

Forgiveness

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in Heaven may forgive you your trespasses. ~ Mark 11:25

IN ONE OF THE PETITIONS IN THE OUR FATHER, we ask God for forgiveness of our sins in the same measure that we forgive others who have sinned against us. This is the only one of the seven petitions that Jesus repeated after he had taught this most perfect of prayers to us: *“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses,*

neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt 6:14-15). Our forgiveness by God is contingent upon our forgiveness of others. Our forgiveness is conditioned on what we do for others. Doing unto others as we would have God do to us is an application and elevation of the Golden Rule (see Mt 7:12). Jesus’ emphatic repetition is just as surely needed in our world as it was in his.

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In an extended parable, Jesus taught us this same lesson:

“[T]he Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my Heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Mt 18:23-35).

The *as* in the Our Father is important. Jesus made it important in many other instances: *“You, therefore, must be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect”* (Mt 5:48); *“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful”* (Lk 6:36); *“love one another; even as I have loved you”* (Jn 13:34). In each case, the inner life of love of the Blessed Trinity is the standard not only for

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The First Nail, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

our relationship with God but also with one another. Jesus wants us to really strive. He frowned on the half-hearted and the lukewarm, even threatening to vomit such out of his mouth (see Rv 3:16). Jesus tells us: *“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you”* (Lk 6:27-28), as Jesus himself did from his cross when he said, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”* (Lk 23:34). If he could forgive, for love of us, those who put him to such a terrifying death, he can ask us to forgive not just little things, but things that our enemies and persecutors, and even killers, do to us. Jesus is also our model for *when* we forgive: *“God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us”* (Rom 5:8). We must forgive **even before** those who injure us ask forgiveness. This is breathtaking.

Even further, forgiveness is not a one-time event. There are people who may hurt us, or sin against us, over and over. The Apostle Peter asked Jesus just how generous we are expected to be: *“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many*

as seven times?” (Mt 18:21). He received this astonishing reply: *“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven”* (Mt 18:22).

Jesus sets for us these seemingly impossible standards, but he teaches us that *“with God all things are possible”* (Mt 19:26). He gives us the pledge that, whatever we encounter, his grace will be sufficient for us (see 2 Cor 12:9). Forgiveness is something we must work at. It is not the result of words, but the result of action that stems directly from the heart. We get our continuing example of love and forgiveness from Jesus in the Eucharist: we sin again and again, but when we humbly ask, he forgives us over and over, and invites us to come to his Table to eat the Flesh and drink the Blood that won this grace for us. No greater love is there than God’s for us. He asks us to have the same kind of love for all our brethren whom he loves as well: *“If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen”* (1 Jn 4:20).

(CCC 2838-2845)

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