



During this discourse, the fourth of five in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus continues to show how society's standards are not those of his disciples.

Peter presents a question about forgiving other people, and his initial proposal of doing so on seven occasions might appear to veer on the generous side. But Jesus replies in terms which suggest an incalculable number, and one which calls into question a system of pardon founded strictly on justice. Jesus illustrates God's attitude by the parable of the debtor who refused to cancel a trifling amount in spite of his own creditor wiping out an enormous bill which he had no hope of ever settling.

Peter wants to know the limits of forgiveness. He is told that there is no limit to God's forgiveness, and the parable makes it clear that the disciple of Jesus is expected to reflect this when dealing with other people. The master's understanding and kindness is further emphasised when he cancels what he now refers to in the original text as a loan, rather than a debt. The ghastly punishment mentioned at the end of the story is not given in light of the debt owed but because of the person's refusal to forgive someone else. Also, this forgiveness must be genuine, "from the heart", and not just a superficial action which conceals the person's true feelings and attitude. ■

LEARN

The law of retaliation (*lex talionis*) was a statute restricting retribution to the extent of the injury caused. It was intended to stop the developing of a vendetta which would have no ending.

A talent was a financial unit, representing a great sum of money. Ten thousand of these would be an astronomical amount which a servant would have no hope of ever repaying.

To end up in slavery as a result of debt was common in the ancient world. Under Jewish law, a wife could not be sold in this way.

SAY

There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea.
(F.W. Faber)

REFLECT

There is, in fact, a limit to God's forgiveness, and that is the limit which we ourselves impose. We are warned elsewhere in the Gospel that the amount we measure out will be the measure which we receive. But, more importantly, we ourselves remind God of this, and ask God to treat us as we treat others each time we say the Lord's Prayer. One of the effects of using archaic language is that sometimes we do not really understand what we are saying: the line "Forgive us our trespasses..." really means "And forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors", and Jesus goes on to spell out clearly that this is the standard of forgiveness that we will be subject to, one that we ourselves have laid down.

Peter's posing of the question recalls an early story in Genesis about Lamech (Gen 4:23-24). This episode illustrates the increase in violence among human beings, where Lamech boasts about exacting seventyfold vengeance for injuries he received. The law of retribution ("eye for eye, tooth for tooth") was intended to restrict revenge to the proportion of the offence, so it meant *only* an eye for an eye, *only* a tooth for a tooth... But later biblical teaching is about reconciling the parties. It may well be that Matthew is linking the debt owed to the master in the parable to sin, hence the master represents the heavenly Father. It is the clear, and uncomfortable, message that if we hope that God will forgive us, then we should be careful where we set the limits of God's mercy. It is truly in our hands. ■

DO

Look into your own heart. Is there someone there whom you will not forgive? What might you do about this?



ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you,
that your prophets be found true.
Hear the prayers of your servant,
and of your people Israel.

GLORIA

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to people of good will.

We praise you,
we bless you,
we adore you,
we glorify you,
we give you thanks for your great glory,
Lord God, heavenly King,
O God, almighty Father.

Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
you take away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us;
you take away the sins of the world,
receive our prayer;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father,
have mercy on us.

For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

COLLECT

Look upon us, O God,
Creator and ruler of all things,
and, that we may feel the working of your
mercy,
grant that we may serve you with all our
heart.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of
the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

FIRST READING Ecclesiasticus 27:30-28:7

A reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus.
Resentment and anger, these are foul things,
and both are found with the sinner.
He who exacts vengeance will experience the
vengeance of the Lord,
who keeps strict account of sin.
Forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you,
and when you pray, your sins will be
forgiven.
If a man nurses anger against another,
can he then demand compassion from the
Lord?
Showing no pity for a man like himself,
can he then plead for his own sins?
Mere creature of flesh, he cherishes
resentment;
who will forgive him his sins?
Remember the last things, and stop hating,
remember dissolution and death, and live by
the commandments.
Remember the commandments, and do not
bear your neighbour ill-will;
remember the covenant of the Most High,
and overlook the offence.
The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

PSALM

Psalm 102

Response:
The Lord is compassion and love,
slow to anger and rich in mercy.

1. My soul, give thanks to the Lord,
all my being, bless his holy name.
My soul, give thanks to the Lord
and never forget all his blessings. (R.)
2. It is he who forgives all your guilt,
who heals every one of your ills,
who redeems your life from the grave,
who crowns you with love and
compassion. (R.)
3. His wrath will come to an end;
he will not be angry for ever.
He does not treat us according to our sins
nor repay us according to our faults. (R.)
4. For as the heavens are high above the
earth
so strong is his love for those who fear
him.
As far as the east is from the west
so far does he remove our sins. (R.)

SECOND READING Romans 14:7-9

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the
Romans.

The life and death of each of us has its
influence on others; if we live, we live for the
Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord, so
that alive or dead we belong to the Lord. This
explains why Christ both died and came to
life, it was so that he might be Lord both of
the dead and of the living.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!

Speak, Lord, your servant is listening:
you have the message of eternal life.
Alleluia!

GOSPEL Matthew 18:21-35

A reading from the holy Gospel according to
Matthew.

Peter went up to Jesus and said, "Lord,
how often must I forgive my brother if he
wronged me? As often as seven times?" Jesus
answered, "Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-
seven times.

"And so the kingdom of heaven may be
compared to a king who decided to settle
his accounts with his servants. When the
reckoning began, they brought him a man
who owed ten thousand talents; but he had
no means of paying, so his master gave
orders that he should be sold, together with
his wife and children and all his possessions,
to meet the debt. At this, the servant threw
himself down at the master's feet. 'Give me
time,' he said, 'and I will pay you.' But the other
servant's master felt so sorry for him
that he let him go and cancelled the debt.
Now as this servant went out, he happened
to meet a fellow servant who owed him one
hundred denarii; and he seized him by the
throat and began to throttle him. 'Pay what
you owe me,' he said. His fellow servant fell
at his feet and implored him, saying, 'Give
me time and I will pay you.' But the other
would not agree; on the contrary, he had him
thrown into prison till he should pay the debt.
His fellow servants were deeply distressed
when they saw what had happened, and they
went to their master and reported the whole
affair to him. Then the master sent for him.
'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all
that debt of yours when you appealed to me.

Were you not bound, then, to have pity on
your fellow servant just as I had pity on you?'
And in his anger the master handed him
over to the torturers till he should pay all his
debt. And that is how my heavenly Father will
deal with you unless you each forgive your
brother from your heart."

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

PROFESSION OF FAITH

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with
the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
(all bow during the next three lines)
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the
Virgin Mary,
and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under
Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,
the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is adored
and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
I believe in one, holy, catholic and
apostolic Church.
I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness
of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection of the
dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

PRAYER OVER THE OFFERINGS

Look with favour on our supplications, O Lord,
and in your kindness accept these, your
servants' offerings,
that what each has offered to the honour of
your name
may serve the salvation of all.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

How precious is your mercy, O God!
The children of men seek shelter in the
shadow of your wings.

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

May the working of this heavenly gift, O Lord,
we pray,
take possession of our minds and bodies,
so that its effects, and not our own desires,
may always prevail in us.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.