

## Forgive Us Our Debts

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Gospel reading, **Peter said to Jesus, “Lord how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to your seven times, but seventy times seven.”** Here ends the text.

A son came to his father’s house to ask for help. “Dad, we’ve gotten ourselves into a financial jam, and I need to borrow some money.” “How much do you need?” his father asked. “Oh, about \$50,000.” “\$50,000!” the father exclaimed. “How did you get into so much debt?” The son explained that they just had too many credit cards. They had splurged too much on the kids, clothes and music lessons and electronic gizmos. They probably ate out too much, and they had bitten off more house than they could chew. Mortgage payments and car payments and furniture payments. Day by day, week by week they just got further into debt. And now he couldn’t hold off the credit agencies any longer. They had missed their mortgage payments, and the bank was ready to foreclose. “Just have patience with me, Dad. We’ll change our habits. I’ll pay you back.” The father had pity on his son. He got out his check book and wrote him a check for the full amount. “That won’t be necessary son. I’ll pay for it all. I’m giving you a fresh start. Just don’t cash this check until I can put more funds in my account.”

The next day the son was at home when he heard a crash. He went outside and found that elderly Mrs. Griffen had backed into his pickup truck which he had left parked on the street. He fumed at her, “This is going to cost you hundreds of dollars.” “I’m sorry,” she said. “I haven’t been able to make my car insurance payments, and I can’t pay you right away. Please be patient with me. I’ll save up money to pay you from my social security checks.” But the son grabbed her wrist and said, “That’s not good enough. I’m taking you to small claims court.”

One of Mrs. Griffen’s neighbors heard about the son’s behavior and called his father. The father was terribly disappointed in his son. As he hung up the phone, he looked through the curtains and saw his son knocking at the front door. “What’s he want now,” he thought, “a pint of blood.” On the doorstep the son asked if his father had transferred the funds yet. He needed more money to fix his truck. The father exploded at his son, “You wicked son! I was willing to pay all your debts because you pleaded with me for help. You should have shown the same mercy on Mrs. Griffen as I had mercy on you. I’m putting a stop-payment on that check. Good luck with those creditors.” And he slammed the door.

There is nothing so sad as a person who has been forgiven a tremendous debt but will not forgive others.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Peter comes to Jesus with a question. Jesus has just explained to his disciples how to deal with a brother who has sinned against them. Go and show him his fault, and if he listens to you, forgive him. This prompts Peter’s question, **“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”** You can always tell quite a bit from people’s questions. They’re not just asking for the fun of it. There’s usually something deeper behind the question. From Peter’s question we can tell that someone has sinned against Peter, and he’s forgiven them. But this has happened more than once. Peter is keeping count. He recommends a limit to this forgiveness, probably because his patience is wearing out. Peter thinks he’s being somewhat generous, but Jesus surprises him, **“Not seven times but seventy times seven.”** Oh, seventy times seven. Peter’s going to need a new ledger book. But Jesus explains to him what he really means. He tells him a story.

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who was settling his accounts with his servants. One servant was brought before him who owed ten thousand talents, millions of dollars. How he got into this fix, who knows. I suppose little by little, day by day. Of course he couldn’t pay it, so the king orders the servant, his wife and children, and all he had to be sold to pay the debt. But the servant pleaded for patience, that he would pay everything. I suppose, if the king could wait a few hundred years. But the king had pity on him. He not only had patience, he forgave the whole debt. The servant didn’t have to pay anything. But that servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a few months wages. He seized him and choked him saying, “Pay what you owe.” The fellow servant pleaded, “Have patience with me, and I will

pay you.” But he refused and threw his fellow servant in prison until he could pay the debt. When other servants told the king, the king called the servant in and said, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you.” The king sent him to jail until he should pay all the debt. Which meant, of course, that he rotted in prison.

Then Jesus explains the meaning of the story. **“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”**

You and I have a great debt. Not financial, credit cards and mortgages, but spiritual, mistakes and sins. Sins against our brother and sins against God. How did we get into this mess? Little by little, day by day. Each day we sin because we’re sinners. That’s our nature. We’ve accrued an enormous debt of sins. But one day will come a day of reckoning when we’ll be brought before God to settle up. We can’t pay the debt. There’s no way. Good works don’t cancel out wrong deeds. Ask any judge. There is no purgatory. No second chance to work off our debt. Only an eternal debtors’ prison where their worm does not die and their torment does not cease.

But God had pity on us. He forgave us our debts. All of them. The debts we’ve incurred up to this point in our life and the debts we’ll incur for the rest of our life. But understand this one thing. God just didn’t write it off. There’s no magical loop-hole to make our debts disappear. Someone still has to pay. The father who wrote the check was going to pay his son’s debt with his own money. The king who forgave his servant was going to pay his debt with his own money. And God paid our debt with his own Son. Jesus gave not just a pint of blood, but a quart, maybe two. Blood that was extracted out of him by scourgings and thorns and nails and spears. Jesus paid the debt of all our sins with his own blood.

But how sad it is when we’ve been forgiven our tremendous debt, but we won’t forgive others. How disappointed God is with us when our brother cries for patience, for mercy, but we seize him by the collar and demand that he pay us. We keep counting his sins. We fill our ledgers. We keep reminding him that he owes us. And when we’ve squeezed all we can out of our brother, we have the gall to come back to Jesus with our debts to squeeze a little more blood out of him.

Why do we do this to our brother? Because we think there should be a limit on forgiveness. Three times, four times, seven times. We run out of patience. Time’s up. Pay me what you owe. But then God says, “Oh, you think there should be a limit on forgiveness do you? Then you must believe there’s a limit on my forgiveness too. You can take your limits and your ledgers and have a little bon fire down in hell. I’m going to fuel it for all eternity with all the ledgers full of your sins.”

Every Sunday, hopefully every day, we pray the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” For some of us older folks we remember, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” But just how do we do this? When someone sins against us it hurts. It might be a bunch of little sins that accrue over time, or it might be one big lump sum that just wipes us out. How do we forgive without limits? It’s not humanly possible.

But all things are possible with God. Every time our brother sins against us and we record it in our mind, write it in our little ledger books, we need to write down beside it ten sins of our own. It won’t be difficult. We need to confess *our* sins. And then we come here and receive absolution. We receive Christ’s body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. And then we can take out our ledgers and cross off our sins one by one. We remember that Christ marked our ledgers “paid in full” and then sealed it with his own blood. And then God gives us the strength to mark off our brother’s sin against us, because Jesus paid for that sin too just like he paid for all of ours.

How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Well that depends. It depends on whether you believe there’s a limit on God’s forgiveness or not. And I’m here to tell you that God’s limit isn’t seven times, or seventy times seven, or even seventy times seven hundred. There is no limit on God’s forgiveness unless we limit him ourselves. For *his* mercy endures forever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.