

Unforgiveness is prized among Americans. If we get bad service from a company, a restaurant, or a business, we say, "I'll never go back to them again." And we don't. We think people are fools if they do. If some business hurts us, cheats us, or sells us a product that fails--even if it happens accidentally, we generally don't forgive. We prize unforgiveness in our culture; we expect it as part of acceptable behavior.

Small wonder then that when we offend someone, we fear we won't be forgiven. We avoid them. We hide from them. We know other citizens of this country have also learned the virtue of unforgiveness.

Believers often assume that God is an American, too. If God got bad service from us--if we were late, if we tried to cheat, if we made God feel inferior--we assume the divine response would be the same: "I'll never go back to them again."

Consequently, one of the most frightening sayings we hear from Jesus is from this Gospel: "People will be forgiven every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." It's a saying that realizes our greatest fears about having a relationship with God. If we mess it up, we can mess it up big time.

For centuries the world over All Souls Day has transfixed believers. We instinctively desire to pray for those who have died. We shudder to think that people we love might not find forgiveness from the God we love. So we appeal to God as their intercessors. Have mercy on the sins of the dead, and grant them rest for their belief.

Although this Gospel passage plays on our fears about God, the Bible from start to finish is replete with passages which assure the believer that God's mercy knows no limit. God is not an American. God will forgive. Who are those who sin against the Holy Spirit? Simply those who do not seek the mercy of God. Eternal sorrow derives not so much from God's intolerance as from our pride. *It's not that God won't forgive, it's that we don't ask.*

If prayers for the dead make this day somber, let this belief afford us hope. The characteristic prized in the reign of God is mercy.