

# Proper 19



## Pentecost 17 September 15, 2002

### Prayer of the Day

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity. Grant us the fullness of your grace, that, pursuing what you have promised, we may share your heavenly glory; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### Genesis 50:15-21

{15} Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" {16} So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, {17} 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. {18} Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." {19} But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? {20} Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. {21} So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

15: The story of Joseph and his brothers is found in Genesis 37. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and was sold to Potiphar, an Egyptian officer, and from there eventually rose to a position of great power in Egypt.

16. *Your father gave this instruction:* Jacob gave no such instruction.

17-18: Joseph does not answer; he only weeps; the brothers also weep, and submit to Joseph.

19-21. *Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God:* Only God has the right to judge the acts of human beings. Joseph is not saying that he will leave it to God to judge them for their evil intent, but that God has already spoken. "He has included the guilt, the brothers' evil, in his saving activity and thus justified them. Were Joseph to condemn them now, he would be setting a negative statement beside the one God had already spoken and would thus be putting himself 'in the place of God.'" Though the intent of his brothers was to harm him, *God intended it for good*, not for Joseph, but *in order to preserve a numerous people*. Joseph has accepted God's will and purposes and concurring with them declares his intent to *provide for you and your little ones*.

There are several parallels between Joseph in this reading and Jesus. Joseph wept, and so did Jesus. Joseph tells his brothers, "Do not be afraid." And Jesus frequently tells his disciples the same. Joseph asks, "Am I in the place of God?" with the implied answer, "No!" and then concurring with God's judgement provides for their needs. Jesus *is* in the place of God, and prays for those who crucify him. The brothers intended evil to Joseph, but God intended good for his people. The religious leaders of Israel and the Romans intended harm to Jesus, but God intended it for good, for the salvation of his people. "...the statement about God's good plans, which change evil into good, now comprises the mystery of all the gracious acts of Israel's God until the time of Jesus Christ and is sealed by him on his cross until the end of days."

### Psalms 103:[1-7] 8-13

{1} Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. {2} Bless the LORD, O my

soul, and do not forget all his benefits-- {3} who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, {4} who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, {5} who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. {6} The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. {7} He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.] {8} The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. {9} He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. {10} He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. {11} For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; {12} as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. {13} As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

3-5: "...an individual praises Yahweh with reference to the salvific deeds that he has experienced in life. This is therefore a song of thanksgiving."

6-22: "...in the second main section (vv. 6-22), hymnic motifs are heard that go beyond personal experience and in a most comprehensive way glorify Yahweh's wonderful rule in the history of his chosen people."

*10. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities:* This is the principle on which the relationship between God and humans is based. Here the Psalm declares the principle upon which Joseph's brothers are forgiven, and upon which Joseph provides for his brothers and their children.

*11-12:* Yahweh's love is compared to the distance between heaven and earth, while the distance between our guilt and ourselves is as great as that between east and west.

## **Romans 14:1-12**

{1} Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. {2} Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. {3} Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. {4} Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. {5} Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. {6} Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. {7} We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. {8} If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. {9} For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. {10} Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. {11} For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." {12} So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

*1. Welcome those who are weak in faith:* "The 'weak' are probably Jewish Christian members of the Roman community; the 'strong,' the Gentile Christian members."

*2-3:* Dietary practices were apparently a source of discussion and dispute among members of the Christian community in Rome. "...Paul insists on the duty of Christians to welcome into their midst even 'weak' fellow members. No one should try to impose his point of view on others," *because God has welcomed them.*

*4, 10. Who are you to pass judgement.... Why do you pass judgement...:* These are important questions in a time when many Christians presume to judge the sincerity or correctness of the faith or practice of other Christians.

*5-6:* It is also true about observing the days of feasts and fasts. These things are not important in themselves, but only for the occasion they give for honoring God.

*10. we will all stand before the judgment seat of God:* Each of us, all of us will be judged by God.

*11. each of us will be accountable to God:* To be accountable to God is to be in the relationship to God for which we were created.

## **Matthew 18:21-35**

{21} Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" {22} Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. {23} "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. {24} When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; {25} and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. {26} So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' {27} And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. {28} But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' {29} Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' {30} But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. {31} When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. {32} Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. {33} Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' {34} And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. {35} So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

*21-22.seventy-seven times:* "The grammarians agreed that the Greek phrase *ἑβδομήκοντα* [*hebdomekontakis hepta*] means 'seventy-seven times', not seventy times seven. It reproduces exactly the LXX of the Lamech passage; the Hebrew is quite unambiguous (Gen. 4:24)." "One is not being commanded to count but to forgive without counting. The quality of Christian forgiveness requires that it should not be conceived in quantitative terms."

Jesus' instruction regarding forgiveness reverses Lamech's claim in the Song of the Sword, "*I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.*" "...the execution of vengeance (which God has reserved for himself!) is claimed by man. It becomes wanton, and in addition man boasts of it.... Lamech's defiant demand reaches into Yahweh's own domain." The forgiveness of the disciples is to be as great as Lamech's vengeance. To illustrate this principle Jesus tells a simile: the kingdom of heaven is like this.

*23-25. a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves:* The slaves are members of the royal household who have benefited in one way and another from the king's largesse. Now the king wants to benefit from his investments.

