

“Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.” (St. Matthew 18.26)

About 30 seconds ago, we all just said something together. But do we realize what we just said? In the Nicene Creed we just said, “I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the Resurrection of the dead, And the Life of the world to come.” Three incredibly difficult things all packaged in together, yet we gloss over them week after week. The Apostles’ Creed at Morning and Evening Prayer puts it, perhaps, even clearer: “I believe in... the *Forgiveness* of sins”. We do believe that as Christians, we just said that. But do we realize and deep-down *actually* believe what we just said? I think for most of us, we have been so used to reciting these words for most of our lives and have never really stopped to think about the implications.

We believe that sins *can be* forgiven. Of course we do, we’re Christians! But as C.S. Lewis points out in an essay, if the people who compiled the creeds found it necessary to put this in, it must, then, be important. This simple statement, which we say so often, carries a lot of heavy baggage. What does it really mean to believe in the forgiveness of sins?

It means, as Lewis points out, that “we believe that God forgives us our sins; but also that He will not do so unless we forgive other people their sins against us.”¹ This is put forward in the Lord’s Prayer plain and simple. God expects us to forgive others for us to be forgiven. And there is no limit, but instead we must forgive others an infinite amount of times, says Jesus in today’s Gospel.

Peter asks Jesus if he should forgive his brother seven times. He asks this because the custom taught in Judaism is mercy is shown by forgiving three times – so seven is more than needed. To this, Jesus replies, “Not seven, but until seventy times seven” (or in some translations, “seventy-seven times”) – a hyperbolic extension on the request to suggest you can never forgive somebody enough. To illustrate how often we need to forgive, Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant. When taking account of his servants, a king came to one who had an unsurmountable debt – ten thousand talents. There was no way the servant was going to be able to pay this debt ever in his lifetime, so the king decided the only way to reconcile the debt was to sell him off, along with his wife and kids and all their possessions. This, of course, troubled the man, and he fell to the ground to plead for forgiveness of the king. The king was moved and had mercy upon the man and forgave him the entire debt, but then the man went out and did not forgive another servant for a far smaller debt, and instead choked him and had him thrown into prison. When the king caught wind of this, he was furious, summoned him, chastised him, and sent *him* to the jailers until he could fully repay his debt to the king – which meant he was imprisoned for the rest of his life. Jesus says this is how God deals with us if we do not change our hearts.

As I mentioned when we went over this passage last year, it’s helpful to conceptualize this sum of money in today’s terms. We can say that the servant was making about \$30,000 per year, based on the average earning of one denarius per day. The equivalent, then, of 10,000 talents is approximately \$6 Billion. \$6 billion divided by \$30,000 per year means the servant could have paid off his debt in a reasonable 200,000 years. The king forgave him this incredible debt, yet the servant then went after one of his colleagues for a measly \$8,200. If anybody is keeping up with the math, that means he was chasing down approximately one ten-thousandth of a percent of his debt (0.0001%). The servant does not seem to grasp onto the mercy that was shown to him, because he can’t even show one *ten-thousandth* of a percent of that mercy to his fellow servant.

In this parable, if we are to read that the king is God, this massive \$6 billion debt portrays to us an illustration of just how much we owe God because of our sins, and how we are utterly helpless to ever pay him back. Not only does he forgive our sins, but he pays the debt on our behalf through Jesus our Lord upon the cross. We are about as worthy to receive the gift of forgiveness and everlasting life as that servant was likely to pay off that massive debt. But our God is a God of mercy who responds to

¹ C.S. Lewis, “An Essay on Forgiveness” (Macmillan Publishing Company, New York: 1960).
<https://www.maitlandpres.org/post/cslewis>

our pleading with his own sacrifice. He puts himself on the line to pay off the debt that we owe. All he asks is that we can show an infinitesimal portion of this mercy, this forgiveness, to others we encounter.

This doesn't make forgiving any easier though, does it? And when I say forgive, I do not mean "excuse" – I do not mean to pretend something didn't happen. I am saying to *reconcile* with the other person. To be made right with them in the face of God. That is really, really hard work. But, even if it's not that serious, it can be hard to forgive a parent or friend who constantly nags you, or annoys the living daylights out of you. How do you reconcile with these irrational, impossible people? By showing even the slightest amount of mercy towards them. By committing them to God's keeping. By taking your problems to God and asking him to help make it right. Giving them a chance, giving God a chance to reconcile you, is taking a step in the direction of true mercy. Even if it takes your whole life to even make it half an inch closer to a place of forgiveness, you are still making a step that the unforgiving servant didn't take.

This knowledge of the forgiveness that God has for us should humble us and should fill us with the desire to forgive others, but we know it doesn't always work that way. But we have to make the distinction between forgiving somebody or merely excusing their behaviour. We often become far too used to excusing – letting it slide rather than doing the work of reconciliation, of forgiveness. True forgiveness is a gift modelled to us first through God. That is our only real reference point. His ultimate mercy is the place from which our mercy and forgiveness flows. Those things that we cannot find the way to excuse, and even those things that we cannot find the way to forgive, we have to try our best and the rest we have to offer to God to turn their hearts. Trusting the work of forgiveness when it looks impossible to God is still taking a small step in the right direction. Allow God to work between you to reconcile you.

Lewis wrote, "Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the [person] who has done it." We can be able to understand that the action needing forgiveness comes from a place of sin, because we understand what it feels like to be forgiven of sin. We are all broken, we are all tainted by sin since the Garden of Eden. But if we can see and recognize our own brokenness and how it has been forgiven by God, we can see and truly forgive the brokenness in others.

So, how can we *truly* forgive somebody? How can we pray the Lord's Prayer and profess the Creed and really mean it? Lewis says we have to remember where we stand. We have to remember that forgiving the sins of others is a requirement of us because we believe in the forgiveness we ourselves receive. Not to *excuse* the behaviour, but to *forgive* the person behind the behaviour, and recognize the stain of sin for what it is. It takes practice. It takes dedication. And, ultimately, it takes God. When faced with a difficult situation like this, offer it to God. Ask for his help, for you and for the person you are trying to forgive. Show them the smallest ounce of God's mercy. And be comforted that your sins have been forgiven through his great mercy. Be comforted that the weight around your neck is lifted off on the Cross with Jesus.

And this comfort, this reassurance, can be for us a source of joy, rather than the burden of bearing a grudge. A joy like that of St. Paul in today's Epistle, for part of the cause of his joy is the reassurance "that he who has begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1.6). The reassurance that God's mercy is always present – that he started it, continues it, and will finish it at the last day. May we believe in the mercy that we have received so that we may share even a small part of it with somebody else.

And now unto God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, power, honour, and glory as is most justly due. Henceforth and forevermore. Amen.