

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Jesus' words today speak of the absolute necessity of forgiveness. Peter approaches Jesus and asks how many times he must forgive his brother. Jesus states that forgiveness must be given out generously, like the Father – not seven times, but seventy-seven times. The story Jesus tells is that of a servant who owes the king about \$4 billion dollars – and his debt is forgiven. The other servant owes the first servant only a few thousand dollars – certainly a substantial debt, but not undoable, like the \$4,000,000,000.00!

This is our debt to God. Each sin is such an offense against God, it is *un-pay-back-able* by us. Yet, God in His infinite mercy and love, generously, willingly, *gladly* forgives our sin, our debt to Him. This is the purpose of the Cross of Jesus. Each sin that we sustain by someone else – being lied to, betrayed, abused, ignored, and everything else – may be debts in the small to large range in our lives... but nothing compared to our own debt to God. God says to us, “Do you see how much I have forgiven? How can you hold this debt of sin over anyone else?”

So how do we forgive – seventy-seven times, or even seven times? Maybe we have a hard time forgiving once! First, we have to realize what forgiveness is and what it is not. Forgiveness is not saying that there was no offense. The offense may very well be real, and certainly not something which we *could* say is “nothing.” To forgive isn't to ignore the reality of the hurt, nor the extent of the hurt, but to recognize it fully.

To forgive means that we will not hold the offense against the other. In essence, we are saying that we trust that God will judge... and I don't need to.

To forgive also means that I am *making a choice*; it is an act of the will. God want to heal us, and remove the pain of the wounds we have received, but while this is connected to forgiveness, it is not the same thing. Sometimes we experience the healing of the memory, healing of the pain, and then we are able to forgive. Sometimes we have to make the choice, and then experience the healing. And sometimes (more often!) we have to forgive over and over and over. His process happens not because we didn't do it right the first time, but because there are so many layers of pain and woundedness that we can't handle it all at once, and God allows us to peel back the layers slowly, as we are able. He allows us to forgive deeper and deeper.

“To forgive and forget” is not reality. Forgetting happens only if we have memory problems. True forgiveness, however, does remove the **power** that the memory had over us.

So now that we know more about what forgiveness is and isn't, how do I forgive?

I have personally found that **I have no power on my own to forgive another**. I experienced this in a powerful way on a plane ride when I was in seminary. I felt that I had been slighted by one of the flight attendants, and so I was upset, stewing in my seat. Realizing that I needed to let it go, I tried breathing slowly and letting it go... but it didn't work! In the end, I acknowledged to God that I had no control over it and asked God to help me to forgive... and peace finally came.

We need Jesus to help us forgive. I have found a good first step of forgiveness is to pray *specifically* and *persistently* for the person who has hurt me. As I pray for that person, God does something to my heart... to help heal my own woundedness. I may need to ask God for the *desire* to forgive, since, if I'm going to be honest with myself, I may not really want to do. I also will often need to ask God for the grace so I have the ability to forgive.

Once I have spent the necessary time in prayer (which may be a minute, or may be several days, weeks, or months, depending on the wound), and find that the desire to forgive is finally there, I make the choice to forgive. This I do with Jesus, because, again, I can't do it on my own. I will usually pray something like this, “In the name of Jesus, I forgive the flight attendant for not listening to my needs and making me feel unimportant.” Note a few things about this: first, I speak this aloud. We are sacramental, bodily people, and to speak it and to hear it helps to make it real. Second, I make this choice to forgive in the name of Jesus – His name has power, for He is God. He is able to make real the forgiveness we need. Third, I don't sugar coat the hurt – I speak the truth about what happened. Fourth, I speak how it made me feel, the wound it gave me, especially if it spoke against my identity as a child of God.

Forgiveness is a very real process, and brings the healing of Jesus to the deep woundedness of my heart. I pray that if you have any unforgiveness in your life, that you are able, with the grace of God, to be set free from its bondage so you may live in the freedom of the Children of God!