

Synopsis: OT XXIV [A] (Sept 17) Homily on Matthew 18: 21-35 (L-17)
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Introduction: Our readings for this Twenty-Fourth Sunday concern forgiving our offenders and getting reconciled with them. All three readings today remind us of the path to forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation and challenge us to walk this, the only Way to Life.

Scripture lessons: Sirach, in the first reading, reminds his listeners that if they don't heal and forgive and show mercy they can't expect to receive much of that from God in return. It is unwise to nurse grudges and wise to forgive because our life span is very short and our eternal destiny is decided by how we forgive, how we work for reconciliation with those who offend us and how we render humble and loving service to them. Today's Psalm, (Ps 103), speaks beautifully about God's forgiving love. "*God is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion,*" we sing in the Psalm refrain. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that we have to forgive others because we belong to Christ who taught us by his own example in forgiving those who killed Him how we must forgive in our turn. Since we humans are related as brothers and sisters of Jesus, we are in the family of God, so hatred and bitterness should have no place in our hearts. In today's Gospel, through the parable of the two debtors, Jesus teaches us that there should be no limit to our forgiveness and no conditions attached to our reconciliation. We represent the greater debtor in the parable because we commit sins every day and, hence, we need God's forgiveness every day. But we must forgive in order to be forgiven. Jesus explains, after teaching the prayer *Our Father*, "*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father also will forgive you* "

Life messages: 1) We need to forgive, forget and be reconciled: In the light of eternity and considering the shortness of our span of life, harboring old grudges is pointless. The forgiveness that we offer others is the indispensable condition which makes it possible for us to receive God's forgiveness and to pray meaningfully: "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" What God expects from us is limitless forgiving and an ability to overlook faults and to keep on loving even in the face of insults.

2) We may never forget the hurt we have experienced, but we can choose to forgive and pray for our offenders. As life goes on and we remember an incident that was hurtful and caused great anger, we need to remind ourselves that, with God's grace, we have already forgiven the one that hurt us. Time does heal memories. Forgiveness finally changes us from being prisoners of our past to being

liberated and at peace with our memories. Forgiveness allows us to move beyond the pain, the resentment, and the anger. When we forgive we make the choice that heals. We can forgive the offender by wishing him God's blessings and by offering that individual to God by simply saying, "Help so-and-so and me to mend our relationship." When we withhold forgiveness, we remain the victim. When we offer forgiveness, we are doing it also for our own well-being.

OT XXIV [A] (Sept 17): Sir 27:30--28:7; Rom 14:7-9; Mt 18:21-35

Anecdote # 1: "Adopt an orphaned Muslim child and raise him as a Muslim in your Hindu family": In the motion picture of the life of Gandhi there, is a scene in which a Hindu father whose child has been killed by a Muslim comes to Gandhi in great grief and remorse. Out of a sense of retribution he has killed a Muslim child. He now kneels before Gandhi asking how he can get over his guilt and regret. Gandhi, who is gravely ill, tells the man that he must go and adopt a boy and raise him as his very own son. That request seems reasonable but then comes a requirement: In order to find inner peace, the Hindu man must raise the boy to be a Muslim. Overwhelmed at the inconceivable thought of raising a son as a Muslim, the man leaves Gandhi's room in total disarray. Later, however, he returns and again kneels beside Gandhi's bed. He now understands. He must take the hostility from his heart and replace it with love. That kind of forgiveness is more than passive resignation to a bad situation. By the grace of God we can use forgiveness as a positive, creative force bringing light into a darkened world.

2: "I spoke to a brother whom I have pardoned." Thirty-six years ago (1981) there was an attempt on the life of Pope St. John Paul II. Fortunately, the Pope lived. After he recovered, he shocked the world when he made a visit to Rome's Rabbibia Prison on Christmas Day to see the man who had attempted to assassinate him. Millions watched on television as the Pope, on Christmas Day, visited with Mehmet Ali Agca, who only two years before had tried to assassinate him. The white-robed Pope and jean-clad terrorist huddled in the dark prison cell for 20 minutes, talking in low voices that could not be heard. When he emerged John Paul explained, "I spoke to a brother whom I have pardoned." We will never forget the headline the next week in *Time Magazine*, "Why forgive?" That is a good question, one that has been asked for centuries. Today's readings give the reasons. Three months after the terrible attack of September 11, 2001, Pope St. John Paul II, in his message for the annual *World Day for Peace*, taught clearly that there can be no peace without justice, and there can be no justice without forgiveness. That's a message that has gone largely unheard and unheeded on all sides of today's conflicts. It's kind of like what Chesterton said about Christianity itself – it hasn't been tried and found wanting; it's been found difficult and left untried

