

Trinity 22
Matthew 18:21-35
Forgive Us Our Trespasses As We Forgive Those Who Trespass Against Us
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“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?” writes the Prophet Micah in chapter 6, demonstrating the great indebtedness that we have to our loving God, who has given us all that we need and has forgiven us all our sins. Micah shows that there is nothing that we can offer God to repay him for his great goodness and concludes, “What does the LORD require of you but to do justice and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”

It is impossible to pay God back for all the benefits he has given you, especially for the forgiveness he has won and freely given you. Even if God gave you a thousand lifetimes to do good, you could never repay him for what he has done for you. But you do not need to repay God. He does good to you only out of his fatherly divine goodness and mercy. He forgives you by grace, according to his own love. All that God requires of you in response to this is to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

This means that God requires us to forgive others as we have been forgiven. Jesus concludes his parable, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you [namely, send you to the prison of hell], if you do not forgive your brother from the heart.” And Jesus explains the petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” by saying, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matthew 6:14-15) So it is irrefutable, that if you do not forgive others, God will not forgive you.

Yet, this must not be misunderstood to mean that God forgives us on account of us forgiving others. God forgives us purely on the bases of his own mercy and for the sake of the bitter suffering and death of his Son Jesus Christ. Ephesians 4:32 states, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” We forgive as we have been forgiven. Scripture makes it abundantly clear that God forgives us before we could possibly do anything to deserve it. “But God

shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) God sent Jesus to die for us when we didn’t deserve it. God forgives us before we have done anything that could possibly deserve it. And we receive this forgiveness through faith alone, as Scripture also writes,

“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.’” (Romans 4:5-8)

And we heard in our Gospel lesson that the king forgave his servant before his servant could do anything to deserve it, purely according to his own grace and mercy.

Yet, when the servant, who had been forgiven the massive debt of 10,000 talents refused to forgive his fellow servant his much smaller debt of 100 denarii, he rejected his master’s grace and mercy. He ought to have done to his fellow servant as his master had done to him.

10,000 talents is an absurd amount of money. It would take multiple lifetimes to pay back. 100 denarii on the other hand, while not a small sum, is manageable. It is about 100 days wage. The 10,000 talents symbolize our debt which we owe God on account of our sin. It is impossible for us to pay it back. Yet, God forgives us all our debt out of compassion for us. People sin against us. That hurts. It’s difficult to bear, just like it would be difficult to swallow the loss of 100 days wage. But, since we have been forgiven all our sins, we ought also to forgive others their sins against us. To refuse to forgive others is to reject God’s grace and to reject the faith. You cannot have faith in Christ while you refuse to forgive others. How can you believe that God has forgiven you all your sins for Christ’s sake, yet believe that God withholds forgiveness from the one who has sinned against you? Your faith in Christ compels you to forgive others.

Forgiving others is difficult, because of our own weakness and because *sin* hurts. When someone damages your reputation, destroys your trust, or damages your property or body, the pain lingers. Yet, the requirement for Christians to forgive shows God’s immense grace.

God requires you to forgive those who do not deserve to be forgiven, because God forgives you when you do not deserve it. That is the very point. To be forgiven means that you don’t deserve it,

otherwise it wouldn't be forgiveness! By withholding judgment and forgiving the one who sins against you, you demonstrate that God forgives you apart from you deserving it.

You might object to forgiving the one who has sinned against you, because he is not sorry or has not shown himself to be sorry. But God did not wait for you to be sorry to forgive you. He won your forgiveness by placing your sins on Jesus long before you could ever say, "sorry." True, you can only receive forgiveness through faith. This means that you must repent and believe that God forgives you for Christ's sake. But God did not wait on you to pay the price of your sin. So, you also must stand ready to forgive the one who has sinned against you. Forgive him even before he says he's sorry.

Besides, there might be a reason that he has not said sorry. Perhaps, he does not know that he has sinned against you! Have you confronted the person who has sinned against you? Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." If you have not confronted the person who has sinned against you, there is a good chance that the person does not know that he has done you wrong. Or perhaps, he does know and is sorry, but is too embarrassed to talk to you and instead has asked God for forgiveness privately. Either way, you don't know unless you talk to him! So, don't stew in your anger. Don't condemn the one who has sinned against you while justifying your judgement by claiming that he is not sorry. God forgave you before you were sorry. And your neighbor cannot ask for forgiveness if you do not talk to him!

