

What God wishes to say to you

A sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matt 18:21-35

In the gospel text from Matthew, Peter asks: "Should I forgive as many as seven times?" And the answer is: "Seventy times seven."

That doesn't mean when you've forgiven someone 490 times, then it's O.K. not to forgive. It means totally.

Then comes the parable of someone who owed ten thousand talents (about \$25,000 in today's terms). The king was going to sell the servant and his family into slavery, but the servant pleaded for mercy and the king forgave him his debt.

This same servant then turns around to someone who owed him a mere twenty-five dollars (!), and when that person begs for mercy, the servant says: "No," and throws him in prison.

The point of the parable, which comes in the last verse, is to forgive from the heart. The point is: Don't just forgive, but forgive from the heart.

Lest we think that is an isolated saying, remember that when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we have the petition: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Even more striking is Matthew 6:9-13, in which the Lord's Prayer is immediately followed by this: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt 6:14).

That's harsh. If you don't forgive others, you will not be forgiven.

We ask ourselves: How do we do this? It's not only forgiving but forgiving from the heart.

Then we say to ourselves: "I must think of all my sins, and how can I be complete enough? I might overlook something, forget something." There are devotional books that list all kinds of sins, as a help, so to speak. But what about overlooking or forgetting sins?

In the second place, it says: "from the heart." Again, there are devotional helps that give you a plan for meditating on the cross for a certain amount of time so that you can do it sincerely and purely and "from the heart."

But then there is the problem: What if I die suddenly? Remember the thief on the cross at the last moment had a chance to repent.

But it happens that people do die unexpectedly. How is that handled? Because it doesn't say: "Forgive, except if your end comes and you don't have time." It says "unless you forgive, you will not be forgiven." That's clear, plain.

What happens? As we look at the larger context in the Bible, we see there is something wrong here. Because that way makes forgiveness mechanical and even manipulative, a way of trying to manage God. Lord, I did this, so you must do that.

But we remember Romans 6:5: "If you have been united with him in a death, you will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

Paul is pointing to Baptism and the all-sufficient cross. Salvation does not depend on us in any way. The cross takes care of sin, death, and the power of evil.

Of course, the flip side of that is the thought: "Hum, I can take advantage of that!" It gives me a free pass.

Paul takes this up in Romans 3:6, 6:1, and 6:15. He writes we are then tempted to say: "Well, then let us sin that grace may abound!"

[There's a preacher's story about this: There was a pious boy who wanted a bicycle, and he prayed and prayed for a bicycle, but no bicycle appeared. He then said to himself: "Well, I'm doing something wrong here." So, he went out and stole a bike and then asked for forgiveness.]

What does Paul mean in these three places? When someone says: "We're forgiven anyway," Paul is really saying: "You don't get it." We're either slaves to sin or slaves to our Lord Jesus Christ. He has bought us out of slavery. Do you want to go back to that slavery to sin? We have freedom, a different kind of freedom.

Commonly we think we're only sinning if what we're doing is something that comes from some ancient list of sins. We think it's up to me to decide. But this is to confuse psychological guilt and theological guilt.

To be sure, we respect psychological guilt and feelings of remorse, but this guilt before God is not a matter of feelings. This guilt before God or theological guilt doesn't depend on feelings.

Luther famously pointed out that everything and whatever we do ends up in spiritual pride or spiritual despair. We're always falling into one ditch or the other.

What Luther has said reflects what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5: "I do not even judge myself; God alone judges."

How does God work? How does God make it so that we don't live in this back and forth between pride and despair and then collapse.

We recall what it says in the Psalm 103 for today:

"He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west. So far does he remove our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:10-12).

Then to come back to the New Testament, to Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

We can say that in different words: He took our sin; in return he gives us his holiness. That's like no other exchange anywhere. It's the best deal there ever was.

Luther, in writing about this in the Large Catechism, says:

"We urge you to confess your sins not for the purpose of performing a work but to hear what God wishes to say to you. The Word or absolution, I say, is what you should concentrate on, magnifying and cherishing it as a great and wonderful treasure to be accepted with all praise and gratitude" (LC: Confession 22; Tappert 459, Kolb/Wengert 478).

We focus not on our sins but on what he has done in forgiving us.

A little bit earlier writing about Baptism, Luther says: "Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to Baptism" (LC: Baptism 79; Tappert 446, Kolb/Wengert 466). We return every day to the starting point where he has made us his own. Every day we begin anew in Baptism with the life and the hope that are there forever. Amen