

## 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Sirach 27:30-28:7
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 14:7-9
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I give you a new commandment, says the Lord; love one another as I have loved you.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 18:21-35

The 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A continues our study of the Gospel of Matthew 18, Jesus' so-called discourse on the Church. It gives us one of the famous stories of Peter coming up to Jesus and asking him, "how many times should I forgive my brother," which leads Jesus into giving one of his most famous parables, a parable that's unique to the Gospel of Matthew. It's the parable of the unforgiving servant, or as the Catechism calls it, the parable of the merciless servant. I like that name and you'll see why in just a minute. So let's read through the passage together and then we'll go back and try to put it in its first century Jewish context. In Matthew 18:21-35 we read these words:

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. "Therefore 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 jailers, 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."<sup>1</sup>

That is the end of the Gospel. As I hope you can see, there is a lot going on here. This is a very, very rich passage. So the first point we want to make about these words, in context, is to remember that we've just heard about Jesus's instructions about what to do when a brother sins against you; and how to take it up with him individually, and then take two or three witnesses, and then take it to the Church if he doesn't repent. So we just heard that in the previous verses, and in that context Peter basically says "okay, well how often do I have to do that, how many times do I have to forgive? Do I have to forgive as many as seven times?" You can see there from Peter's words that he considers seven times to be very, very merciful. That is a lot of times to forgive someone. And you can almost hear here an allusion to the Old Testament, which talks about the sevenfold vengeance of Cain in Genesis 4. So if you remember in Genesis 4, it tells the story of Cain slaying his brother and what God says is that "if anyone tries to take vengeance on Cain, vengeance shall be taken upon him sevenfold [or seven times as much]." So what Peter is presenting here is like an antithesis, an opposite. Instead of sevenfold vengeance of Cain in the Old Testament, it's sevenfold forgiveness. Which is a lot, that is a lot of times to forgive someone. But Jesus takes it much much further than that by saying "I say to you not just seven times, but seventy times seven times," which would be 490 times that you would forgive someone.

Why does Jesus say that? Well two things. First, there is some debate about exactly how to translate Jesus' words. Some translations will say 77 times, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

other translations will say 70×7 times, which would be 490 times. Either way, whether it's 77 times or 490 times, it's an exorbitant number of times. It just goes way beyond what Peter was thinking would be the height of forgiveness, namely to forgive someone as many as seven times. I'm inclined to the perspective that Jesus is actually saying 490 times, because if you go back again to the Old Testament in Daniel 9, God uses the image of 490 years, or seventy seven's of years, to describe the time period that it is going to take for Israel's sin to be atoned for and for the ultimate forgiveness to take place that will come through the death of the Messiah. That is in Daniel 9:25-27. So 490, from a Jewish perspective, in light of the book of Daniel, is like the number of ultimate forgiveness. That's how many times God forgives his people. He will go even up to 490 times. So I think that Jesus is alluding to that image from the book of Daniel. In either case, what Jesus is saying is, in effect, "you have to forgive over and over and over and over and over again." Your mercy has to be like God's mercy, an exorbitant mercy, a mercy that forgives over and over and over again. It's a shockingly gratuitous number of times of forgiveness. In order to illustrate that exorbitant mercy, Jesus does what he frequently does in the Gospel of Matthew. He gives the disciples a parable that will illustrate the principle by means of a story.

So in this case, this is the parable of the unforgiving servant. So what happens in this parable? Well we have already read it, and so the context here is of a king who is wishing to settle accounts with his servants. And in this case, the first servant that's brought to him owes him a certain debt. He owes him a certain amount of money. Now in the New American Bible that is used in the lectionary in the United States, the translation says that the servant owed the king a "huge amount." Now that's a loose translation. It's accurate, it's true, but it doesn't really get at the heart of it. So let me be a little more specific here. In the Revised Standard Version, the literal Greek says that he owed the king "10,000 talents." You are probably familiar with the idea of a talent from the parable of the talents. Talents were gold coins that were worth a lot of money. And in actuality, one single talent was equal to 6000 denarii. Now you might think, "well that doesn't mean anything." Well a denarius was a day's wage. So one talent would equal 6000 day's wages, and this servant owes 10,000 talents. That's not just a huge amount of money, that's an almost inconceivable amount of money. So put into terms of days wages — think about this — if this servant owed 10,000 talents and he worked at a day's wage of one denarius per day, it would take him over 160,000 years to pay

