

Connecting With the Sunday Readings

Twenty-fourth Sunday
Ordinary Time

Gospel Word
Matthew 18:21-35

Today's Gospel reading in Matthew is the final section of what is often called "the church order" discourse. Here we find a definition and description of forgiveness. As Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer, "and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," we are shown why we should forgive as we are forgiven. Peter asks Jesus for a specific number, a clarification on forgiveness. Jesus answers with an answer equivalent to unlimited—don't count; take a number, multiply it by ten, then by itself, and forgive without measure. He illustrates with a parable.

Parables, as a teaching tool, give us a glimpse of the Kingdom within our hearts and within the world. The setting shocks us with circumstances that parallel our own, and we detect a need to apply the lesson that is learned because of the unpleasant consequence presented in the parable. It transforms the hearers' hearts and lives. The parable of the Unmerciful Servant is sometimes referred to as the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Funny how the words merciful and forgiving are interchangeable, and stem from grace: undeserved merit or favor. The king has asked for the loan of ten thousand talents to be paid back by his servant; the servant can't repay it. The king orders that justice be done. The servant begs for mercy. The king mercifully responds with a forgiveness of the debt. The debt is completely erased, not postponed. It was beyond what the servant expected.

The forgiven servant then turns around and becomes the Unforgiving Servant. He demands payment of a debt much, much smaller in comparison to the debt from which he was released. In fact, the punishment he demands for his debtor, of violence and torture, was unnecessarily cruel and unfair. We can see by example how the servant chooses to withhold the kind of grace that he was given. It's not a pretty picture. We might cringe at the similarities we have to the unforgiving servant. His consequence becomes the very justice he narrowly escaped before. He eventually got what he gave.

Living the Word

Jesus begins by paralleling the kingdom in the parable to the Kingdom of God. The unforgiving servant's behavior parallels our own behavior. How soon we forget that God forgives us an unmeasured number of times, and we turn around and refuse to forgive; in fact, we may demand our own form of torture as punishment, just as the unforgiving servant did.

Psalm 102:3 says, "...as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us." Here it says immeasurable *distance* from our sins is given to us by our merciful Lord and King. If we should be like the unforgiving servant, and after being forgiven an enormous debt by our Lord, we turn and refuse to forgive a smaller, paltry debt from another, we doom ourselves to our own form of justice.

We occasionally hear a story of forgiveness on the news. It makes news because it is of grace beyond measure and distance. How can an entire family unit be wiped out by a drunk driver and the shattered remnants of the extended family stand and publicly (and privately) forgive the driver? It can be done, and it has been done. It reflects the peace of the Kingdom of God that comes from grace. Even nonbelievers stand in awe, and wonder where grace such as this comes from. It is grace beyond measure. It removes distance in the community, and removes the debt away from the debtor. Consider whether you forgive from the heart—beyond measure, and whether you give unlimited distance between the person and the transgression.

Prayer

Father, forgive me when I'm slow to forgive. Your grace is enough to sustain me through any disturbance. Amen.