

## FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT (2024 - B)

Today, I would like to offer some comments about justice, mercy and forgiveness. Let me begin then with what Saint Paul says in our second reading. He tells us that God is rich in mercy. He also says that our salvation is not the result of something we have done. In other words, it's not some kind of payment for services rendered, nor is it the satisfaction of some debt.

Rather our salvation is a gift. It was because of His great love for us that God who is rich in mercy has restored us to life when we were dead. This restoration to life is God's gift to us.

Furthermore, this gift has come to us through God's Son. It was by our Lord's death on the Cross that we were restored to life. Our Lord's suffering and death on the cross produced vast fields of grace, unlimited oceans of grace, an infinite amount of grace, and this saving grace, like precious ointment, is applied to our souls by faith.

When we believe and are baptized, as was Saint Paul, as was the Ethiopian Eunuch, as was Lydia and her household, and as were so many others mentioned in Acts, when we believe and are baptized, then this grace won for us by Jesus Christ, is poured into our souls and then we who were spiritually dead are restored to life. This, our merciful God does for us out of His kindness and His great love for us.

So how are we to understand this great mercy of God, and what should be our response?

First, note well that we are all called to be merciful. For example, Jesus said, "**Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful (Lk 6:36).**" Our Lord says much the same thing in one of the Beatitudes: "**Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy (Mt 5:7).**" Clearly then, for us, mercy is not an option. Rather mercy is an expectation.

Now mercy is not a simple concept. That's because mercy involves both justice and forgiveness. Here is a definition of mercy: "The relaxation of justice." In other words, when someone has offended you, or when someone has harmed you, mercy means that you don't punish them to the full extent of the law. To put it another way, you don't give them what they deserve. Instead, you give them a lesser punishment or perhaps no punishment at all.

Now I think all of us understand the concept of justice. At a basic level, it's about fairness. Even little children understand this. Just try giving one child a smaller piece of cake than another, and you will hear about it. They will say, "That's not fair." That's because we all have an expectation that we will all be treated equally. It's only just.

In another sense, justice is measured out when wrongs have been committed. So when there has been a theft or when property was damaged, the guilty party must make restitution.

When other crimes have been committed, the guilty party can be fined or punished with imprisonment. So there are consequences for acts of injustice, and these consequences are designed to make the guilty party pay back the debt in justice that he or she owes to society.

So justice is about fairness. It's about making right what was wrong. That's for the guilty party, but what about the innocent party? What about the one who was wronged?

Here is where mercy and forgiveness come in. These are things the innocent party must consider, and remember, mercy is an expectation for us. God expects that we be merciful, and God expects that we be forgiving.

Now it's true that we could demand punishment to the fullest extent of the law. It's also true that we could demand an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. However, Jesus suggests that instead, we should be forgiving and this is so even to our enemies (Mt 5:38-48).

For example, Jesus says, **"If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you also; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt 6:14-15)."** And don't forget we are even taught to pray that way. **"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."**

But why? Why do we have to do this? Because it is how God treats us, and Saint Paul reminds of this often. For example, he says, **"Forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ (Eph 4:32)."** And, **"Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you (Col 3:13)."**

So mercy and forgiveness go together, but forgiveness comes first and then mercy.

That's because you have to let go of the hurt or the injury first. You have to forgive before you can be merciful. Otherwise, mercy is impossible.

At this point, let's consider why God is forgiving and merciful before we then go on to consider why we should be forgiving and merciful.

Remember that God is love, and He has a great love for us. God wills our good, and our ultimate good is to live with Him in heaven. That is why He made us.

But then there's this fact. Our sins. As Saint Paul says, **"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rm 3:23)."** Now if God were to consider only justice and not mercy, it would mean that no one would be going to heaven, and we would all be going to hell, and that would be very bad for us, and that is something God does not want for any of us.

Rather, God wants what's good for us. However, because God is infinitely perfect, He must also be infinitely just, and so, He cannot overlook our offenses. The debts we have brought upon ourselves by our sins have to be satisfied. Justice has to be done. But in His great love for us, God has taken care of things. The debts we could never pay, have been paid by His Son. Jesus Christ has taken our place.

To put it another way, it would be as if you paid the fine for another's offense. It would

be as if you went to jail to serve out another's sentence. Except, in this case, it was the very Son of God who paid your debt and my debt, and He did so because He did not want us to suffer the everlasting fires of hell.

And so, God forgave us and was merciful to us, and He offers His grace and His life to those who have faith, and that is why we too should forgive and why we too should be merciful.

Lent is a good time for us to reflect upon these things. During this season, as we consider our own sinfulness and our own need for mercy and reconciliation, we should also consider how we have responded towards those who have harmed us.

We expect that strangers might fail us, but what we don't expect is that those we love and trust will do so too, and yet sometimes they do (usually in small ways but sometimes in large ways as well), and that can leave deep wounds. When a child steals from us, or when a parent abandons us or when a spouse is unfaithful to us or when a priest hurts us.

These are times when our faith is shaken and when trust can be destroyed forever. Yet, if we fall into that trap and refuse to forgive, we will become hardened and cold and unable to love, and if we are unable to love, then we will also be unable to enter into heaven.

It would be a mistake to think that those we love will never disappoint us. The human condition is such that we all fail in keeping the commandments to love God and neighbor. No one but the Blessed Virgin Mary is sinless. Furthermore, as we all know, we ourselves are flawed, and because of that, we have all disappointed others, even those we love very much.

So, if we sometimes fail to love as we should, how can we expect that others not fail from time to time? Furthermore, if we hope for forgiveness and mercy from them, and if we have already received these things from God Himself, then how can we not do our best to show them to others? That is only fair, and it would be the greatest of injustices on our part not to try.

So as Easter draws near, I would encourage you to be reconciled with those in your life. If someone has harmed you, choose to forgive them. If someone has wronged you, let it go. If you have been harboring anger and resentment and grudges and considering ways to get back at someone, consider mercy instead. Reach out and reconnect with those whom you really do care about before it's too late.

Also, if you were the source of hurt, humble yourself and ask for pardon and forgiveness. Do that not only with those in your life here on Earth, but also with God in heaven. In fact, that's what going to confession is all about.

Only God loves perfectly and only God will never disappoint and only God can be trusted completely, and only God is rich in mercy. But He is also our example. In His great love, He has been merciful to us. Let us then do all we can to be merciful as well. Amen.