

Lesson 6

Proper 19

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 18:21–35

Jesus gave the Keys of the Kingdom to Peter, then extended this authority to speak for Him to all His disciples. He focused on the loving concern that reaches out also with admonition in Jesus' name to a brother or sister who is deadening his or her relationship with Jesus through evident willful sin or persistent neglect of Word and Sacrament. Peter then came to Jesus with a question that revealed that he had understood that the point of the power of the Keys is to give forgiveness in Jesus' name to those who repent. The purpose is to include, not to exclude; to reconcile, not to reject.

85. What does Peter's "How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" say about this matter of forgiving those who have offended or hurt us?

86. What was Jesus suggesting with His "seventy times seven"?

87. Is it realistic to think of continuing to forgive someone whose "repentances" are short-lived and who just continues to offend and hurt you?

88. Why is it important to you that you learn to forgive those who offend and hurt you? (See Matthew 6:12, 14–15.)

Franzmann says in *Follow Me*: "There is a Must of forgiveness in the disciple's life. . . . Forgiveness is the ground the disciple walks on, and the air he breathes. . . . The disciple who will not live toward his fellow disciple by the forgiving word which he has heard from his God has forfeited the forgiving word of God. If he violates the fellowship with the brother whom God has placed beside him, he forfeits his fellowship with God" (p. 154).

89. What does your forgiveness do to and for the one you forgive?

Only Matthew provides us with this powerful parable of the unmerciful servant. We readily understand its point. Also there is an extreme contrast between the two amounts owed. The hundred denarii owed by the fellow servant was not an insignificant sum. It represented a hundred days' wages. But it becomes insignificant when compared with ten thousand talents.

90. Why did the king's gracious forgiveness of the unmerciful servant's debt not have the desired effect on the servant?

91. How necessary is it for us to learn the lesson of forgiveness taught by Jesus' parable? (See Mark 11:25.)

92. How can we get power to grow in our readiness to "forgive your brother from your heart"?

The Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 50:15–21

As a young boy, the favorite of his father, Jacob, Joseph told his family some dreams he had, dreams that obviously pointed to a time when his brothers and even his parents would bow down before him. In their jealousy and anger, his brothers sold him into slavery and told their father a wild animal had killed him. Joseph trusted the Lord, and the Lord's blessing followed him to Egypt. In whatever circumstance he found himself, Joseph put forth his best effort, and under God's guidance and blessing, he continually rose to the top. As a slave he was placed in charge of all of Potiphar's household. When falsely accused by his master's wife and imprisoned, he became the chief trustee in the management of the prison. When God enabled him to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, he was made Pharaoh's right-hand man and administered the storage of grain during the predicted years of abundance and its distribution during the predicted years of famine. In time, Joseph brought his family to Egypt, and they were settled on choice delta land in Goshen.

When their father died, the brothers feared that Joseph would take his revenge on them. Joseph had become the second in authority in all of Egypt, and the brothers knew he could do to them as he pleased, so they approached him carefully.

93. How did the brothers add psychological and spiritual force to their plea for forgiveness? Why did Joseph weep when he received their message? What may be seen in Joseph's "am I in the place of God?" (See Romans 12:17–21.)

94. How did Joseph look at everything he had experienced in life? What encourages us to look at life in the same way? (See Romans 8:28–39.)

95. How has God directed the course of your life so that you were ready at the opportune time to provide some significant service to the people around you?

96. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 14:1–12

The Early Church, also in Rome, was a blend of Jew and Gentile. The Jewish Christians carried with them the traditions of Judaism and its ceremonial laws. Because these laws prescribing dietary restrictions and the careful observance of the Sabbath had been so important in the practice of their faith—setting them apart as the people of the covenant—they understandably continued to have conscience scruples about such matters as Christians. And they sometimes felt that Gentile Christians should also be expected to follow their rules.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and through the strong testimony of Peter, the question had been formally resolved at the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem in AD 50. It was decided that Gentile Christians were not to be burdened with Jewish rules—for also the Jewish Christians knew they were not saved by their observance of the laws of the old covenant, but only through faith in Jesus' gift of salvation. However, tensions over this question continued for some time. The Church in Rome included a large number of Jewish Christians, so Paul addressed the matter in his letter, speaking to the tensions between the “weak” and the “strong.”

