

12th Sunday after Pentecost

Matt 19:16-26

September 15, 2013

This morning I am going to talk a bit more about Mercifulness. Last week we saw how vital this is to our Christian life. The Scriptures are absolutely clear on this point. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” If we wish to have mercy shown to us we must show it to others. If we wish to be forgiven, we must forgive. But that’s a problem for us, isn’t it? It’s almost a “catch 22”. If you want a job, you must have experience, and if you want experience, you must have a job. In reality, however, conundrums like this are only partly true. With effort, persistence and the application of our God-given intelligence, we can all improve both our physical and spiritual situations. In short, it takes work.

Of course, there are always people who don’t want to work. There are, also, those who work a bit and then they say to themselves, “That’s enough”. Remember the story of the farmer who prospered and then just wanted to kick back and take his ease? What did Jesus call him? - “Thou Fool”.

So what are some practical ways that we can work at becoming more merciful, more forgiving, more charitable? All of the wise spiritual teachers indicate that it is with our money that we must make a beginning. This, like fasting, is where the rubber meets the road. Mercifulness extends far beyond money matters but we must begin here. Elder Epiphanius, for example required (required, mind you!) that all his spiritual children give 10% of their income to the poor. He would not take upon himself the responsibility of a spiritual father for anyone who would not do that.

Prof. C.S. Lewis, when asked how much a Christian should dedicate to charity was less explicit but perhaps even more demanding. His answer was, simply, “more than you think you can afford to give.” He, by the way, lived strictly on his salary as a professor. All the income from his books and radio talks went into a charitable trust managed by someone else. That reminds me of the practise some Christians have of giving their charity to someone else, often an elder, to distribute for them. If you read the life of Elder Marcarios of Optina, you will discover much of this. He was known as a “great persecutor of money”.

One of the lessons here is the importance of dedicating a set amount for charitable giving as a foundation. I use the term ‘foundation’ because we need to avoid the idea that doing this relieves us of any further responsibility to give alms. It doesn’t. A foundation of disciplined giving is the least, not the most, that we should do.

Building this foundation of disciplined giving will, also, serve to introduce us to two great blessings. First, the realization in our own lives of the hold that money and anxiety over money can gain over us. The young man in today’s Gospel is certainly an example of that but it is often hard for us to see the same thing in ourselves. Yet, this is one of the greatest hinderances to really following Christ. Secondly, it will introduce us to an awareness of God’s Providence that we will not acquire any other way.

People who do this, without exception, will happily testify that they receive in blessings far more than they give in charity. Not the least of these blessings is a marked decrease in financial anxiety. Also, one’s own excesses, either of penny pinching or of profligacy, begin to be corrected and, just as fasting helps bring about an over all improvement in bodily health, so charitable giving brings about improvement in the health of our financial affairs. These blessings are, however, only by-products of the most important activity of this practise, which is the softening of our hearts and the acquiring of a merciful spirit.

There is, also, a third benefit to disciplined almsgiving. It tends to teach us wisdom and discernment. People, often, foolishly think that charity should be spontaneous, i.e. impulsive, and that love, to be natural and genuine, must be without deliberate consideration. Into this group also falls those whose idea of charity is that of a 'noble gesture' which is vanity. Not so! We are, actually, obligated to use our alms wisely.

St. John of Kronstadt, for example, himself an icon of charitable giving, says that when we discover that a person is in need because he is lazy and will not work, we are not obligated to share with him the money we have gained by our labors. This, also, applies to certain criminals, people who live dissolute lives on purpose and various human leeches. We are not to despise such people but neither should we give them money since that often just encourages them to stay in their sins.

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving constitute the three legged stool of Orthodox ascetic practise. Almsgiving, sadly, is often the most neglected of the three. Yet, as with a stool, if one leg is weak or missing, the others aren't going to function properly either. When you talk with your pastor or spiritual advisor, you might want to get some personalized guidance about this. Again, I will mention that he who is self-directed has an idiot for a counselor.

I will end this talk with the observation that at least from reading the Gospels themselves, almsgiving and practical charity would seem to be, for those of us in the world, the place we need to put much of our attention. The monks don't have money. We do. How we use or misuse it matters.

May God grant us the wisdom to seek after a clean heart and a right spirit. And that spirit is a spirit of Mercifulness. Amen.