

The parable we hear from our Lord this morning (Matthew 18:23-35) is about forgiveness. It's often interesting to put the Sunday lectionary readings into their Scriptural context, sometimes it gives us a bit more insight into the meaning of the passage. Immediately before our reading, St. Peter asks Christ, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21) Christ then answers, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven," (Matthew 18:22), and then he tells the parable we heard this morning.

The parable is an example of the principle-forgive up to seventy times seven times. The way the Fathers interpret this number is simple. Christ does not intend for us to count 490 offenses from a single person, and then stop forgiving them. Rather, this number symbolizes infinite forgiveness; as often as we're offended, we forgive.

And then we have the parable (basic interpretation taken from Blessed Theophylact's Exposition of the Gospel of St. Matthew)-in this parable, there are several key "players": a king, several debts, and several debtors, who are servants of the king. The king is Christ-and the Scriptures teach us "the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son" (John 5:22). So as the King, and as the Good Judge, Christ settles accounts with His servants.

Obviously, we are the servant who owes the King 10,000 talents. As with the 70x7, this number of 10,000 is symbolic-10,000 talents is more than a laborer could earn in a lifetime of working. This is the debt accumulated for an entire lifetime. Blessed Theophylact writes that every day we receive the grace and the mercies of God, but we give nothing to God (or very little, amounting to nothing) in return. So the debt the servant owes, the debt we owe, is a debt we can't pay. The Scriptures often use the language of debt for our sin, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," we pray in the Lord's Prayer (and this translation is more accurate than trespasses-the prayer refers not to people who have gone where they shouldn't, but to people who owe, who are in debt). The debt of our sin is something we can never repay. We've fallen short of God's righteousness, we've ignored the will of our Creator, and nothing we can do on our own will ever make us right again. It's a debt we can't pay.

The first notion the King has is to sell His servant-when a servant is sold, he has a new master; this indicates alienation from God. The debt we owe on account of our sins separates us from the King. But the servant falls down in repentance, and he begs not to be sold, but to be given another chance to repay his debt. The Good King knows that the debt can never be repaid; and He takes pity on His servant, and He gives the servant something he doesn't deserve-He forgives the debt of His servant in full. We can see here that the King's plan to sell the servant wasn't designed as a punishment to torment, but was designed to help the servant understand the gravity of his debt. The King didn't want the servant to suffer, but to change, to be healed.

So when the servant repents, his debt is cleared, and his punishment is set aside. This is how our God forgives our sins, and this is how we're to forgive each other.

But Christ doesn't stop here, He continues on with the parable, to show us what happens when we don't forgive as we've been forgiven. The newly forgiven servant goes out and finds an acquaintance who owes him a small sum, 100 denarii, what a laborer would earn in about 3 months. So this debt can't even be compared with the debt that was just forgiven. And the servant, even after the marvelous grace he's been given, he refuses to have compassion on his fellow man, and gives him over to be punished. His own pleas brought the mercy of the King, but the pleas of his fellow servant fall on deaf ears. When the King hears about this, He's outraged, and the grace the servant had been given is revoked, and he's given over to torment until his debt can be paid. And as we've already discussed, the debt is too large, it can never be paid, so he's been given over to eternal torment for refusing to forgive as he'd been forgiven.

Christ teaches us this morning that the mercy of God pours over us, He forgives us, He removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). And we're reminded that God commands us to forgive as we've been forgiven. The offenses of our brothers and sisters and strangers and friends, the magnitude of these offenses doesn't begin to compare with our sins against our Creator. But if we refuse to bear the smallest burden of forgiving others, if we, "from our heart, do not forgive our brothers trespasses" (v.35), then our punishment will mirror that of the evil servant; as Christ says in the Gospel of St. Mark-" And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:25-26).

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!