

24th Sunday In Ordinary Time, Year A

This book is also called Ecclesiasticus. It is not found in the Hebrew Bible nor in the Protestant canon, but it was used in the early Church and is included in the canon of the Council of Trent. The author is named in 50:27 as Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sirach. It was written in Jerusalem between 180 and 190 B.C. and was translated by his grandson into Greek in about 132 B.C.⁵ Until the end of the 19th Century, we only had the translation, but in 1900, 1931 and several times since 1956, manuscripts of Sirach in Hebrew have been discovered and they agree substantially with the Greek translation.

Sirach 27:30-28:7

Last Sunday's readings dealt with the matter of correcting those who do wrong. Today we hear in poetic form how to forgive them and so win forgiveness ourselves. There is an old Arabic proverb that could sum up the exhortations in this reading: "Write the wrongs that are done to you in sand, but engrave the good things that happen to you in marble. Let go of emotions such as resentment and retaliation, which diminish you, and hold onto emotions such as gratitude and joy, which increase you."¹

30 Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight. These things are hateful because they poison the soul and warp our actions.⁴

28:1 The vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance, for he remembers their sins in detail. Both Proverbs 25:22 and Romans 12:19-20 add to our understanding of God's advice to those who have had such devastating hurts that vengeance seems justifiable: "Do not avenge yourselves; leave that to God's wrath, for it is written: 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.' But if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; by doing this you will heap burning coals upon his head."

2 Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.

While God's love is unconditional, His mercy is not! In order to experience His mercy, we must be merciful! This reminds us of the sixth petition of the Our Father: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Scriptures tell us that even the just man falls seven times a day. So, we are called to forgive as God forgives, in imitation not only of the quantity but also the quality of His forgiveness. But in Mark 2:7 we read the question, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" We see that forgiveness is an action that is purely divine! Jesus is asking us to LIVE the divine life that we have received! The key is that we forgive, not merely by forgetting, but by loving. It is the heat of God's love that melts the ice of our sin and it is the heat of our love that will bring about the forgiveness of those who trespass against us. We don't just remit their debts; we love our enemies into wholeness as God has loved us into wholeness.²

3 Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing (forgiveness) from the Lord?

4 Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself, can he seek pardon for his own sins?

There is a principle of justice at work, which will not allow God to forgive those who will not forgive others. God cannot forgive those who will not forgive because He is perfect Justice and perfect Mercy but Mercy can only operate in the context of justice. If justice did not demand punishment for sin then there could be no mercy, no redemption from that sin. Someone who does not deserve punishment cannot be pardoned from that punishment. When Justice is denied, mercy won't come into play.⁴

5If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath, who will forgive his sins?

6Remember your last days, set enmity aside; remember death and decay, and cease from sin!

These are reasons for forgiving others, but note that the motivation in this Old Testament passage does not go beyond the perspective of this life.

7Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor; remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults.

Romans 14:7-9

This was written by Paul in 57 A.D. Last week we were told to love and this week we are told why. These three verses have been plucked from the middle of Paul's discussion about the strong and the weak in the church at Rome. Some in the community apparently felt that Christ had given them such freedom that they could eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols and did not have to observe the special days (presumably the Sabbath and fast days) required by Jewish law. Others were more scrupulous and felt obliged to avoid such meat and to observe such days. Paul agrees with those who embrace the freer position, but he urges both groups to respect each other's good intentions. Those who eat the meat give thanks to the Lord and those who abstain do so for the Lord. This brings Paul to our verses, in which he moves from the specific situation to more general principles. Whatever we do, we are to do for the Lord, not for ourselves. Whether we live or die we do it for the Lord. Christ is Lord of both the dead and living. Thus Christ is Lord of both groups among the Roman Christians.⁷

Brothers and sisters:

7None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. The "us" refers to Christians who find it impossible to be both a Christian and a loner at the same time.¹ The liberating act of Christ freed man from enslavement to Law, Sin, and Death and enabled him to live for God. This implies the service of God in all things. This is also the basis of a Christian's social obligations.⁶

8For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. Christians belong to Christ in both life and death, having been purchased at the price of his blood. Our highest aim is thus to please him—a pursuit that often requires the suppression of our self-interests and opinions.⁵ However, this section of Paul's letter provides the basis of the motto traditional in the Church, "Unity in essentials, freedom in doubtful matters, and in all things charity."⁹

9For this is why Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. In this world we live in the unseen presence of Christ; in the next we shall see Him in His real and living presence. Death is the gateway that leads to Christ. We are bound to Christ by ties that neither time nor eternity can break.¹⁰

Matthew 18:21-35

This parable is really a commentary on the petition for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught his men back in Chapter 6. Our first reading today provided such a commentary in a series of adages and questions. This reading uses a story to make the point.

