

This week's sermon is provided by the Lutheran Church of Canada. Special recognition and thanks goes out to our brothers and sisters in the LCC!

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In last week's Gospel Reading, which immediately precedes today's reading, Jesus continued to teach His disciples about the kingdom of heaven proclaiming that the neediest is the greatest. Those who recognize their utter dependence on God for everything, not just most things, but everything – like children that are completely reliant on those who care for them – are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And which is why Jesus declared: *“Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

Today's Gospel Reading concludes this same discourse where Jesus is teaching His disciples about greatness of the “little one” in the reign of heaven that they might preserve and aid the “little ones” even when direct intervention is needed in the case of sin. In light of the sin among brothers, that is, fellow Christians, Peter, once again on behalf of the disciples, brings a question to Jesus: *“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”*

Peter's question is a serious one – not so much because as some commentators have thought that the going rate of forgiveness was three times, and now Peter thought of himself as the ultimate ‘forgiveness man’ because he was willing to forgive seven times. Actually, seven is understood as a number of perfections. Therefore, Peter is moving in what seems to be the right direction when considering forgiveness. But if Peter's response is a new way of thinking in regard to forgiveness, then Jesus' response is a completely new reality altogether. So, He says: *“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”* And what's the point? Just this: the number of times that we are to forgive others is so large that we should not count the times we do so but continue to always forgive.

Jesus then proceeds to make this clear in His parable of ‘the unforgiving servant,’ or what we might also call ‘the merciful master,’ as to just what is at stake when it comes to forgiveness; namely, the kingdom of heaven, the Christian faith itself. The master in the

parable wanted to straighten out all the accounts and so called a servant who owed him *“ten thousand talents.”* While the actual worth of a talent varied, it was always a costly amount. And, as some have noted, even if the servant was extremely well-paid, it would take him over 1,000 years without a day off to repay the king. This isn't a few maxed-out credit cards or even a mortgage that is in default and that bankruptcy may need to be declared. No, this is once again Jesus demonstrating that the size of the debt was so insurmountable that it made the servant and his family indentured servants forever. There's no possible way for the servant to ever repay his Master.

And yet, what is the servant's ridiculous response to the Master. He *“fell on his knees imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’”* The Master could've rightly laughed in the servant's face and replied in return, 'Yeah, right?!' Instead, just as Jesus blew Peter's suggestion as to the number of times to forgive someone out of the water; so He says: *“And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.”*

And in the same way, you are forever forgiven by the blood of Christ whether you feel like it or not. There's no way for you to pay off your merciful Master in heaven for all the debt you have built living in lies. There's no payment plan that can make things right after you've convinced yourself that you've got your act together. There's no possibility of you making it up to God for not only all of the hurt you have caused Him, but for the pain you've brought to other people, living a life of sin that is totally against His will. But the Master has decided once and for all to relieve you of all your debt, to put the full cost upon His own Son, giving Him up to die, and then raising Him from the dead. And when that happened, do you know what? Your debt was paid in full. *“It is finished!”*

And no matter how many people may remind you of what you've done or the mess of which you still can't quite clean up by yourself, your Master has completely, once and for all, forgiven all of your debt. You are baptized into this forgiveness and now live a new life in Christ. So, Peter writes in his First Epistle: *“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”* Your life is completely defined by and drenched in the forgiving waters of your baptism with everything you do dripping with the forgiveness of Christ. Your mouth . . . and therefore your words . . . are filled with our Lord's forgiving body and blood.

And to not forgive others is in fact, to forget, to not believe, that our gracious and merciful Master has forgiven you. For when the servant in this parable who had his unpayable, massive debt forgiven; and yet went out and choked a fellow servant who owed him the rough equivalent of a few months' wages, he wasn't just being a jerk. He was living in unforgiveness . . . in unbelief. And in this unbelief the servant is eternally working on the debt of which he will never be able to pay. That's an apt description of unbelief: eternally trying to pay on a debt you are unable to pay. So Jesus says: *"So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

Now, just because you must forgive, don't turn it around and make forgiveness something selfish. In other words, don't make the main thrust of forgiveness something that frees the person who forgives. To be sure, holding on to past hurts and unforgiveness brings pain and can make our lives more difficult. But Jesus says that there's a much deeper issue here; namely, living in unforgiveness is akin to living in unbelief. It's a matter of faith. And if you don't forgive, you display your unbelief . . . showing that you don't believe that Jesus has forgiven all your sins – that He is *"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."*

Now, let's be honest. What child ever wants to forgive, let alone what kind of indignant adult, insecure husband, or hurt wife actually wants to forgive? It's much easier to hold on to the hurt to make ourselves feel better than those who have caused such pain. Most of us don't even know how to say, 'I forgive you.' When someone tells you, 'I'm sorry,' we often just respond, 'Oh, that's okay.' But do you know what? Hurt, pain, selfishness, and destruction—these things are not okay. Forgiveness is not saying that this sort of thing is okay. Rather, forgiveness actually releases another person from being paid back for the wrongs they have done.

'But pastor,' you protest, 'you don't know . . . 'You're right, I don't know. I have no idea of the horrors of your past . . . the guilt that continually gets heaped upon you . . . the people who have betrayed you . . . the loved ones who have abandoned you. You say, 'I don't feel like forgiving them.' But dear children of God, little ones of the Lord, because our heavenly Father has forgiven your overwhelming debt of sin, you forgive whether you feel like it or not. Forgiveness is what the new person who has been baptized into Christ does . . . does only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

To be sure, your emotions, your desire to forgive, may come along much more slowly and drag on for what seems forever. Yet, take comfort as one commentator on this text says: “Disciples should not doubt the fact of God’s unlimited forgiveness for themselves in Jesus Christ, nor should they doubt the efficacy of the past act of declaring the other person forgiven. Emotions may cloud the mind and heart, but they cannot trump the promises of God.”

And yes, it very well may be that because of lingering emotions even after having initially forgiven or being forgiven, we must forgive others and also listen to the forgiveness pronounced by others more than once for the same sin. That doesn’t mean that you didn’t forgive them from the beginning or that they never absolved you from the start. Our feeble human nature may simply require hearing and to speak forgiveness again and again.

It is important to note that the Master in the parable initially treats the first servant better than he deserved and better than he asked to be treated. We Christians can also, then, forgive those who have wronged us even before they recognize their offences. For us at times the most difficult words we say in prayer are the words our Lord Himself gave us to pray saying, *“And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* But they are the words that spring from faith, that spring from the great forgiveness that your loving Father has lavished upon you in and through His dear Son – your lives dripping with baptismal forgiveness and mouths filled with the heavenly food of the Lord’s Supper of debts forever paid that we may know that in Jesus, whether we feel like it or not, we are forgiven and that we now also forgive. Amen.

**The peace of God guard your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**