

Sunday Twenty-fourth Week Ordinary Time 'A'
Sir 27: 30-28:9; Rom 14: 7-9; Mt 18: 21-25
September 17, 2023

Last week's Gospel was about fraternal correction, something we love to do, but don't care to receive. Today's Gospel is about something we love to receive, but find it is very hard to do. That is forgiveness.

We should forgive. Hearing the second half of today's parable, the servant doesn't look all that bad. Someone owes him money and didn't pay him back on time. So he has him punished. That was justice in those days, a harsh justice, but justice. What makes the servant's behavior so outrageous, even after two thousand years, is the first part of the parable. The servant had a much bigger debt cancelled by his master and he should have done the same to his fellow servant.

These days, we plan on God's forgiveness; we expect it. We know the confession hours in church, and can expect to go to church and be forgiven. But, will God forgive us if we are unwilling to forgive others? We can go through the motions of confession, but Jesus says that if we are unwilling to forgive others, the Father will not forgive us. At the end of the parable we hear that because of the servant's behavior, he was ultimately not forgiven. The Our Father, a prayer we learned as a child, a prayer we recite at Mass every Sunday, contains what Saint Augustine called the "*terrifying petition*," where we ask God to forgive us in the same manner we forgive others.

We do need to forgive. Imagine a world or a life where no one ever forgave anyone. Such a world would be cruel, cold, uncaring, and frozen in place.

To forgive is not to forget; it is not to excuse; it is not to overlook. To forgive is to recognize the damage someone has done, to move away from revenge and retaliation, and to refuse to be damaged further by what that person has done to us. The alternative is to be trapped in the past, furious for years over old offenses. The hatred, resentment, and anger that go with the negative, angry feeling or feelings can become a spiritual cancer in our life. To refuse to forgive is to allow a past hurt to stay radioactive in our heart and in our life, gradually poisons our life. Forgiveness frees us from an obsession with past hurts. Forgiveness helps us move on with our life and to grow in grace.

St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans we heard today, says that we are responsible to God for how we use the gift of life. Do we spend our years stuck in painful intersections after an injury? Long after everyone has left the scene and gone home, are we still there steaming and furious for years? By refusing to forgive, we transform a past harm into a continuing hurt that can consume us.

We can forgive. In fact, we do forgive all the time. We often experience hurts from friends, family, people at work. Most of the time, we edit these hurts out and move on. Like natural healing, forgiveness happens if we don't keep pulling off the scab.

Forgiveness doesn't show weakness, but strength and power. Forgiveness enables us to stop reacting negatively, angrily, and to take control of ourselves. Forgiveness does more good for us than for the one we forgive, because it sets us free.

How can we begin to forgive another person? Jesus says, "*Pray for those who persecute you.*" Prayer transforms us from being a victim into becoming an intercessor.

We start to see people who have done wrong to us in a new light, as individuals in need of healing. To begin the process of forgiveness, prayer for the other is always a good place to begin.

We also need to pray for ourselves. Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross is the source of a huge river of forgiveness. At every Mass, we can ask God to irrigate the hard desert ground of our soul with his water of forgiveness, to enable us to forgive and to be set free.

Then we need to look to the future and not dwell in the past. All of us have hurts from the past. Forgiveness comes as we look forward to what can be in our life and not to what was. In the passage from the Book of Sirach we heard, "*Remember your last days; set enmity, set hatred aside; remember death and decay, and cease from sin.*" We might paraphrase that as "*life is short.*" We need to look to our future with God.

We should forgive; we need to forgive; we can forgive, because forgiveness releases our soul from spiritual paralysis and makes room for God's grace and his will in our life.

Forgiveness is the spiritual surgery that brings healing to our life.

- Fr. Stephen Lattner, O.S.B.