

**11TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
JULY 30/AUG 12, 2007**

I CORINTHIANS 9: 2-12

ST. MATTHEW 18: 23-35

Fr. Dr. Photios+ (W)

Gospel *Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.*

The Parable

Sometimes in His teaching, the Lord uses “parables, similes and stories” to enliven and uplift the hearers’ minds and teach more vividly, drawing the spiritual student to attention away from sloth and laziness.¹ Christ uses the parable in today’s Gospel to drive home His point about forgiveness:

Let us, therefore, learn from this parable to forgive our contentious brethren their offences against us. For if we forgive our debtors, God will also forgive us our transgressions; but if we do not relieve and forgive them, we shall not be forgiven or pardoned by God; rather, we shall incur greater displeasure and punishment for ourselves, and terrible torments.²

The parable teaches forgiveness, in particular to those who show sincerity and fall before us begging for their forgiveness.³

The Characters In The Parable

The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a certain king. The kingdom is the Word of God and is of all the heavens. Christ, the Word

is likened to a man who was a king, that is, He Who became incarnate for our sake and appeared in the likeness of men, and He settles accounts with His servants as a Good Judge. He does not punish first without judging: that would be cruel.⁴

The servants are all of us. The Lord communicates with us in our lives, extending His invitation to come to Him, and He judges us according to our own consciences. We are examined and judged according to the way we have lived our lives, what we have done within God's grace. In this way, we, the debtors of ten thousand talents, are examined to see how we have used these gifts from the Lord. Have we properly exercised these "talents" for God or sinned against Him? In addition, ones who are leaders, those who have taken on the responsibility for the "care and guidance of many men" are in debt for ten thousand talents. God has given them gifts, and they are to give him a return, so-to-speak, through keeping His commandments.⁵ In other words, rulers who are given sovereignty by the Lord are expected to carefully tend to their charges.

The wicked servant, in a position of trust, who owed Him the ten thousand talents but couldn't pay, having wasted His master's wealth, has become a debtor:

He is handed over by his master to be sold, together with his wife and children. Once sold, he becomes the servant of another master; this illustrates alienation from God. His wife refers to the flesh, as being the **partner of the soul**; their children are (their) **wicked deeds**, wrought by the soul and the body together.⁶

The Lord turns the flesh over to Satan for the evil one to afflict with "illnesses or demon-induced diseases". The "effects of the passions," the children, are also slated for tormenting so they will not sin anymore and their souls might be saved.⁷

See how the woman, which is the flesh, and the children, which is the doing of evil, have been given over to affliction so that the spirit might be saved, as in the case of that man who can no longer steal because his hand is crippled (note: e.g., caused by God withering the hand that stole).⁸

The Indebted Servant Receives Forgiveness But Won't Give It!

Don't be like he was! He received his master's mercy, who forgave his debt when the servant fell down before him and worshipped him asking that he have patience with him. He knew what he owed but couldn't pay it, so he asked for a reprieve and promised to pay all he owed. He forgave the debt entirely, which was ten thousand talents, among the Jews one talent was worth about one gold pound. [In contemporary values, it was "well over twelve million dollars"]⁹ The master's order that his servant repay the debt had been "merciful rather than merciless". He issued it so the servant would fear his punishment and "pray and obtain pardon". He forgave him after the sentence so his reprieve might register strongly with him "so that he would once and for all remember the punishment from which he had been delivered, and would himself be merciful to his debtors, having learned from his misfortunes".¹⁰

Considering the servant's master as our Lord, He values our repentance so much so in this case that he forgave all the debt even though only an extension of time to pay had been requested. The servant repented and He showed His love for mankind by totally forgiving him. He gave him more than he asked for. Christ does that for His children. It is a sign of His great love for us.¹¹

Then the debt-free servant threw God to the winds. He left God and became a stranger to Him. He was owed a mere hundred pence by one of his fellow servants. Did he show God's mercy on his neighbour? Did he deal with him in mercy and forgiveness as he had been treated by the Saviour? No, he was cruel and merciless to him, physically assaulting him and demanding he pay up now! His fellow servant fell down at his feet and sought mercy seeking the same kind of time extension that his creditor had asked of the Lord. This was denied, and he had him thrown into prison until he paid the debt.¹²

So great was the servant's inhumanity that, although he had been forgiven the greater amount (ten thousand talents), he could not at all forgive the smallest amount (a hundred pence), nor even grant a postponement. And this despite the fact that the fellow servant spoke the **very same words** (emphasis supplied) to him, reminding him of the words by which he himself had been saved: 'Have patience with me and I will pay thee all.'¹³

...

