

Homily for August 11, 2016
Feast of St. Clare

In today's reading from Matthew Jesus is teaching us two things.

- 1) to remember our own faults
- 2) and not to bear a grudge against one who stumbles

It is clear that from this parable and from the teaching in chapter 7 where Jesus says we are to first attend to the log in our own eye before assisting another with the speck in their eye that we are to be scrupulous in the examination of our own conscience and merciful when seeking to examine the conscience of another.

Jesus is everywhere in the Gospel attentive to the state of our heart. That is our interior disposition that is so often hidden from others but well known to ourselves and the Lord. As we examine our conscience we are called by Jesus to take seriously our own faults and the greatness of God's mercy in lovingly forgiving us. In order to make his point Jesus uses exaggerated speech.

One servant is a **debtor** who owes the king a **huge amount**. This is an understatement for the Greek literally says "a myriad of talents." A myriad, the largest number in ancient Greek, is ten thousand; a talent, the largest monetary unit, is worth six thousand denarii. Since a single denarius typically represents a day's wages, one talent alone is already "a huge amount," totaling about half a lifetime of wages. To a first-century audience, a *myriad* of talents sounds like infinity. Jesus had just used hyperbole in his discussion with Peter ("seventy-seven times"). Now he uses the hyperbolic numbers to magnify the servant's dire situation and the boundless mercy of the king (18:27), and to prepare the readers to feel the weight of their own situation as sinners and more deeply appreciate God's infinite mercy, which they are called to imitate¹.

But listen to how unaware the one is who owes so much. He says to the king:

'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'²

Here is a man whose lack of understanding of the impossibility of repaying the debt has entirely escaped him. He thinks that his debt is insignificant. Even in his spiritual blindness the King is willing to forgive him and so we are told:

¹ Mitch, C., & Sri, E. (2010). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 234). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. (1993). (Mt 18:26). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

*And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.*³

Notice the next move. Having been forgiven so much, clearly this man has not been receptive to the mercy of his Lord and when seeing his fellow servant, seizes him by the throat and says “Pay up”!

Listen to the response of the one who has been accosted:

Have patience with me, and I will pay you.

There is a slight variation from the first plea. This man asked for patience and says I will pay you, but does not add the adverb “everything”. He is more aware of his interior state than the first man, aware of his poverty and so appeals for mercy from the one he is indebted to but does so from a place of self-understanding.

And yet the one who had been forgiven an insurmountable debt is unwilling to release one whose debt is miniscule in comparison.

When Jesus says we are to forgive seventy times seven he is alluding to a story from Genesis. The increase from seven to seventy-seven recalls Lamech, who appears last in the genealogy of Cain’s family, a family that was filled with immorality, murder, and vengeance. Lamech boasts, “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold” (Gen 4:24). Just as Cain’s descendants responded to their enemies with unlimited vengeance, so Christians should respond to sins committed against them with limitless forgiveness.

What is the application of this revealing parable? Admitting our own faults can be so difficult for us and we can easily make light of how our sins have affected others. Conversely we can have a heightened sense of indignity of how others have wronged us and we harbor resentment, bitterness and even vindictiveness. When this happens there are two souls imprisoned, the one we will not forgive and our own soul.

Jesus calls his disciples to a very high standard of mercy. We cannot speak words of forgiveness while harboring resentment. The *Catechism* reminds us that true forgiveness entails “a vital participation, coming from the depths of the heart, in the holiness and the mercy and the love of our God” (Catechism 2842). Admittedly, this is not always easy. Some injuries are so deep that it “is not in our power not to feel or to forget an offense” (Catechism 2843). Nevertheless, if we remember how much God has forgiven us then we can avoid becoming like that unforgiving servant who, though he was forgiven much, failed to forgive others. We can also pray for the person who hurt us and try to see beyond their harmful acts and to consider their own sorrowful condition. Hence, “the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and

³ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.* (1993). (Mt 18:27). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession” (Catechism 2843). In this way, the disciple can forgive his enemies interiorly, “from his heart”