

**SUNDAY OF FORGIVENESS
CHEESE-FARE SUNDAY
FEB 5/18, 2007**

ROMANS 13: 11-14:4

ST. MATTHEW 6: 14-21

by

Fr. Dr. Photios+ (W)

Gospel: *For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:*

But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;

That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

You seek, not simply what is to your own advantage, but what also benefits your fellow human beings. You are not quickly provoked by those who are angry with you. You are not resentful if wrong is done to you, nor do you rejoice if your friends act unjustly, though you do rejoice with them over the truth of their righteousness. You put up with disagreeable eventualities. You believe all things in simplicity and innocence, and hope to receive everything promised to us by God. You patiently endure all trials, never rendering evil

for evil. And, laborer of love that you are, you never waver in your love for your fellow beings (cf. I Cor. 13: 4-8).

[Nikitas Stithatos, *On Spiritual Knowledge*, # 87, p. 168 in *The Philokalia, Volume Four* (compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth), Faber and Faber Limited, London, U.K., first published 1995, Paperback Edition, 1998.]

Spiritual Combat

We are ending our spiritual preparation for Great Lent with a most appropriate Christian subject – forgiveness. Clergy and laity alike ask forgiveness of each other as we attempt to navigate Christ’s vessel – ourselves – toward a true reflection of Him. We are readying ourselves for spiritual combat, a struggle within our hearts. Our goal is to purify our souls and cleanse the flesh.

Forget Others’ Wrongs

Christ stresses the curative powers of forgiveness. When we forgive others, we bring forth the Father’s forgiveness of us. We are not to hold grudges. If any of us has a grievance with any other person at this moment, dismiss it from your heart and don’t let it back in! The Lord reminds us of the Father so we will revere Him and remember we are His children, the offspring of God the Father Almighty. The Father forgives, so we, His children, must also do so.¹

God ‘Conditions’ His Forgiveness

He forgives us for our trespasses *if* we repent. He laid down our Christian duty in The Lord’s Prayer:

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Since even after sin-cleansing baptism, we still sin because of our spiritual frailties, we repent and ask Christ to forgive us. He will “as we forgive others”. If we keep remembering the wrongs that people have done to us and refuse to forgive them, God will *not* forgive us:

For if we forgive men their trespasses, our heavenly Father will also forgive our trespasses. By forgiving our brethren we find forgiveness of our own sins; the Lord’s mercy is hidden in mercy and forgiveness for our neighbour.²

God follows our lead – if we won’t forgive, neither will He!³ Failure to forgive others is cruelty, and our meek God hates it.⁴

Fasting

The true fast is not only to wear down the body, but also to give to the poor a portion of what we (ourselves) need to eat; when (the poor) receive their fill of food from us, then our fast will be pleasing to God.⁵

As Orthodox Christians, we use the fast as a weapon in our spiritual combat arsenal. We not only fast from food but also the passions/evil influences of *this* world. Our fasting is not to be merely rote or mechanical. It is a *voluntary* spiritual weapon designed to overcome our evil proclivities. Fasting is spiritual preparation and should never be done out of pride. Needless to say, we are not to judge others' fasting habits. We need to keep our eyes on ourselves!

In Secret

Fasting is not to be done mournfully, nor hypocritically. We are not to 'show off' our fasting to our neighbours. Fasting is not a public display. The Lord says it is to be done so we "appear not unto men to fast". It is to be done 'secretly' "unto the Father Who is in secret: and thy Father Who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (St. Matthew 6: 18).⁶

'Anointing' Our Heads

When fasting, we are to anoint our heads and wash our faces thus appearing to others not to fast. Bl. Theophylact, following the Fathers, puts forth an alternative understanding of "anoint". In olden days, oil was used after bathing to demonstrate "joy and well-being". We can understand such oil to mean almsgiving, and we are anointing our Head (which is Christ) with "deeds of mercy, and our face, that is our senses, we should wash with tears of repentance".⁷

Thus, if thou dost wash thy face with tears and dost cleanse thy soul from sin, and dost relieve the poor with alms, by these means thou dost anoint the head that is, Christ, and thy righteousness will go (before thee) like the dawn, and the glory of God will encompass thee.⁸

Don't Be Obsessed By Possessions/Accumulation

Today's Gospel ends with Christ, having cautioned against vainglory, speaking to us about acquisitiveness. He explains that 'piling up' treasures on *this* earth is fruitless. Such treasures are subject to decay, corruption, and theft. Our heavenly treasures are not. They endure eternally. When we store treasures in heaven by working actively, vigorously, resolutely and compassionately for our neighbours, we put in practice a true Christian's spiritual duty to love them as ourselves but even more so. This pays lasting spiritual 'dividends':

But he who sows *in the spirit* (emphasis supplied), who bears an image of the heavenly and whose life is in heaven, stores up treasure in heaven and rejoices eternally.⁹

Our heavenly treasure is not subject to the normal causes of deterioration, corruption, or evil as mere earthly possessions are in the secular world. We possess more than we need due to vainglory in this world. We should concentrate upon our day-to-day spiritual improvements to transform ourselves to more closely resemble His image. Our salvation will be permanent, in stark contrast to the mere accumulation of goods, which are subject to fire, flood, earthquake, pestilence, war, decay/deterioration, conversion, conspiracy to defraud, fraud, embezzlement, and theft. Even if our earthly treasure is not stolen, “Jesus says, even if nothing is lost in this manner, are you not wretched for being nailed down by your worries over wealth? This is why He says, ‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’”.¹⁰

Forgiveness Sunday means just that – forgive always, forget real or imagined grievances/wrongs. When we fast, do so with proper spiritual outlook. Do it as a Soldier of the Cross. Don’t do it hypocritically, to show off, to prove how ‘correct’ we are. Have faith in Christ and from that faith do the good works that are integral components of salvation. Faith and good works flowing from one’s faith complement each other. Both are necessary for salvation!

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.¹¹

Forgiveness is an essential ‘good work’!!

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Bl. Theophylact’s *Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. I* in the series, Bl. Theophylact’s *Explanation of the New Testament* (tr. from the original Greek by Fr. Christopher Stade), Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 1997, p. 59.

² Hieromonk German Ciuba (tr. from the Slavonic into English; tr. from the Greek into Slavonic in the year 6851, A.D. 1343), *The Gospel Commentary*, Russian Orthodox Church of the Nativity of Christ (Old Rite), Erie, PA, 2002, pp. 43-44.

³ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁴ *id.*, p. 59.

⁵ Ciuba, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁶ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁷ *id.*

⁸ Ciuba, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁹ *id.*, p. 54.

¹⁰ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹¹ St. James 2:26