

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus advises “Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise, your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison” (Mt 5:25-26). Until modern times, debtor’s prisons were very common. If an individual failed to pay what they owed, they could be sent to prison by a court-ordered judgment. A person would remain in prison until they had worked off their debt by hard labor or secured outside funds to pay the amount owed.

Although society no longer sends people to jail for failure to pay financial debts, we can still be imprisoned figuratively by our sin. Jesus came to free us from sin, and this is why he suffered and died for our sake. “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Lk 20:28).

One sin that often imprisons us is anger. We often hold on to hurts instead of letting go. I recall a daughter who did not get along well with her mother. She had good reasons for feeling distant from her mother and every encounter with her was always a sore point. With prayer and the help of God, she asked God for the ability to let go of the hurt. She received the grace to let go of all of the past hurt and truly felt like a new person. Forgiveness on our part often lifts a great weight off our shoulders. Her mother did not change, there was still some friction between the two, but with a fresh outlook, the relationship between the two was much healthier for both.

It is not always easy to forgive another person, but this is what God calls us to do. Each time we pray the Lord’s Prayer we ask God for the forgiveness of our sins and he in turn asks us to forgive those who have trespassed against us. Jesus wants us to forgive one another as freely as God forgives us.

To emphasize the point, Jesus tells the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Peter asked a question of Jesus if forgiving a brother seven times was adequate. Jesus counters that we are to forgive without limit and tells the parable of the debtor who owed the king a huge sum.

The king was lenient and forgave the debt. However, the servant was not as forgiving to a fellow servant who owed him a small amount. “Instead, he had him put in prison until he paid back the debt” (Mt 18:30). The king heard of this and punished the servant without the compassion to pay it forward. “Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt” (18:34).

Jesus asks us to forgive our brother from our heart. If not, then we too will be held accountable for our failure to show mercy. Like our loving God, we too must offer forgiveness repeatedly to sinful brothers who repent.