

9th Week After Pentecost – Tuesday

How many times should I forgive?

The difference between the commandment to forgive all times and the priest's responsibility and right to bind and loose.

Matthew 18:18-22; 19:1-2, 13-15 Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. 21 Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? 22 Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. 1 And it came to pass, that when Jesus had finished these sayings, he departed from Galilee, and came into the coasts of Judaea beyond Jordan; 2 And great multitudes followed him; and he healed them there. 13 Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. 14 But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. 15 And he laid his hands on them, and departed thence.

The following are notes about a portion of this Gospel.

The Lord had just finished telling all his disciples, that whatever they bound on earth would be bound in heaven, and loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven, referring to the awful responsibility of the priestly ministry, when Peter, apparently not completely understanding, asked how often he should forgive when *he himself* was personally wronged.

Here are two different things, and priest, mark well the difference!

In the one, the priest has a power and responsibility before God to hear confessions and mandate that God's forgiveness be given, or in the terrible case of the unrepentant, that such forgiveness not be given. This is referring to a *person's personal sins against God only*, for every sin, whatever it is and to whomever it is directed, is always against God.

Regarding sins against himself, such as when one person wrongs him in some way, *the priest has NO AUTHORITY, but only a commandment*: to forgive "seventy times seven", that is, to ALWAYS forgive. We all share in this commandment.

"For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: (15) But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will

your Father forgive your trespasses." (Mat 6:14-15)

What a terrible responsibility the priest has! He must disassociate himself from his personal views and feelings. To those that wrong him, he shares with all men the responsibility to forgive all times. Only in the case of when he is acting as God's priest, and in his judgment he feels a person is not repentant concerning his sins, may he withhold forgiveness.

Regarding the strange number "seventy times seven", Blessed Augustine has an interesting comment:

"Yet not without reason did the Lord say, "Seventy times seven;" for the Law is set forth in ten precepts; and the Law is signified by the number ten, sin by eleven, because it is passing the denary line. Seven is used to be put for a whole, because time goes round in seven days. Take eleven seven times, and you have seventy. *He would therefore have all trespasses forgiven*, for this is what He signifies by the number seventy-seven."

(Catena Aurea - Gospel of Matthew, Chap 18 - <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/catena1.ii.xviii.html>)

So the number "77" indicates not only that we must forgive always, but that we must forgive ALL SINS ALWAYS.

Some of the Fathers interpret the number as $70 * 7 = 490$. The actual number is not important, but its meaning is - it is an arbitrarily large number.

"What then saith Christ, the good God, who is loving towards man? "I say not unto thee, until seven times, but, until seventy times seven," not setting a number here, but what is infinite and perpetual and forever. For even as ten thousand times signifies 358 often, so here too. For by saying, 'The barren hath borne seven,' So that He hath not limited the forgiveness by a number, but hath declared that it is to be perpetual and forever." (St John Chrysostom, Homily LXI., Matt. XVIII. 2, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110.iii.LVIII.html> - the scripture quotation is from 1 Sam. ii. 5.)

There are other instances in the scriptures when an arbitrary number is used to indicate a limitless number:

"If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold."(Gen 4:24)

Of course, my parish should be aware of another famous large number (if you listen to my homilies):

"Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three: and for all there were so many, yet was not

the net broken." (John 21:11)

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