

Conquering the Unforgiving Servant Within

By Stephen Gabriel

Forgiveness was the divine motive for the most sublime event in the history of humanity: the Incarnation. The mystery is that God loves His wayward creatures so much that He forgave them and wished to restore them to His friendship. God willed that the reconciliation of God and man be carried out by His only son, Jesus, the God-man who is truly the personification of His forgiveness. Inasmuch as Jesus taught us to be Godlike, He taught us to be forgiving. Indeed, His frequent message was to forgive our neighbor – not just once, but over and over again.

Today's Gospel account of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:21-35) teaches us something about how God has forgiven us and makes clear how Our Lord expects us to forgive our neighbor.

After the servant begged for more time to pay back his loan, the king, moved with pity, went even further. Rather than simply giving the servant more time to repay the debt, the king went beyond what justice demanded and forgave the entire debt. The king's gesture of mercy and his gift of what must have been a sizable amount were undeserved. Christ, of course, was describing the restoration of God's gift of grace.

The king's reaction to the unforgiving servant's treatment of his fellow servant leaves no doubt about God's expectations of us. Indeed, we are expected to do more than forgive, in the sense of letting our neighbor off the hook; we can also expect a trip to the torturers unless we forgive from our hearts.

It is difficult to ignore this teaching. Our Lord is very clear on the importance of forgiveness. Yet, our pride makes it so difficult to forgive at times. Our pride insists that we make an issue of being slighted or, at least, that we never forget and vow to get even.

A spirit of forgiveness is so vital for a healthy and happy family environment. People living together are bound to rub one another wrong from time to time. However, we can pre-empt many ill feelings by accepting the faults of our loved ones. In fact, Saint Josemaria Escrivá counsels that spouses should learn to love even their mate's defects.

A natural consequence of not forgiving and forgetting is a destructive grudge that will eventually tear a relationship apart. Witness the sorry state of the institution of marriage in this country. Without doubt, a greater willingness to forgive on the part of husbands and wives would lead to happier marriages and stronger families.

One way to grow in the spirit of forgiveness is to regularly seek the forgiveness of Our Lord in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. By frequently dropping to our knees before a priest and accusing ourselves of offending God in so many ways, whether big or small,

we begin to see the faults and offenses of others from a different perspective. We see their faults against the backdrop of our own sins.

And by examining our consciences each day, focusing on where we failed and succeeded in living out our Christian vocation, we become more sensitive to our weaknesses and our need for improvement. The result is an incremental growth in humility. The more we struggle to overcome our own defects, the less we see the defects of others and the more accepting we are of their failures.

It is good to recall that forgiving our neighbor is no mere suggestion, but a divine mandate. Our very salvation depends on how we correspond. Our Lord can read the hearts of all His children. And when we face Him at the end of our lives, He will be looking for the forgiving heart of His Son. If we approach Him as imposters, He will greet us as He did the unforgiving servant.

Our capacity to forgive is a grace given to us by God. Let us ask God for more humility and bigger hearts that can bear the weight of the many slights and offenses that we may need to endure in our lifetime. Because forgiveness is contagious, our example will move our friends and family to seek the reconciliation they need to be at peace with others, with God and with themselves.

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