

Scripture Reading September 20 2020

Sirach 28:2-7 (NRSV)

² Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.

³ Does anyone harbor anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord?

⁴ If one has no mercy toward another like himself, can he then seek pardon for his own sins?

⁵ If a mere mortal harbors wrath, who will make an atoning sacrifice for his sins?

⁶ Remember the end of your life, and set enmity aside; remember corruption and death, and be true to the commandments.

⁷ Remember the commandments, and do not be angry with your neighbor; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook faults.

Matthew 18:21-35 (NIV)

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.

²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' ³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Sermon: Mercy and Forgiveness

The “Parable of the Unmerciful Servant”¹ is a ridiculously exaggerated story, and yet we can be left in a terrified state by the end of it! Is it really true that God’s forgiveness is *conditional* as Matthew implies?² I’m not at all convinced and I suggest caution in taking the story too literally.³ I want to backtrack a little at first and point out that Matthew presents a very *Jewish* Jesus.⁴ Rightly so, for Christ is *not* white! That Jewishness is partly revealed in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus, shockingly, reinterprets the sacred Torah for his day. However, some of his teachings are not as unique as we’re inclined to think, that’s because he also reminds his Jewish audience of the wisdom of widely-accepted Jewish writers. For example, consider the words of Sirach, from the 2nd century BC, that we heard earlier: “Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Remember the commandments, and do not be angry with your neighbor; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook faults.”⁵ These words concerning forgiveness are the same as those of Jesus - recall the line from the Lord’s Prayer that says: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”⁶ Matthew, then, presents the teaching of Jesus as in-keeping with the accepted *wise* counsel of old,⁷ possibly because he wants the Jewish Christians in his ethnically-diverse community to not lose sight of that important heritage and to put those principles into practice.

That links to a related background point: the very practical question of how Jewish and non-Jewish Christians are to live in harmony as a faith community was a pressing issue for Matthew’s *readers*. The whole of Matthew 18 speaks to this issue. It begins with the disciple’s question to Jesus: “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?”⁸ Jesus responds by pointing to a child, someone without status or legal rights.⁹ And then he says, do not cause these little ones to stumble by your actions.¹⁰ Jesus goes on to speak about resolving disputes within the Christian community.¹¹ And that prompts Peter’s question: “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”¹² Peter probably thought he was being generous because the prophet Amos indicates only three times.¹³ Jesus replies by effectively saying, “If you’re counting, you have missed the whole point

¹ Matt 18:21-35.

² Matt 18:35. See also Matt 6:12, 14-15; Luke 11:4; Mark 11:25-26.

³ While it does seem to be *Matthew’s* view, we need to counterbalance his words with the rest of the New Testament!

⁴ This begins with the genealogy in Matt 1:1-17 to stress how Messiah Jesus is in continuity with Jewish tradition.

⁵ Sir 28:2,7. These writings are often over-looked by Protestants, but Jesus’ audience were very familiar with such texts.

⁶ Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4. Too many Christians see “forgiveness” as an exclusively a *Christian* concept. This probably comes from the stories of Jesus that contain the punch-line “your sins are forgiven” (e.g., Matt 9:1-8; Luke 5:20; 7:48), words of Jesus that were considered blasphemous by devout Jews. However, Jews also believed in the concept of forgiveness (see also: Dan 9:9; Isa 1:18; 43:25; Jer 31:34; Mic 7:18-19), as do other faiths. What’s at issue here is *how* divine forgiveness is mediated.

⁷ Consequently, Jesus is continuing the Jewish wisdom tradition (cf. Proverbs, etc.)

⁸ Matt 18:1.

⁹ Matt 18:2-5.

¹⁰ Matt 18:6-10.

¹¹ Matt 18:15-20.

¹² Matt 18:21. The context of this chapter is the kingdom of God and the NRSV interprets “brother” as “church member.”

¹³ Amos 1:3,6,9,11,13; 2:1,4,6. And later, citing this evidence, some notable Rabbis suggest only three times.

of forgiveness!”¹⁴ There is *no* reckonable limit to forgiveness. He then tells a financial parable in the context of a non-Jewish king.¹⁵ Briefly, an official had embezzled an *impossibly* large amount of tax revenue and repayment was equally impossible.¹⁶ Rather than simply executing the scoundrel, the king determines to inflict a more degrading and protracted punishment. The man pleads for time to make restitution, which is ridiculous; he could never repay the amount – his situation was hopeless. The king’s response is equally shocking; he magnanimously forgives the debt. But the man does *not* respond by sharing that compassionate spirit and thereby break the culture, or cycle, of oppression associated with debt. No, he tries to extract repayment of a relatively minor, but payable, amount from a person who owes him money. The story ends with the official being hauled back to the king, who says, “You wicked servant, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”¹⁷ That is where many scholars think the actual words of Jesus end and what follows is an allegorizing interpretation of Matthew.¹⁸ *Matthew’s* emphasis, following on from Peter’s question, is to *not* be stingy or ungracious like the unmerciful servant, whereas the *parable* begins with “the kingdom of heaven is like . . .”¹⁹ and its focus is on the generosity of the king, or God, who forgives an unpayable debt, for it’s God’s nature to be gracious towards the humble.²⁰

I want to explore some themes in this parable, but before I do so, please note the story is intentionally *extreme*! It’s a response to Peter that implies his question is ludicrous! The parable is therefore *meant* to be hyperbole and absurd.²¹ The audience, on hearing the story, would recognize that the King’s merciful attitude would naturally propagate gratitude. Consequently, when the forgiven official then seizes *his* debtor and demands payment of a relatively miniscule amount, this would have provoked the reaction of people shaking their heads saying “Ridiculous,” “Impossible,” “How could anyone do such dumb thing?” In other words, Jesus’ point to Peter is, “You should know better; you have already been forgiven. Therefore embody that same generous spirit and pass on what you have received to others.”²²

And this brings us to a wider theme in Matthew, namely that of *mercy*. Matthew twice quotes from the prophet Hosea: “For I desire *mercy*, not sacrifice,” says the LORD.²³ Sacrifice at the Temple was, of

¹⁴ Matt 18:22. Jesus is not playing math games with Peter! (Whether it is 77 or 70x7 is irrelevant! See also Gen 4:15,24.)

¹⁵ (Or Matthew inserts – and adapts - that story here to support the point.) We know the king in the story is *not* Jewish because Jewish kings would imprison debtors, but not torture them or sell off their wives and children (likely into sexual slavery), and the man worships the king, which a Jew would never do.

¹⁶ The amount of money involved would exceed the taxes for all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria! (Eugene Boring)

¹⁷ Matt 18:33.

¹⁸ Matt 18:35 (and possibly 34 as well); this ties in with Matt 6:14-15. Hence it seems, *for Matthew*, God’s forgiveness is revocable and that is one reason the prayer can be seen as seeking ultimate forgiveness on the final Day of Reckoning. (FYI: Matthew understands the king as being God. It’s possible that earlier versions of the parable did not make that connection, however it’s proven impossible to reconstruct any confidence of a pre-Matthew version of this story.)

¹⁹ Matt 18:23.

²⁰ See Matt 5:3,5; “poor in spirit” and “meek” are associated with humility.

²¹ Therefore, the torture at the end is equally part of the absurd. Don’t take it too literally. (This does *not* support the notion of purgatory or imply that God is a torturer, that is equally unthinkable! See also Matt 25:26,30,46.)

²² That is the punchline of Matt 18:32-33. (See also Luke 7:41-43; John 15:12.)

²³ Hos 6:6; Matt 9:12-13; 12:6-8. (And Matt 23:23.) Note Mark 2:16-17, Luke 5:30-31 both omit the reference to Hosea.

course, the Jewish means of receiving forgiveness for sinful deeds. The positive thing about this is that it's a sign of acknowledgement that our sin against others is also offensive to God, for we are all made in his image. Saying sorry, and seeking forgiveness and restitution, is certainly appropriate, but it is all *after* the fact. God desires a change of heart to one that is *merciful*.²⁴ Matthew is telling his readers that we need to interpret the Old Testament commandments through the spirit and teachings of Jesus, and through the lens of Hosea's words. And this is summarized in the Beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."²⁵

