

**The Lessons Appointed for Use on the  
Sunday closest to September**

**14**

**Proper 19**

**Year A**

**RCL**



Romans 14:1-12  
Psalm 103:8-13  
Matthew 18:21-35

**The Collect**

**The Collect**

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

**Psalm 103:8-13**

***Benedic, anima mea***

- 8 The LORD is full of compassion and mercy, \*  
slow to anger and of great kindness.
- 9 He will not always accuse us, \*  
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
- 10 He has not dealt with us according to our sins, \*  
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.
- 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, \*  
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.
- 12 As far as the east is from the west, \*  
so far has he removed our sins from us.
- 13 As a father cares for his children, \*  
so does the LORD care for those who fear him.

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

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. 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. 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.

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. 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.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

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. For it is written,

“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.

**Matthew 18:21-35**

Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 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. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 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.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

## SERMON

Like most of you here I'm a bit older than my teeth and have a long history of Presbyterian sermons in my backpack. Most of them, I have to confess, made no impression on me at all. The only thing I can recall Sam Curry at First Presbyterian saying was, "Well don't play with that in church" after I accidentally shot the cap gun which I had been fiddling with in my coat pocket to distract me from whatever Rev. Curry was saying. Church seemed to me something one did to benefit one's self at some indeterminate time in the future and so nothing to do with the present with which I was so involved. Retired Anglican bishop N.T. Wright must have had a similar introduction to Christianity, because he wrote:

**I started my thinking about Jesus's death with the assumption, from what I had been taught, that the death of Jesus was all about God saving me from my "sin," so that I could "go to heaven." That, of course, can be quite a revolutionary idea for someone who's never thought of it before. But it's not quite the revolution the early Christians were talking about. In fact, that way of putting it, taken on its own, significantly distorts what Jesus's first followers were saying.<sup>1</sup>**

That was my experience as a child as well. Nobody ever mentioned to me the idea that my life was to be understood and shaped in relation to the final goal for which we have been made and redeemed – that God the creator intends to bring heaven and earth together at last, and that this plan had been decisively inaugurated in Jesus Christ. It seemed to me more like a contract of sorts, a pension plan for a faithful servant.

The bad news I took from those lengthy Sundays was that I had better mind my p's and q's if I wanted to avoid hell (and who wouldn't?) The good news was that if I made a mistake, God would forgive me (Hallelujah! That takes all the stress out of it!) Interesting concept there. If Mrs. Hill, my seventh grade English teacher, made a mark in my "permanent record" it was there until the sounding of the last trump, but God had a stack of "get out of jail free" cards to which I was invited to make appeal.

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright "After you believe: Why Christian Character Matters"

On one level, that's comforting and right. Ezekiel wrote:

Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.<sup>2</sup>

On another level, however, it limits the world changing revolution inaugurated by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to be all about me. By focusing our attention on God's willingness to forgive, we miss the larger revolution occurring in our world. Right now. Right here. We have a role to play in that revolution. Our actions must be motivated by a commitment to furthering God's plan rather than being all about what's good for me.

Our Gospel passage from Matthew is commonly called the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, so I named this sermon the The Unforgiving Sermon to emphasize the ways we distort Christ's message when we comfort ourselves by thoughts of God's forgiveness and ignore our obligation to do our part. Here's how the Parable goes.

A servant owes several million dollars to his master. The master demands that he pay up, but he can't. In the way of the time, the master ordered him to be sold along with his wife and children, and all his possessions to pay the debt. Here's where it gets interesting. The debtor slave falls on his knees before his master and begs, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." Sounds a bit like Wimpy from the old Popeye cartoons: I will gladly repay you on Tuesday for a hamburger today. As a business negotiation, the servant's plea isn't very persuasive. I don't think it would carry the day were I to employ it when the electric bill comes due, but when the slave begs for patience and forbearance the master is moved to do the most surprising thing:

And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

He did what?? We're not talking chump change here. We are speaking of major money – millions of dollars. He forgave a debt of several millions of dollars simply because

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Ezekiel 18:31-32

his servant bowed before him, submitted to his authority and cast his future (and that of his family) upon the grace of the master? And it worked!? The one with power (the master) looked upon the condition of the one with no power (the slave) and so pitied him that he took upon himself the burden of his slave. This is astonishing, but parables are supposed to be astonishing. Their very hyperbole forces us to pay attention to them.

So, to what is this parable forcing us to pay attention? In the world in which we live, the one with power (God) pities us in our powerlessness and extends His Forbearance to the ones with no power (us) and, in His pity, takes upon himself the burden of His servants. Remember, Peter began this discussion by asking:

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

Peter is asking how much nonsense he must endure from another member of his community before he can give up on that other without incurring blame. Jesus answers Peter:

Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

If the Lord is willing to excuse your grievous sin, what is to be the consequence of that forgiving? The collapse of the local economy? No. This parable has nothing to do with money. It has to do with furthering the goals of the Lord. It’s not hard to find passages in the Bible approving of serving up the sinner with his just desserts. Jesus is setting forth a new direction. We, the forgiven, are to be about spreading God’s patience, love and forbearance in the world. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

We would think, then, that the servant who was spared the consequence of his indebtedness would, in turn, extend forgiveness to others, reflecting God’s love to others.

Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows that forgiveness without repentance is harmful to us. We conveniently forget that the salvation of the first slave came at tremendous cost to the master and so miss the larger lesson.

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.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

This time, the debt is a couple of bucks, but the forgiven slave does what's legal – throwing his debtor into prison – rather than dealing with him as he, himself, had been treated. The basic point is this: Christian life in the present, with its responsibilities and particular callings, is to be understood and shaped in relation to the final goal for which we have been made and redeemed<sup>3</sup> – that God the creator intends to bring heaven and earth together at last, and that this plan has been decisively inaugurated in Jesus Christ.

We can scrupulously honor the demands of the law, but if we do not reflect the love God has shown us onto those about us, we are like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If we have not love, we are a nullity, an impediment to all those with whom we come into contact. The availability of God's forgiveness should empower us to be about our Father's goals, not a comfort and permission to those who have not love to act contrary to God's goals.

AMEN

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<sup>3</sup> N.T. Wright "After you believe: Why Christian Character Matters"

## BENEDICTION

In “Surprised by Hope”, Bishop Wright argues that the final hope of Christians is not simply “going to heaven,” but resurrection into God’s new creation, the “new heaven and new earth.” It’s not about you. It’s about joining with God’s goals.

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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