He had no regard for the form of the petition, by which he himself had been pardoned, nor was he moved by the words, Have patience, which he had used for his own deliverance¹⁴

The Wicked Servant Repudiated God's Gift

Upon learning from the fellow servants (angels who hate evil, love good, “watch over us and are angered by man's inhumanity”)¹⁵ of the spiritually departed servant's inhumane treatment of his fellow servant (his neighbour), the master chastises him, the wicked servant. Because he was unmerciful to his fellow servant and disregarded his master's complete forgiveness of his immense sum, he has repudiated the gift; “it was repudiated by the man who did not show mercy to his fellow”.¹⁶ He explains to the servant that he himself had forfeited the gift. He patiently rebukes one who is self-condemned. “Lack of mercy is not only abominable before God; it is displeasing to angels, and to men who are meek and good.”¹⁷

We sin against God in the “tens of thousands” whilst our brethren's sins against us are numbered in the hundreds. We owe God “many and great debts” because of our many and great sins. Those sinning against us owe us just “a small and insignificant sum” when compared with the “ten thousand talents” we owe God. If we can't forgive the relatively minor debts owed us “we lose the pardon which God gave us when we prayed and entreated Him, and we shall mercilessly be required to answer for all our transgressions.”¹⁸

His Punishment

He was condemned “endlessly and forever” and will never be able to repay the debt because “in hell there is no confession of sins”.¹⁹

Christ presents this parable as a spiritual teaching vehicle. The main thrust of it is to convey to us the ‘dead seriousness’ of not forgiving our neighbours. We must forgive them with our hearts, not just our lips. We look to ourselves first to get our spiritual conduct in order. We don't look around to find fault with others. Let's begin with ourselves, shall we?

If we understand our own failings, we should have more empathy for others' faults. In other words, we are to censure our own sins, not those of our neighbours. Don't remember wrongs done you! Let them go:

Understand, then, what a great evil is remembrance of wrongs, since it **revokes** (emphasis supplied) the gift of God; though God does not repent of His gifts, nevertheless they are revoked.²⁰

God didn't revoke His gift. Our unforgiving did!

The Lord used a monetary value in this parable, but it is easily extended to cover any debts of our neighbours. As well as money, it can be “contempt, or abusive words, or anything else”.²¹ When we come to the Divine Liturgy to worship and take the Lord’s Body and Blood, we need to forgive everyone. No grievance can be held and at the same time we take Holy Communion. Let’s turn the other cheek, take the initiative in forgiving others. This will do wonders and very often stirs the forgiveness in their hearts. Our forgiveness of our neighbours must be unconditional from the depths of our hearts.

What do you say we forgive each other **now**?

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

¹ *The Gospel Commentary (Lessons Taken from the Holy Gospel and from Many of the Divine Writings of Our Father among the Saints, John Chrysostom)* (translated from the Slavonic into English by Hieromonk German Ciuba), Russian Orthodox Church of the Nativity of Christ (Old Rite), Erie, Pennsylvania, 2002, p. 362.

² *ibid.*, p. 363.

³ Blessed Theophylact, *Explanations of the Holy Gospel of St. Matthew, Vol. I*, (translated from the original Greek by Fr. Christopher Stade) Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 1997, p. 158.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *The Gospel Commentary, op. cit.*, pp. 363- 364.

⁶ *id.*, p. 364.

⁷ *id.*

⁸ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-159.

⁹ *The Orthodox New Testament Holy Gospel, Volume I (Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged)* October 2000, Holy Apostles Convent/Dormition Skete, Buena Vista, Colorado, *St. Matthew*, Endnote # 169, p. 109.

¹⁰ *The Gospel Commentary, op. cit.*, pp. 364-365.

¹¹ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

¹² *id.*

¹³ *id.*

¹⁴ *The Gospel Commentary, op. cit.*, p. 366.

¹⁵ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

¹⁶ *The Gospel Commentary, op. cit.*, p. 367.

¹⁷ *id.*, pp. 367-368.

¹⁸ *id.*, p. 369.

¹⁹ *id.*

²⁰ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

²¹ *The Gospel Commentary, op. cit.*, p. 371.