off his debt. So we are only 2000 years removed from Jesus's time, if that servant was working off his debt, he would still have about 150,000 years of working today before he will be finished paying off his debt. In other words, this guy is never going to be able to pay off 10,000 talents worth of debt. It is a truly huge amount of debt. And so he pleads with the king, "please forgive my debt. Have patience with me, and I'll pay you everything." Now this guy is a servant; it's absurd to think that he would ever have enough time to pay the debt off of 10,000 talents to the King. In other words, he's asking the king to have patience in the prospect of him paying off the debt, but that is impossible. He just doesn't have enough time to pay the debt off. And yet what happens with the king? The king forgives him. He just basically wipes the slate clean and forgives the servant this debt that would've taken him 160,000 years to pay off. The modern-day equivalent might be like \$1 trillion, or something like that. That's his debt.

Now what does he do? He goes and finds another servant who owes him 100 denarii. Now remember, a denarius is a day's wage, so he owes him 100 days worth of work. Now that's a lot of work. That's a third of the year's wages. And so it's not an inconsequential amount of money. The NAB, the New American Bible, translates it as "a much smaller amount." And that's true, but it doesn't really get at the heart of the matter. The unforgiving servant owed 160,000 years worth of debt. This guy owes 100 days worth of debt, and does the servant forgive him? No. To the contrary, he grabs him by the throat and says "pay what you owe" in anger. So he turns to his fellow servant and basically demands that he pay what he owe. But when the fellow servant does what he himself did, namely, falls down and asked for mercy, he refuses him. The unforgiving servant refuses him, and not just refuses him, he takes him and he puts him in prison until he shall pay the debt off. Now what's that about? Well it's very important to remember here that in the first century A.D., many of the people in prison were put there because of debt. If you committed a capital crime, you didn't go to prison to go to death row or to await the death penalty or something like, they would simply put you to death. Prison was for people who were in debt and needed to get it paid off. And what would often happen is you would get thrown into prison until either a family member or a rich relative or you would be in some way able to scrounge up enough money to pay off the debt. It was called debtor's prison.

So what happens here is that this unforgiving servant puts his fellow servant into prison until he should pay off the debt. Now you can imagine here how the other servants feel when they hear about this, because by this point the story has reached them that the master was so merciful with this servant, and yet this servant has thrown one of their fellow servants into prison until he should pay off this smaller debt — much smaller debt — of just 100 denarii. So when they find out what happened, they go and they tell the master, and the master summons the servant and basically says “you wicked servant. I forgave you all of your debt because you besought me. Should you not have had mercy as I had mercy on you.” Again, note the contrast here, it's striking. Not only is there a striking contrast between the amount of debt between the two servants, 160,000 years worth of debt for the one and 100 days worth of debt for the other, there is also a striking contrast between the mercy. The master's mercy was exorbitant, it was extravagant, it was unprecedented' but this servant's mercy was nonexistent, he had no forgiveness in his heart toward his fellow servant for a much, much smaller debt.

So what happens now to this merciless servant? The Lord delivers him over to the jailers and the jailers throw him into debtor's prison until he should pay all his debt. Which by now you get the full significance of...how long is he going to be imprisoned for? Well, around 160,000 years, until he should pay off his debt. And then the punchline comes. The whole point of the parable is the very last line. It makes this parable one of the most striking and, in some ways, terrifying of all of Jesus' parables because he says, “so also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you don't forgive your brother from your heart.” And that punchline is the clue to the whole parable. Jesus here isn't really talking about economics in the first century A.D. He is not talking about us being put into an actual debtor's prison until we pay off our monetary debt. He's talking about a spiritual prison whereby we would pay off the debt of sin. Just like in the Lord's prayer, “Lord forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” those who were indebted to us. He's talking about the fact that unless we show mercy to our brothers and sisters, we too will not be shown mercy by the Father. This is a very, very striking parable, especially when you consider the ramifications of how long it would take this unforgiving servant, this merciless servant, to pay off his debt. So what's the point of the parable? Well go back to the beginning of the story there. The context here is Peter saying “how often do I need to forgive?” And the answer is really over and over and over and over again. And even if you have forgiven 490 times, you're

not even going to come close to the mercy and the forgiveness of your heavenly Father, who forgives all of the debts of humanity when we come to him and beg for his mercy, when we ask for forgiveness, when we ask for mercy.

