

There is, in the deuterocanonical writings sometimes called the Apocrypha, a book by a second-century BC man who shared a name with the Messiah, a fellow named “Jesus, son of Sirach.” The title of the book is *The Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach*, or for short, it is called just *Sirach*. Anglicans call the book *Ecclesiasticus* and it is found in that group of writings bound between the Old and New Testaments in Anglican bibles. In Roman Catholic bibles it is part of the Old Testament. Most Protestant Christians have never heard of this book, but it is something that all of us should read from time to time. As its name implies, it is full of wisdom. Particularly striking is what the author had to say about anger and wrath, and his comments point significantly to the reading from Matthew's Gospel that we have for today. Sirach's son, Jesus, had this to say about anger and wrath: “Anger and wrath are abominations, and the sinful man will possess them. He that takes vengeance will suffer vengeance from the Lord, and he will firmly establish his sins. *Forgive your neighbor and the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.*” There is no doubt in my mind that our Lord, Jesus, was very familiar with this text, written about 150 years before his birth, and he probably had it in mind when he told the parable of the two debtors, because he told this parable in the context of Peter's question of how often we ought to forgive. Jesus told Peter, in so many words, that he ought to forgive to the point of losing track of the number of times, because that is the way that God forgives us. God doesn't count. His unconditional love drives him to forgive us untold times, because forgiveness is the nature of God. God is described as slow to anger, abiding in steadfast love and always ready to forgive. For this purpose, God sent his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, into this world, not to punish us for our debts of sin, but to set aside the burden of our sin. As God is, so should we be, if we truly want to be Christian disciples. To refuse to forgive, when the person that offended you apologizes, offers to make amends and asks your forgiveness runs contrary to Christian values and, simply put, is sin. Sin angers God.

Listen again to our Lord's parable of the two debtors. A powerful man, one with the power of life and death over his subjects because he was the king, decided to settle up his accounts. One of his subjects could not pay up, so the king ordered him sold into slavery. Of course, the king would take the proceeds of the sale to apply against the debt. One way or the other, the debt would be fulfilled. Jesus said that the man begged the king to have mercy, to give him a chance to pay it off. The king did more than give him a chance to pay up. The king forgave the debt. He forgave it; he set it aside. It was as if the debt had never existed. Isn't this what God the Father did when he sent his Son into this world to die for our debts, to atone for our sins so that they could be set aside? It should not stretch our imaginations far to see that when Jesus told this parable he meant for us to understand that the king is Almighty God. And Jesus said, “Now listen to what that foolish man did. Even after his king forgave him, he refused to extend the same forgiveness to someone who had done him wrong. Don't you think,” Jesus said, “that God will punish those who refuse to forgive as he forgives us?” We say, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” We can't just mouth the Lord's Prayer and not take it seriously, not if we really want to be disciples.

Today's gospel says torture is the payment for those who refuse to forgive. It doesn't have to be the torture of hell that pays back the sinner. A psychological reality is that those who refuse to forgive find their hell on earth. We have to realize that we can be right and miserable, but by forgiving we can be happy. Truly, the door to happiness is forgiveness. When we forgive, we join with God in doing God's essential work of bringing the peace of God to this broken world. The peace we bring may be minor and applicable to only a very small place in this world, but it is a peace that indeed passes understanding because it conveys the love that God has extended to us. Fulfillment comes only when

we do God's will and his work.

A reality of life is that we live in constant conflict, sometimes great, sometimes small, but conflict is always with us. It is our nature to get angry, but the anger comes to us with the price of our own internal turmoil. If our neighbor, or friend, or family member offends us, we can let it fester until we destroy ourselves, or we can remember that it is divine to get over it. Forgiveness helps us as much as the one who offended us. Forgiveness heals, because forgiveness is a gift of God. *Amen.*