3: Unforgiven sins according to Dostoevsky and Shakespeare: Dostoevsky's novel, *Crime and Punishment* deals with unforgiven sin. The novel is little more than the tale of a young, poor, Fascist student who murders a rich, old lady so he can get her money and continue his studies. But the student, hounded by guilt, pursued by his sins, finally confesses his crimes and is punished. Eloquently, so eloquently, Dostoevsky shows us what the real world is really like, a world where sin comes due like all debts and must be paid in full as the creditor comes calling us to account. The same is true of Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. A man is killed so Macbeth can usurp the crown, and Lady Macbeth, tormented by her part in the murderous sin, is driven to insanity. She pitifully raises her hands imagining them still to be stained with blood, and frets, "Will these hands ne'er be clean?" Can't we identify with Dostoevsky's and Shakespeare's characters? We are sinners as they were. Some of us owe a lot. Some are sin-indebted a little. But each of us, like the debtors in the Gospel text, must settle accounts with the King, God Almighty himself. Forgiveness Is Available.

Introduction: Our readings for this Twenty-Fourth Sunday concern forgiving our offenders and being reconciled with them. All three readings today remind us of the path to forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation and challenge us to walk this, the only Way to Life. The Gospel specifically emphasizes two ideas. The first idea, found in Jesus' reply to Peter's question, is that the disciples of Jesus must forgive one another always ("seventy times seven times"), without limit. The second idea, found in the parable, is the communal dimension of forgiveness.

First Reading (Sir 27:30--28:7). The Book of Sirach was written around 180 B.C. by a wise Jew, Jesus Ben Sira, or Sirach. By this time in Israel's history, the great theological battles about monotheism are over, the kings have come and gone, and the Exile is a distant memory. The prophets have been silent for a long time, and many Jews are living in cities where pagans are the majorities. In these circumstances, the writer teaches the Jews how to live a good life, what moral and spiritual choices one should make, how awful wrath and anger are and how the sinner "hugs them tight." Release them and let them go, he says. *"The vengeful will suffer Yahweh's vengeance; for He remembers their sins in detail. Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven."* Sirach reminds his listeners that if they don't lay aside anger, forgive and show mercy to an offender they can't expect to receive much forgiveness and mercy when they face God. This teacher of wisdom tells us how to avoid Divine retribution. God treats us the way we treat each other. Today's passage says, in various ways, that it's unwise to nurse grudges and wise to forgive and concludes by reminding us of our own death. *"Remember your last days, and set enmity aside; remember death and decay, and cease from sin! Think of the commandments, hate not your*

neighbor; remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults." This reading prepares us for today's Gospel passage, the familiar parable of the unforgiving steward, in Matthew 18:21-35.

Today's Psalm, (Ps 103), speaks beautifully about God's forgiving love. "*God is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion,*" we sing in the Psalm Refrain. Since healing is the outward sign of inner forgiveness, restored health means restored relationships with God.

Second Reading: The context of this passage is a discussion of relations between the strong and the weak members of the Church. This discussion was occasioned by tensions in Rome between the Gentile Christians who were liberal in their attitude toward the Law and the Jewish Christians who were scrupulous about legal observances. They were the strong and the weak, respectively. Paul urges mutual tolerance. The strong, in particular, should respect the scruples of the weak. The fundamental principle here is that no Christian exists by himself or herself, but only in relation to the Lord, the risen and exalted *Kyrios*, that is, Christ, and therefore in relation to other Church members, who are equally related to the *Kyrios*. Paul reminds us that we live and die for Jesus Christ who, from his cross pardoned his crucifiers, among whom we must include ourselves, for Jesus died for the sin of all mankind. In this way, Jesus taught us to forgive others because we belong to Christ who taught us by his own example to forgive. Besides, we humans are related as brothers and sisters of Jesus, as members of God's family, and hence hatred and bitterness should have no room in our hearts. "*No one of us lives for oneself," the Apostle writes, "and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's."*

