

24th Sunday OT - (Year A) – September 17, 2017

SIR 27:30–28:7; PS 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12; ROM 14:7-9; MT 18:21-35

St. Jerome famously said, “**Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ.**”

The truth of the saint’s words becomes glaringly evident when the words of the Bible—particularly **Jesus’** words—are taken *out of context*. When people do this, they create a **Jesus of their own making** who scarcely even *resembles* the real Jesus, and, who **conveniently** fails to challenge *them* in their own sin!

One of the most **common** examples of this is when a discussion of **sin** pricks a person’s conscience and they say, “**Jesus said, “Don’t judge.”**

On the one hand, that’s true. Jesus *did* say, “**Judge not...**”. On the other hand, Jesus’ words *don’t* mean what such a person **wants** them to mean, namely:

“**Don’t point out my sin...to me.**”

So, let’s see what Jesus really *did* say in the **Matthew Chapter 7** where he did, in fact, speak of “**not judging**”.

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

(Mt 7:1-5)

In the very last verse, Jesus **does**—in fact—speak of judging another person’s *sin* when he speaks of “**tak[ing] the speck out of your brother’s eye**”. But only *after* attending to our own sin first.

In **last Sunday’s Gospel**, recall that Jesus said: “*If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.*” (Mt 18:15)

What’s the *key word* here? **Fault**.

Now, let’s contrast judging **faults** with judging *souls*. **St. Paul** wrote to the *Romans*:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things. Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? (Rom 2:1-3)

It should be obvious, after **just** this *little bit of digging*, that important *distinctions* must be made if we are to understand what the Scriptures **do** say...and what they **do not** say.

If we were, for example, to take the person's statement, "**Jesus said, 'Don't judge'**" at **face value** and just *leave it there*, then we'd allow ourselves to be **bullied into silence in the face of sin**. This is typically **why** a person makes such a claim in the first place. They don't want to face **their own sin** and they certainly don't want someone else **causing** them to face it. I say "**they**" here, but any of us could just as easily say "**I**", any time **we** get defensive when someone **rightly** points out *our* sin.

This little exercise in **reading Scripture in context** is equally important as we consider *today's* Gospel, because Jesus's answer to Peter's question in today's Gospel—if not properly understood—can lead to a lot of unnecessary **confusion** and **heartache**.

Peter approaching asked [Jesus], "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. (Mt 18:21-22)

Misinterpreting these particular words of Jesus has kept many a good Christian trapped in cycles of **abuse, manipulation** and **suffering** at the hands of a friend or family member. They are convinced that Jesus is giving a free pass to the offender to walk all over *them* like a personal *doormat*...with no **limit**...and no **consequences**...because he commands forgiveness.

But such a **misunderstanding** comes from *ignorance* of the **context**.

So, with context in mind, recall that the focus of last week's Gospel was *fraternal correction* which is the **private admonition of one's neighbor with the purpose of reforming him or, if possible, preventing his sinful indulgence**.

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04394a.htm>

Today's Gospel passage follows *directly after* the passage on **fraternal correction** in Matthew's Gospel, which shows us that genuine forgiveness does not **exclude** first

expecting the sinner to *discontinue the sinful behavior*. Forgiveness, therefore, does *not* mean **NOT** confronting sin.

If we do as Jesus commands, and bring sin to the sinner's attention *in a charitable manner*, and the person refuses to **repent** or to even *acknowledge* the offense, we may, at some point, need to **curtail** or even *cut off* contact unless and until they **do** repent. But we are not excused from forgiving them, *even if we are forced to suspend contact*.

Jesus said we are to forgive **seventy-seven times**. Now, just in case Peter and the other disciples might have thought that Jesus was putting a **specific upper limit** on forgiveness, he followed the statement with a parable in which a king forgave a debt so large that it could **never** actually have been paid back...not in **multiple lifetimes**.

And that's the point!

If we are to comply with Jesus' command to *"love one another as I have loved you"* (cf. Jn 13:34), *there can be no limit to forgiveness*, precisely because **his** forgiveness and mercy toward *us* is limited *only* by our **desire** to be forgiven, which requires that we first **recognize** and **acknowledge our need** to be forgiven.

What forgiveness *actually* looks like, varies from situation to situation. It *may* mean resumption of contact with the person who offended us. **It may not**. It *may* require us to speak to the person who offended us. **It may not**. Situations vary. But our obligation to forgive—**as commanded by Christ**—remains.

The key to putting this into practice is found in the **last verse of today's Gospel**. Jesus had just explained the frightening consequences for one who refuses to forgive, when he said:

"So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart." (Mt 18:35)

Authentic forgiveness is not a mere matter of words. Genuine forgiveness is, above all, a matter of the **heart**—*even before* it is a question of **communication** with the other person. If we forgive only with words, without benefit of the interior healing that comes from our first *having been forgiven* by God, it not only doesn't **last**. It can also lead to **discouragement** and **despair** because our heart remains vulnerable to the spirits of **resentment**, **vengeance** and even *hatred*.

Jesus demands forgiveness without limit because *Jesus knows the human heart from the inside*. He knows that the healing that sincere forgiveness brings about is meant to touch both the **offender and** the person **offended**.

If we have ever tried to forgive another person by **glossing over** the hurt, or by merely speaking *words* of forgiveness that have not actually **taken root** in our heart, then it won't be long before the next offense brings the papered-over **resentment** and **anger** right back to the surface. Superficial forgiveness may even cause us to believe that we are **incapable** of forgiving in a genuine way, because resentment and anger have returned.

Now here's another key point. When Jesus said, "**seventy-seven times**", he did not simply mean if we are sinned against seventy-seven times, we must forgive each offense individually. A **single offense** may have been so damaging to us that it may take us many attempts—seventy-seven or more!—to forgive just **that one** horrendous hurt.

Whatever the circumstance, if we are to "**love one another as Jesus has loved us**", then we first need a clear idea of just **how much** he has loved *us*. His love was displayed most extraordinarily on the **Cross**. But because a crucifix is such a familiar sight to a Catholic, we may never have considered what it *really* cost Jesus to die for us in that way. So, let's take a deeper look at what **our sins** really cost Jesus.

[Meditation on Crucifixion & Unilateral Forgiveness]

The amazing thing about *forgiveness in the name of Jesus* is the increase in compassion toward the other person we begin to experience. Jesus knows this. And once we discover it, then we can *love one another as he loves us*...from the heart.

The king in the parable was moved with compassion because he could distinguish between the **debt** and the **debtor**—between the *sin* and the *sinner*. The unforgiving servant was **unmoved** with compassion because he could not see beyond himself and thus, he could not see an actual person as broken as himself, before his eyes.

The secret to being able to look at someone who has hurt us with **compassion** is to first look at Jesus with **gratitude** for what he has done for *us*.

Because forgiveness helps us see **ourselves** and **others** as we really are...and as God sees us...sinners...each one...in need of a Savior.