Returning to the parable for a moment, those who truly understand the magnitude of God's mercy will pay that *forward* to those who have wronged them.²⁶ The official's unwillingness to forgive reveals his complete lack of gratitude toward the King. Members of the Kingdom of God are to be forgiving people, says Jesus, people of humility, mercy, and repentance. Remember, however, the overall context here is the *communal* life of the Church; *not* as individuals.²⁷ In such a setting, *both* parties agree to the Lordship of Jesus the Messiah, and *both* parties actively acknowledge they have been forgiven by God. Consequently, the practice of forgiveness is not an isolated fact, or *one-sided*, but an ongoing activity among members of a community that share *common* principles.²⁸ One of the points of the parable is that once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offence against God, the injuries that others have done to us can appear small by comparison. Put another way, *if* we have an exaggerated view of the offences of others, we *may* have minimized our view of our own.²⁹ Now this does *not* mean that we should swallow all resentment and "forgive and forget" as though nothing had happened. We should *never* forget the infidelity of the spouse, the exploitation of children and women, or a life that is turned upside down by cruelty or betrayal. Nor should we forget the Holocaust, slavery, ethnic cleansing, or police brutality. No, unlimited forgiveness is *not* to be confused with sentimental toleration of hurtful, abusive, and illegal behaviour. Christians are often guilty of forgiving too much too quickly. Premature forgiveness is an easy way out that does little to help the offender or heal damaged relationships.³⁰ Repentance *and* accountability of the sinner are vital, along with communal support for the victim. Even then, we can't minimize the difficulty of forgiveness or the deep pain of those who have been sinned against. Yet only in such a communal context can there be hope for no limit on forgiveness.

While we might still have doubts about forgiveness on religious grounds, the medical world recognizes the merits of forgiveness for one's health and well-being, because holding on to past hurts and resentments deeply affects our emotional and physical health. In our society as a whole - in places of

²⁴ See Ezek 11:19; 36:26; Jer 31:33; Heb 8:10.

²⁵ Matt 5:7; Sir 28:4. (In Matthew's thinking – and Jewish context – that may refer to the mercy at the Last Judgement.)

²⁶ Faith in God, Martin Luther insists, naturally brings forth acts of love towards our neighbours.

²⁷ See Matt 18:15-20.

²⁸ Forgiveness is also *not* a matter of putting another person "on probation," waiting for them to do something wrong so that we can take it back!

²⁹ Matt 7:3 –5.

³⁰ See also Mat 18:15-20.

the work and within families - when such grievances are not addressed, or are merely glossed over, we end up with the seeds of bitterness that fester into deep, painful wounds. Rabbi Harold Kushner tells this story: "A woman in my congregation came to see me. She's a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. Says to me, 'Since my husband walked out on us, every month is the struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to movies, while he's living with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?' I answer her, 'I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't; it was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally, as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting *him* by holding onto that resentment, but you *are* hurting yourself.'" He makes a valid point.³¹ To move forward we must remember forgiveness is initially a decision, not an emotion or a feeling. Over time, and with the Spirit's help, we trust our hearts will follow our heads and the fires of anger and bitterness will fade. This will seem like an impossibility at the outset and shows that forgiveness is a *process*, not instant. In the end, some sadness and scars will remain, but the fading of the bitterness demonstrates the injustice no longer holds us in captivity.³²

Let me try and summarize: in forgiving *us*, God is *not* saying, "Never mind, your sin is not really such a big deal after all." Sin *is* consequential. What's happening is this: in forgiving us, God is *refusing* to hold our sin against us, and God is *refusing* to let our sin be the last word in the way that the world is moving. In the same way, in *our* forgiving others, *we're not* saying the injustice and suffering that we have experienced is inconsequential. Those sins have caused us *real* pain and forgiveness does *not* deny our hurts. Instead, forgiveness means *releasing* or to "let go" of the "other." What we are doing is *refusing*, with the Spirit's help, to let that sin have the last word in *our* story. In commending us to forgive, Jesus is inviting us to join his revolution to turn the world around, to and break the cycle of revenge and retribution. And the courage to forgive one another begins with the humility of recognizing that we ourselves have been forgiven by God. This is no easy lesson! Forgiving others who have wronged us is not natural; revenge is natural. We are inclined to pervert the Golden Rule by "doing unto others as they have done to us!"³³ The key thing, then, is that the Christian community should never ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation our goal. This is part of kingdom work, and experiencing forgiveness frees us and releases us in surprising and profound ways. Remember, God is merciful and forgives, therefore may we be merciful and forgive. Amen.

³¹ Rev. Marjorie J Thompson puts it this way: "To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who was wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem. . . . Forgiveness involves excusing persons, the *punitive consequences* they deserve because of their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means that the power of the original wound's power to hold us trapped is broken."

³² If the other person has repented of their ways, that may aid our own healing. But if not, that can result in the forgiveness process taking longer, because it is one-sided.

³³ Forgiveness may be painful and revenge may be sweet, but forgiveness will do us lasting good, while revenge will only do us lasting harm. Just take a look at the world around us to see the reality of this cycle of violence and injustice fueled by revenge.