

Exodus 14:19-31  
 Psalm 114  
 Romans 14:1-12  
 Matthew 18:21-35



### A KING WHO WISHED TO SETTLE ACCOUNTS

Review last week's gospel, Matthew 18:15-20, with regard to the question of *forgiveness*. It begins, "*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother*" (Matt 18:15). *Forgiveness* was the hoped-for result, because genuine restored brotherhood implies (actually *requires*) forgiveness all around.

If it is really necessary to progress to the point where we treat our former brother "as a Gentile or a tax collector" (v.17), forgiveness is out of the picture, and both sides have lost. In fact, any time you go beyond 18:15 to 18:16 and 17, you are skating on thin ice. If, by getting "witnesses" and thereby justifying your offended pride, you lose a former friend, your loss is double. In the end, it is always better to forgive.

If forgiveness is missing from the picture, the appearance of reconciliation is only on the surface. Peace talks in the Middle East have been held continually since the days of Abraham, but peace has never come. We are led to conclude that "agreeing to live at peace" and *forgiving* are two different things.

The Book of Common Prayer offers two invitations to public confession. One goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and begins, "*Ye who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life...*" The second says simply, "*Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.*" This second version is different. We ask God to forgive our sins, but we no longer need to say we love others and forgive them for what they have done to us. There is a big difference here.

Plan B may work for a while. It may even work for the rest of your life. But it will not work in eternity. If you and I are destined to live forever with God, we need to practice forgiveness every day. We need to become perfect at it. It is the way to freedom, and peace, and eternal life.

In other words, *forgiveness* is the main issue in last week's gospel on how to settle differences. Not everyone sees this, but Peter saw it. This week's gospel relates how he reacted to Matt 18:15-20.

Matthew 18:21-22. *Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"* <sup>22</sup>*Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."*<sup>1</sup>

• "As many as seven times?" Discuss Peter's idea of forgiveness: practicing patience and restraint with the offender as long as you can stand it. Suppose a certain fisherman always managed to chafe Peter's boat at the landing. How long would Peter have to take this? What are his options, according to Matt 18:15-22?

Human nature tends to prefer *revenge* to forgiveness. Revenge was in the heart of Cain when he slew his brother Abel. And Lamech said to his wives, "*Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, hearken to what I say: I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.*" (Gen 4:23-24). Lamech was proud of his revenge. Pride and revenge have always been partners, just as humility and forgiveness have always been partners.

Jesus taught us to pray, "*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*" (Matt 6:12). The older invitation to confession (above) recognizes these two aspects of forgiveness. First we forgive others, then we ask God to forgive us. The Bible says clearly that to be forgiven, you and I must first be willing to forgive. "*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*" (Matt 6:14-15).

When we "forgive men their trespasses," we are forgiving the man, not the trespass. The distinction

<sup>1</sup> Bible quotations are from the RSV.

helps reconcile the OT rule of justice under the law, “... *As he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth ...*” (Lev 24:19-20), with the NT rule of forgiveness. Until Christ came, the law prevailed. When Christ came he said, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also ...*” (Matt 5:38-39). Before Christ came, the man and the trespass were identified as one. Now they are seen separately. Christ came into the world to save sinners. He came to separate sinners from sin. God views a person and his sin as being *separable*. I am glad to view myself this way, and I must learn to view others this way as well.

Matt 18:23-35. “*Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup>When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; <sup>25</sup>and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup>So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup>So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup>He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup>Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; <sup>33</sup>and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup>And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup>So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”*

• *A king who wished to settle accounts.* Jesus told this story to show Peter why it was important to forgive a brother who sins against you, not just a number of times, but permanently. It is not difficult for a believer to see in this parable the reason we must “forgive those who trespass against us.”

In the story, the king at first demanded justice, but then relented and forgave his servant’s impossibly great debt. (A single talent is said to have been worth fifteen years’ wages!) But afterwards, this same king observed that this servant did not follow his master’s example. He seized his fellow servant, who owed a much smaller debt, and put him in prison! So the king, wishing to be just, said in effect, “You didn’t forgive your servant’s debt. You are my servant. Therefore neither will I forgive yours.” Finally Jesus said, “*So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*”

Peter would have understood, as every Christian must understand, that his sins against God are forgiven to the extent that he is able to forgive others. And we now know (much more than Peter did at that time) the extent to which our Father has gone to forgive us. He gave his only Son – Jesus – to pay the cost of our redemption. People say, “There must be a more humane way to do this,” but there wasn’t, and never will be.

God loved the world he had made and he gave his Son to save it. Seeing Jesus die for us, who are far from perfect, was very hard for God. In a sense, forgiving us cost God everything he had. So he will not be pleased if he sees you turn from his amazing grace and refuse to forgive a brother. He will ask the key question in Matt 18:33: “*Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?*”

On the other hand, God is especially pleased to see you forgive with him in mind, saying, “Father, since you have forgiven my impossibly large debt at the cross, the least I can do in return is forgive the debt of this person, out of my love and appreciation for what you have done to forgive me.”

Forgiving others from the heart can be hard, but we must learn to do it. It is not just a test of your obedience. It is essential to your life in Christ. If we are to walk with him, we must learn to forgive as we have been forgiven. We must learn to see the person and his trespass separately. Then we can forgive the person and accept him without saying his trespass is acceptable as well. In the words of the Apostle, “*Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive*” (Col 3:12-13). And finally, “*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*” (Eph 4:32).