

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY/A 2005

When two peoples agree to live together like in a relationship of marriage, there is always a kind of declared or tacit consensus around which they build up their lives and whose respect is the guaranty of their union. For instance, a married person cannot behave like when she/he was single. The marriage has brought a change in the couple's life to the point that they can say that they henceforth belong to one another. And, because of that, they seek to do what is pleasing to the partner and assures their relationship. The intensity and the quality of this relationship makes that each one lives for the partner, precisely because she/he finds the meaning of her/his life in this relationship.

In today's 2nd reading Saint Paul describes Christian life in the same way. The Christians are not their own masters; they belong to Christ and, therefore, they do not live for themselves, but for the Lord. Because Christ died and arose for our sake, in both life and death, Christians are the Lord's. This is why in their relationship with their brothers and sisters, they cannot be led by simply human factors. They must act according to the example of Christ who gave up his life to save us and who brought the abundant mercy of God upon us. In fact, it was in our weakened and sinful state that God reached out to us. In spite of humanity's repeated failures, God showed us his mercy and forgiveness.

It is the message of forgiveness that Jesus brings about in today's Gospel. For Jesus, our forgiveness must be without limit. This is what he means by telling Peter he must forgive seven times seventy seven times. In fact, Jesus does not want us to stop and calculate the amount of the damages done to us; he wants to emphasize the immense distance that is between the heart of God and the human heart. His Father is a God of infinite mercy. There is no sin he will not forgive, no guilt will be greater than his love. His inexhaustible goodness is here contrasted to the meanness of human heart that is incapable of forgiving even the smallest offenses.

This is what the parable teaches us in the example of the two debtors. Christians, who are sons of God, must forgive the offenses with a heart similar to that of their Father who is in heaven; they must show a love without limit. Let us remember **the prayer of our Father: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"**. Those are some of most healing words in Scripture. Look at what we have received from the Lord. From the good of our families and our children to the spiritual gift of living eternally in God's love. The pain received from others is minor in comparison to the gifts God has given us. We cannot let this pain destroy our ability to receive God's gift. This is what the unmerciful servant did.

In fact, the unmerciful servant ruined a golden opportunity. He could have become a person of kindness and gentleness, reflecting a small portion of the forgiveness he has received. Instead, he held onto his past, his anger at the money still unpaid, and his refusal to forgive destroyed him. **Think about it today on this anniversary of September 11.** But what does God's forgiveness mean? To forgive does not mean to let things stand as they are. God is not covering up all the evil done by human beings, does not close any eye and pretend not to see. God manifests his mercy when he transforms people and leads them

to conversion, when he changes them and turns them from selfish individuals to become truly loving persons. Forgiveness does not imply that a fault or sin does not matter. Nor does it mean that the offense is forgotten, for that is often impossible. Rather, it means freely choosing to overlook an offense because one is free to do so, having loved and forgiven oneself.

For us too, to forgive should mean to open our hearts to welcome our brothers and sisters despite the pain, to set the conditions so that they can begin reconstructing their lives. It means also to search for every possible way of setting peace. The Christians must never cut off all links and cannot even expect that the first approach of reconciliation should come from one who has offended. Even if it looks stupid to human eyes, we must be the ones to make the first move towards our brothers and sisters.

But, why is forgiveness so important? According to the first reading, when we give free vent to our vindictive retaliatory instincts, to our rage and grudges, we do not get any justice, we simply make things worse. It is necessary to go beyond simple justice, and one must open one's heart to sentiment of mercy. The forgiveness of an offense done to us is an indispensable condition to pray and obtain pardon from God: *If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath, who will forgive his sins?*

Second. Forgiveness is a matter of life or death, of peace or bitterness. The words of Sirach are so clear : *"wrath and anger are hateful things."* The unforgiving person is self-consumed by wrath and anger and the other hateful things. The failure to forgive brings much pain and scores of inhuman reactions. Not to forgive is like not breathing; it is unnatural and inhuman. Forgiveness towards others then enables us to be in control of ourselves just as the inability to forgive delivers us over to a bitter slavery of wrath, anger and mistrust.

Another motif is our very precarious condition as human beings. *"Remember your last days; Remember death and decay..."* This statement puts the question bluntly before us: do we want to die with bitter and hateful memories or do we want to be delivered?

Let me now conclude. We hurt others and others hurt us. What can be done? The only solution is forgiveness. How wonderful life would be if more people could say: I am sorry. A wonderful sense of peace comes over us as we forgive. Forgiveness drains poison, heals the wound, brings us peace. Forgiveness creates new hearts and minds. How not to take this opportunity to make peace with yourself and the people around you? Today we pray for the grace of treating others as we have been treated by the Lord. We pray for the ability to forgive and move on with life, just as we thank the Lord for the innumerable times he has forgiven us and has himself moved on with sharing his life with.



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