*24. ten thousand talents:* "A denarius was a standard day's wage in the first century. Two denarii would provide 3,000 calories for five to seven days or 1,800 calories for nine to twelve days for a family with the equivalent of four adults." The ten thousand talents would provide as much for over 125 years. It was an enormous debt.

*25. his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions:* "The practice of enslaving individuals on account of unpaid debts was not uncommon in the Graeco-Roman world.... 1 Sam 22.2, Isa 50.1...Exod 22.2...2 Kgs 4.1; Neh 5.1-13...wives and children were widely reckoned as property."

*27. out of pity...released him...forgave him the debt:* The king's relationship with his client/slave is grounded in mercy; an enormous mercy matching the enormous debt. The king's response is even more gracious than the patience his slave asked, time to pay off the debt.

*28. one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii:* This debt was 1% of the first slave's debt. It would feed a family of four with 1,800 calories for a year and a half to two and a half years.

*30. he...threw him in prison:* This relationship is grounded in strict justice, not in mercy, nor even in patience.

*31-34:* Other slaves report the first slave's action. The king declares that the first slave should have acted with the same mercy he received, and withdraws his forgiveness.

*35:* God will act toward those who do not forgive as the king did toward the unmerciful slave. The principle is embedded in the Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:12. Matthew actually uses the term "debts"

while Luke uses the term "sins" (Luke 11:4). When we pray for forgiveness it is not because we have a right to it, but because we dare to depend on God's mercy. God's mercy expects that we, in turn, are merciful toward others in their obligations to us. We pray that God will treat us as we treat others. In a sense this rewrites the Golden Rule so that we "do onto others as we would have God do onto us."

## Reflection

Forgiveness is the lesson of the day. Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord (Romans 12:19). Joseph forgives his brothers for the harm that they intended. God had other plans, and turned their wickedness into good. God does not deal with according to our sinfulness. He is merciful and gracious. The strong should not seek to pass judgement on the weak, for we are all accountable to God. Forgiveness is the duty of the Christian. *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses* (Matthew 6:14-15). We are to follow the example of God and of Jesus, not because it will serve our purposes, but because it serves God's purposes.

## Hymns [12]

*With One Voice* (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

132 --E--Come, You Faithful,

307 --D--Forgive Our Sins

399 --II--We Are the

552 --II--In Thee Is

126 --G--Where Charity and

419, 422, 484, 781s/721v

## Prayers of the People [13]

P or A: Mindful of our debt to God, let us offer our intercessions and thanksgivings saying, "God, hear your people," and responding, "Hear us in mercy."

A: We are the people you have saved by bringing us through the waters of baptism and giving us the gift of faith. Miriam and Moses sang your praise for their deliverance through the Red Sea. May the servants of your church, bishops, pastors, musicians, youth workers, diaconal ministers, all rightly lead the praise of your delivered people. God, hear your people. Hear us in mercy.

A: We are the people you have called to deal justly with one another. Jesus taught us to pray for the forgiveness of our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Make our nation and community signs of justice and forgiveness from the heart in the world. God, hear your people. Hear us in mercy.

A: We are the ones who know we can come to you with our every need. We entrust the powerless, the homeless and the sick to your care and ask to be shown the good work you have prepared for us to do. Bring wholeness and health to those whose hope is in you, \_\_\_\_\_. Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. God, hear your people. Hear us in mercy.

A: We are the people you have taught to welcome the weak in faith, though not for arguments over opinions. Make our church a place where good news is spoken, faith is modeled and honest questions may be explored with one another openly, not judgmentally. God, hear your people. Hear us in mercy.

A: We are the people who are chosen to be light and salt in the world. Give us a true sense of accountability before you for the way that we use the treasure, time and talents you have given. We dare not squander them. We ask only to do what is faithful in our stewardship. God, hear your people. Hear us in mercy.

P: We will all stand before your judgement seat, O God. Never allow us to despise or judge a brother or sister in Christ, but deal with each charitably, seeing their needs as important as our own. Answer our prayers as is best for us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Presider or deacon*

As we the faithful of Christ live to the Lord and die to the Lord, let every tongue give praise to God and pray for all in every danger and need.

*Deacon or other leader*

For *N* our bishop and *N* our presbyter, for this holy gathering, and for the people of God in every place.

For mercy, peace, and justice among all peoples. For abundant fruits of the earth, and for safety from violent storms.

For those who feast and those who fast. For the sick and the suffering, travelers by land, by water, and by air, prisoners, captives, and their families, and all those in desperate need.

For our city and those who live in it, and for our families, companions, and all those we love. For those who rest in Christ and for all the dead.

Lifting our voices with all creation, with the blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ. **To you, O Lord.**

*Presider*

God of infinite mercy, hear the prayers we offer this day, and as you forgive us teach us to forgive our neighbors, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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## Notes

[1] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*. London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1956, p. 427.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 434.

[3] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989, p. 290.

[4] *Loc. cit.*

[5] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1993, p. 687.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 689.

[7] Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew: Translation, Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981, p. 381.

[8] W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to St. Matthew, vol. II, Commentary on Matthew VIII-XVIII*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991, p. 793.

[9] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1961, p.108.

[10] Bruce Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 120.

[11] Davies & Allison, *Ibid.*, p. 799.

[12] <http://www.worship.ca/text/wpch0102.txt>

[13] [http://www.worship.ca/text/int\\_a2.txt](http://www.worship.ca/text/int_a2.txt)

[14] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>