

“How Often?” (St. Matthew 18:21-35)

For Your Life in Christ the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost,
September 11th, 2011 and the 10th Anniversary of 9/11
Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church of Irvine, CA (LCMS)

Rev. Dr. Alfonso O. Espinosa

Introduction: Long after September 11th, 2001 was May 2nd, 2011

- A. On September 11th, 2001, 2,740 Americans were murdered by the Islamic militant group al-Qaeda. After four passenger jets were hijacked, Stoneycreek Township, PA, the Pentagon, & the World Trade Center were the final resting places of our fellow Americans after the worst attack ever on our country’s soil.
- B. But on May 2nd, 2011 around 1 in the morning in Pakistan an elite Navy SEAL team killed al-Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden. Some of the news agencies reported that we responded with “joy and jubilation...[but that these reactions] slowly [gave] way to more somber reflection.” In describing the SEAL Operation Neptune Spear that killed Osama bin Laden, President Obama reported, “justice has been done.”
- C. And that much was true. The Word of God says clearly in Romans 13:4 that the civil authority ***“is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”*** Based on the Word of God, President Obama wasn’t the only one who gave the green light for Operation Neptune Spear, God did first.
- D. But my question is this: what did we do with the news about our sworn enemy Osama bin Laden? There was a big part of me that was genuinely glad, because if anyone ever got what they deserved, then it was assuredly *this* man. But not long after my initial reaction I realized that there seemed something strange about the spectacle of some of the dancing in the streets coming over the news. I began to remind myself: there are still terrorists, the war is still going on, the 10 year anniversary of 9/11 is coming (and now it is here), we still live in a very dangerous world, and then finally – it took your pastor long enough – I had to back up to check my heart. How was I really reacting towards this wicked man Osama bin Laden? Did I hate him? Had I forgiven him even in light of the God-given justice that ended his life? And what about the monstrous and

-2-

cowardly hijackers themselves? Those responsible (for example) for over 3000 children losing a parent on 9/11?

- E. For myself the call to forgiveness had come in a much more personal context. Without getting into details, years ago someone very near and dear to me almost lost their life at the hands of a violent attacker. The event immediately put me in a tail-spin: the preacher of forgiveness, forgiveness which is THE defining gift of the Church was all of a sudden confronted with his sinful nature – every ounce of which – did not want to forgive. I knew I was in trouble because I could feel darkness invading my soul. I had to repent.

Part I: But We Underestimate the Call to Forgive

- A. Saint Peter probably thought he was being quite spiritual when he asked the Lord, ***“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”*** (Matthew 18:21). Up to that point, the tradition of the rabbis was to forgive the same sin three times.
- B. But come on! Surely if we keep forgiving the same sin over and over again, is there not good reason for doubting the sincerity of repentance? Surely Peter knew this, but still, he *was* learning from Jesus and must have thought that he was more like the Lord by suggesting that he just might venture out to forgive someone up to seven times! Wow!
- C. Who could have prepared him for how the Lord answered? Not 7 times Peter, but 70 x 7! The point to the Lord’s answer is not for us to whip out a calculator and then keep track until someone reaches 490 offenses against us. The Lord’s answer means ***He calls us to have unlimited forgiveness.***
- D. It is interesting in fact that there has been a little debate amongst translators whether the Lord said 70 x 7 or said 77 times. St. Augustine points out that if you consider the genealogy of Christ in Luke’s Gospel which begins with Jesus and goes all the way back to Adam, there are 77 generations recorded. Augustine says that this was Jesus’ way of saying, you and I are to forgive in such a way that all of the sins committed by all men of all generations should be forgiven! Again, ***your forgiveness is to be limitless.***

Part II: But this seems at best unrealistic or unreasonable!

- A. Jesus anticipated our reaction and so He tells a parable.
- B. He paints a picture of two servants:
 - 1) Servant #1 owed the king himself 10,000 talents. Now 10,000 talents is for all intents and purposes an amount of money that is meant to stagger the imagination. 10,000 talents is worth 60 million denarii. Furthermore, the talents could have been made with silver or with gold so that in truth the range of value in dollars could be anywhere from 10 to the hundreds of millions.
 - 2) Now get this: servant #2 owed the first servant 100 (not 60 million), but 100 denarii. That amounts to less than a twenty dollar bill (\$20.00), that's right, twenty bucks.
- C. What is the comparison about? The first comparison is about your sin and my sin in the face of God. The first servant is about you and me standing before God. We are brought face-to-face with the Lord and He who knows every single sin we have ever committed or omitted in thought, word, and deed has those sins flashed before us and Him. Every sin and how great is that sin? Keep in mind that sin is often depicted in the Bible as debt, so one way of understanding your debt is to use the parable. It is as if you are in debt to God on account of your sin for millions and millions and millions of dollars.
- D. Towards servant #1, the king knows there is no way the servant could EVER repay him. But justice is declared. God is just. Because the servant can't repay the king, the king orders that the servant and his wife and his children all be sold. But just then there is an amazing turn of events. Even though this servant owes the king so much, a staggering amount. This servant bows down as if in worship and pleads; he begs for mercy. The Scriptures say that the king forgives the servant his debt "out of pity" = ***"the pained feeling at sight of the sinner's plight, coupled with the strong desire to help him. Compassion is the inner motive of God, from which pardon flows."*** (Lenski, 715)
- E. The words are crucial to know. The King literally "remitted" the debt, that is dismissed it, sent it away; it was gone as if it never ever existed. Millions and millions of dollars in debt

forgiven. All of it *by the blood of the Lamb; on account of Jesus. This is a picture of how the Lord has forgiven you:*

Psalm 103:12: *"as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."*

Micah 7:19: *"He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all of our sins into the depths of the sea."*

- F. The servant asked for patience, but he received infinitely more. The Lord does not treat you as your sins deserve and He has forgiven them ALL!

Conclusion: Then Another Amazing Thing Happens

- A. This servant then does the unthinkable: he goes out looking, actively searching for another servant who owed him \$20.00. You would think servant #1 went out looking for servant #2 in order to forgive him, but that's not what happened. Servant #1 assumes a higher authority than even the king and ***refuses to forgive his fellow servant! The king was merciful, but the servant merciless.***
- B. **His heart was hardened and he rejected the grace of God.**
- C. And because he rejected the king, the king delivered him to the jailors or to translate more accurately, the torturers.
- D. The lesson: ***how any neighbor has ever sinned against you is nothing compared to how you have sinned against God; and if God forgives you, then there is only one response to whomever has sinned against you: forgiveness. Let go of the 20 bucks, you've already been forgiven millions!***
- E. If you feel the weight of your sin through this parable, then thanks be to God! The Law of God has brought you to account. Now rejoice dear Christian: it is not too late. The Law cuts you so that you would repent. Christ has released you from the hardness of holding on to the petty debts that people owe you; Christ has taken your hopeless situation and given you the glow of gratitude. You have no debt. God no longer sees your sin that is covered by Christ's blood. You are debt-free so that we finally understand the parable: you do not forgive in order to be forgiven; no, you forgive because you *have* been forgiven completely, forever by the blood of the Lamb.