

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg

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TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage for this Sunday comes from the Gospel of Matthew 18:21–35. In this reading we hear Jesus teaching His disciples about the need to forgive those who have offended them. Teachings on forgiveness occur frequently in the New Testament, and this passage provides us an excellent opportunity to consider what forgiveness might mean for our own lives as disciples, both as we receive it ourselves and as we give it to others.

Peter prompts Jesus' teaching with his question to the Lord, "How often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" To this question, Jesus responds, "Not seven times but seventy-seven times." The Lord's response to Peter basically indicates that we are to forgive without limit. It is interesting to note that forgiveness is to be extended even when there is no indication that the offending party has repented. This is an important point that has beneficial implications on spiritual and emotional levels for us as disciples. Sometimes we need to forgive even when others aren't seeking our forgiveness. Oftentimes, forgiveness actually benefits the one who forgives more than the one who is forgiven. That might seem strange to us, but think about how lack of forgiveness can harm us. The Scriptures are full of warnings against anger and harboring resentment. We can certainly recall the teaching of Sirach 27:30 where it is written, "Wrath and anger, these also are abominations, yet a sinner holds on to them." We might also think of Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians 4:26-27 when he said, "Do not let the sun set on your anger and do not leave room for the devil." These are only a few examples of the many teachings, which warn us against the destructive addictiveness of wrath and anger in the human heart. Jesus does not want His disciples to be corrupted by hatred or addicted to wrath and anger. Forgiveness is the only way to overcome these destructive influences even when others aren't asking for our forgiveness. To forgive does not mean that we approve of what the offending person has done or that we are willing to permit their actions to recur in the future. Rather, forgiveness is about not letting another person's wrongful actions dominate our thoughts and feelings any longer. When we don't forgive, we harbor ill feelings that end up corrupting our own ability to be happy and erode our ability to love freely. Jesus certainly gives us an example of forgiveness in His own life and ministry, especially upon the cross, as He forgives those who are crucifying Him even though they don't ask for it. If God is love, then we cannot be living reflections of the image of God when we are harboring hatred and resentment.

When have you seen anger or resentment become addictive and erosive elements in people's lives?

How is it possible to forgive someone who isn't seeking our forgiveness?

How can the power of evil use our anger to "work on us", and what does evil try to do with our anger?

Jesus teaches Peter that he is to forgive without limit (seventy-seven times). What are the typical limits we place on our forgiveness?

What actions of others most cause you to become angry, resentful, or wrathful and why?

Jesus then gives a parable that teaches about the absurdity of limiting our forgiveness. In short, if we place limits on our forgiveness of others, God will place limits on His forgiveness for us. In the parable, a contrast is given between the man who owes 10,000 Talents (analogous to a billion dollars) and the man who owes 100 Denarii (roughly three months wages). There is simply no comparison. When the man who received mercy and was “forgiven” his debt chose to not be merciful to someone else, then the mercy he had first received is revoked. The message is clear; if we are merciless in absolving people’s debts to us (offenses), then God will respond accordingly and be merciless in resolving our debts (sins) to the Lord (compare with the similar instruction of Mt 6:14–15). We see this same teaching reflected in the Lord’s Prayer (Mt 6:12) when we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” When we close our hearts to forgive others (regardless of whether they want it or not), we close our hearts to receive God’s forgiveness for us. Our motivation to forgive others, then, should be prompted first and foremost by the awareness of our own need for forgiveness. That is why an important part of discipleship is the humble self-awareness of our sins and of our own need for God’s mercy. It’s easy for us to focus on the offenses we have suffered at the hands of others but rare for us to focus on how we have been the cause of offense to others. This parable reminds us that we should first be mindful of how great is our personal need for God’s mercy and of our utter inability to earn it or pay our debt to the Lord. Only when we realize that God is gracious and merciful with us can we then become motivated to be a channel of that mercy to others. We all know the expression, “To err is human, to forgive is divine.”[1] This saying takes on new meaning when we realize that forgiveness is a divine action that we can share with others only as we receive it ourselves. The key to becoming disciples who forgive others is to first be disciples who seek God’s forgiveness in our own lives. The experience of Sacramental Confession is one important way in which we experience this enormous mercy of God for our own sins. Another way of remembering our need for God’s mercy is through the daily examination of conscience, which is a prayerful review of the day so as to help a person recognize the wrongs they have committed.

How do you foster a healthy and humble awareness of the sins and offenses you have committed?

How do you experience God’s mercy for you? For whom are you denying mercy or forgiveness at this time?