21Peter approached Jesus and asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?" In the days of Christ there was a Jewish custom that a person had to forgive someone only three times for having offended you. It was

considered acceptable to demand punishment on the fourth offense. Peter thought he was being very generous by suggesting to forgive someone seven times. He was startled to hear Jesus tell him that, in effect, we should always forgive those who are truly repentant, no matter how many times they ask.⁸

22 Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. The number seven appears as a figure of fullness and perfection. While forgiveness is central to Jesus’ teaching, this reading is not on forgiveness in general but the demand that it be UNLIMITED.

23 That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. In the parable, the king is like God, who has the right to demand what we have no hope of paying but in mercy forgives the entire debt. If we think we can get away with treating each other with mercy of a lesser quality, we are sadly mistaken. The servant is a figure of the sinner. All sin is primarily against God, because God is the principal author of the laws the sinner violates. The Catechism, however, makes clear that there is NO OFFENSE, however serious, that cannot be forgiven, provided the repentance is honest.¹¹

24 When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Some translations tell us that it was 10,000 talents. This was greater than a king’s ransom! The figure is exaggerated for emphasis to accentuate the mercy in forgiving such an incalculable debt that was utterly impossible for the servant to repay.¹²

25 Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. This story tells us the serious consequences that awaited those who could not repay their debts. It was not uncommon to see a debtor remain in prison for the remainder of his life. When we reflect upon this, not one of us is capable of paying off our own debt to God. Jesus Christ had to die on the cross for us, and he paid the ransom for our sins with his life. If we were at any time to be judged as to how well we paid off our own debts, heaven would be empty!⁸

26 At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, The servant fell down on his knees and bowed his forehead to the earth. and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.’ The servant has acknowledged his debt, and he has given every sign of humility and regret. Even his promise to pay, though it is impossible to fulfill, is a token of his desperate earnestness.

27 Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan. The king’s kindness in forgiving the debt goes far, far beyond the servant’s petition.

28 When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ Some translations read “a hundred denarii” or about a hundred day’s wages for a laborer. The debt just forgiven was 600,000 times greater!⁴ This would have been such a minor debt by comparison with the one just forgiven.¹¹

29 Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

30 But he refused. Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison until he paid back the debt.

31 Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. There are times when we are brought to God, as the defaulting servant in the parable was “brought” to his master by some temporary misfortune—such as sickness, the death of friends or relatives, the loss of work or position or loneliness—which awakens our conscience to a realization of the peril we are in. Our own

weakness and need of help should teach us to be tolerant and forgiving of others. As they have the same frail nature as we have, they experience the same or similar hardships, sorrows, yearnings and anxieties that we do. If their faults and failings offend us, ours offend them. If we desire forgiveness of our sins, we should be willing to forgive theirs.¹⁴

³²His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to.

³³Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?'

³⁴Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. Note that a man in prison could enlist the help of friends and family out in the world to help him pay off his debt. This reminds us of the importance of praying for the dead who are undergoing purification in purgatory.¹³

³⁵So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart." The Catechism makes it clear that it is in the depths of the heart that everything is bound and loosed. It is not in our power not to feel or to forget an offense but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession. In other words, we are not to nurse a hurt. We are to turn it over to God and we are to pray for those that hurt us. Besides, a nursed hurt never gets well.¹¹

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Aelred R. Rosser, (2) "Understanding 'Our Father'" by Scott Hahn, (3) "Dictionary of the Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (4) "The Commentary Notes of Tim Gray and Sean Innerst," (5) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible; The Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans," With Introduction, Commentary & Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (6) "Jerome Biblical Commentary," (7) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Lawrence E. Mick, (8) "The Bread Of Life Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (9) "The Navarre Bible: Romans And Galatians", (10) "The Letter to the Romans" by William Barclay, (11) "The Catechism Of The Catholic Church," (12)

"Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (13) "Bible Basics" by Steve Kellmeyer, and (14) "The Parables Of Christ" by Charles J. Callan, O.P.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.