

Forgiveness is a very simple action which can usually cut two ways, depending upon the side we are on. If we have unintentionally offended someone by something we said or did, accidentally damaged someone's property, or just hurt another person's feelings; we are genuinely sorry and we seek forgiveness. We do this because we value the friendship and we realize that life is a lot smoother when we all get along.

On the other hand, when someone has offended us, hurt our feelings, or taken something from us, we may not be so willing to grant forgiveness. Sirach reminds us of this very real dimension of human nature: *Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.* The backlog in our judicial system indicates a desire for vengeance, not forgiveness.

And yet, Jesus reminds us that forgiveness is part of what it means to be a Christian. The Jewish Law mandated that a person forgive a particular individual three times and after that, they could write them off. It is with this in mind, that Peter raised the question: *Lord, when my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times?* Peter believed that he was being extremely generous because he took the old requirement of three, doubled it to six, and then added one more for good measure. Jesus did not give him a pat on the back for his forward thinking but, rather indicated that his thinking was not generous enough. *No, Jesus replied, not seven times; I say seventy times seven times,* words which become a metaphor for an incalculable amount.

The reason for this endless number points to another dimension of forgiveness. And that is the reconciliation we seek from God. Again, from Sirach: *Should a man nourish anger against his fellows and expect healing from the Lord? And then, Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.* These are valuable words which remind us of one of the definitions of the Latin phrase "quid pro quo". In other words, if we want God to forgive us our sins, then we have to be ready to forgive those who have injured us. It only makes sense, doesn't it? That is, after all, the bargain -- for want of a better word -- we enter into and are reminded of every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. That little line, *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us* says it all. These are not empty words, but words which carry great weight and significance in the plan of salvation because we are asking God to forgive us only in the measure that we forgive one another.

It is not always easy to forgive, especially when the price is costly. But, that is where forgiveness is all the more required and where the degree of our faith makes the difference. Real faith brings us to forgiveness, shallow faith will never allow it to happen.