

***FORGIVENESS, TREASURE IN HEAVEN
and JUDGING OTHERS
The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste***

**March 9, 2008
Cheese Fare Sunday
or
Forgiveness Sunday
Revision E**

**GOSPEL: Matthew 6:14-21
EPISTLE: Romans 13:11-14:4**

Today's Gospel lesson is also used in the West as the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday. Today's Epistle lesson is used in the West for the first Sunday in Advent. This is also the Sunday in the Orthodox Church commemorating the Expulsion of Adam from Paradise. We are thus beginning our journey back to Paradise, and this journey concludes with the Lord's Resurrection at Pascha.

In the Eastern Church, the Sunday before Lent is called Cheese Fare Sunday or Forgiveness Sunday where the theme is a clean beginning to prepare for Pascha. In the Orthodox lectionary, forgiveness is also emphasized on the 11th Sunday after Pentecost (late August-early September) where the Gospel lesson is Matthew 18:23-35. The theme in August-September is more a day to day forgiveness in response to Peter's question, "How many times shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" Today, the focus shifts from day to day affairs to a more global perspective. Last Sunday, the focus was on the Last Judgment; today that perspective continues with the reminder that we won't be forgiven if we don't forgive others.

GOSPEL LESSON - Matthew 6:5-21 - Forgiveness, Fasting, Treasure in Heaven

Today's Gospel lesson follows immediately the first occasion where the Lord taught His disciples to pray using "The Lord's Prayer." In giving "The Lord's Prayer", Christ's viewpoint is eschatological as if those praying are already in heaven. For example, "Thy will be done" speaks of a Glorified Christ, not a humble servant on His way to the Cross. "Our Daily Bread" refers to the Lord's Table. "Lead us not into temptation" means lead us not out of Paradise into evil. Etc.

The Gospel lesson follows this by touching on three topics in rapid succession: forgiveness, fasting and treasure in heaven. All three are in response to the Lord teaching His disciples how to pray. About a year later, His disciples asked Him again to teach them to pray as John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray (Luke 11:1). Jesus followed by repeating the words that He gave earlier and that we know today as the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2-4). A great deal of fasting was part of the prayer life of John the Baptist (Luke 5:33) and fasting has been part of the life of the Church ever since.

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Forgiveness: In the Lord's Prayer, we say "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matthew 6:12). The Gospel lesson begins with Jesus amplifying what He meant by this. "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (vv.14-15). Thus there is a reciprocal relationship between divine and human forgiveness. Jesus illustrated this same theme on other occasions, such as the Parable of the Servant Who Was Forgiven 10,000 Talents (Matthew 18:23-35).

John Chrysostom commented on this: "We ourselves have control over the judgment that is to be passed upon us. For in order that no one, even the senseless, might have any complaint to make, either great or small, when brought to judgment, He causes the sentence to depend on us who are to give an account. In what way we have judged for ourself, in the same, says He do I also judge you" (Homily XIX on Matthew 6).

Forgiveness can also be seen from the illustration of Old Testament Law. From the Old Testament analogy, Jesus is the Lamb of God, without blemish, by whom we are redeemed (1 Peter 1:17-19). He is the propitiation or substitutionary atonement for our sins (Romans 3:21-26). However, just as God accepted Abel's offering, but not Cain's (Genesis 4:3-5), and just as He accepted the Publican's offering but not the Pharisee's (Luke 18:10-14), so if we don't forgive all men their trespasses against us, God the Father will not accept our offering. Under Old Testament sacrificial laws, a person who was unclean could not offer an offering (Numbers 19:20ff). Our offering may be a perfectly good offering (the blood of Christ), but if we are rendered defiled or unclean by an unforgiving heart, it's not acceptable (Matthew 6:14-15). And the longer we linger with lack of forgiveness in our heart, the deeper goes the root of bitterness (Hebrews 12:14-15) and the harder it is to pull out. But this is the season where we focus on pulling it all out and starting clean.

Fasting: Another major focus of the Gospel lesson is fasting. In the West, the Lenten fast begins with Ash Wednesday, which is probably taken from Daniel 9:1-6 (and other places). Daniel in this passage mourned the sin of Israel that brought on the Babylonian captivity, and he sought the Lord with fasting, sackcloth and ashes. A similar type of fasting occurred in the great city of Ninevah in response to the preaching of Jonah (Jonah 3:1-10).

