



Merciful Lord, Hear Us We Pray

by

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The Lord God is merciful to all his creatures. When we call upon him, he stays his hand in forgiveness and pardons the wicked who repent, even at the end of their days. It is his desire that all men and women would come to eternal life in him, for no one was born to die. We, whom he fashioned in his own immortal image and likeness, were born to live, to come to life in him. Whoever therefore dies has rejected his own nature, the gift of his own humanity.

So deep is his love for his people that even on the cross, at the moment of death, he prayed to his Father to forgive those who did not know what they were doing.

So broad is his love that he showed mercy on the woman caught in adultery. According to Jewish law her life was forfeit, but he did not take her life. Instead, he gave her life back to her.

So eager is he to forgive that when the Good Thief asked for pardon and eternal life, Jesus rushed to grant it.

With these and many other examples, we are sometimes inclined to ask if in the end all will be forgiven. Certainly it is said that with God all things are possible; he himself said that. But we should not proceed too quickly. He also said that every sin can be forgiven, even if we should reject him we can be forgiven, but those who reject the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven.

Need for Repentance.

The example of the woman caught in adultery and the good thief make the same essential point. Jesus does not force us to be forgiven. He does not forgive us despite ourselves. His forgiveness is first of all an *offer* of forgiveness; it is not by itself the complete effect of it. He makes clear that there is no forgiveness unless we respond to his gift. Like the white dove of peace that comes from the throne of God and descends on the Earth, we have to respond and welcome him or else this dove will not stay, but will return whence he came and brush our dust from his feathers as testimony against us.

The woman caught in adultery makes this point. Jesus did not demand her life. He extended his patience and mercy to her. These he offered so that she for her part would have the opportunity to repent and change her life, and in so doing save it. He offered her patience and mercy, but he did not give her absolution. Instead, he warned her to change.

His patience is not without limit. That is precisely the meaning of our death, which marks the further limit of his patience and mercy. She who had sinned could be forgiven if she repented, but if she embraced her sin and in so doing rejected the gift of life itself – the gift of the Holy Spirit – then no mercy would avail.

The example of the Good Thief shocks us in its blunt simplicity. This man of we assume many crimes was forgiven and admitted to eternal life only for asking, or so it seems. Can Anyone be forgiven? Yes, anyone can be forgiven as long as life remains. But even in this case forgiveness was not forced upon the Good Thief. He did not hang mute upon his cross, or like his mate berate Jesus even in his torment. No, he did two things. First, he confessed his crimes and repented of them, because he warned his mate that they were criminals who were being punished in accord with what they had done. He made no excuses and, even more importantly, he harbored no bitterness toward those who had carried out this sentence of death. Then, secondly, he acknowledged Jesus' goodness and mercy, and his power and glory publicly. For this he was saved. He welcomed the dove of forgiveness that Jesus sent to him, and changed himself accordingly.

There is a famous proverb from the Old Testament in which Jesus – for the words of God are always his words – defended his justice. If a man who has lived a violent and sinful life repents at the end of his days and turns from his sins, he shall be saved, but if a man who lived uprightly under the law all his days should then change and embrace a sinful way in the end, then he must die for his sins. How we end up depends on what we do. We not only have free will, we have *effective* will. What we will and what we do matters. That is Jesus' justice, that he requites us according to the conduct of our lives. This is not to say that we are saved by deeds as such. If that was our belief, how could we explain that man who lived righteously until the end of his life, but then by rejecting virtue rejected all his good works and so came to ruin. It is not by amassing good works that we are saved. What were the works of the Good Thief? None. What were the good works of the Man Born Blind? As far as we know, none, because he was so crippled by blindness that all he did each day was to sit by the road, waiting and meditating on the scriptures.

Yet what we do is not the same thing as what we busy ourselves with. All our acts of charity and love feed our souls – or at least they have the capacity to do that – and lead us to him, but no one of them is necessary. Eternal life is not the reward. It is the natural consequence of our acts of will, when we choose to respond to his call to life. Heaven is a place of rewards, and the rewards are meted out in proportion to the virtues that each person lived, but it is not itself the reward. It is the consequence. That is what we mean when we say that it is faith that saves, and not good works.

Faith is an act of will. It is an action. It is repentance and reform, and its signs are everything that flows from our love of him and our trust in his goodness. We do not have to compose great symphonies that lift and inspire the people. We do not have to wash lepers or to build homes for the homeless. But we have to trust, and we have to put that trust into action by responding to his mercy and forgiveness. We have to have the courage to change. The Good Thief changed. Judging from the gospel account, his partner did not. That is the difference between them. The woman was called to change, and her life was extended so that she could put that change into effect.

We Forgive.