Exegesis: (A) "Seventy times seven times!": Peter asked Jesus how often he ought to forgive his brother, and then answered his own question by suggesting that he should forgive seven times. It was the Rabbinic teaching that a man must forgive his brother three times. The Biblical proof for this was taken from the first and second chapters of Amos where we find a series of condemnations on the various nations for three transgressions (Am.1:3, 6, 9; Am.1:11, 13; Am.2:1, 4, 6). From this it was deduced that God's forgiveness extends to three offenses, and that He visits the sinner with punishment at the fourth. Also, seven was a holy number to Jewish people, symbolizing perfection, fullness, abundance, rest, and completion. Peter expected to be warmly commended. But Jesus' answer was that the Christian must forgive "seventy times seven times." In other words, there is no reckonable limit to forgiveness.

(B) The lessons taught by the parable: (1) We must forgive in order to be forgiven. Jesus explains this after teaching the prayer, *Our Father*, saying=, "*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*" (Mt 6:14-15). James offers this warning in different words: "*For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy*" (Jas 2:13). This means that Divine and human forgiveness go hand in hand.

(2) We represent the greater debtor in the parable. We commit sins every day and, hence, need God's forgiveness every day. In the parable, the first servant (a top official of the king), owed his master 10,000 talents, an incredible debt. 10,000 is the highest number used in reckoning, and the talent is the largest currency unit in the whole of the Near East. The modern equivalent would be about ten million dollars! Surely Christ is exaggerating here because, according to Roman tax records of the time, all Israel's taxes for one year amounted to about \$800,000. We are told that this was an amount equivalent to 15 years of wages to a laborer in that day. The first servant would have taken 15 years to pay off the debt while the other only, three months of work. What Jesus means is that this man was hopelessly indebted. The accumulated sum of all our sins makes us greater debtors before God than the first debtor in the story. But God is ready to forgive us unconditionally. The sum total of all the offenses which our brothers and sisters commit against us is equivalent to the small debt of the second debtor in the parable, namely 100 *denarii*, one *denarius* being "the normal daily wage for a laborer" (NAB note). 100 *denarii* could have been carried in a pocket, and it was one five-hundred thousandth of the debt which the first servant owed. Our own merciless behavior towards our fellow human beings is both shocking and sad; it resembles that of the forgiven first servant who turned toward his fellow servant in the same household and refused to forgive a much smaller debt. The moral of Jesus' story is that members of the community must treat one another as God has treated each of us. Here is a Divine call to throw away the calculator when it comes to forgiveness. We must choose the more honorable path and forgive one another "from the heart." Jesus' instruction echoes Lv 19:17: "*You shall not hate your brother in your heart . . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" We have been forgiven a debt which is beyond all paying – the debt of the sin of all mankind which brought about the death of God's own Son – and, if that is so, we must forgive others as God has forgiven us. Otherwise, we cannot hope to expect any mercy. Having experienced forgiveness at the hands of God and God's people, we are then called to make it possible for others to experience it.

(3) Peter's question resonates within us: "How often should I forgive?" Jesus' answer comes in the form of an idiom, "seventy times seven times" which means that at all times and in all places we are to embody God's forgiving grace. Forgiveness involves more than absolution of guilt. It involves the reconciliation of our past and the healing of our brokenness. It involves intentional work to heal and be reconciled with another. God awakens in us the wholeness that invites us to share in His holiness. Healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness, acting together, sketch a way of life embodying an ever-deepening friendship with God and with one another.

