

COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SUNDAY, SEPT. 11, 2005
(Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time)
(Sir 27:30-28:9; Ps 103; Rom 14:7-9; Matt 18:21-35)

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This Sunday's readings are about forgiveness. The author of Sirach (almost two centuries before Christ) already knew that harboring grudges was not only bad for one's physical health, but also for the soul (and thus, psychosomatically harmful). It is the sinner, and really, the biblical "fool," who "holds them tight." Note how already in this passage from the "Old Testament" we find the condition that we have first to forgive our neighbor in order to obtain God's forgiveness (Mark 11:25; Matt 6:12 and Luke 11:4 in the Lord's Prayer —Matthew uses the Aramaic "debts" to mean "sins," but Luke's use of "sins" in regard to God and "debts" in regards to humans underlines that forgiveness ["remission"] is not confined to the "spiritual," but includes all aspects of life). Note the contrast with Jeremiah's somewhat mixed feelings, Jer 15:11-15; 17:16-18. Jesus' prayer in Luke 23:34 is unique in the Bible (cf. Acts 7:60, modeled on Jesus' prayer).

Ps 103, St. Thérèse of Lisieux's favorite (because it speaks of God's fatherly love), stresses God's patience with us, all the second chances that we have been allowed (sometimes, up until when "tough love" is the only hope). We can always throw ourselves on God's infinite mercy, and audaciously expect forgiveness from him. To do otherwise is to look too much on ourselves, on the enormity of our guilt, which, however, as St. Catherine of Siena often repeats, is nothing compared to God's love and mercy.

Continuing in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells Peter that our obligation to forgive our neighbor is infinite, open-ended (using for emphasis a "pleonasm" —an excessive, exaggerated expression— "seventy times seven"). The parable which is told in order to illustrate the disproportion between what we have been forgiven (by God, and I venture to add, by others, also) and what we begrudge in our pettiness, is classic Jesus. It has every ring of authenticity, and brings home his call to rejoice in what God has done for us, and thus to look beyond our narrow concerns regarding what we fancy is owed to us by others. Note how often "my/your heavenly Father" and "your brother" appear in Matthew's Gospel.