

Today's message from Sirach and Jesus is clear: as God has so generously forgiven us our many sins, so we need to forgive others. Forgiveness is Jesus's most important teaching, because refusing to forgive is refusing to love, which is rejecting God, because God is love. Refusing to forgive hardens our souls, our personalities, makes us grow cold – never God's intention for us.

Sirach describes this vividly in our First Reading, when he writes that anger is hateful, yet the sinner hugs it tight. We cling to it: our anger; the slights, rudeness, and insults we've experienced; grudges and hates. On days when we're clear-headed, we know that's behaving irrationally because it's hateful. So why is it so difficult for us to forgive?

We see our fallen human nature at the start of the Gospel. Peter asks Jesus: how far do I have to go with this forgiveness thing? We have a mathematics to forgiveness: we want to spoon it out, ration it, keep a record. I'll forgive once; or I'll forgive if they acknowledge they were wrong; or if they forgive me first.

But that's not God's way, because God is love. His Divine Mercy is lavish, generous – because he sees all of us as his children. God's forgiveness is unmerited, not a reward because we've been pretty good. God just forgives and expects us to. God doesn't discriminate in granting forgiveness; he even forgives our enemies, or someone who's been unfaithful all their life but repents at the last minute. We hate that, don't we – that God forgives those who don't seem to deserve it? That's when we even need to forgive God, for loving everyone equally!

Jesus's parable shows God's unlimited forgiveness. The servant asked the king for patience to repay him, but the king goes one step further and forgives him his huge debt. It's overwhelming forgiveness! How can that servant then turn around and not be patient with someone who only owes him a small amount? The ungrateful servant forfeits the mercy and forgiveness he just received, because he didn't appreciate it.

In this parable, Jesus is teaching us that if we withhold forgiveness from others, God will withhold it from us at the Last Judgment. If we demand strict justice on someone who's offended us, God will exercise strict justice on us. We will receive what we have given.

Jesus built his core teaching into *The Our Father*, his basic prayer for his followers: forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Jesus is warning us we cut ourselves off from Divine Mercy when we don't forgive.

It's not easy for someone who's gone through a divorce to forgive their former spouse. Same for someone who's experienced any kind of abuse. ... Forgive them anyway, but stay away from them, so they don't get worse by continuing their wrongdoing. Jesus doesn't argue that we have just cause for our grievances; but dwelling on them, letting them gnaw at us, is another win for the offender. When we forgive, we're not letting someone off the hook: we're releasing the offender into God's hands for justice.

Even mental health professionals say to forgive. It does no good for us to carry around anger and bitterness, to keep nursing our injuries. It's like that old saying goes: "Resentment is like drinking poison and hoping your enemy will die." Hating someone

just inflicts more harm on us; it adds to the burdens we already carry. It keeps the offender in our heads to needle us and raise our blood pressure.

Some hurts are so deep that we can't forgive at that moment; the best we can do is keep asking God to help us to forgive and wait patiently for that grace. But taking that first step is what's important to God, and to persevere at it. It may take years, but God in God's time will help us get there. We can forgive and still be emotional about what happened, but we also ask God to heal our emotions over time, too. God loves us for wanting that.

There are so many modern examples of people who have been able to forgive: men who have spent years in prison for crimes they never committed, exonerated by DNA evidence, who when released say they were able to forgive their accusers while in prison; the wife of the co-pilot of the first plane to crash into the World Trade Center, who on her first visit to Ground Zero, could finally forgive the men who murdered her husband, because she recognized the vastness of her own sins and how Jesus had forgiven her; Imaculee Ilibagiza, whose book describes how she escaped the genocide in Rwanda by locking herself up in a Pastor's bathroom with 7 other women for 91 days, hearing the murderers rampage outside, and who could finally forgive them for killing her family, when she recognized they were God's children, too -- just horribly blinded by their sin.

Two practices have helped me forgive. I hope you will find them helpful. One was to make a list of everyone who hurt me deeply, and keep taking that list out, and pray for the grace to forgive them, and even ask God to bless them. With the passage of time, it works. The other is to remember that ultimate act of forgiveness of Christ on the cross, when he says of those who framed him and tortured him: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." I say that prayer for those who have hurt me; I can forgive them when I believe they didn't really understand how much pain they caused me.

God sent his Son to die on the cross for our enemies. So forgive others, not because they deserve it, but because we have been forgiven a king's ransom. Appreciate how much we've been forgiven, and pass it on. Give thanks for God's mercy and goodness to us. Imitate the behavior of Christ the King. We don't want to be caught dead with unforgiveness on our souls.

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