

MERCY: SEEKING AND APPLYING

In this Sunday's reading from the Holy Gospel , (Matthew 18: 23-35), we are brought before a terrible "reckoning", analogous to the reckoning each of us will face at the Judgment:

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 servant had accumulated a fairly large debt. This took time, suggesting an attitude of negligence, with a resultant ballooning of debt. A final reckoning is inevitable, something the servant was putting off and not addressing earlier. The Lord knew that the only way in which his conscience could be pricked is through the threat of severe consequence, losing his family to slavery! Prior admonishment fell on deaf ears, but this potential serious chastisement got his attention. Filled with fear and dread, the servant repented, and vowed to correct his ways. This triggered God's mercy, giving the servant a greater reprieve than he sought, a complete forgiveness of debt instead of the sought after deferment. How great is the Lord's patience, love and compassion!

Holy Scripture utilizes various illustrative and instructive metaphors relating to spiritual labors necessary for our salvation: the vineyard, farming, building, sea travel, etc. Here, we are presented with the analogy of profit and debt, a metaphor that St. Seraphim uses in his description of life as a marketplace:

God the Word, the God-Man, our Lord Jesus Christ, compares our life with the market, and the work of our life on earth He calls trading. He says to us all: *"Trade till I come"* (Lk. 19:13), *"buying up every opportunity, because the days are evil"* (Ephesians 5:16). In other words, make the most of your time getting heavenly blessings through earthly goods. Earthly goods are good works done for Christ's sake that confer the grace of the All-Holy Spirit, on us.

St. Serahim of Sarov (Conversation with N.A. Motovilov)

How did the servant accumulate this debt, and how does this relate to our spiritual life? In St. Seraphim's "Conversation", he beautifully expounds on the need to acquire the Holy Spirit as the "true aim of our Christian life", but also relates to such effort as the principle means of acquiring spiritual capital, namely, gain for the soul. Good works done for Christ's sake are the primary means of reaping spiritual profit. But, just as the earthly marketplace offers methods of gain, there are also opportunities for loss and liability. The Holy Fathers teach that the principle way in which we incur spiritual loss is through the retention of unrepentant sins, which not only blinds us and weigh us down, but also contribute heavily to the indebtedness that will follow us to our own reckoning, that of the dreadful day of Judgment. The Holy Church provides us with a means of relinquishing such "losses", through the Mystery of Confession, Holy Communion and repentance.

As the parable demonstrates, the Lord applied profound mercy to the servant upon his repentance. The servant's plea was, "Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all." Later, as the servant's heart grew hardened and he demanded an accounting of his own debtor, (who, made the exact same plea), he refused to show mercy. As a consequence, relief from his own debt was canceled, a terrible fate that he brought upon himself.

In "The Lord's Prayer", a prayer that was taught to mankind by our Saviour, we hear: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The mercy that we all desperately need from Christ, both in this life and at the dreaded day of Judgment, will be a reflection of the mercy we show others.

Regarding the mercy of God, St. Gregory Palamas writes that it can be seen in two forms:

...Mercy is therefore a twofold virtue. On the one hand, it means giving shelter, protection, food and necessary aid to those in want. On the other, it is patience, forgiveness of wrongs, and compassion towards those who offend.

Homily Thirty-Six

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, if our merciful Lord chooses to apply his love in the form of chastisement, (or threat of), know that it is offered in the spirit of a necessary "jolt", required to soften our hearts and redirect the eyes of our soul towards spiritual recompense, repentance and renewed

gain. Also, as we take stock in our own “spiritual balance sheet”, let us continually reap gain through good works for Christ’s sake, and relinquish loss through the act of heartfelt repentance. Finally, as we prayerfully seek out God’s mercy for our basic needs in life, let us ponder on how we have applied the same mercy towards those around us who have needs. And, as we seek forgiveness from our Lord for our perpetual spiritual debt, let us eradicate any lingering grudge or judgment towards others that would potentially block access to God’s mercy! “Forgive us, as we forgive others...”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.