is nothing that we can do to cleanse ourselves, and that we are hopeless without the intervention of God on our behalf.

Peter came to Jesus and asked Him how many times we are to forgive our brother who sins against us. We can certainly relate to this question – someone does something against us, and then does it again and again and again. They apologize each and every time, but still the behavior gets repeated. Doesn't there come a point where the apology rings hollow, when we are entitled to say to the person, "I do not forgive you this time. Away from me!"? Our human sensibilities would lead us in this direction, and we feel justified in hanging on to our anger. We think that this will protect us, that it will lead the person to correct their behavior in the future, and will guard them from such wanton abandon of the truth. Peter even proposed a seemingly outrageous number of times that one would forgive their brother – seven times! Seven times seemed to be more than enough to cover a momentary lapse, a "slip-up" that was unintended. Maybe the plausibility of Peter's suggested response makes Jesus' response all that much more strange. Let's take a look at Jesus' response here, and the parable that ensues, to see just what the Holy Spirit would have us learn from this passage, and apply it to our daily lives.

Forgiveness is not something that is earned – it is given freely, out of love and compassion. When our child is trying to help us fold the laundry, and instead of actually folding they're really making more work for us, because they're unfolding that which has already been folded – even though we've told them repeatedly not to do it – we forgive them because of their youth, because of their willingness to "help out", because we hope that by observing and being corrected, and then trying again, they'll learn how to do it right in the future. When we offend our brother by something we've said, that was not intended to hurt or harm them in their body, or even in their mind, we hope that they will forgive us, realize our intentions weren't malicious, and by receiving forgiveness, rather than just an "It's okay", we can be encouraged not to repeat the action, but remember just how egregious it was to our brother.

When we come to our heavenly Father in prayer and contrition, not only praying for forgiveness for those sins of which we are aware, but also for those which we are not, He doesn't forgive us because of anything that we have done. Indeed, we are incapable of doing anything about our sinful condition. We are as "filthy rags", as Paul reminds us in Romans – nothing can be done by us about our sorry state – we're fit to be thrown into the trash. He forgives you because of what Christ has done on the cross – He suffered the punishment, the shame, the utter abandonment of the Father, in order that you would be healed. He loves you so much that He was not willing for you to perish, but for you to have eternal life.

When it's difficult to forgive our brother for what he has done to us, we must remember the parable of the unmerciful servant. To sum it up, we don't want to be like this guy! Jesus told this parable to illustrate the relative positions of God the Father and us, when it comes to the economy of forgiveness. He has forgiven us much, while we are reluctant to forgive little. Look at the relative size of the debts mentioned in the text – 10,000 talents is years of work, more than anyone could hope to have enough of and repay. 100 denarii is the equivalent of a few dollars, maybe \$50 in today's money – hardly worth mentioning, certainly not worth turning into the jailers, and demanding that it be repaid even with selling the man into slavery. But, it illustrates how hypocritical, how unforgiving we as sinful men are – and just another reason why we need the full and complete forgiveness of God in our daily lives – even for those sins of which we are not aware.

We must not only remember the unmerciful servant, though – we must also remember the kindly, forgiving, merciful master – he not only doesn't give the first servant his just deserts, but also listens to his other servants when they come to him and reveal the injustice that's taking place in their midst. Our loving Father in heaven wants the best for us, and certainly never wants any of us to perish in the fires of hell. He has done everything to save us from the wrath that our sins deserve – by His power and His impetus and His actions. The only way that we can end up there is for us to be unrepentant and unforgiving until the point of our earthly death. He wants to bring the unmerciful

servant back into His fold – and, if it takes a little bit of “tough love” to accomplish this, then He reluctantly will use it. He tried to forgive the man but showing love toward him didn’t produce the desired result.

We’re given a picture here of a master that is so benevolent to his servants, that he does everything necessary to restore them to a right relationship to himself, even to the point of forgiving the debt that was rightfully owed to him. In the same way, there is no way that we could repay what we owe to our heavenly Father – it’s just too much – we owe Him our very lives, our very selves. However, He forgives us, wipes out the debt, through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. He died so that you don’t have to die eternally. He rose again so that you will rise at the end of time to be with Him in heaven, forever. All of this, not by each of us doing something to satisfy God, but by God Himself, Jesus, doing the work and paying the debt. Only He could do this, and survive, and live again, and also do it perfectly. The God-Man, the Christ of God, did this, for each and every one of us!

God’s will in our lives is that we live repentant, forgiving lives, set back in order by His action in our lives, lived out in Godly obedience by the Holy Spirit guiding our words and deeds. We receive this complete makeover in our Baptism, where our Old Adam is washed away and is drowned and dies, and the New Man gradually emerges to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. We have faith placed in our hearts, as a gift, and it grows throughout our lives, until it reaches perfection when we receive the crown of heavenly glory. Yes, we will continue to sin in this mortal life, and this sinful nature will not be eradicated until Christ comes again in glory. We will continue to be unmerciful, unrepentant, and unwilling to admit our sin and our reluctance to forgive. It’s a part of the sinful nature that clings to us like glue; to paraphrase St. Paul, it’s there, and there’s nothing we can do of it this side of heaven.

However, the Holy Spirit continues to work on us, to make us more and more into the image that God wants us to have. He urges us to forgive our brother when he sins against us, even if it’s more times than we can even count! It’s better for us, to have that burden of remembering the past over and

over again removed from us. It's better for our brother, who can then go on to live a life freed from sin, able to work in God's kingdom once again. And, it's better for all of us, to see the example of this forgiveness bearing fruit in their midst, modeling for them what a God-pleasing way to deal with conflict truly is. What we think we're going to profit from holding a grudge just doesn't bear fruit – instead of somehow holding back the one who has sinned, it actually restrains the one holding the grudge. Relationships are destroyed, rather than being rebuilt. Working together is sacrificed at the altar of getting “even” and somehow, falsely, thinking that one is “better” than another.

The parable of the unmerciful servant not only serves us in our lives of interacting with each other, but also reminds us of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. God the Father has forgiven each and every one of us so much we can't even contemplate how much. He has done this without regard to our worthiness to receive it, and even urges us by the Holy Spirit to confess our many sins to Him with a pure heart. He then rushes in with the forgiveness that our heart needs so greatly, solely out of His love for us, His children. He has truly done everything for our salvation! Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.