

Sometimes, as we consider the words of Jesus, particularly his parables, we become so immersed in the story that we lose sight of the context in which the story came to be. Today's Gospel reading began with a question from Peter to Jesus:- "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Then he goes on to provide a suggested answer ..." "As many as seven times?" Jesus answers: "Not seven times, but 70 times 7." Other translators say 77 times. When Peter suggested "7 times" he was probably being generous. He probably expected to gain Jesus' approval. Imagine his amazement at Jesus' reply: "No, not seven times but 70 times 7." This was possibly a Jewish expression meaning "endlessly" or "indefinitely".

Jesus was a brilliant teacher. He used stories a lot, because it was a simple way to get the message across. The man in Jesus' story who owes the huge amount of 10,000 talents is probably a high ranking public official who has been caught out in a gigantic rip-off. The debt is so huge that there is no way that he can possibly pay it off. The command to sell everything in payment of the debt is an expression of the king's rage at discovering the enormity of the man's swindle. The king knows that there is no way that the corrupt official can possibly pay back the debt. That is the whole point of the story.

The king then, out of pity for his official's hopeless plight, grants the man more than he had requested: not time to pay off the debt (which was impossible) but the total cancellation of the whole debt. It's an act of sheer generosity, not motivated by the goodness or merits of the corrupt official, but by the generous and compassionate heart of the king.

However, continuing Jesus' story, no sooner has the official escaped total ruin but he seizes on a fellow-servant who owes him 100 denarii (a trifling amount compared with what he owed to the king) and demands immediate repayment of the 100 denarii. Given time, there was every possibility that this servant could satisfy his debt. Though this servant made his plea in the same words as the first servant had used to the king, the corrupt servant harshly rejected his colleague's request.

The king, on hearing of the injustice of the corrupt servant, immediately cancelled the forgiveness he had extended to the corrupt official, and added the further punishment that he should be tortured until the entire debt was paid. Since there was no hope of payment, the man's punishment would be endless.

The king in the story told by Jesus represents God. He has forgiven us already: not because we are good enough but because God is so good that He wants to share his mercy and love with us who have no claim to either. God has sent his Son, Jesus, to die for us, to pay on our behalf a debt we could not possibly pay ourselves.

On the cross, however, God has cancelled this debt. This free gift of forgiveness is given to us, like all God's gifts, under one strict condition: that what we have freely received, we freely share with others.

Through the story, Jesus is telling us: If we are not forgiving towards others, as God is already forgiving towards us, we will find one day that the forgiveness God has extended to us may be cancelled. Remember the words he gave us when the disciples asked him to teach them how to pray:-

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Many years later, St. Francis wrote a prayer which put it in a much more detailed way:-

Lord, make us instruments of your peace,
where there is hatred let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
Oh divine Master,
Grant that I may seek
not so much to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love,
For it is in giving, that we receive;
It is in pardoning, that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying, that we are born to eternal life.

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