In our Gospel lesson, however, the Lord gave fasting a different face. Since the sackcloth and ashes were so easily twisted into an appearance-only form of fasting, the Lord instructed His disciples to fast from the heart, in secret. From the Lord's point of view, there is no difference since He reads the thoughts and intents of our hearts (Hebrews 4:12-13, 1 Chronicles 28:9).

To illustrate fasting from the heart, the Lord used a play on words that doesn't come across very well in most English translations. In describing the hypocrites, He said that they go about with a sad countenance and "disfigure" or "waste away" (Greek: *aphanizo*) their faces (v.16). John Chrysostom spoke of this being facial coloring (or make-up) to appear pale and hungry (Homily XX on Matthew 6). Then the Lord also spoke of treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not disfigure or waste away (Greek: *aphanizo*). The implication of the play on words is that the fasting -- from the heart and in secret -- and the treasure are linked.

Some people think of fasting in terms of rules, where all are required to fast during certain times. Yet the Lord did not say that, and the Church has interpreted this to mean that all

should fast as they are able. For one person with a slow metabolism and a light daily workload, fasting may be much easier than for another with a fast metabolism and a heavy daily workload. If fasting and treasure in heaven are linked, the implication is that some store up more treasure than others, but each fasts as he is able. But doing it just for show voids everything.

For more discussion of fasting, see the 4th Sunday of Lent.

In the Eastern Church, fasting begins tomorrow on what is called “Clean Monday” and lasts until Pascha. Tomorrow is called “Clean Monday” because of the tradition of everyone in each parish asking forgiveness of each other the day before. Thus fasting begins from the heart with a clean slate.

Treasure in Heaven: The third major focus of the Gospel lesson is preparation. The illustration used for preparation in the Gospel text is storing up treasure in heaven. What is this treasure? Fasting can generate one type of treasure, and it is certainly not the same as earthly treasure. Jesus told the rich young ruler, “One thing you lack: go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross and follow me” (Mark 10:17-22). Thus giving up one’s worldly goods can be another type of treasure in heaven.

John Chrysostom compared using one’s wealth to obtain treasure in heaven as a planting of seed. Burying one’s wealth in the ground merely gathers it together for moths, rust and thieves. But it also enslaves our heart and nails it to all that is below (i.e. in Hades). “For wherever your treasure may be, there your heart is also” (Matthew 6:21). “Laying up stores in heaven, however, you will reap not only this fruit (the attainment of reward for these things), but you plant your gold. For the same is both treasure and seed: or rather it is more than either of these individually. For (earthly) seed does not remain forever, but this abides perpetually. Again, earthly treasure does not germinate, but treasure in heaven bears you fruits which will never die” (Homily XX on Matthew VI).

Israel in the Old Testament was referred to in these words: “...the Lord God has chosen you to be a people for His special treasure out of all the peoples on the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 7:6, Psalm 135:4). Today, we find all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ (Colossians 2:1-3). Yet we have this treasure contained in earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4:7), which are our bodies. From this treasure come good things (Matthew 12:35) just as a good tree bears good fruit (Matthew 7:16-17). Misuse of earthly treasures results in the earthly treasure becoming a witness against us (James 5:1-6). On the other hand, Moses considered the reviling or reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt (Hebrews 11:26).

The treasure is often referred to in terms of precious metals (gold, silver) or precious stones, and there are continuous references to this from the beginning of time to the end of time. For example:

- The Garden of Eden: In and around the Garden, gold and some precious stones are mentioned: bdellium and onyx (Genesis 2:10-13). These are just raw materials that have not been refined, cut or polished.

