

SERMON
On the Gospel Reading of the 11th Sunday of Matthew (Mt. 18:23-35)
(16 August 2026)

Today's Gospel passage, dear brothers and sisters, may rightly be called the very essence of the Christian Gospel, the heart of our faith. It is prompted by the question that the Apostle Peter asks the Lord: how many times should one forgive a brother who sins against him? Peter thought that perhaps forgiving up to seven times was sufficient. But is there another answer? Christ replies that forgiveness cannot be confined within the narrow limits of a legalistic calculation that sets fixed boundaries and precise numbers. Rather, forgiveness is a free act of love, and therefore we may forgive as many times as we choose.

To lead His disciples to a deeper understanding of forgiveness, beyond mere legalism and moralism, the Lord tells them a parable. A king, while examining his accounts, discovers that one of his servants owes him ten thousand talents. The sum is astronomical by the standards of the time. To appreciate its magnitude, consider that a single talent represented roughly twenty years' wages for a labourer. This debtor, therefore, was not a poor working man unable to repay a small loan. He was most likely a wealthy landowner or merchant who had borrowed an enormous amount either to expand his business, only to suffer financial ruin, or who had squandered the money on luxury and reckless living. Whatever the case, one fact remains: his debt to the king was beyond measure.

Since he could not repay what he owed, the law of that time required that all his property be confiscated and that both he and his family be sold into slavery. Faced with this disaster, a situation for which he certainly bore responsibility, the unfortunate man fell to his knees and begged the king to grant him more time, promising that he would somehow repay the debt. We are not told whether such a promise was realistic, nor does the king even enter into that discussion. Instead, he does something extraordinary: he completely forgives the entire debt and releases the man from every obligation. Leaving in great joy, the forgiven debtor soon encounters a fellow servant who owes him a comparatively tiny sum. Instead of learning from the king's astonishing mercy, he seizes the man by the throat, demanding immediate repayment of the small debt. News of this soon reaches the king, who is outraged by the man's ingratitude and greed, and he punishes him severely.

Sadly, dear beloved brothers and sisters, our own behaviour often resembles that of this servant with the enormous debt. We fail to recognise God's countless blessings and, above all, His immeasurable mercy and compassion toward our many sins. Yet we remain hard-hearted and merciless toward our fellow human beings, who may have wronged us either intentionally or unintentionally. We become stubborn and resentful even over the smallest matters, a careless remark, a position at work, an inheritance, or countless other temporary and passing things that will all remain behind when we leave this life.

We repeat almost mechanically and ritualistically the petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12), without the slightest intention of putting those words into practice. Our wounded pride and our ego prevent us not only from forgiving another person but even from giving them the opportunity to explain themselves or perhaps to correct their mistake. We act as strict and impartial judges only when it comes to others, while for ourselves we always find excuses and mitigating circumstances. Yet Christ is perfectly clear: "For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:2). We cannot ask Christ to judge us by a different standard than the one we ourselves use when we judge, condemn, and criticise our neighbour.

We often hear about the justice of God and imagine that it resembles human courts, where punishments are imposed according to a person's deeds. But God's justice is mercy, forgiveness, and love. For if God were just according to merely human standards, none of us could be saved. It is God's mercy that saves us, not our own virtue. Therefore, if we desire to be counted worthy of His mercy, dear brothers and sisters, let us also show mercy, forgiveness, and love toward our fellow human beings. This is the first and greatest commandment of Christ. Amen.