

Ordinarily today's gospel is a no-brainer. If somebody offends you, you forgive them. If they rip your clothes, scratch your car, or spill the milk, they usually say, "I'm sorry." And you say, "That's all right." Even if it's the same person, and even if it happens over and over again.

Jesus says to forgive those who sin often. He then tells a parable about sinning deeply. A guy owes billions of dollars. He pleads for mercy and gets it. But he does not show mercy in turn, and that's what really gets him into trouble. Jesus expects repentance and forgiveness.

Ordinarily this gospel is a no-brainer because we know the value of mercy. We grant it to people we love, and we fearlessly ask it from God and neighbor whenever we mess up. Forgiveness is fairly easy.

Then there's Iraq. President Bush accuses Saddam Hussein of advocating terrorism, blocking international controls, and building weapons of mass destruction. If the president is right, Hussein must be stopped. We cannot allow someone bent on destroying human life to carry out such designs.

But it isn't easy. As in all conflict, how we do it matters as much as what we do. For example, without international support, our case against Hussein lacks credibility. The international community is committed to justice, and its participation is essential to affirm the justice of aggression against another nation. We also need clear international norms regarding weapons of mass destruction. The United States withdrew from the A.B.M. treaty earlier this year, but there is no clear replacement declaring who may possess nuclear weapons and who may not. Without international agreement, it looks like we permit weapons of mass destruction only in those countries that we like. We need international standards. If we do overthrow Hussein, Iraq will be further destabilized. War will kill many innocent people and make extremists feel free to unleash new rounds of terrorism.

In the gospel parable, a man is guilty, asks forgiveness and receives it. Hussein has not done so. He may be incompetent for reconciliation, and that's what makes forgiveness so hard in this case. America's challenge is to immobilize terrorists in a way that does not weaken the wary peace of the world.

If you've ever tried to reach peace with an irrational neighbor, you know how hard it is. But just because it's hard doesn't mean we shouldn't try to immobilize the offender while minimizing the risk to human life. And if an offender ever does repent, our unpleasant task is to forgive.