97. As Paul wrote about them, who were the “weak” and who were the “strong”?

98. As Paul described the disagreement over sacred days and dietary rules, what was he mainly concerned about?

99. What principle for Christian living did Paul assert in dealing with this matter?

100. How could both sides in this issue be right?

101. Why did Paul expand his argument in this to include general statements about a Christian's living and dying to the Lord?

102. How are matters of indifference—matters simply of choice—to be decided in the life of a congregation?

Paul followed this with strong encouragement not to judge your brother in such matters. He reminded them—and reminds us—that each of us must stand before God's judgment seat. Paul bolstered this argument for the Jewish Christians by quoting Isaiah 45:23—and for the Gentile Christians, he added his own "each of us will give an account of himself to God." We will not give an account of the brother's actions; he will have to do that. But we will be accountable for our own approach to Christian discipleship and our expression of Christian freedom.

Lesson 6

Proper 19

O God, our refuge and strength, the author of all godliness, hear the devout prayers of Your Church, especially in times of persecution, and grant that what we ask in faith we may obtain; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 18:21–35

85. Peter's question makes us recognize that we, too, tend to hold grudges and even want to retaliate instead of forgive. We naturally feel there are limits to what can be expected of us.

86. By multiplying Peter's "seven," Jesus insisted that we not limit or stop our forgiving. How many times? Only as many times as we want the heavenly Father's forgiveness for ourselves. +

Franzmann says in *Follow Me*: "Jesus' answer calls for unbounded forgiveness (18:22)—'seventy times seven' removes every limitation from forgiveness, just as 'Love your enemies' (5:44) removes every limitation from love" (p. 154).

87. Our human limitations and needs make it unrealistic to go on forgiving in a situation in which the offense is repeated again and again after only brief times of reform. Health and safety, emotional and physical, may require that you end such a situation by removing yourself. Today's psychology recognizes that one who allows an abusive situation to continue, repressing anger and continually excusing or forgiving the offender, is a co-dependent and enabler who allows and nourishes the addiction or the aberrant behavior. Such a chain of trauma must be broken by removing yourself from direct contact and insisting that the hurtful behavior be corrected. This is not to be just punitive but therapeutic "tough love," separating you from the situation and encouraging correction.

88. It is important for our own sake that we consciously forgive those who offend and hurt us and not let anger become resentment that will sour into hatred. (See 1 John 3:14–15; Hebrews 12:14–15.) Palestine has two major bodies of water. The Sea of Galilee receives the Jordan River from the north and sends it to the south and is fresh water, teeming with life. The Dead Sea receives the Jordan River and a few other streams but has no outlet. It loses water only by evaporation—and is clogged with salts and minerals. Nothing lives in it. The two seas provide a contrasting analogy regarding forgiving and not forgiving. Receive God's forgiving love and extend it to others and you remain alive and healthy; receive God's forgiving love and refuse to share it with others and you end up destroying any real life within you.

89. A forgiving spirit, in contrast to a hard, unforgiving spirit, enables the repentance of one who has hurt or offended you. It is the Good News of Jesus that enables us sinners to come to God again and again for forgiveness, and it develops the renewed mind in us that produces Christian attitudes and lifestyle. Similarly, our forgiving those who hurt us opens up the possibilities of change in them.

The parable's point is this: Forgive your brothers and sisters freely because God has forgiven you freely. There is warning as well as encouragement for us!

90. The unmerciful servant shows that even God's wondrous forgiveness is unappreciated by many who refuse to see how much they really need it and how loving and unstinting God is in His desire to forgive.

91. If we want to be the Sea of Galilee and not the Dead Sea in our Christian lives, we must forgive consciously in the name of Him who forgives us. Forgiving consciously means forgiving even when your sinful nature doesn't want to. Often that conscious forgiving needs to be consciously repeated again and again. But as this kind of forgiveness is practiced, we tend to get better at it.

