

Anger and Forgiveness
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Sir 27:30-28:7; Mt 18:21-35)

Peter asks the wrong question of Jesus when he says, “*Should I forgive my brother as often as seven times?*” The implication is that the eighth time, he will *finally* be able to hold the crime against his brother. Jesus would have us understand that forgiveness is not primarily for the benefit of the offender. Forgiveness is a necessity for the one offended, so that the evil does not cause further harm.

The Bible often describes sin in terms of *debt*, as Jesus does in this parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt 18:23-35). When someone sins against his brother, he incurs a debt against his brother. Justice is violated by the offender, therefore the offender has the obligation to “pay back” for what he did, at the very least by apologizing and restoring, to the degree possible, what was harmed. This satisfies the principle of justice, which means “rendering each his due.” Forgiveness on the other hand, means the debt is canceled and the offender is released from his obligation to repay. The offender no longer “holds it against him.” With forgiveness, justice is satisfied not by the offender, but by the one offended, since he “pays the price” of the offense by *accepting* the damage inflicted as a personal sacrifice.

It is clear why forgiveness is not easy, nor even desirable on a human level. Why should the offender be “let off easy” for what he did? What kind of justice is that? What incentive is there for him not to offend again? This is why Peter feels that forgiving seven times is quite generous, but at some point enough is enough.

The problem arises, however, because of *anger*.

Anger is one of the passions God created in the human soul as an integral part of human nature.¹ It arises in response to evil. When we see an injustice, we get angry. As a passion, anger moves the soul to the course of action that will try right the wrong, correct the injustice, fight the evil. If we are not moved to anger by injustice, then something is wrong with us!

Anger, then, is normal. And when we have been sinned against, it is important to recognize and acknowledge that it will make us angry. The problem, however, is that anger (as with all the passions), has been damaged by Original Sin. Anger is now disordered by concupiscence, placed in the service of man’s pride and selfishness, instead of ordered to his true good.

¹ Passions are natural movements of the soul in response to situations, which incline us to particular courses of action. Anger is among the “negative” passions, which also include sorrow, hate, fear, and despair. “Positive” passions include love, desire, delight, and hope.

Anger or “Wrath” is therefore named as one of the seven “capital sins,” a root cause of many of the other sins in our life. “*Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight*” (Sir 27:30). Because of this sin within us, we tend to get angry and lash out now anytime our *pride* is challenged, anytime our patience is stretched, anytime we are inconvenienced in any way.

Moreover, when we have been actually offended, our anger seeks to redress the wrong by means of *vengeance*, the desire or intention to see the offender suffer the harm inflicted upon us. This vengeance will always be selfish.

Because of concupiscence resulting from the Fall, this outcome is virtually certain. The desire for justice – which is the pure purpose of anger – becomes corrupted into the desire for vengeance (literally, “satisfaction”). For this reason, Jesus tells Peter he must forgive seventy times seven times. The desire for vengeance does greater spiritual harm to a person than being sinned against.

The command to forgive is absolute for a follower of Christ.

With regard to the righting of the wrong, i.e. the question of justice, God assures us He will handle that Himself: “*Vengeance is mine, says the Lord*” (Dt 32:35-36, Lv 19:18). Though He is dispassionate, God wishes us to understand that He has anger! In the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus indicates that “*with anger* the master will hand the wicked servant over to the torturers” (Mt 18:34). It is in this context that we should fear and never doubt the “Wrath of God.” God assures us that justice will be served, but it will be handled His way, in His time.

“*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*” (Rm 12:19-21).

Forgiveness means no longer holding the debt against the offender. It does not mean he is being “let off the hook,” or that the problem is being ignored, or that injustice is being tolerated. Forgiveness is a submission to the justice of God, which is higher than our justice. Just because we no longer hold someone’s debt against them, does not mean they do not have to answer to God.

But forgiveness accomplishes several things in the meantime. First, it is as St. Paul says, a form of heaping burning coals upon the offender. It increases the degree of his punishment if he does not repent, or conversely, provides him a greater incentive to repent, apologize, and be reconciled. Forgiveness is charity toward the enemy.

More than that, forgiveness frees the person sinned against from the capital sin of wrath, triggered by the offense, but which causes far worse damage to the soul. Anger festers when the wrong is not righted. It “broods over injuries.” It corrals the other negative passions (hatred, sorrow, despair) and serves up a bitter banquet, robbing the person of life, taking away peace, leading to many other sins. Nothing in our soul is lost when someone sins against us. Everything in our soul will be lost through Wrath, however, when we cling to the desire for vengeance.

Forgiveness breaks the cycle. It is a conscious and brave act which acknowledges the crime, and the extent of the harm it caused (i.e., the “debt”), and thus acknowledges the legitimacy of the natural anger. But, as an act which assumes the burden of the debt (I will not hold the debt against my brother, I will “pay it” myself as a sacrifice), forgiveness satisfies the principle of justice (the sin of the offender is “paid,” it’s just that I pay it), and this mitigates the reason for the anger. Forgiveness releases the anger, the burden of vengeance is no longer present, and the person can move forward.

A key phrase with regard to forgiveness is “letting it go.” In the parable, the master “let him go and forgave him the loan” (Mt 18:27). When forgiving, we “let the offender go,” but more importantly, we are letting go of anger and the desire for vengeance. *We* are free.

This is the meaning of “Meekness,” and why meekness is one of the Beatitudes. The way of Christ is not that of weakness, but freedom and strength. The monster to be slayed is not my evil neighbor, but the Original Sin within my heart. Forgiveness is not a surrender, it is pure spiritual victory. Meekness and not vengeance goes further toward accomplishing true peace and achieving the reconciliation of enemies. Meekness and not wrath is the precondition for solving problems in relationships, and addressing (dispassionately) the sins of the other. Meekness – forgiveness – is the precondition for our salvation: for “unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart” you will not enter the Kingdom of God.