

Fr. Philip's Sermon September 8, 2013

11th Sunday

Mat 18: 23-35

Good morning, God bless us all.

Today's gospel reading about this unmerciful servant is not a particularly pleasant one to hear. Rather than inspire, it seems more intended to warn us of a very great spiritual danger. And while we may with good sense appreciate such warnings, we are not usually uplifted by hearing them. Still, I would hope to acquire some positive and helpful thoughts about mercifulness through an Orthodox reflection upon this text.

Coincidentally, or to be more accurate, providentially, I have been listening to a talk by Hieromonk Kosmas of Australia entitled "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy". This is, of course, one of the great Beatitudes given to us by Christ Himself. In this talk, Fr. Kosmas makes a number of very interesting and important observations. For example, he points out that in the account of St. Theodora's vision of the trials of the soul after death, popularly known as the Toll Houses, the final trial has to do with whether a person has been merciful. The angel who is guiding St. Theodora in her vision tells her that even if a person has fasted and prayed and kept themselves from all kinds of sins they will fail to obtain Paradise if they have not been merciful to others. The angel also tells her that those who have been merciful will pass the other trials even if they have many sins. This certainly echoes St. Peter's teaching in his first epistle that "love will cover a multitude of sins".

We should be mindful however that neither this mercy nor this love are just feelings or sentiments. Love and mercy are revealed by our behavior towards one another. St. John Chrysostom teaches the same thing when he says that at the judgment it is our neighbors who will either save or condemn us. In today's Gospel it is the complaint of his fellow servant that causes the king's wrath to fall upon the merciless one.

When love and mercy are talked about in the Bible the usual meaning is what the Church often calls 'good works'; almsgiving, charity, hospitality, visiting the sick, assisting others and forgiveness of debts. We read the same thing in Christ's parable about the last judgment. The righteous, He declares, are those who have ministered to the poor, the destitute, the sick and the captive. The emphasis is on works of mercy and practical charity. These are what Christ considers the 'weightier' issues of the law. So it is for us also.

It is altogether too easy for us to become distracted by the minutiae of pious Orthodox life – what Fr. Seraphim called 'correctness disease'. It is also very common for people who are trying to live what they believe to be a 'spiritual' life to become unhealthily over concerned about themselves. The Christian teaching about mercifulness is a great antidote for both of these problems. The Fathers also indicate that for Christians living in the world, (that is Christians who are not monastic's), works of charity and mercifulness are the best means of acquiring the virtues, subduing the passions and enjoying the blessing of God's Grace in our lives. The other principal means of acquiring righteousness in God's Eyes is participation in the Divine Services of the Church – regular worship.

It is certainly very dangerous, even foolish to leave such an important matter to the hit-or-miss of the moment or the capriciousness of mere moods. It has always been the practice of serious Christians to build charitable giving into the very structure of their temporal affairs. Of course charity and mercifulness extend far beyond financial giving but just as struggle with passions begins with fasting, so mercifulness begins with almsgiving. In fact, the Greek word that is used in Scripture for mercy is the same word for almsgiving. So, that is where we have to start.

I can't help but believe that as we are now entering upon a new liturgical cycle, (this is the time of the Church's New Year), this message about the importance of mercifulness is truly God-sent to all of us. It is quite clear from today's Gospel as well as from the entire Orthodox Tradition, that salvation, righteousness and mercy from God are to some extent dependent upon ourselves and how we choose to live. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy";

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”; “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”.

So, let us take this message to heart and begin a contemplation of these things with a mind to improving our practice of mercifulness. First and foremost let us begin to pray to God that He will open our eyes to the immeasurable mercifulness that He has already shown us, in calling us, unclean and sinful – debtors all, into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ. We have all been forgiven great and unpayable debt. Recognizing this great mercy already bestowed upon us, let us also show responsive gratefulness by cultivating a similar spirit of mercifulness in ourselves.

We will look further into this matter next week, God willing.

Amen