

## FORGIVENESS

"Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight" (Sirach 27:30). I have never been the type who sought revenge if I had been wronged. What was the point (honestly, I wasn't smart enough to pull it off)? Rather than seek vengeance, I harbored a grudge.

As we progress through today's readings, we journey through an evolution of thought.

The prophet Sirach offers a simple instruction for behaving: "The vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance, for he remembers their sins in detail" (SIR 28:1). We use this basic moral instruction with children: if you are bad, then you will be punished. If you misbehave, then you will suffer the consequences. How many of us continue to rely on a similar moral calculation as adults? If I'm not caught, is it okay to fudge on my taxes? Traffic is light; is it okay to use my smart phone?

Slightly more advanced advice for moral behavior closes the first reading: "Set enmity aside ... Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor; remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults" (28:6-7).

The Old Testament covenant was a proscription for those times when the level of understanding of "justice" was seeking retribution and restoring honor. Jesus was the new covenant. Jesus expected us to go beyond seeking an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (MT 5:38) and to go beyond "offering no resistance to one who is evil" (MT 5:39). While Sirach instructed us not to seek revenge but to "forgive your neighbor's injustice" (28:2), Jesus expected us to move beyond a single instance of forgiveness.

Jesus commands us to forgive seventy-seven times (MT 18:22). Seventy-seven times! Our deeper understanding of what right behavior requires more from us than asking what's in it for me. We are called to be merciful, which demands forgiveness.

St. Paul preached, "None of us lives for oneself ... we live for the Lord." Jesus taught us that the whole law and the prophets depend on two commandments: loving the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and loving your neighbor as yourself (MT 22: 37-40). Loving our neighbor – forgiving our neighbor – is a manifestation of our love for God and living for the Lord. That is the fundamental reason we behave ethically, morally, and with compassion.

**Pope Francis reflected that we all expect mercy when we're indebted, and demand justice when others are indebted to us. Just as the prophets, the saints, and the Son of God contributed to a mature understanding of mercy, so too has our understanding of justice evolved. Justice is more than fulfilling the legal requirements of restoration and retribution. A mature justice is legal, ethical, moral, compassionate and merciful.**

The servant in Jesus's parable failed to understand this. Fortunately, we have the new covenant to guide us.

(Readings for the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time)



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