

Let's just imagine the scene of today's gospel: The man is summoned to the inner chambers of the king. We can imagine there is a long flight of stairs he must take before he reaches the king, dreading each step.

The King looks at him, "You owe me a lot of money. I want my money." The guy is begging, on his knees pleading. The King is moved by this and reaches into that ledger book, took hold of the page, and ripped it out: "I forgive you the debt. You are now free and clear. Go in peace."

Can you imagine the reaction of the servant? He must have floated in the air, not touching a single step on the way down. The man is off to freedom.

We might hope so, but that's not the way the story goes. He apparently touched every step on the way down, and when he gets to the bottom, he finds another servant who owes him his money and throttles him for the equivalent of \$20 bucks and has him thrown in jail.

The King hears about it. Did you forget what I did for you? Well," said the king, "I have news for you. You know that jail cell where your buddy sits? You are going to join him until you pay me back."

The equivalent of \$10 million in the day of Jesus would take probably 125,000 years to pay back. I'm told that the entire annual revenue into the Roman coffers all over the globe was approximately \$850,000.

This is really the story about a servant who was offered the forgiveness of \$10 million and did not receive it. He didn't let himself off the hook, as it did not touch him.

I'll tell you why I know that. I know that because what happened at the bottom of the stairs simply could not have happened had he really received the forgiveness.

It would have been utterly impossible had he really accepted being forgiven. He wouldn't even notice if the guy presented himself and said, "Hey, I owe you 20 bucks." He'd say, "What 20 bucks?"

+It's like you decide to play the lottery on the way to Mass and think nothing of it. At the collection, someone nudges you for a couple bucks to put in the collection. "Sure, no problem."

You get home and find out you've won the lottery. The next Sunday, you don't hunt the guy down. No, you are floating down those steps and are so happy you give a large portion to Cathedral.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) We can never pay it back, but receive it with boundless joy and do likewise.

How many hearts have been untouched by such a gift? Some, like the character in our story are so driven for the next buck, for the next big deal that you are blinded by arrogance. Others carry anger and prejudice unable to see the goodness that shines in all of God's children.

Some, as we have seen over the past months, stand at the bottom of those stairs, unable to realize the life God has given, holding on to a racist past, spewing hatred. They are broken, but totally unaware.

The mark of receiving real forgiveness is a humble awareness that I am, broken in some ways, that I am in need of forgiveness because of this.. We are set free to forgive others in an uncomplicated way when we accept that our own books are not balanced either – that nobody's books are balanced, that every human being needs another chance, and another: seventy times seven.

Then there are some whose hearts are good and contrite, but struggle to accept that you are truly forgiven by God. You confess the same sin over and over, unable to believe he has forgiven you.

You bang yourself over and over on the head about hurting someone, an accident, spoken words, and you hold on to this, unable to accept the forgiveness one may have offered.

Why am I so emotionally impoverished that I struggle with forgiveness? What would it take for me to become a forgiving person? As far as I can see it is simple: Experiencing forgiveness. Our ability to forgive starts with realizing we are forgiven. I gave my parents plenty of opportunities in forgiveness!

It is the free flow of forgiveness – giving and receiving it – that keeps our life simple and free from futile self-justification. The deepest source of this simplicity and freedom is my awareness that God utterly forgives me or forgives me through others I may have wounded.

+When Shannon Ethridge was just 16 years old, an act of forgiveness and love changed her life forever. While driving to her high school one day, Ethridge ran over Marjorie Jarstfar, a woman who was riding her bicycle along a country road.

Marjorie died as a result, and Ethridge, who was found completely at fault by authorities, and was consumed by intense guilt. She contemplated suicide several times, but she never took her life because of the healing response of one man: Gary, Jarstfar's husband.

Gary forgave the 16-year-old and asked the attorney to drop all charges against her. Instead, he simply asked that Ethridge continue on in the godly footsteps that his wife had taken.

"You can't let this ruin your life," Gary told her more than 20 years ago.

Gary's act of forgiveness showed Ethridge the amazing love of God. Today, Ethridge is the bestselling author of many a book concerning the mercy of God. That is what she did at the bottom of those stairs.

Do you know what that means to those of us who can receive the forgiveness? For those of us who can let ourselves off the hook, do you know what that means?

It means nobody's going to have to remind us how to behave. Nobody's going to have to tell us how to act. Nobody's going to have to tell us what to do when we get to the bottom of the stairs.