

## **Seventy-seven Times**

*A Missionary Commentary on the  
Sunday Readings*

### **Sunday Readings**

Sirach 27:30–28:7

Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12

Romans 14:7-9

Matthew 18:21-35

[USCCB link to the Sunday Readings](#)

Where does our Christian understanding of forgiveness come from? In today's readings it is rooted in our mortality, God's commandments, his very nature, and the fickleness of the human heart.

Wrath and anger are the prized possession of the sinner says Sirach, a sage of the second century before the birth of Christ. We must let go, put aside, send away the faults of others lest our own faults torment us when God decides to settle our accounts with him.

Bookkeeping is different for God than us. It is just not who God is. Some claim that God forgets our sins. He does not. But, unlike us, God sets them aside, does not use them as a yardstick to "size us up." Indeed, our sins are as far away as the "east is from the west." Why? Because God is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion. God focuses on our humble and contrite heart embracing his forgiveness for our sins of commission and omission, our willingness to repent and to forgive others.

Forgiveness comes from the heart, where our behavior begins. Forgiveness is not an emotion. It is a decision, an action, to send away, put aside, let go of the injury another has caused. We are so fickle. We hold on to injuries. Sometimes, even after they apologized for the suffering they caused us, and bend over backwards to make amends, we may mention the injury months, even years, later.

Missionaries face their sins every day. They constantly ask themselves what they have done and what they have failed to do, since God sent them to love others for the good of others. Moreover, they learn how others – missionaries, men (or women), people from their country, race, or ethnicity, have injured others. They find themselves asking forgiveness – seventy-seven times – for their own shortcomings and for the harm others have done. The ravages of colonialization, the eradication of language and culture, the exploitation of resources are a few examples.

Forgiveness must come from the heart. The desire for forgiveness – asking for forgiveness – must come from the heart as well.

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## **Notes on the Sunday Readings**

### **First Reading**

In this remarkable passage from the sage Sirach, God's call to forgive flows from his commandments and is rooted in our mortality or "last days." If we forgive others, God will forgive us. Set aside wrath and anger, and God will heal us. We will receive God's mercy.

### **Psalm**

The psalmist extols the kindness, mercy, and compassion of God. Remember the benefits we receive from God – forgives our sins, heals our ills, saves our life, and is kind and compassionate.

### **Second Reading**

St. Paul reminds us that Christ died and rose from the dead, so he is Lord of both the dead and the living. We do not live or die for ourselves but for the Lord so that, in both life and death, we belong to him.

### **Gospel**

Peter asks Jesus how often he is to forgive his brother, "seven times?" Jesus responds, "not seven times but seventy-seven times." Jesus tells a parable - the kingdom of heaven is "like a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants." One servant owed a vast amount and begged for patience. The king, moved with compassion, forgave all of it. Then, this man, found a "fellow servant" who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him, choked him, and demanded repayment. His fellow servant also begged for patience, but the man refused, and sent him to prison until he paid his debt in full. Deeply disturbed by what the man did to his fellow servant, the other servants went to their king and told him what happened. The king summoned the "wicked servant," chastised him, and handed him over to the "torturers." "My heavenly Father," Jesus says to his disciples, will do the same to you "unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart."

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