So that's the parable for today's gospel. What does that have to do with the Old Testament? Well if you go back to the Old Testament passage here in Sirach 27, you are going to see an interesting parallel. While we are turning there, it's important to note that Sirach is one of the books of the Old Testament that is only found in the Catholic Bible. And it's a great book, I really recommend it to you. It was actually one of the most popular books in the early Church. So in the early Christian tradition, they didn't call the book Sirach — which is a Hebrew name — they called it Ecclisiasticus, meaning the book of the Church, because this was everyone's favorite book to read. It was one of the most popular books because it has lots of practical wisdom for how to live a life according to the law of God. In chapter 27, verse 30 and following, we have a whole teaching on forgiveness, on forgiving our neighbors sins against us. So I am just going to read through it and highlight a few of the themes here. I want you notice here, this is the Old Testament, not the New Testament. This is the Old Testament message of forgiveness. In Sirach 27:30 we read these words:

Anger and wrath, these also are abominations,  
and the sinful man will possess them.  
He that takes vengeance will suffer vengeance from the Lord,  
and he will firmly establish his sins.  
Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done,  
and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.  
Does a man harbor anger against another,  
and yet seek for healing from the Lord?  
Does he have no mercy toward a man like himself,  
and yet pray for his own sins?  
If he himself, being flesh, maintains wrath,  
who will make expiation for his sins?  
Remember the end of your life, and cease from enmity,  
remember destruction and death, and be true  
to the commandments.  
Remember the commandments, and do not be angry

with your neighbor;  
remember the covenant of the Most High, and  
overlook ignorance.

I'll stop there. Notice some key things here. Number one, vengeance, what does it say? If you take vengeance against your neighbor, guess what? You will suffer vengeance from the Lord. That is the first point. In other words, leave it to God. Leave the vengeance to the Lord. Let the Lord be the judge and the one who punishes sinners. It's not your job to do his work. Number two, notice the emphasis on forgiveness. "Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done." This line could almost come straight out of the Gospels. That's essentially Jesus' message to Peter. When Peter's asking "how many times should I forgive?" Jesus says "as many times as you are sinned against, forgive." Third, notice the reason for forgiveness, "so that you too will be forgiven." So in other words, you are seeking pardon when you forgive others, because Sirach is saying that if you forgive others when they sin against you, then when you turn to God and ask him to forgive you, you will receive the same mercy. Again, that could be a line straight out of the Lord's prayer, when Jesus says to the apostles, "I want you to pray in this way...forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." It's one of the most dangerous words in the Our Father, because what you are basically saying is "Lord, I want you to forgive me as much as I forgive others." That's a really dangerous thing to pray if you're not a very forgiving person. And yet Sirach here is saying, if you forgive others, then your sins will be pardoned. It is straight out of the teaching that you find in the Gospels.

And then finally, anger as well, not just unforgiveness, but anger. If we harbor anger in our hearts toward our neighbor, and yet we go to seek healing from the Lord, we are not going to be able to find that healing, because the unforgiveness is still dwelling in our hearts. So what God is saying here is don't be angry with your neighbor. Remember the covenant and overlook the ignorance of your brothers and your sisters. Why? Because we are all going to die one day. And Sirach says that you need to keep in mind the day of your death, the end of your life, and cease from anger, cease from enmity, and cease from vengeance. This is something that is such a practical point. Mainly, when you get angry at other people, if you experience anger or unforgiveness rising up in your heart, pause and think about the day of your death, think about your own judgment, think about all the times

that you have sinned, all the times and you have hurt others, and yet God has had mercy on you, and it will help you to be able to have mercy on others. Or put negatively, think about the fact that if you don't forgive your neighbor, you will not be forgiven on the day of judgment. That's a great motivator to help you be forgiving. In other words, if you can't muster up forgiveness out of love, at least muster up some forgiveness out of the fear of your own final judgment, out of the fact that one day you're going to die and be judged as well. So there is some wonderful practical teaching here in Sirach, and notice how close it is to Jesus' teachings in the Gospel. It is the very same principles that he's trying to instruct the disciples in in Matthew 18.

