

Forgiveness or Justice?

18 Pentecost A

"Lord, ... how often should I forgive?" Matt. 18:21

It's time that those of us who have had dirty jobs during our life get a little respect. Those of us who only sit behind desks will now have to listen about real men and women.

A man named Mike Rowe has taken up their praise, and he's the star of the cable TV show *Dirty Jobs*.

Rowe has tried his hand at more than 165 of the dirtiest and most disgusting jobs being done today. He serves slop to pigs, removes bones from fish, hunts plagues of vermin, and sloshes around in sewers — sometimes vomiting on camera. He gets coached by the people who do these jobs for a living, and gets mocked by them as well. Unlike most reality-TV shows, it is the *star* of *Dirty Jobs* who ends up the butt of the jokes.

And a star he is. According to *Fast Company* magazine (February 2008), Rowe is swarmed by autograph seekers at airports, photographed by camera phones in coffee shops, and surrounded by dirty jobbers everywhere. Said a waitress in South Carolina, as Rowe was signing autographs, "My family owns a sewer business!"

People love Mike Rowe. Women adore his craggy good looks, and guys admit that they see this star as a hero who's willing to roll up his sleeves and really get his hands dirty. Walking down a street in New York, Rowe got a shout from both a cop and the criminal handcuffed in his cruiser. Together, they said, "Man, you're awesome!"

There is one more job that should be mentioned and though it's not dirty it's a tough one. It's the job of every Christian: forgiveness. Forgiveness is a tough job, but someone's gotta do it, "pilgrim." Fortunately, Jesus rolls up his sleeves and shows us how.

In his well thought-out question, Peter, summons up his courage to ask Jesus how many times he should forgive.

"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus answers, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven." (18:21-22). Peter thinks he has a reasonable solution by limiting the number of times one can humanly forgive – seven! Jesus' reply ~~however~~ means seventy multiples of seven. It would seem probable that Peter and the disciples could not multiply – but the math does not

make the point. It is a limitless number that Jesus uses. And Matthew wants to tell us that Jesus was pointing to something greater than numbers we can count. Remember when the toddler first began to count and ran out of fingers? There is no need to count. Forgiveness is to be unlimited.

Jesus goes on and leads us to consider a more troubling aspect of forgiveness. If after one has received mercy as the first slave did, will the forgiven one remember also to forgive someone in his debt? Jesus tells a parable about a king to make his point.

St. Paul also wrote in today's second reading, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then, each of us will be accountable to God." Christians have no fear of judgment because they have been forgiven already through Christ, if they are truly repentant. While not judged for our sins because Christ already nailed them to the cross, the parable suggests that we will be judged on how we showed mercy.

The king did not forgive the unmerciful slave a second time. Was Jesus statement to Peter being contradicted by the king's action in the parable? This human king has taken back his forgiveness! And yet, could it be that Jesus makes a comparison in this parable between forgiveness received and the expectation that those who received it will now give it to others? The apostle Paul reminds Christians that they also are accountable to God.

Think about this - if God, is the human king of the parable, could Jesus be saying that in the kingdom of forgiveness and mercy, equal justice must be applied to prevent chaos in His kingdom. When the other slaves found out what their brother slave had done to the other debtor they reported him to the king. If the king had forgiven again, there would have been chaos and rioting among the slaves. Justice demanded that the once forgiven slave should have done the same to the one that owed him a debt. Instead he grabbed his fellow slave by the short hairs demanding a pound of flesh.

Do you also see then that the king could no longer forgive in this case? The slave's debt was wiped out once and for all but an irrational moment of greed, "Give me what is mine!," changed everything. What a fool! When a person insists on that kind of justice, God gives that person what they truly deserve! What's the matter God, can't the slave get another chance? What do I conclude about this parable? God expects His unlimited forgiveness for a debt owed to be paid back in kind – with pardon and not blame.

Contrast the slave's lack of mercy to our first lesson as Joseph told his brothers not to be afraid. He would not even the score with them because of the evil of slavery they had put upon him. God used the evil against him for good, to save others. Therefore Joseph refused to put himself in the place of God as their judge. Mercy triumphs over judgment! Let us who have received forgiveness beware that we too will not fall short of the mercies of God. Let us not put ourselves in the place of God. Let us remember that forgiveness is not a dirty job! Amen.