

FORGIVENESS

By Jim Seghers

In his marvelous reflection on the Lord's Prayer (in *Jesus of Nazareth*), Pope Benedict XVI offers his insight on the fifth petition: "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." At the beginning of his meditation he points out that there is a dual aspect to the reality of trespass that impacts the relationship with men, and our relationship with God. These offenses can cut deep when we are on the receiving end, but the healing that is needed is only found in forgiveness, never in retaliation.

Pope Benedict points out that "'forgiveness' is a theme that pervades the entire Gospel. We meet it at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in the new interpretation of the fifth commandment, when the Lord says to us: 'So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift' (Mt 5:23f)."

Commenting on this passage the Holy Father observed:

"You cannot come into God's presence unreconciled with your brother; anticipating him in the gesture of reconciliation, going out to meet him, is the prerequisite for true worship of God. In so doing, we should keep in mind that God himself—knowing that we human beings stood against him, unreconciled—stepped out of his divinity in order to come toward us, to reconcile us."

Jesus elaborated God's forgiveness in the powerful parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:21-35). St. Matthew records this parable in the eighteenth chapter of his Gospel. It is the sixth lesson on how Jesus' disciples must live. The passage opens with Peter's question: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Peter's question reveals how difficult it was for Jesus' earlier lesson on forgiveness to penetrate our unforgiving hearts. Jesus response, "seventy times seven," takes our breath away, because this idiomatic expression means "without limit."

Who is it among us that have not tasted the bitterness of hurts and betrayals? Jesus knows that. Therefore to place our wounds in perspective, Jesus contrasts two debts: 100 denarii, which represents our wounds, and 10,000 talents, which represents our offense against God. The comparison is staggering. One hundred denarii is the equivalent of one third of a workingman's yearly income. Ten thousand talents represents the total annual income earned in more than 2,739 consecutive years! The first debt is trivial in comparison with the enormity of the second.

God's forgiveness, then, becomes our norm. We can forgive, indeed, must forgive, because God's forgives us. Pope Benedict challenges us precisely at this juncture.

"If we want to understand the petition fully and make it our own, we must go one step further and ask: What is forgiveness, really?"

The guilt of the perpetrator and the wound of the victim are realities that must be repaired. “For this reason, forgiveness must be more than a matter of ignoring, of merely trying to forget.” It “must be worked through, healed, and thus overcome.” The obvious difficulty of this process explains why there is so little genuine forgiveness in the world. Our ability to heal is like our ability to overcome evil—non-existent. Therefore the transformation and inner purification of both parties that occurs by “suffering all the way through and overcoming evil” only happens within the mystery of Christ crucified.

Jesus did more than talk about forgiveness; he lived it. At the end of his life he offered an amazing petition amid his final agony: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). Thus Pope Benedict was moved to quote Reinhold Schneider:

“evil lives in a thousand forms; it occupies the pinnacles of power...it bubbles up from the abyss [of hell]. Love has just one form—your Son.”

After the Resurrection Jesus asked Peter if he loved him three times. He didn't say, “Peter, I forgive you, but I don't trust you.” He didn't remind Peter of how deeply he was wounded when he overheard Peter taking an oath that he didn't even know him. Jesus didn't withdraw his intimacy; instead he embraced Peter with his love and total forgiveness.

Jesus' forgiveness was the flaming coal that burned away Peter's guilt bringing the inner healing he desperately needed. Peter could say, “He loves me. He forgives me. I am still his cherished friend.” At the same time Jesus' forgiveness brought the gift of compunction. Peter could remember that awful moment of his betrayal with great sadness and copious tears while at the same time experiencing the comfort and joy of Jesus' love.

The gift of compunction prompted David to write, “For I know my transgression, and my sin is ever before me,” literally “before my face” (Ps 51:3). Forgiveness allowed St. Paul to write: “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor 15:9). Jesus' mercy moved St. Augustine to lament, “How late have I loved thee.”

We must forgive others and ourselves the way Jesus forgives. However, there is a price. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

“We must put our heart—or, better, our whole existence—on the line. And even this act is insufficient; it can become effective only through communion with the One who bore the burdens of us all.”