

Although we spoke about forgiveness last week, this is such an essential topic – as brought out by last week's Gospel – it might be worthwhile to jot down a few notes to refer back to and to provide some material for meditation and self-examination.

A lot of people might cling to unforgiveness because of some misunderstanding of what it means, and that misunderstanding makes forgiveness so repugnant in their mind that they cannot overcome it. One of the main points that I want to come to, then, is what forgiveness means, what constitutes forgiveness. But we will start by stepping through last week's Gospel (Mt 18:21-35).

Our Lord's teaching on forgiveness was prompted by a question from St Peter: Lord, how many times must I forgive, as many as 7 times? It might seem odd that Peter would propose a particular number. Why 7? Aquinas says that Peter was drawing on Sacred Scripture; Naaman, the Syrian General with leprosy, for example, was told by the prophet Elisha to go wash in the Jordan 7 times to cure his leprosy. This curing of leprosy pointed towards curing of the soul through mercy so Peter thought maybe this meant a person is supposed to forgive a person 7 times. As a side note, notice how the Apostles converse easily with Jesus. It is because of their good will – they are humble and thus willing to accept our Lord's instruction (they accept Him as absolute Truth and Goodness), and they truly love Him, even though there may still be affected by some self interest.

Our Lord responds: not 7 times but 70 times. Scripture scholars say this is difficult to translate; some translations say 70 times, others 70 x 7 times. It doesn't matter too much. What our Lord is saying is that one must forgive indefinitely, there is no limit. Jesus then furthers the teaching on forgiveness through a parable.

In the parable there is a king who has decided to settle accounts with his servants. The king is God, or we could say our Lord. The servants are all people, every single human being, each of us. The English translation of this used for Mass in the U.S. says that a servant was brought before the king who owed "a huge amount." That is not a bad translation; it does get across the main point. But at the same time, it's helpful to look at the size of the debt that our Lord actually states – 10,000 talents. One of the things Scripture scholars do is dig into these sort of things – how much is 10,000 talents? Here's what it comes to:

- 1 Denari = one days wages
- 1 Talent = 6,000 denari
- 10,000 talents = 60,000,000 (60 million) days wages = **164,383.6 years worth of wages**, and that's assuming working 7 days a week. If allowance is made for one day a week off (52 days per year), say for the Sabbath, then the debt increases to almost 192,000 years worth of wages.

So the debt owed to the king is about (let's say for short) 192,000 *years* worth of wages. It's not just a huge amount, it is an insurmountable amount; he can't possibly pay it back. The king thus ordered him to be sold, along with his wife and children. The man then pleaded for mercy and the king forgave him the whole debt.

This is something to stop and really ponder. The debt of this servant represents the debt of sin. There is no indication that this servant was a greater sinner than anyone else. While the debt of sin varies *some* from person to person, it remains the case that no one can repay the debt of their own sin. If anyone thinks this doesn't apply to them, they are suffering from a terrible scourge of foolish pride.

The king is ready to send the servant off for punishment because he can't repay the debt. He gives no indication of forgiving the debt *until*...the servant pleads for mercy. The same is true for everyone. God does not force Himself on anyone. Our Lord is eager to impart the mercy He won for us with His Passion, but the individual person must seek it with a sincere heart. Jesus created a special sacrament for the forgiveness of sins, the Sacrament of Confession. Many today say: ah, nobody goes to Confession anymore, as if that makes it right. Ah yes, popular opinion, what everybody is doing, once again trumps the plan and instructions of our Lord. How about what the Lord says, is that worth nothing? These are worldly people who say and think such things. It will not end well, do not follow them, listen to the Lord, He is one who will judge.

When the king brings up the debt to the servant, notice that the servant does not try to deny it, he does not blame someone else for it, he does make excuses for it, he does not try to justify it. It is his debt, he knows it, he doesn't deny it, he simply pleads for mercy. This is how mercy is received. We have to do the same – no excuses or shifting or denying blame, just a plea for mercy. He also seems to have no care at all about his debt, mindless of it, until the king brings it to his attention. Ask the Lord to open your eyes to see your debt so that you might be relieved of it before death. This life is the time for mercy. Once we die, it is too late.

The message of the huge debt is that the mercy of God is necessary in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But there are *two* conditions laid out in this Gospel for receiving that mercy (there are other conditions, like real contrition, but here we are just talking about what's in this Gospel). The first condition has already been touched on – the individual person has to sincerely desire it, seek it, and humbly plead for it. We come now to the second condition. After having his insurmountable debt completely forgiven by the king, this servant had the audacity to go out, grab a fellow servant, demand repayment of 100 denari (100 days wages) that he owed to this servant, and when the fellow servant begged for mercy, he refused to grant him forgiveness and instead had his fellow servant thrown into debtor's prison until he paid him back the debt he owed to him. When the king heard about this he became enraged, called that *wicked* servant before him, and revoked his forgiveness.

The second condition, from this Gospel, for receiving the mercy of God, then, is: a person has to be ready and willing to extend forgiveness to others. Our Lord makes it crystal clear that a person *will not* receive the mercy of God if they are unwilling to extend forgiveness to others. It is serious business. Jesus also called that servant who refused to grant forgiveness wicked. Unforgiveness makes a person wicked.

But what is forgiveness? What does it entail? What does it really mean to forgive another? It might first be noted that real forgiveness pertains only to real offenses, not imagined ones. People can expend a lot of time and energy coming up with offenses supposedly committed by others when there was no real offense committed, except maybe by them. But, there are real offenses that people commit against one another – maybe some cheating, lies, spreading nasty gossip and rumors, and even physical injury. When the wicked servant was brought back before the king, the king did *not* say: no, you weren't owed a debt. There was no question about the debt owed to the wicked servant. No, the wicked servant wasn't condemned because he falsely claimed that the other servant owed him. He was condemned for not granting forgiveness. There are real offenses of one person against another and this is what real forgiveness pertains to. To "forgive" an imaginary offense, though, counts for nothing – except maybe against the person who imagined it.

So again, what is forgiveness? Perhaps the first thing to say is what it's not. Forgiveness does not mean there is no acknowledgement of debt, of wrongdoing, of an offense. If someone stole something from you, forgiveness doesn't mean that I deny the theft – in forgiving another one might say: oh that's nothing, don't worry about it. To say something like that is fine, it is a way to express forgiveness, but it's not denying the theft. Forgiveness most certainly does not mean saying that what is wrong is ok or even neutral. In fact, this is impossible. Forgiveness means the pardoning of a debt, an offense; i.e., without repayment or restitution. So a person cannot forgive without acknowledging a debt, an offense. Forgiveness does not mean I love the harm you have caused or any other such mentality. Forgiveness is not an invitation to recommit the harm. The habitual stance of being ready to forgive, does not even necessarily mean that reconciliation is going to occur. The habit of forgiveness does not necessarily mean that you are now going to regularly associate with the offender or have them over for supper; it may be that you're not sure if the person can be trusted; i.e., forgiveness, once again, does not mean: by all means, go ahead and commit the offense again. Our Lord does not say that either. Remember that an important part of a good Confession is a firm purpose of amendment.

This is perhaps a sampling of the misunderstandings about what forgiveness is. Next week's article will take up the topic of what it *is* (rather than what it is not), how to practice it, and things that can help practice it. Hopefully a clear understanding of what forgiveness is will clear up any and all misunderstandings about it and thus better enable a person to practice it. This doesn't mean it will make forgiveness easy if someone struggles with it, but hopefully it will at least make it feasible.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn