

**I TELL YOU, NOT SEVEN TIMES, BUT SEVENTY-SEVEN TIMES**  
**Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM**

**Matthew 18, 21-35**

*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.*

*“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”*

Matthew is the evangelist who deals with the theme of forgiveness more than the others, especially in this chapter 18. Jesus called the disciples and stated that, if the brother really does not want to be reconciled, he should be treated as a tax collector or a sinner. This did not mean excluding him from love, but that this was no longer a mutual love, but a one-way love. Well, these are the verses that we comment on this Sunday, Matthew 18, 21-35. Peter understands. He understands that this love must be limited and so he tries **to put a damper**.

And then Peter - the negative nickname indicates his stubbornness - approaches Jesus and says to him “*Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?*” The rabbinic legislation put a limit, a maximum of three times the forgiveness. Well, Peter tries to overdo it, to exaggerate, he doubles it and says “*Up to seven times?*” Jesus’ reply is “*I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*” Here he is referring to the book of Genesis, to the song of the vengeful Lamech who said “*If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.*” meaning the ultimate revenge.

Jesus takes this song, but changes the significance and says “*I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*” This number does not indicate an unlimited quantity but the quality of this forgiveness is unconditional. And to make him understand Jesus uses a parable: with the typical

tones of the Middle Eastern imagination, about a king who wants to settle accounts with his officials. At that time all the king's employees were called "servants", but here we see that he is an official. Well, he owes a huge, incredible sum, 10,000 talents, about 300,000 kilos of gold, something impossible. So Jesus speaks of this incredible sum and the servant asks him to have patience to repay this debt. But what patience, a lifetime would not be enough. It is calculated that it would take about 164,384 years to repay such a sum.

So the evangelist writes that "*The servant's master took pity on him...*" Compassion is the sentiment of God, it is the sentiment with which Jesus restored life to those who do not have it. This official, this servant had no more life, the king had ordered that he be sold with his wife and children according to the legislation in force; well, this official, this servant has an absurd, unlimited forgiveness.

When he leaves, having been the object of this forgiveness and mercy there is no change in him. He finds one of his companions who owes him a small sum, 100 denarii. One denarius was the daily wage, a little more than three months of work so it is possible. "*He grabbed him and began to choke him.*" He took away the life, the greed of this person. And he says, as the official told the king, '*Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.*' and in this case it is possible, three months of work is possible. But he did not want that, he was ruthless and had him thrown in prison until he had paid the debt.

Seeing what was happening, the companions tell the king and the king had very harsh words, he said '*You wicked servant, I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?*' Therefore, having been the object of mercy he did not have mercy to this other person. And the king gave him to the jailers "*.. until he should pay back all he owed.*" so he was eliminated for always. It is of course an imaginative, Middle Eastern way of expressing rejection..

Jesus' conclusion is important "*This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*" Jesus had previously said that what will be bound on earth, will also be bound in heaven, and what is lost will be lost; God already forgives people, but this forgiveness remains tied as long as it does not turn into forgiveness towards others. So it is not a question that God does not want to forgive, but if a person, despite having obtained forgiveness from God, refuses to forgive others this lack of forgiveness, remains. So the invitation to the community is to dissolve this forgiveness, to communicate forgiveness because, we are all already forgiven by God, but this forgiveness only becomes operative and effective when it turns into forgiveness for others.