92. We get power and grow in readiness to forgive as we conscientiously use Word and Sacrament, the Means of Grace, and put the Word into practice. The Holy Spirit works through these means to help us grow in appreciating God's forgiving love for us and enables a responsive love to be shown in our readiness to forgive our brothers and sisters.

The Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 50:15–21

While Joseph had forgiven them long before and had shown his love for them by caring for their needs, the brothers carried around a sense of guilt, and they knew that retribution was the natural rule in the society in which they lived.

93. The brothers added force to their plea by approaching Joseph in their father's name and by calling themselves "servants of the God of your father." Joseph had wept as he had tested his brothers when they first approached him to buy grain. He found they were no longer the insensitive men they had been earlier. Joseph wept now because he was caught up in the emotion of their fear and hesitancy. He assured them he would love them as his father's sons and as fellow servants of the Lord. While Joseph had ascended to a position of almost unlimited power in Egypt, he had not lost his perspective on life. He knew he could not stand in God's place by usurping what is God's prerogative. Romans 12:17–21 reminds us that like Joseph, we are not to avenge ourselves, but leave all such matters in God's hands—and not be disappointed and bitter when instead of punishing our enemies, He loves them and, in His mercy, turns them around in repentance. That God has had such mercy on us, so that His Son redeemed us and restores us, leads us to learn to imitate Him and repay evil with good.

94. Joseph saw God's hand in every circumstance of his life, directing it to accomplish God's own good purposes, and he was willing to "let go and let God." Paul's words in Romans 8:28–39 add irrefutable Christian logic to Joseph's example—and we are encouraged to trust God to be at work for good in everything in our lives. Whatever happens, such an outlook says, "God is at work in this. I will trust Him in anything."

95. Your group may point to instances in which God moved and directed and equipped them to be at the right place at the right time to provide the service that was needed. Plan to share something from your life; it will encourage openness.

96. Joseph's forgiveness toward his brothers exemplifies the kind of forgiveness Jesus urged with His parable. Joseph forgave out of his awareness of God's mercies toward him, and that is also the point Jesus made in His parable.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 14:1–12

97. The striking thing about this whole consideration is that Paul identified those who clung to legalism as the ones who were "weak" in the faith. Usually it seems that those who have strong convictions about what is right and what is wrong in Christian behavior and about how the Church

ought to be doing things are the strongest Christians—and, as a result, they take strong stances in insisting that their views be the rule for the Church. But in the process, they sometimes get so hung up on doing the right thing in the right way at the right time that they equate that with being Christian—and their appreciation of justification by faith alone may be diminished by their legalism. The essence of being a Christian is “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). It is the person who understands this and conscientiously makes up his own mind about how he should express his faith and love in his life in the Body of Christ who really is a strong, mature Christian—and he should feel no need to force other Christians into his mold for expressing faith and love. Paul said, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5).

98. Paul was mainly concerned that Christians love and respect one another and not judge one another harshly about matters that do not directly affect the faith.

99. Paul asserted the principle of Christian freedom to serve God according to one’s own informed conscience. (See Galatians 5:13–14.)

100. Both sides may indeed be “right” in things that are simply a matter of choice, in which no scriptural or moral right or wrong is involved. As Paul pointed out, the one who feels free to eat may do so in thankfulness, honoring the Lord, and the one who feels it is his duty to abstain may dedicate that act of willing self-denial to the Lord.

101. Paul expanded his argument to include living and dying to emphasize that the issues of life and death far transcend any arguments over legalistic details in matters that Scripture neither forbids nor commands. The Christian life is more than not eating meat—it is living out one’s faith in love. Dying as a Christian involves more than having observed certain days—it is approaching eternity trusting Christ for full redemption and the gift of eternal life.

102. Matters of scriptural indifference—matters simply of choice—are decided by majority vote in a congregation, and the minority goes along in love.