

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 14th Sunday after Trinity
September 13, 2020

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There is always a common theme in the three lessons at every Sunday Mass. Today, all three lessons are about **forgiveness**. **Sin** and **forgiveness** and **mercy** are words often mentioned in every celebration of Mass. There are other words you are more likely to hear on television talk shows and soap operas: **sorrow**, **guilt**, and **reconciliation**. **Reaching out** is another example. Despite our familiarity with these words we really do not know much about their depth of meaning. In fact we may talk about sorrow, guilt, and reconciliation as a way to avoid thinking too deeply about them.

So we can credit St Peter with asking the Right Man the right question. Saint Peter was a lucky man! He could ask Almighty God a question man to man. A lesser man might ask the Lord which horses were going to win the daily double at Suffolk Downs! But Peter asked about **forgiveness**. “Just how many times must I forgive?” And then the apostle betrayed his lack of understanding. That is when he added, “as many as seven times?” St Peter was not in math class. He was with the Lord Jesus. And he was told that if you put forgiveness into the realm of a numbers problem, it isn’t forgiveness.

When the Lord replied “seventy times seven” He wasn’t telling Peter to do the math and stop forgiving when he reached that sum! Jesus was reminding Peter, and us, of something we tend to forget. Terms like **mercy** and **forgiveness** are borrowed from our own human experience. We then apply them to God’s dealings with us. But we can only do that by *analogy*. We cannot apply the plain sense of our own experience to Almighty God. There is simply no direct comparison between *our* mercy and forgiveness and that of the Lord. “My ways are not your ways saith the Lord.”

So what does seventy times seven mean? It does *not* mean a sum of 490 and get an “A” on your math quiz! What it *does* mean is: our forgiveness must become so much a part of our inner spiritual condition it no longer involves a conscious effort. That is how God forgives. The Lord is not conscious of having the virtue of forgiving; *He is a forgiving God*. That is Who He is. And the Lord sets His goal for us on that level.

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There is a funny story I have told you about a conversation in the Oxford College where C.S. Lewis and his colleagues taught. Over after-dinner drinks the question was put: “What does God know?” After much discussion, and consulting of old dust-covered books, one learned professor made the final pronouncement on the question: “God doesn’t know anything!” This caused quite a bit of mirth and gaiety! But the answer was right. You and I may, or may not, be in a position to know. But Almighty God is *the source of knowledge*. He doesn’t know. He is.

At the very heart of the Lord’s Prayer Jesus describes the intimate connection between overlooking offences in others and having our offences overlooked. In giving us this prayer we call the “Our Father” Our Blessed Lord was inviting you and me to imitate the generosity with which Almighty God Himself forgives. And after His Ascension into Heaven, and 500 years later, and even in 2020, this gospel standard remains as high as the Lord Jesus has set it.