The texture of forgiveness is present in our lives. Sometimes we forgive others and sometimes we don't, but either way we always know what forgiveness is. Above all, we know that it can't be given. Like self respect and like honor, it is not something that one person can give to another. It can only be offered to another, but it can't be given.

It is impossible to forgive anyone who does not want to be forgiven. It is always possible to extend the offer of reconciliation, and we are duty-bound to do that to everyone who hurts us, but it is not possible to make them forgiven. Thus Jesus advises us that if we bear some grudge against our brother, before we bring our gift to the altar we should first go to him and *seek* to be reconciled. Thank god he does not command us to go to him and *be* reconciled, because that is not something under our control. Extend to everyone the hand of forgiveness and reconciliation but, as Saint James advised in his Epistle, do not be naïve. Be as innocent as the dove, and yet as wily as the serpent.

James reminds us implicitly that as we love Jesus and our neighbor, so also must we love ourselves. As Paul cautions, we do not even own our lives, but owe them to Jesus

who ransomed us. For that reason, we must prize our own persons because of him, and must not assent to sins against us. All the holy martyrs submitted to the inevitable, to those who in Jesus' words can kill the body, but they never assented to martyrdom. So it is our duty to him who made us to care for our persons and not to let ourselves be mistreated.

### Jesus Forgives Us.

As we seek to be reconciled to each other, so Jesus seeks to be reconciled with us. It is sometimes said that his mercy is incompatible, or at the least it seems incompatible, with his justice, but as we have seen that is not in any sense the case.

Justice consists of giving to each person what he has earned. In the Old Testament justice is defined in simple, graphic terms: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Jesus spoke critically of the Law of Talon, but he did not say that it is unjust. He said it is not a sufficient guide to our actions. He said that it should not be read as instructions to be followed carefully and thoroughly, but he did not say that it is unjust. Indeed, since it is part of the revealed Law, it can't be unjust.

He is merciful, and he demands that we too be merciful because of the mercy he has shown us. He says that we will be forgiven as we forgive, that he will offer forgiveness to us as we offer it to our neighbors. This is his justice and is according to the Law of Talon. If our neighbor responds to our offer or if he does not, it will be credited to us as mercy because we did what we could. This is the same as the terms on which he extends forgiveness to us, for we too must respond to it to make it real and effective.

This precept is repeated in another Old Testament saying, in which Jesus advises us that if our neighbor sins gravely – thinking especially though not exclusively of cases where he sins against us – and if you remonstrate with him and warn him of his wickedness, then if he does not repent and change he will die for his crimes but you will have saved your life because you loved him enough to try to save him. So, we are not responsible for the decisions and actions of others, but we are responsible to love them and to try to do what is best for them. He also we see the Law of Talon explained. The man who remonstrates with his neighbor and tries thereby to save him has acted according to the law. The test of how we treat each other is not whether we acted justly, it

is whether we acted lovingly. Jesus warned the Woman Caught in Adultery that he is the just Lord, and that some day she would have to answer before him for the conduct of her life, but he shows us his patience and his mercy to her.

At the end of our days he will demand from us an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. He cannot do otherwise because that is justice, and the terms of his patience are at last exhausted. He promises us that all sins can be forgiven, but he does not promise anyone that all his sins will be forgiven because it is impossible even for God to forgive anyone who rejects the offer of forgiveness.

Monsignor O'Flaherty.

There was a man, a monsignor, who during the Second World War worked in Rome to rescue Jews from the nazi terror. He was tireless and cunning, and he was never caught by the German or Italian authorities, although they knew very well what he was doing, and they knew that it was the pope who had given him that assignment. As the Allies were approaching Rome, the German officer who was the governor of Rome approached Monsignor O'Flaherty to plead for help in getting his wife and children to safety, away from the war and the Allies. The monsignor refused to help, and very heatedly did he reject the very idea, but later when the German Colonel was being interrogated by the Americans, one of their first questions to him was how had he managed to get his wife and children to safety in Switzerland. He knew immediately who had done that.

The Colonel was sent to prison because he had been a cruel and ruthless tyrant. Over the course of his years in prison, only one visitor ever came to see him: Monsignor O'Flaherty. They talked and reminisced, and years after the war the Colonel asked the monsignor to baptize him, because he had never been baptized as a child. The monsignor was proud to approve that request, and the Colonel died a Catholic, who had been an atheist all his life. As relentless as the Colonel had been, the monsignor was far more relentless, because he would not let the Colonel die, but tracked him through the years until he also rescued him from death.

There is one sure way to get into Heaven. Make your enemies into friends, and if they should die before you let them plead your case before the throne of Jesus. Then he

will see that in life you imitated him, and adopted his goals as your goals. As he loves himself, so also must he then love you. As he said, he came into this world not to attend to the healthy, but to heal the sick; not to march with the flock but to recover the lost sheep; to prove that his life is the greatest power in all the world and that the love of life overcomes all darkness.

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