

Without forgiveness we would all be eternally lost. If God the Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity had not become incarnate in the person of Jesus and died to atone for the sins of the world, then only God and the angels would ever be in Heaven. But there's more to it than that. Not only would we be in hell without the forgiveness of sins that we have in Christ, our lives here on earth would be hellish if we did not forgive each other.

There's a theme that is presented to us repeatedly in the New Testament. And that is, if we are to expect forgiveness from God, we must also forgive others. It's in the Our Father: "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Earlier in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." In Mark's Gospel He says, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." And in Luke Jesus says, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." In the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

Clearly, in order for forgiveness to flow *to* you, it must also flow *from* you. God's forgiveness is conditional. God will withhold or withdraw the forgiveness of our sins, if we refuse to forgive others. We must forgive *all* those who have injured us, or insulted us, or betrayed us in any way, or be condemned: a harsh, but simple formula.

It isn't difficult to see why this is so. God's will for us is that we become Christ-like. God is at work on us at all times to the extent we submit ourselves to Him. Like a sculptor, He is shaping us and chiseling away at us, breaking our hardened hearts, and our selfish wills. He is determined to make saints of us, in the image and likeness of His Son.

Our Responsorial Psalm for today, Psalm 103 tells us about who God is and what He is like regarding forgiveness. Psalm 103 tells us that God forgives *all* our sins, and heals all our infirmities. God doesn't forgive most of our sins, or 90% of our sins. It's not the case that God is willing to forgive our sins as long as their not too vile. He forgives *all* our sins. He sets no limit on how many sins we've committed or on how bad they are. God redeems our lives from the grave, and crowns us with mercy and loving-kindness. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. He will not always accuse us, nor will He keep His anger forever. God has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor has He rewarded us according to our wickedness. His mercy toward us is as great as the heavens are high above us.

And yet His forgiveness is conditional. For us to receive God's forgiveness, we must do as He does. *We* must forgive *all* the sins of those who sin against us. *We* must set no limit on how many sins have been committed against us or on how bad they are. We must be full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. We must not always accuse others, or keep our anger forever. We must not deal with

others according to their sins against us or repay their wickedness in kind. Our mercy toward others must be as great as the heavens are high above us.

Of course, it isn't always easy to forgive others. Sometimes we can forgive without too much difficulty. Other times it's very difficult even though we try and try and try. Sometimes really terrible things can happen to people. What if a loved one or a friend is killed in a traffic accident and a drunk driver is responsible. How does one forgive that driver? A man is unfaithful to his wife. How can she forgive him? As bad as it can possibly get: betrayal, theft, rape, murder, slavery, Nazi concentration camps, people hijacking planes and flying them into buildings – how can we forgive?

We can and must forgive others because God has forgiven us. God has forgiven everyone, or offers forgiveness to everyone, for a sin debt that is impossible for us to pay.

Jesus illustrates this point in the parable of the unmerciful servant. The problem for us, here in 21st century America, is that the full weight of the illustration might escape us. For one thing, the translation we currently use has replaced the exact numbers Jesus used. Instead, we're told that the man owed a "huge" amount. In other translations, it has the servant brought before his king owing 10,000 "talents". Ten thousand may seem like a lot, but a talent, a unit of measure for money in New Testament times, would be worth approximately \$500 dollars today. That makes 10,000 talents roughly equal to 5 million dollars. Now to most of us, the point is made. That is more money than we could possibly repay. But it's even more intense. At that time, 10,000 talents was far more than the total budget of the average

province. For instance, the total revenue of the province of Galilee was only 300 talents. To really put this in perspective in today's terms, it would be more like if one man owed the government 500 trillion dollars.

Of course the king in this parable represents God, and the servant who owes the 10,000 talents is any one of us. We have all been forgiven to such an extent that we could never have repaid God ourselves. And then the forgiven servant meets up with someone who owed him some money. But this debt was infinitesimally small in comparison. Again, other translations give the amount to be 100 denarii which would be worth about \$10 today. A man who had just been forgiven something on the order of 500 trillion dollars won't forgive someone else who owes him about \$10. This is why, when the king heard of it, he withdrew the forgiveness he had granted. And Jesus tells us this is what God will do to us, if we don't forgive others as He forgives us.

Forgiveness is the very basis upon which we can even come to know God in the first place. Forgiveness is the foundation of our relationship with Him. Without the forgiveness of our sins that Jesus won for us through His great sacrifice, there would be no relationship between humanity and God at all. We would be totally estranged. But God in His mercy gave us His Son to redeem us, and to bring us to Himself.

God is in the process of building a family of redeemed, Christ-like people. It is they who will inhabit the Kingdom of Heaven. Imagine what it would be like if He admitted people who refused to forgive others after having been forgiven a debt beyond which they were able to pay. And the

forgiveness God grants to us came at a very dear cost indeed. It cost Him His only begotten Son. For Jesus, the only one who never sinned against God the Father, it cost the beating and scourging, the crucifixion, having His Father turn His back on Him, and a descent into Hell. All He asks of us is that we forgive others.

We may feel that if we forgive someone, we are somehow the loser. That person has injured us, or taken something from us wrongfully. We feel there must be consequences. He has to pay for what he did. To forgive him would be to say that he doesn't have to pay. To forgive him means that we go without justice. We have to give up what is rightfully ours: that retribution for what was done to us. We demand that he suffer for what he did, so much more so than the suffering he caused us.

Forgiveness does not mean that you must like the person who sinned against you, or be his friend, or send him a Christmas card, or take him out to lunch, or invite him over to your house. It simply means that you release the whole matter into God's hands.

If someone has sinned against you and he does not repent or say he's sorry or ask for your forgiveness, do not think for a split second that he has or will get away with anything. Nobody can slip one past the Almighty.

If the one who sinned against you does not ask for your forgiveness, you must forgive him anyway, in the sense that you, in your own heart, have forgiven him and will indeed extend forgiveness to him in case he does repent and ask for your forgiveness.

When you forgive someone you release yourself from anger, hatred, vengeance – who would want to marinate in such things? And who is pleased when we refuse to forgive? Only the devil, who knows that if we don't forgive, neither will God forgive us. That's how we become the loser. That would make our lives here on earth hellish.

In Jesus Christ, God forgives us all our sins. No matter how many, no matter how bad. He doesn't count our sins to keep a running tally. However vile our sins may be, He won't recall them to His Mind if we have repentant and forgiving hearts.

If we are the Body of Christ, then we represent Him to others in this world. He is living His life through us so that others may come to know Him. How then, could we do anything else, but to forgive others as He forgives us?