And why should we do all this? Well if you look at the Responsorial Psalm for the week, the answer is clear. It is that when we are merciful, when we are kind, when we are slow to anger, and when we are compassionate, we are imitating God, because it is the Lord himself who is "slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and compassionate towards those who are repentant." In fact in that Psalm 103:11-12 — it is one of the most beautiful lines there — it says "as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him. And as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." That is an awesome image there. So when God forgives your sins, when he takes away your transgressions, he takes them so far away from you that he puts them as far as the east is from the west. Well how far is that? Well literally, an infinite distance. It's a kind of poetic image for saying he completely removes your sin. It's completely forgiven, it's completely atoned for, it's completely gone. And that's how we have to be whenever we forgive the sins of others. We have to put them away. We have to forget them. We have to remove them from our hearts and let that anger and that vengeance subside and have mercy toward our brother and sister, and have mercy toward our neighbor.

So that's the explanation for the Gospel, the Old Testament reading and the Psalm for today. I would just like to end with a couple of reflections here about these passages, because I really think that this is one of those passages in the gospel that is not only beautiful, but challenging. It's hard to live according to Jesus' teachings. It is easy to be angry and unforgiving. It's hard to forgive people over and over and over again when they continually sin and continually hurt us. So how can we actually live this out. Two final points from Pope Francis and the



Catechism of the Catholic Church. One of the things Pope Francis did was call for a year of mercy. And when he did that, he wrote a document called *The Face of Mercy*. It was a little short letter just on mercy and what it means. It is one of my favorite things Pope Francis wrote. And I highly encourage...every Christian should read this document. I remember when I first read it, thinking “I thought I understood the Gospel.” And then I read it and I realized I was missing a major part of the Gospel, and that is the message of mercy, which is at the center of Jesus' teachings, it is at the heart of Jesus' mission, at the heart of Jesus' message. And in this document, *The Face of Mercy*, Pope Francis says something very powerful about this particular parable of the merciless servant, of the unforgiving servant, in Matthew 18. Pope Francis wrote these words:

This parable contains a profound teaching for all of us... In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us... For us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves. At times how hard it seems to forgive! And yet pardon is the instrument placed into our fragile hands to attain serenity of heart. To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully...<sup>2</sup>

So notice what Pope Francis is saying there. First, we are bound to give mercy as Christians. It is not like we get to choose, “well I will be merciful in this case but not in this other case.” No, no, no, we have an obligation, we have an imperative, from which we cannot excuse ourselves, to be forgiving and to be merciful toward others. And the reason we have that obligation is because God has already shown mercy toward us in Christ. We are like the servant who owes the master 10,000 talents. In other words, through our sins we have accrued a debt that we can't possibly pay off. We could never do enough good works, enough good deeds, enough good actions to pay off the debt of our sins. This is very, very important for us to realize, that the parable of the unforgiving servant is a parable about us. Every single sinner has accrued a debt that is impossible for us to pay off. Why? Well because when we sin against God, who is infinitely good and infinitely loving, our sin, in a sense, creates an infinite gap, an infinite chasm between us and God, and we don't have the power to bridge that infinite gap. There is no finite action that we can do that is powerful enough to cross that infinite gap. But God,

---

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *The Face of Mercy*, no. 9

whose mercy is infinite, can pay off our debts no matter how high they are because he is the all-good, the all-loving, the all-merciful one, and because his love literally covers an infinite multitude of sins. 1 Peter says “love covers a multitude of sins.” Well God's love is infinite. It is not bound by that chasm, so it can leap across the gap, so to speak, and cover our sins, pay the debt of our sins. We can't. So we are like the servant who has been forgiven and therefore we have the obligation to show the same mercy to others, an infinite mercy. To try to the best of our ability to imitate the mercy of God, which has no limits. And the only way we can achieve serenity of heart, of happiness, is to have that kind of mercy.

