

God Has Mercy....Do We?
Romans 14:1-12Matthew 18:21-35
September 14, 2008

Today's scripture reminds me of the story told about Gen. Robert E. Lee after the civil war. Lee visited a Kentucky lady who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her house. There she bitterly cried that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Federal Artillery fire. She looked to Lee for a word condemning the North or at least sympathizing with her loss. After a brief silence, Lee said, "Cut it down, madam, and forget it. It is better to forgive the injustices of the past than to allow them to remain, let bitterness take root, and poison the rest of our life." [Lee: The Last Years, Charles Flood]

In this passage, Jesus speaks to Peter about forgiveness. Peter asks a question: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? seven times?" A sincere question from a sincere man. We must look back for a moment to the beginning of C. 18 to better understand the reason for this question. Jesus was in Capernaum, teaching, and the disciples came to him with an important question. One that had evidently been on their minds for awhile. "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" Jesus' discourse from that point on deals with that question. Unless we come to him as innocent as children in our faith, we have no hope of receiving the Kingdom. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him... settle your differences... how can you live with me if you can't live with your brother?" Peter hears these words and he immediately asks this question: "Lord, how often should I forgive my brother-- seven times?"

To a man as determined, as realistic as Peter, seven times

seemed like a great amount of latitude, of forgiveness for wrongs done him. He might be willing to forgive seven times, but wrong him an eighth and look out. Conditional forgiveness...

Two brothers, Harry and James, were playing right before bedtime, and somehow Harry hit James with a stick. Tears and bitter words followed and they were still angry as their mother prepared them for bed. Mother said, "Now James, before you go to bed you're going to have to forgive your brother." James thought for a moment and then replied, "Well OK, I'll forgive him tonight, but if I don't die in the night, he'd better look out in the morning." Conditional forgiveness.

Peter would be willing to go so far, but he, like we, suffered with the difficult process of forgiveness. Once again, Peter did not understand what Jesus was saying... he didn't grasp the spiritual implications. Jesus said, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." Jesus was not using this as an actual number, this was a number to represent an infinite number. As was so often the case, Jesus taught Peter and the others by means of a parable. Unconditional forgiveness... V.23 A king called people to settle accounts. One man owed him 10,000 talents (\$10 million), but couldn't pay. The king commanded that he and his family be sold to pay the debt. The man begged for mercy and the king forgave the debt. Notice, the king did not say: "give him more time", or "let him work out payment plan"... he forgave the debt!! This same man went out and found a fellow servant who owed him 100 pence or 10 denarii (\$20) and demanded payment. This man begged also, but the man would not forgive the debt and cast him into prison. The king heard about this and cast him into prison as well! Unconditional forgiveness... see the analogy here: God has called his people to

account. The debt of sin has compounded and now must be paid. This man owed \$10 million... more than the entire country could pay in a lifetime... you see, a debt so great that the man could never pay it. Our sin debt to God is a debt that we could never pay. We will never have the resources to balance the account. The king forgave the debt... God forgave us this terrible debt. Christ would pay this tremendous debt for us. But, after being forgiven, we go out and like the servant, refuse to forgive our brothers and sisters who sin against us. We have been forgiven a greater debt than we could ever hope to repay and yet we refuse to forgive a trifling offense by our brother.

The king cast this servant into prison... if we can not forgive those who sin against us, we are living our lives in a prison of bitterness that ultimately poisons our souls. We become slaves to this hatred, this bitterness. One man tells a story of being bullied in school. "When I was in the 8th grade I was tormented daily by a bully. It was not physical so much as mental...he would knock my books out of my hands, shove, yell, ridicule, tease me... it was pure hell! I dreaded walking that long hall each day to English class (he always waited for me on that hall). I hated that boy as much as I ever hated anyone.

You know, that was 1966 (35 yrs ago) and I just recently have been able to forgive him for that. I carried that bitterness around with me for all those years. I never saw him again, but I never forgot him. Yet, I finally was able to lay it down. I was imprisoned by that bitterness and it was a trifling debt compared to the debt we owe God."

God is merciful, why can't we be merciful? We pray in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us..." Hear those words today! V. 27 says:

he loosed him... he set him free! The only way we are ever going to be free from the imprisonment of bitterness is to forgive those who have wronged us. Unconditional forgiveness!

On the evening of April 25, 1958, a terrible tragedy happened on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. A young Korean exchange student, a leader in student Christian affairs, left his apartment and went to the corner to mail a letter to his parents in Korea. As he turned back from the mailbox, he stepped into the path of 11 leather-jacketed teenage boys. Without a word, they attacked him, beating him with a blackjack, a lead pipe and even with their shoes and fists. Later that evening, the police found this Korean boy in the gutter.. he was dead from this beating. All Philadelphia cried out for vengeance. The D.A. gave legal authority for the boys to be tried as adults, so they could be given the death penalty. Then, shortly before the trial, a letter arrived from Korea addressed to the D.A. It was signed by the parents and 20 other relatives of the murdered boy. It read in part: "Our family has met together and we have decided to petition that the most generous treatment possible within the laws of your government be given to those who have committed this criminal action. In order to give evidence of our sincere hope contained in this petition, we have decided to save money to start a fund to be used for the religious, educational, vocational, and social guidance of the boys when they are released... We have dared to express our hope with a spirit received from the gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ who died for our sins." Unconditional forgiveness!! Each of us today can think back upon some incident, some wrong that has hurt us. Are you still bitter, still hurting? If you haven't forgiven that person, then you are bound just as securely as this servant. You might say, " If I can't forget what happened to me,

how can I forgive?" Jesus said forgiveness is the first step. In Guideposts, Corrie Ten Boom told of not being able to forget a wrong that had been done to her. She had forgiven the person, but she kept rehashing the incident and couldn't sleep. The Lord gave her comfort and peace thru the words of a Lutheran pastor who spoke to her when she went to him with her dilemma. He said, "Up in our church tower there is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After you let go of the rope the bell keeps on swinging. First, ding, then, dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down." Angry thoughts continue for awhile (they did for me) but they will stop with time.

Forgiving is not easy. God forgave us all our many sins. By the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our account has been marked paid in full!!! But, that is just the beginning. Jesus wanted his disciples to understand something: how could they live with him if they could not live with their brother? Peter asked, how often should I forgive, Lord? Jesus said, "As often as necessary, Peter." How can we live with the Father if we can't live with each other? Psa 32:1 says "Our God, you bless everyone whose sins you forgive and wipe away."

We are blessed when our sins are forgiven. How much greater is the blessing when we can forgive those who sin against us.

AMEN.