In the parable, there was no way the servant could repay the Master for his debt (10,000 Talents), but it would have been possible for the fellow servant to repay his lesser debt (100 Denarii). What does this comparison of debts mean to you and your experience of forgiveness (both for yourself and others)?

What conditions do you place on forgiveness?

The experience of forgiveness offers us certain graces or gifts. These gifts include peace, healing, freedom, integrity, and revelation. Let's look at each of these for a moment to better understand them and desire them for ourselves and others.

- Peace: Sin causes disharmony on a variety of levels. This disharmony can manifest itself as shame, sorrow, embarrassment, hurt, resentment, antagonism, anger, and so forth. All of these feelings cause us to lose our peace of mind and soul. Notice that this is true both for the offender as well as the one offended. The experience of forgiveness restores our peace by placing us in right relationship with God and ourselves. When forgiveness is shared and received with another person, then we experience an additional gift of peace by being in right relationship with others as well. Thus, forgiveness is the key to restoring the gift of spiritual peace in our lives.
- Healing: Sin wounds us. This is true for both the one who is offended as well as for the one who offends. When we sin, we are damaging our relationship with God and others. When we are sinned against, we know all too well the injury that occurs. Forgiveness is what allows us to heal the wounds of sin. To receive forgiveness is to receive a loving balm of mercy that lets us know we are no longer defined by the wrong we have committed. To give forgiveness is to stop licking our wounds and to willingly move on with our lives by choosing to leave behind our resentment and hurt.
- Freedom: a common word for "forgiveness" in Greek (either *apoluo* or *aphesis*) actually means to untie, release or dismiss. The experience of sin can actually be like a chain that binds us. We can find ourselves imprisoned by the wrongful experiences we have either suffered by others or committed against others. Forgiveness is the moment when we are set free from the burden of injury or the guilt of offense. Who doesn't want this freedom to move on with their lives? Sometimes we have to realize how tired we are of carrying that burden or guilt before we have the grace to desire the freedom of forgiveness.
- Integrity: If we are truly created in the image of God, then we cannot authentically and truly become ourselves until we also reflect God's likeness. That likeness involves forgiveness because God's nature is to forgive. By forgiving others, we become a living channel of God's grace and action in the world as we manifest the Lord's mercy in a specific way. It is this spiritual integrity that allows us to move forward in our discipleship and to become more authentically a friend of God who acts as God acts and loves as God loves. Sometimes we can find ourselves stagnating in our spiritual lives because we have chosen either not to forgive or not to seek forgiveness. That stagnation and spiritual frustration can be the Lord's way of encouraging us to recognize and resolve the offensive obstacles that are preventing us from moving forward in our efforts to be more Christ-like. When we fail to practice forgiveness, we are fundamentally out-of-sync with the will of God.
- Revelation: Although it might seem strange to us, God reveals Himself through the events of our lives. All aspects of our lives, even our sin, can become a means of knowing, receiving, and responding to the presence of God. The great Spanish mystic Saint John of the Cross understood and articulated this spiritual insight when he prayed:

Lord God, my Beloved, if You remember still my sins in such wise suchwise that you do not do what I beg of You, do your will concerning them, my God, which is what I most desire, and exercise Your goodness and mercy, and You will be known through

them. And if it is that you are waiting for my good works so as to hear my prayer through their means, grant them to me, and work them for me, and the sufferings You desire to accept, and let it be done. But if You are not waiting for my works, what is it that makes You wait, my most clement Lord? Why do You delay? For if, after all, I am to receive the grace and mercy which I entreat of You in Your Son, take my mite, since You desire it, and grant me this blessing, since You also desire that.[2]

This prayer of John of the Cross that God will be known through our sins should encourage us to examine ourselves in a humble, thoughtful, prayerful and reverent way. Even small sins can be a means of God's self-revelation to us.

*Which of these gifts of forgiveness do you most need at this time in your life?
How does this list help you better understand the far-reaching benefits of forgiveness?
What is a step you can take this week to give yourself the gift of forgiveness?
In light of the above teaching on forgiveness, what reasons would a person have for not being willing to forgive?
Who benefits most by our refusal to forgive others?
How do you know when you have truly forgiven someone else, and what is the concrete sign for you that indicates forgiveness has taken place in your life?*

[1] A similar Latin expression attributed to Seneca says, "Errare humanum est, sed in errare (errore) perseverare diabolicum," that is, "To err is human, but to persist in error (out of pride) is diabolical."

[2] St. John of the Cross, "Sayings of Light and Love, 26" in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991, p. 87.