

Sermon—12th Sunday of Matthew
St George Orthodox Church—Albany, NY
Fr John Vazquez
8.27.23

MATTHEW 19.16–26

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit—one God—Amen!
 Christ is in our midst!

In the Old Testament there are many different kinds of offerings that the Israelites would offer to God

Grain offerings, sin offerings, whole burnt offerings

These offerings were a way for the people to have communion with God—with the animal offerings the people would bring the animal and offer it to God—after it cooked on the altar the people would eat the meat and the fat would be for God—and as a portion was offered to God and portion was eaten by the people there would be this communion

Well, as I mentioned one of these offerings was called a whole burnt offering—in this case the animal would be offered to God and the entire things would be burned on the altar.

That would be equivalent to us taking up a collection of money here in the Church and then burning it on the altar.

What is the point of that?

The point is to drive home the idea that everything is God's....everything is God's

This is the context we have to keep in the back of our minds today as we hear the gospel. We come to Christ today as the rich man and we say what can I do to inherit eternal life?

So we ask our Lord an important question

And our Lord begins by responding to us “you know the commandments” keep them.

And to this we respond “yes, I know them and I keep them but it seems like I am still missing something”

Again our Lord responds to us, “yes, you still lack one thing”

And then we hear that we are to sell everything we have and give to the poor and come follow Him

And we are taken aback—sell everything? I thought I was following You. But our Lord says to us today

“You do not understand my child, the riches that you have—that you think are yours—that you think that you have acquired because of your own hard work

They are all from me. I have filled you up with these riches because I desire to see how much you love me and now if you show me that you aren't willing to give them up you show me that you are not following me”

Our Lord says to us, “Do you love me enough to say, ‘I thank you Lord for these things but it is not these things that I want but you Lord. I therefore offer all that you have given me back to you my Christ.’”

Our riches are not just our money, our riches are all that we have, our families, our talents and abilities, our personalities these are our riches

And each of us have riches that are a little different

The problem that we are shown today is that sometimes we become satisfied with our riches

In other words we become full and content and we think that we don't need our Lord

We become satisfied with what our Lord has given us And the temptation is to stop there.

The temptation is to say—wow, look at what I have. I am like a ruler, a master of my own domain

Who has no need

And before too long we think that the riches that we have are inherently ours

And if we fall to this temptation

Thinking that our gifts—our possessions—are ours we show ourselves to be full and unable to receive God into us

Our souls become like the inn where there was no room for Joseph and Mary because it was so full and we turn Christ away because it seems that we have no need of Him

We turn Christ away who desires to be born in us and dwell in us

Our Lord says to us, “I desire you. I desire to come to you and live in you.”

He says, “I desire to be incarnate in you but you will not let me in because you will not empty yourself.”

THIS desire of our Lord to dwell in us is why our Lord asks us today to sell all that we have and give to the poor

In this act of selling our riches and giving to the poor, we imitate God who gives so generously to us

The selling of our riches and giving to the poor becomes the very means through which we can receive Christ

And so we see that our Lord asks us to sell all that we have for our own sakes —Yes, it is for the sake of the other too but it is for our own sakes.

The generous giving does something to us—it empties us so that Christ can dwell in us.

But we also hear today

We hear, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for

a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven”

Why is it so hard for us to follow this command that our Lord gives us today?

Part of the reason is because of the sense of security we have from the riches that God has given us

As human beings we desire security

I mean look at all the kinds of insurance there are

Car, home, auto, life, identity...this list could go on

This is not a bad thing that we have insurance—it simply points to our innate human desire to be secure

So we see that when our Lord asks us to sell all, he is asking us “Do you love me enough to feel insecure”

“Do you love me enough to step outside of being comfortable” “Do you love me enough to follow me to the cross and to die” What is our response to these questions from our Lord?

There could be all kinds of responses to these questions

Some of our saints have literally sold all that they have, given to the poor and gone into the desert or a monastery to pray to draw near to Christ

And to this we may respond with the disciples “**who then can be saved?** For I cannot do this” Who can really do such a thing as this?

And the answer is no one—even the ones who sell everything and go live in the desert are not saved through this act alone. Just as it is impossible for

a camel to go through the eye of a needle so it is impossible for a person to sell all their riches give to the poor and come follow Christ

But this is the point

There are no rules we can keep, there are no books we can read, there is no amount of money we can give

That can buy eternal life for us

Because Christ is not a possession to be bought

Or a judge to be bribed.

He is God with whom we have a relationship

Sometimes we treat him as a possession or a means to an end

But this isn't the kind of relationship we have with the God who created the universe and everything in it

The kind of relationship we have with our creator is a relationship of communion and vulnerability—so even those who sell all and go live in the desert—if they don't have this relationship of communion and vulnerability with God—they cannot be saved

Because in this relationship we have with the Creator of all we express gratitude and thanksgiving

We give thanks for all the gifts that he has given to us and offer them back to him

The very act of giving thanks means that we are moved to offer to God the gifts he has given us

And of course we know that thanksgiving for us is the word Eucharist

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we are offering ourselves and all that we have to God

This is what the prayers of the Liturgy say

As Christians we are people who give thanks

This is why Adam and Eve—and why we—fall

When we cease to give thanks to God

we take and hold onto what is not ours by nature

The riches of God

Our Fathers teach that the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was not something that Adam and Eve could never partake of—No

It was rather something that they would be able to partake of at the right time

But instead of waiting they—and WE—reach out and take the riches of God—the gifts of God for our own

And when we do this we cease to be creatures who are thankful Who are humble
Who are empty of self-will...

But if we give thanks to God

If we participate in the Eucharistic celebration of the Church

which is the participation in the death of Christ so that we can be raised with him

THEN...

What is impossible with men becomes possible with God

Beloved...we have in this eucharistic celebration that we are now celebrating the most precious gift that God can offer us—he offers us himself

In being here today and coming up to receive from the chalice

Whether you realize it or not

You are offering the most precious gift that you have to give to God in return

You are offering him your life as an offering of thanksgiving for all that he has given you

Doing this you are saying to the Lord whether you realize it or not, “all that I have is yours, my life, all my possessions are yours, do with them what you will.

And we ask our Lord—Show me Lord what you want me to do, how you want me to be, to whom I should give my money and my time”

And our Lord—what does he say?

He responds with his own thanksgiving...Our Lord says to us, “I thank you my Child, for giving me your life as I gave you mine. Now receive the food of eternal life.”

And as long as we continue to participate in this Eucharist—this thanksgiving—then we will inherit eternal life.

Because our life becomes a life of Thanksgiving—a life of self-emptying—and in turn we are filled with Christ.

Glory to our Lord Jesus Christ, his unbegotten Father and the all-holy and good and life-giving Spirit. Amen.