

*Sermon—11th Sunday of Matthew
St George Orthodox Church—Albany, NY
Fr John Vazquez
8.20.23*

MATTHEW 18.23-35

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit—one God—Amen!

Christ is in our midst!

Today, in the Gospel our Lord speaks to us of forgiveness

Forgiveness is that gift that makes salvation possible for each of us

In this gospel a man is taken to account by his master and he owes an unpayable amount—10,000 talents—no person could pay this amount of money including the emperor himself

So its unpayable and the master calls him to account

And the man begs for mercy and he says something very curious—he says, “have patience with me and I will pay you all”

Now, I just said that this was an unpayable amount and yet this man is saying that he will pay everything

This mistake by the man is important for us to see and understand

Simply put this man is deluded—he thinks that he can pay back his master

While in reality this man would not be able to pay back his master if he lived ten lifetimes

Well, perhaps he can be forgiven for being deluded but then he goes out and he seizes his fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii

Now 100 denarii is a payable debt—it is a sizeable amount—but it is payable

Well the servant who was forgiven the 10000 talents throws his fellow servant into prison

And we know how the rest of the story goes

There is a story in the lives of the Saints where there are two friends—very close—and somehow they become estranged from each other.

Well, one of them would not forgive the other

After a while, it happens that a time of persecution came—this was in the time of the early Church—

And the one who refused to forgive was taken and was going to his martyrdom

On his way, his friend came and begged him to forgive him but he would not

As he was being tortured he ended up denying Christ—he refused to forgive his brother and lost his salvation

The other friend who had sought forgiveness was then martyred because he had shown himself to be a Christian in following his friend and asking his forgiveness...

My beloved—forgiveness is one of the most powerful gifts that God bestows on us

It is both a gift that our Lord himself gives to us and a gift that he allows us to give to others

Forgiveness is a loosening of bonds and a deliverance from hell

Because when we do not forgive we condemn to hell

But who is the person who is condemned to hell when I do not forgive....It is myself..

When I will not forgive my neighbor I condemn myself to hell

When someone does something to offend me what happens inside of me?

I get worked up—a fire is kindled within me—and I can feel the anger rise inside me like flames

I gnash my teeth and say mean things and my face changes toward the person who offended me

I cant stop thinking about it and the bonds and chains of the enemy tighten on me and force to me to be captive to this anger in me

Fire, gnashing of teeth, bonds of the enemy—this is the kind of language that is used to describe hell in the Scriptures

When I allow the actions of someone else to offend me I find myself in hell

This trick is one of the greatest tricks of the devil—he makes us think that by us getting mad we are somehow fighting for justice when all we are really doing is locking ourselves in hell from the inside

This deception of the devil is why the Fathers of the Church are always telling us—do not judge and do not take offense. It is not because others don't do anything wrong—people do things wrong and offensive all the time—

We are admonished not to judge by the Fathers because of this snare that the enemy uses against us. He tempts us with what seems like a good piece of fruit—really and truly—when in reality it is bad fruit full of rot on the inside.

And when we fall for this deception—it is so hard to get ourselves out of it...we think that we can get ourselves out of it but we cant

Remember the man who thought he could pay the 10000 talents back....

He was greatly mistaken

And just like him we are greatly mistaken if we think that we can free ourselves from this bondage of holding a grudge or unforgiveness

Well, what can be done?

We take the example of the master—our master—and we let go. What did our master and Lord and God say on the Cross to those who were wronging him and killing him?

He said, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do”

THIS is the way for us as Christians...as hard as that is to do sometimes—we let go and we forgive

And this letting go liberates us and the other person.

So how do we let go?

The first thing we can do when someone offends us is to ask for forgiveness—when we realize that we are the ones bound in hell we will rush to ask forgiveness of the person who we think offended us

And when we seek forgiveness from the other person so often it turns out that the other person softens towards us. When they see our face change—their face changes and we can be reconciled to each other

The next thing we can do is go to confession. When we come to the priest and confess our sins we practice letting go of those things that weigh us down. We hand them over to the Lord and we ask the Lord for his forgiveness and in so doing we set ourselves free. With confession we unlock the door of hell

Finally we remember God’s forgiveness of our unpayable debt. We remember that God has forgiven us and so we are right with God and we extend that to our brothers and we let God take care of justice

May our Lord strengthen us and guide us as we seek to be reconciled with him and with our neighbor, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!