

Forgiveness
11th Sunday of Matthew
August 20, 2017

I have occasionally shared my thought that, if I make it to heaven, I will be quite upset if I see Adolph Hitler there, or Joseph Stalin, or Josef Mengele there, too. The choices that we make in this life must have consequences; otherwise, why does the Bible give us so much moral direction. My question for you is this: Am I right in thinking so? Monsters must be punished, right?

The Old Testament presents a clear idea of justice. In the book of Genesis, God promises Cain, His personal protection, saying that "Whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold" (Genesis 4:15). One passage in Exodus is often quoted: "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Exodus 21:23-25).

The Lord Jesus took a dramatically different approach. One reason that He caught people's attention is that in addition to healing physical ailments, He often pronounced that "Your sins are forgiven." In doing so He spoke as God. At the same time He insisted that His followers forgive one another. The question that led to the parable which we read earlier came from St. Peter. Perhaps he was influenced by God's promise to Cain- "Whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold."

"Peter came to Him and said, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven'" (Matthew 18:21).

And then He told the parable. It is obviously a teaching device and not a true story.. A king forgave one man a huge debt. One reference that I checked said that 10,000 talents would have been the value of 10,000 oxen. Another reference said that it would have been a multimillion dollar fortune. The king had every right to put him into debtor's' prison or to have sold him into slavery. But instead the king chose to forgive the debt. That same person went out, encountered someone who owed him relatively little, and refused to forgive his debt. Off he went to debtor's prison.

The moral of the story is obvious, perhaps too obvious. It is a lesson not in finance, but in forgiveness. We who have been forgiven much and on many occasions need to be equally forgiving. Let's think again about the saying, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." The Lord turned this expression around and made evenhandedness a requirement for forgiveness. "With what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Matthew 7:2). Even more familiar should be our prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." If we expect to be forgiven, we need to forgive.

What is missing quite often is an acknowledgement of our own sinfulness and the forgiveness that we have received from Christ. We gloss over our own sins and focus instead on those of others, be they Hitler or Stalin or Kim Jong-un. And since we are not a Hitler or one of the others, we have nothing to fear, we think.

No, I have not killed anyone, at least not in the last week or two. I have a few regrets about things that I said or did. What I fear most is that God will hold me accountable for what I could have done, the sins of omission, good things that I should have done but failed to do. I also fear that God will find me lacking in the first, most basic commandment, that I love the Lord with all my heart and all my mind and all my soul.

Now, we believe that "forgiveness has risen from the tomb," as Chrysostom puts it. But we can never forget that we are forgiven. St. Paul is the author of much of the New Testament, He preached, he placed his life in danger, and he suffered for the name of the Lord. But he never forgot that he was forgiven, and so we read in one of his letters, "I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am"(1 Cor 15:9-10). Or in another of his epistles, he writes, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first" (1 Tim 1:15).

Back to my question- if I find myself in heaven with Adolph Hitler and am angry about it, will I be wrong? I still struggle with this, but the fact that I or we struggle with an issue does not invalidate the gospel teaching. The Gospel is supposed to challenge us. And the Gospel tells us that we are forgiven by the grace of God. If we are forgiven, we have no right to challenge someone else's forgiveness.

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Text:

Matthew 18:23-35

The Lord said this parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord delivered him to the torturers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."