

# TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Sirach = SEER-ak or SĪ-ruhk

A poetic reading drawn along by its powerful rhythm. Slight pause between "sinner" and "hugs."

These emphatic questions set the tone of the reading.

Slight pause between "flesh" and "cherishes."

The reading concludes with an exhortation whose timeliness remains relevant.

## LECTIONARY #130

READING I Sirach 27:30—28:7

### A reading from the Book of Sirach

**Wrath and anger are hateful things,  
yet the sinner hugs them tight.  
The vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance,  
for he remembers their sins in detail.  
Forgive your neighbor's injustice;  
then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.  
Could anyone nourish anger against another  
and expect healing from the LORD?  
Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself,  
can he seek pardon for his own sins?  
If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath,  
who will forgive his sins?  
Remember your last days, set enmity aside;  
remember death and decay, and cease from sin!  
Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor;  
remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults.**

### READING I

The wisdom of the Hebrew scribe Ben Sira is believed to have been compiled between the years 200 and 175 bc. As a collection of ethical instructions, this book attempts to provide practical advice on primary relationships, such as those with mother and father, siblings, the rich and the poor. Today's reading offers wisdom on the issue of holding a grudge against others. Ben Sira opens this section with the image of the sinner hugging tightly to "wrath and anger."

He proceeds to instruct his hearers that those who inflict vengeance upon others will in turn receive the Lord's vengeance. In order to be forgiven by God, one must extend forgiveness to others. The same is true with anger; if one harbors anger in one's heart, then one should not be surprised when God will not heal the situation. In the final portion of his instruction on why a person should avoid hatred and vengeance, the author employs the image of death. The threat of death is indeed

the gravest of all of his warnings. By remembering the last moments of life, a person ought to recognize that it would be ultimate destruction to die in a state of holding hatred against another. Ben Sira's message is abundantly clear: live constantly the virtue of dismissing the faults of others, and God will respond in kind.

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12 (8)

**R. The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.**

Bless the LORD, O my soul;  
and all my being, bless his holy name.  
Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits.

He pardons all your iniquities,  
heals all your ills.  
He redeems your life from destruction,  
he crowns you with kindness and  
compassion.

He will not always chide,  
nor does he keep his wrath forever.  
Not according to our sins does he deal  
with us,  
nor does he requite us according  
to our crimes.

For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so surpassing is his kindness toward  
those who fear him.  
As far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he put our transgressions  
from us.

READING II Romans 14:7-9

**A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans**

**Brothers and sisters:**

**None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself.**

For if we **live**, we **live** for the **Lord**,  
and if we **die**, we **die** for the **Lord**;  
so **then**, whether we **live** or **die**, we are the **Lord's**.

For **this** is why **Christ died** and **came to life**,  
that he might be **Lord** of both the **dead** and the **living**.

A short and potent reading that makes use of the opposition of "live" to "die," using these words to drive home its insistence that Jesus embodies both "the dead" and "the living."

**READING II**

The wisdom of Ben Sira flows nicely into today's reading from Romans. Paul has just cautioned the Romans against judging one another, and now he tells them quite clearly that the nature of the Christian life is to live totally and completely for the Lord. In other words, as love and mercy flow from the heart of God, so too must all Christians embody these key virtues.

For Paul, conforming oneself to Christ is a matter of life and death. In life, a Christian lives "for the Lord," and in death,

a Christian dies "for the Lord." Paul presents such absolute commitment in the framework of belonging. Christians live and die for Christ because they belong completely to him. We know that Paul's understanding of belonging is rooted in baptism. Through baptism, Christians are immersed into his death in order to have new life in him (Romans 6:1-11). Freedom is based no longer on a law written upon a scroll but rather on a relationship of complete allegiance. This covenantal relationship applies not only to the living but to the dead as

well. Those who have already died belong to Christ as much as those who live. Jesus, who experienced both human life and human death, will give life to all who belong to him.

**GOSPEL**

Jesus has just finished instructing his disciples on the important role of forgiveness and prayer in uniting the community of disciples when Peter asks him how far a person should go in being willing to forgive. Peter attempts to provide a potential answer to

A very challenging Gospel reading in which a quite descriptive parable is used to illuminate Jesus' extravagant teaching about forgiveness.