So notice in the parable of the unforgiving servant, even though he's forgiven by God, he's angry. When the servant comes to him who owes him 100 denarii, what does he do? He chokes him in wrath because he has not yet imitated God's mercy. If he would have received that mercy and shown it to others, he could have had peace, he could have had joy, he could have had happiness. But because he doesn't, he continues in his anger, he continues to be, in a sense, shackled by his own sin and by his wrath. And so the Pope is giving us a wonderful insight into how to live joyfully. If you want to live joyfully, be merciful toward your neighbor, be merciful toward those who hurt you, be merciful toward those who sin against you.

There are so many things here I want to talk about, but this reminds me of a saying of St. Catherine of Siena. In her dialogue, St. Catherine of Siena said this — I'm kind of paraphrasing here, but she basically said — “the reason God gave us other people was so that we can learn to love like God loves.” See if it was just us and God, we would be loving the one who was all perfect and all good, and who never did any harm to us. But that's not how God loves. He doesn't just love those who are good, he loves those who are wicked, he loves those who hate him, he loves those who sin against him. So in order for our love to not be love of ones who do good to us, but the to love our enemy as well, he gives us our neighbors. He surround us with people who are full of faults and sins and annoyances, and who get on our nerves, and who hurt us and harm us, in order to teach us to love a truly divine love, which is not just love of those who love us, but love of those who hate us, because that's how God is. He loves even those who hate him. He loves his enemies and not just friends. That's the point from St. Catherine of Siena. It is just a little side point, something to think about. I think it is really profound.

In closing though, a line from the Catechism. The catechism also addresses a real difficulty people will sometimes have. I have taught this passage before in the classroom and sometimes people say “well Dr. Pitre, it's just too hard. I can't forget what someone — X, Y or Z — has done to me. They have hurt me so bad. They continue to hurt me. I can't forgive them. I can't ignore them. Is Jesus just asking me to be a doormat?” No, he's not saying you have to be a doormat, and he is also not saying that you have to have no feelings, that you can't experience the pain of being hurt. That is not what he is getting at. How can we love someone who has hurt us? What's the nature of mercy, the nature of love? The Catechism gives us a fantastic insight in paragraph 2843. This also was on the parable that we are looking at in Matthew 18. I am going to quote it here. The Catechism says this:

The parable of the merciless servant, which crowns the Lord's teaching on ecclesial communion, ends with these words: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” It is there, in fact, “in the depths of the *heart*,” that everything is bound and loosed. *It is not in our power not to feel or to forget an offense; but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession.*<sup>3</sup>

What does that mean. Well, the Catechism is saying that because of human weakness, it's not in our power not to feel hurt or to forget an offense. That's not what Jesus is saying. When he says we have to forgive, it doesn't mean that we can't feel pain or hurt, and it doesn't mean that we have to forget what someone has done to us. But what we do have to do is, in the depths of our heart, turn that injury into compassion, above all through intercession. In other words, if you can't bring yourself to like the person who's hurt you, you can at least bring yourself to pray for them. And praying for them is the deepest way you can show love to them, because to love someone is simply to will the good for them. So when we pray for someone who has hurt us, we choose to will the good for them. We ask God to bless them. We ask God to heal them. We ask God to save them. It doesn't mean we have to put ourselves in harms way. It doesn't mean we have to let them treat us badly or treat us like a doormat. But it does mean that if someone has hurt

---

<sup>3</sup> CCC 2843.

us, we have to forgive them and express that forgiveness above all by praying for them, by interceding for them. And that is the way that we can show them love and show them mercy, so that one day we too might be together with them as forgiven sinners, as servants who have been shown mercy, in the everlasting kingdom of God, who is the Lord of mercy, who is compassionate toward those who seek him, and who always is full of steadfast love, who forgives and whose love covers a multitude of sins, even an infinite multitude of our sins.