(4) Forgiveness does not mean condoning evil: Neither in God nor in the Christian community, do forgiveness and reconciliation mean the indefinite tolerance of evil and unjust behavior. The king was perfectly ready to forgive the senior official. But how could reconciliation take place when the official later behaved in such an abominable way to a brother? We can be ready to forgive the sinner indefinitely, but we must fight against sin without counting the cost. God and the Church can forgive the repentant sinner, but they cannot condone unrepented behavior that is a source of real evil and suffering. God cannot be reconciled with the sinner who chooses to stay in sin, nor can the Christian community fully incorporate a member who refuses reconciliation and the healing of the behaviors that offend against truth and love. With God in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, forgiveness is easily available to the individual Christian, but along with the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we must seek a mutual healing of wounds and a real change of mind and evil behavior.

Life messages: **1) We need to forgive, forget and get reconciled:** In the light of eternity and the shortness of our span of life, harboring old grudges is pointless. Neighbors who remained hostile and unforgiving till their death are buried a short distance from one another in the same cemetery. Our ability to forgive is the measure of the depth of our Christianity. The forgiveness that we offer others is the indispensable condition which makes it possible for us to receive God's forgiveness and to pray meaningfully: *"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."* Let us remember St. Francis of Assisi's prayer: "It is in pardoning that we are pardoned." Our failure to offer pardon means that we have forgotten God's goodness or have not fully appreciated the unconditional forgiveness we have received from Him. What God expects from us is limitless forgiving and an ability to overlook faults and to keep on loving even in the face of insults.

2) “Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?” Incidents of simple human frailties challenge each of us on a personal level. We need to find healing for painful family relations. We need to find forgiveness for/from an employer and for/from a friend who has deserted us. We need to find forgiveness for the teacher who may have judged us wrongly and when we are in conflict with the one we most trusted.

3) We need to think more of the advantage of forgiving: Let us forgive the person who has wronged us before the hatred eats away at our ability to forgive. It will not be easy, but God is there to help us. We can do this by offering that individual to God, not sitting in judgment on him or her, but by simply saying, “Help so-and-so and me to mend our relationship.” Whatever the hurt, pain, disappointment, fear or anger that we may be feeling, we need to say, “God, I give this over to You. I can’t take care of it, but I know that You can. What would You have me to do?” And then listen. This isn’t merely being passive – or passing the buck to God. In fact it’s just the opposite. This kind of prayer and this kind of listening has to give birth to action, but it’s action that realistically acknowledges God’s Lordship, and trusts that, through God’s power, we can do all things, even the impossible . . . like forgiving. Alexander Pope once said, “To err is human, to forgive, Divine.” Believe it – because God alone is the Divine. When we withhold forgiveness, we remain the victim. When we offer forgiveness, we are doing it also for our own well-being. Forgiveness allows us to move beyond the pain, the resentment, and the anger. We always have a choice: to forgive or not to forgive. When we forgive we make the choice that heals.

4) We may never forget the hurt we have experienced, but we can choose to forgive. As life goes on and we remember an incident that was hurtful and caused great anger, we need to remind ourselves that with God’s grace we have already forgiven the one that hurt us. Time does heal memories. Time can dull the vividness of the hurt and thus the memory will fade. We must never let the person who hurt us own us. Forgiveness finally changes us from prisoners of our past to being liberated and at peace with our memories. Now we can see that those who cause such destruction and pain are sinful suffering men who need the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ.

JOKE OF THE WEEK

1) A woman testified to the transformation in her life that had resulted through her experience in conversion. She declared, "I'm so glad I got religion. I have an uncle I used to hate so much that I vowed I'd never go to his funeral. But now, why, I'd be happy to go to it any time."

2) In a recent issue of *Reader's Digest*, Janey Walser wrote these words: "I once worked in a grocery store and often assisted elderly people when they came in. One woman shopped nearly every day, asking for just a few items each time. After a month, she said to me, "I suppose you wonder why I'm here so often. You see, I live with my nephew. I can't stand him, and I am not going to die and leave him with a refrigerator full of food."

3) Two little brothers, Harry and James, had finished supper and were playing until bedtime. Somehow, Harry hit James with a stick, and tears and bitter words followed. Charges and accusations were still being exchanged as their mother prepared them for bed. She said, "Now boys, what would happen if either of you died tonight and you never had the opportunity again for forgiving one another?" James spoke up, "Well, OK, I'll forgive him tonight, but if we're both alive in the morning, he'd better look out."