Here begins the parable, which proceeds in an understandable way.

It is useful to keep in mind that the servants are subject to the king, their master.

Note the differences between interactions in the scenes: the king toward the servant, the servant toward the other servant, and once again the king toward the first servant.

his own question, suggesting seven times, or the biblical number of perfection. However, the saying uttered by Jesus transcends even perfection, as he contends that there must be no end to a disciple's willingness to forgive another. Thus, the number seventy-seven.

This discussion on forgiveness allows Jesus to tell the parable of the unforgiving debtor. While not exactly revealing the limitless need to forgive, the story certainly

## GOSPEL Matthew 18:21–35

### A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

**Peter** approached **Jesus** and asked him,  
 “**Lord**, if my **brother** sins against me,  
 how **often** must I **forgive**?

As many as **seven times**?”

**Jesus** answered, “I say to you, not **seven times**  
 but **seventy-seven times**.

**That** is why the **kingdom** of **heaven** may be **likened** to a **king**  
 who **decided** to settle **accounts** with his **servants**.

When he **began** the **accounting**,  
 a **debtor** was brought **before** him who owed him  
 a **huge amount**.

Since he had **no way** of **paying** it **back**,  
 his **master** **ordered** him to be **sold**,  
 along with his **wife**, his **children**, and **all** his **property**,  
 in **payment** of the **debt**.

At **that**, the **servant** fell **down**, did him **homage**, and **said**,  
 ‘**Be patient** with me, and I will **pay** you **back** in **full**.’

**Moved** with **compassion** the **master** of that **servant**  
 let him **go** and **forgave** him the **loan**.

When that **servant** had **left**, he found one of his **fellow servants**  
 who **owed** him a **much smaller amount**.

He **seized** him and started to **choke** him, demanding,  
 ‘**Pay back** what you **owe**.’

**Falling** to his **knees**, his **fellow servant** **begged** him,  
 ‘**Be patient** with me, and I will **pay** you **back**.’

But he **refused**.

**Instead**, he had the **fellow servant** **put** in **prison**  
 until he **paid back** the **debt**.

**Now** when his **fellow servants** **saw** what had **happened**,  
 they were **deeply disturbed**, and **went** to their **master**  
 and **reported** the **whole affair**.

underscores the importance of developing an attitude of empathy and being ready to forgive the one who sins. Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a king who wants his servants to pay back what they owe him. The first servant has accumulated a great debt of “a huge amount” that he owes the king. When the king threatens to balance the debt by selling the servant along with his entire household, the servant begs the king to treat him with patience. Jesus says

that this request caused the king to act with compassion, as he released the servant and forgave the debt.

But we quickly discover the lack of gratitude on the part of this servant, as he leaves the king's presence and demands that a fellow servant pay off the debt that owed him. This second servant utters to his debtor the same plea as the first: “Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.” However, unlike the compassionate king,

The master's wrath is tangible.

The reading concludes on a challenging note: If you don't forgive, the heavenly Father will be wrathful and punish you like the master punishes his ungrateful servant!

His **master summoned** him and **said** to him, 'You **wicked servant!**

I **forgave** you your **entire debt** because you **begged** me to. Should **you not** have had **pity** on your **fellow servant**, as I had **pity** on **you?**'

**Then in anger** his master **handed him over** to the **torturers** until he should **pay back** the **whole debt**.

So will my **heavenly Father do** to **you**, unless **each** of you forgives your **brother** from your **heart.**"

the servant is not moved with pity nor does he forgive the debt. Instead, he has the servant thrown in prison. Clearly, this man represents the contrasting attitude to that of the king; he learns nothing from the king's kindness.

In a way that corresponds to the method for brotherly correction in last week's Gospel reading of Matthew 18:15-18, the parable continues by introducing other "fellow servants" who witness the

injustice and approach the king with the story of the servant's sin. The king summons the servant before him and pronounces him "wicked." Thus, forgiveness is to be returned to the one who extends forgiveness, but to the one who fails to forgive no mercy will be shown in return. S.W.