God requires us to forgive others over and over and over again. St. Peter asked Jesus how many times he needed to forgive his brother. "As many as seven times?" Perhaps he remembered Jesus words, as they are recorded in Luke 17, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (vss. 3-4) But Jesus was not giving a literal number there anymore than he was when he said, "not seven times, but seventy times seven." The point Jesus is making is that you should forgive your brother as often as he sins against you. As often as he repents, you should say, "I forgive you."

This seems like a burdensome task. Forgiving can take a toll on someone. Yet, it is a wonderful joy if you do so in faith! Why? Because God has forgiven you so much and he promises to continue to forgive you! Just think of this, Jesus taught us a prayer, which he intends for us to pray every day for the

rest of our lives, in which he tells us to pray, “forgive us our trespasses.” Jesus wants us to pray every day for forgiveness. That means that Jesus promises that we will be forgiven every day. Will there come a time when you will turn to God in repentance and ask for forgiveness and he will refuse to forgive you? Can you pray, “Forgive us our trespasses,” and God reply, “I’ve forgiven you enough already.”? Does Jesus require us to be more merciful than God? Certainly not! No, Jesus tells us to forgive as often as we are sinned against, because God will not stop forgiving you! As often as you repent, God will forgive you.

This does not mean that God condones sin or that he wants us to continue in sin. So, neither does it mean that when you forgive others you are approving of their sin against you. God does not approve of our sin, but he places it on Jesus to be washed away in his blood. And that is what you do when you forgive others. You place their sins on Jesus. To forgive is very different than to approve of sin. To forgive means to acknowledge that what has been done is wrong. That is why people are so uncomfortable with saying, “I forgive you.” Instead they say things like, “No problem.” Or “No worries.” But when someone has done you wrong and repents, you should say, “I forgive you.” That is the most loving and Christian thing you can do. It is to say, “Yes, you have done me wrong and I have put that wrong on Jesus for him to wash it away in his blood.”

To forgive means to forget. God says, “For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.” (Hebrews 8:12) And again, the Prophet Micah says, “You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.” (7:19) When God forgives your sins, he does not keep a record of it for later, so that he use it against you later. He forgets. So, we also should not dwell on the sins of others, but forgive and forget, so that it does not control our minds. This, of course, can only be done by the Holy Spirit.

“But I struggle to forgive those who sin against me. I say the words, but the pain remains. I say I’ll forget, but then anger arises within me later. It seems I have to keep forgiving the same sin over and over and over again. I’m scared that although I say I forgive, I don’t really mean it.”

It is common to struggle to forgive on account of our sinful flesh, which doubts God’s grace. But there is a big difference between struggling to forgive and feel like you’ve forgiven, and refusing to

forgive. We must confess our sins before God and pray for a patient and forgiving heart every day. But to refuse to forgive and to hold a grudge without repenting is to reject the Gospel.

We are not saved by our works, that includes by forgiving others. You are not forgiven because you forgive others. Rather, you forgive others, because you have been forgiven freely for Christ's sake. The reason forgiveness is taken away when you refuse to forgive is because only unbelief and hatred of God's grace could drive you to refuse to forgive. Yes, you will struggle to forgive. Your emotions will rise up within you. You'll pray to God for a forgiving heart, but you won't always feel like you've succeeded in forgiving the one who's hurt you.

But you must not confuse this weakness of the flesh with unbelief. You will continue to struggle with your emotions. You will continue to struggle with your sin. And God forgives your sins for Christ's sake. But to continue to refuse to forgive and to hate your brother who sins against you is to reject the Gospel. In that case, the struggle has been lost.

When you struggle to forgive, look to Christ Jesus who has forgiven you. You do not get the strength to forgive others by threats of the Law, but by the promise of the Gospel. God has forgiven you in Christ Jesus. So, confess Christ by forgiving others. By forgiving others, who have sinned against you, you will garner peace in your heart, because it will remind you that God freely and willingly forgives you for Christ's sake. Amen.