



11TH SUNDAY OF MATTHEW

August 20

THE GOSPEL READING

Matthew 18:23-35

[Forgiveness in the Church]

The Lord said this parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord delivered him to the torturers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."



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THE SERMON

Christ teaches us that mercy is a key to eternal life. In this section of the Gospel of Matthew, the Lord is instructing about life in the Church and human relationships. He tells us how to become like children in order to inherit His Kingdom. He also tells us how to resolve conflict in the Church. Here in this parable, He teaches us about forgiveness. First, we see the justice of God, as Jesus uses the illustration of a king who settles accounts with his servants and finds one who owes him a large sum of money and cannot pay his debt. During this time, and in this culture, if a person cannot pay a debt to their master, they cannot declare bankruptcy. He can be arrested and sold to slavery so that his labor, or the price of being sold, would become a repayment. In this parable, the king exercises his right to sell the servant and his family into slavery for repayment of the debt.

However, the servant falls on his knees, imploring, "Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." Out of mercy for the servant, the king releases him and forgives him of the debt. The servant who is forgiven owed "ten thousand talents," which, in the currency of that day, would be equivalent to millions of dollars. Christ uses this figure to illustrate that it is not an amount that can be paid back, so the forgiveness of the debt was beyond imagination, a great act of mercy and forgiveness. Yet, that same servant finds another person who owes him money and, seizing him by the throat, tells him to pay what he owes.

The amount owed by the second servant to the first is "a hundred denarii," that is to say, a much smaller amount that a worker would make in a few months. The contrast is staggering. The second servant said the same words the first had used with the king. "Have patience with me," he said, "and I will pay you." However, the first servant is unmerciful and puts him in prison until he pays the debt. When the other servants see what has happened, recognizing the great injustice, they report to the king, and the king summons the first servant. The king then calls the first servant "wicked" because he was forgiven an unpayable debt and did not have any mercy on a fellow servant who owed a very small debt.

Jesus teaches us that He desires mercy and not sacrifice. It is better to forgive and be merciful than to exact justice. Mercy is the practical expression of love of neighbor. God loves us, and therefore He is gracious to us. If we say we love one another and are willing to love our neighbor, then we are willing to forgive others as God forgives us. Of course, this requires that we recognize our sins. If we acknowledge our sins, this is the first step to being willing to forgive others. This is the meaning of the Lord's Prayer, which we pray daily: "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," (better known as "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us").

It is important to emphasize that we seek to forgive those who injure us in any way. However, this does not necessarily mean that every relationship is immediately and automatically restored. At times, forgiveness will mean releasing the other person from any guilt they may have incurred from injuring us. At the same time, we maintain healthy boundaries so the situation does not continue. This is a way to release us from the grief of unforgiveness, which hurts only ourselves, while also considering how to protect ourselves and our loved ones from harm.

At other times, by God's grace, there can be a complete restoration of relationships when there is repentance and forgiveness. In either case, forgiveness is needed because it is the key to mercy and healing from God. The Lord hopes that regardless of the attitude of those who have hurt us, we try to forgive them for our spiritual benefit.

It is for us to forgive because it is for us to receive forgiveness from God. God knows we are imperfect and need His grace and mercy. Saint Cyril of Alexandria teaches, "The God of all releases us from the difficulties of our faults . . . But this happens on the proviso that we ourselves release our fellow servants from the hundred denarii, that is, from the few minor faults they have committed against us." When we acquire a measure of humility, we begin to understand that our imperfections, compared to the perfect love of God, are indeed an unpayable debt if the Lord would hold them against us. Then, we can understand how the sins of others against us are nothing in comparison. If God forgives much, we can forgive much less.

Two things happen when we forgive: First, we are changed into the likeness of God. We become like Him. Second, the door to God's mercy and forgiveness is open to us, and our sins are also forgiven. God's love and grace manifest His Kingdom. He invites the outcasts, forgives sins, calls the lost sheep, receives the prodigal son, and rewards all the laborers in His vineyard. Jesus teaches us to be ready to forgive a brother or sister, not just seven times, but seventy times seven, and to pray for those who injure us, forgive them, and return good for evil.

On the other hand, refusing to grant forgiveness means we do not necessarily wish to receive forgiveness from God. How can hope for God's forgiveness be present when no human forgiveness is offered or received? Our willingness to forgive others means we open ourselves to divine forgiveness and become a channel of divine grace. Recognition of the need for divine forgiveness opens the eyes to the need for human forgiveness. Similarly, we can love God far more deeply when we love our neighbor, so we receive forgiveness and mercy when we are merciful and forgiving.

The Church is the community that prays the Lord's Prayer, and so it is the community in which forgiveness is given and received. This parable shows us how God is full of love and mercy, but also full of justice. God loves us unwaveringly, and we are also accountable for our actions. There will be the Final Judgment, and Jesus teaches us to show kindness to others so that God can reciprocate when we stand before Him in the next life. On that

day of the Final Judgment, God will judge us according to our behavior towards others. He wants us to be merciful and forgiving. He wants us to love our brothers and sisters even if they “owe” us.

We are called, as Christians, to be loving and welcoming, that is, to have what in Greek is called *philoxenia* (in Greek, *φιλοξενία*). Saint Paisios the Athonite, also teaches us to have *philotimo* (in Greek, *φιλότιμο*). According to him, *philotimo* is a heart full of gratitude to God and his fellow neighbor, a heart that tries to repay even the slightest good that others do for him. He teaches, “When one realizes one’s sinfulness and the great mercy of God . . . real tears fall of themselves and then man prays and weeps without effort. This is because humility works continuously together with *philotimo*.”

Our Christian ethos, expressed in our behavior, is the best way to bring others closer to God. The Lord teaches us that we will be known as His disciples if we love one another. It is by forgiving others that we receive forgiveness. By pouring the oil of mercy on others, we are also healed from our spiritual wounds by the merciful Lord, and restored to His likeness.