

Matthew 18:21-35^{v vi}

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, 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 slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

^v About the Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35

Today's reading concludes the discourse on discipline in the Church. Matthew presents the material as Jesus' response to a question by Peter. The servant's debt is huge. His promise of repayment is impossible to fulfill, thereby representing humankind's position before God. God's response to limitless debt is limitless forgiveness. The scene is repeated between the slave and his fellow slave, except that the debt is small and repayment feasible. But the wicked slave's response is totally different. The master's question (v. 33) is also posed to the Christian community.

^{vi} Reflection and Response

Picture this. The Marlboro Man rides into the sunset, supremely in command of his own destiny. A short, intense Jew (Paul) blocks his path, reminding our hero that we are never in control of our own lives. Thus the Christian ethic confronts the myth of glorious independence cherished by many Americans.

Yet the letter to the Romans shows us that living under The Lord's care is not really a slavish surrender. Instead, it represents birth into a new freedom. "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves" (Romans 14:7). White Americans have been blessed to learn this lesson from the base communities of South and Central America and our own African-American and Hispanic minorities. These ethnic groups have taught us not to fear community, but to see our only security within it.

What Martin Luther King, Jr. termed "the beloved community" has a supernatural dimension too. "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord" (Romans 14:8a). That verse has a wonderful way of putting our fears and problems into perspective. If all life is God's, why fret over small anxieties and petty worries?

One spiritual writer recommends that when we face a tough decision, we should do exactly what we would do at work: refer it to the boss. Rather than being a copout, turning our choices over to God validates our belief that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves, and has our welfare more dearly at heart than we do ourselves.

Sirach suggests that God will remember our sins with the same nitpicking detail we remember those of others. Those of us who resurrect past insults and arguments might ask ourselves the question: "Does anyone harbor anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord?" (Sirach 28:3).

Scholars say that Paul's letter to the Romans may have been prompted by tensions between Gentile and Jewish Christians—in contemporary terms, the liberals and the conservatives. As he often does, Paul moves from the practical problem to the transcendent principle. He stresses the totality of God's love; the other readings remind us that forgiveness is the underlying basis of community life. (As anyone married longer than a month can attest!)

Quietly consider: What grudge or resentment do I find hard to release? Would anything in today's readings help me do so?