

Homily for September 15, 2002  
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Sirach 27:30-28:9  
Romans 14:7-9  
Matthew 18:21-35

## *A world of mercy and forgiveness is to replace a world of rights and duties.*

Just how often should a follower of Jesus' way forgive another? Remember, it doesn't come naturally to us to forgive, but rather to respond in kind – to claim rights and duties. And thus it is easier to learn retaliation than reconciliation.

No doubt Saint Peter feels that he is stretching the acceptable boundaries of forgiveness by proposing as many as seven times, something that he thinks is a generous number. Peter is thinking in terms of rights and duties. But Jesus responds to Peter by proposing an outrageous number, beyond counting. We can only imagine the shock on Peter's face when Jesus answers with the symbolic number of 77 times or, as the Greek can be translated, 70 times seven times. The number is symbolic because it's Jesus' way of saying forgiveness is to be offered an unlimited number of times. The old rights and duties arithmetic doesn't work anymore in the way we are to live. There just are not boundaries limiting how often a Christian is to forgive the offenses of another. The old world of rights and duties is shattered, and a new world of mercy and forgiveness is to take over.

Jesus goes on to tell a parable about the lavish forgiveness by the master and the miserly lack of forgiveness by the servant. Others observe it and go to the master, reporting the servant's injustice to another. The master then revokes forgiveness of the servant and delivers him to the torturers. It was not the unpaid debt that landed the servant in jail, but the servant's lack of forgiveness that caused the master to treat him in like manner.

The original debtor's actions seem totally incomprehensible and ultimately self-destructive. How could he be so stupid? Himself forgiven a fortune in debt, what prevented him from forgiving the lesser debt? His original request is a clue. He is faced with an unpayable debt, but does not ask that it be forgiven. He prays only, "Be patient with me, and I will pay what I owe." But the king surprises him and does not grant his request; instead he forgives the entire debt. The debtor wants to restore the order of strict justice – the rights and duties math – but receives mercy instead. When he meets his fellow servant, the servant addresses to him the same words the debtor used with the king: "Be patient and I will pay you back." It's as if his old world of rights and duties comes screaming back. The mercy and forgiveness he received were something that simply "happened" to him, not

something that changed his way of viewing the world and of dealing with others.

Jesus applies the parable to Peter's question, saying, "So my heavenly father will do to you unless each of you forgives his brother [or sister] from his heart." What the gospel is calling for here is a totally new way of viewing the world. What the gospel is calling for here is a change of heart. The God revealed in St. Matthew's parables desires "mercy, not sacrifice," and summons people to be forgiving because they have experienced forgiveness themselves.

And that's the key to living this gospel: the experience of forgiveness we've received we are to act out of, share, let that release and relief animate our dealings. In other words, the parable cautions against a legalistic or closed way of experiencing life, which filters the unexpected through the narrow categories of rights and duties. And this prompts my prayer through Jesus to the Father: "Lord, how did you experience forgiveness and mercy so that you could act out of that and so forgive even those causing your death?"

One of the most astounding examples of forgiveness that I've ever read was found on a piece of paper lying by the body of a dead child at the Ravensburck concentration camp. Whoever wrote this passage knew what forgiveness meant in a way far beyond what I've been able to experience personally: "O Lord, remember not only the men and women of goodwill, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us, remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this

suffering – our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which is grown out of all this, and when they come to the judgment, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness."

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