- Tabernacle Worship: Aaron the priest wore an ephod (a garment) that contained two large onyx stones with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel engraved on them (Exodus 28:9-12). He also wore the breastpiece of judgment (actually a pocket or pouch) that contained the Urim and Thummim (meaning light and truth). On the breastpiece was embroidered twelve large gems (all different) representing the twelve tribes of Israel (Exodus 28:15-21). Aaron continually carried the breastpiece of judgment before the Lord (Exodus 28:29-30).
- Building Churches: Paul spoke of building churches on the foundation of Jesus Christ using gold, silver and precious stones (1 Corinthians 3:9-12). This building is called the Temple of God (v.17), and part of the building is a refining process or a test by fire (v.13).
- The New Jerusalem: In John's vision, the light of the city was like a most precious stone (Revelation 21:11). Each of the twelve gates of the city was one solid pearl on which were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (vv.12,13,21). Each of the twelve foundations of the wall was one large gemstone on which was written the names of the twelve apostles (vv.14,19,20). The streets of the city were pure gold (v.21).

The treasure is the light of the knowledge of the Glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and we have this treasure contained in vessels of clay or dirt (2 Corinthians 4:6-7). The Church Fathers often used the analogy of a sword in a fire, where the fire is the treasure and the sword is the vessel. Just as the sword never becomes fire, the dirt never becomes treasure. However, just as the sword heats up and glows in the fire, so the vessel begins to take on the image of God (2 Corinthians 3: 18, 4:4, Romans 8:29-30). This process is referred to in the Orthodox Church as deification, where we begin to become God-like.

Tribulation in our lives is just part of the process that refines the gold and polishes the precious stones in the vessel. As we go on, we die a little more each day to our self-centeredness and death is working in us (2 Corinthians 4:12). The more this happens, the more we are aware of the Will of God and grace causes thanksgiving to abound to the Glory of God (2 Corinthians 4:15). Eventually the vessel gets changed when the corruptible puts on incorruption and the mortal puts on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53).

Looking forward to this in Lent, the treasure becomes a consuming desire, like a man who found treasure hidden in a field and who went and bought the whole field (Matthew 13:44-46). Also, it's like the merchant who found one pearl of great price and sold all he had to buy it. This is the kind of preparation that we desire for Lent, looking forward to resurrection at Pascha.

JUDGING OTHERS

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EPISTLE LESSON - Romans 13:11-14:4

Currently there is no Study for the Epistle for the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, but the traditional account of their witness for Christ is included as an Appendix. Instead, the Epistle lesson for Cheese-Fare Sunday is included, which gives further illumination on preparation for Lent, where the purpose of Lent is to prepare us for the coming of the Lamb of God on Pascha.

Comparison: John the Baptist

Since this Epistle lesson is also used in the Orthodox Church for the birth of John the Baptist (late June or early July), a brief summary of John's message shows some striking similarities to preparation for Lent. John's message was:

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| 1. Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand | Matthew 3:2, Mark 1:4 |
| 2. Be baptized | Matthew 3:5-6, Luke 3:3-7 |
| 3. Clean up your life | Matthew 3:7-12, Luke 3:7-14 |
| 4. Messiah is coming | Matthew 3:11-12, Luke 3:15-17, Mark 1:7-8 |

As part of the preparation for the coming of Messiah, John taught his disciples an ascetic life of fasting and prayer (Matthew 9:14-17, Mark 2:18-22, Luke 5:33-39, 11:1). After the ascension, the Church has adapted to a life of fasting and prayer by seasons. The point of the fasting is not just a gloomy exterior as in a legal requirement, but a "bright sadness" as leading to self control.

Comparing the Epistle lesson with John's message, the Epistle lesson starts off with four sets of contrasting images as follows:

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|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. It's time to awake out of sleep | The night is far spent |
| 2. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ | Make no provision or forethought for the lusts of the flesh |
| 3. Walk properly as in the day | Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in bed-hopping with no moral restraint, not in strife and envy |
| 4. Put on the armor of light | Cast off the works of darkness |

For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed (Romans 13:11-14).

The above four items from Romans read point for point from the message of John the Baptist.

1. **Awaking out of sleep** refers to a renewed repentance from association with things of the night which speaks of the influence of evil powers. When this was written, most people awoke before dawn to begin the day's work, since working at night wasn't practical. With

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the advance of technology, it's possible to work around the clock in different shifts, and we often miss some of the imagery implied by "night".

2. **Putting on the Lord Jesus Christ** is just another term for baptism (Galatians 3:27). And making no provision for the lusts of the flesh refers to an Orthodox fast, where one fasts with the eyes, the ears, etc., as well as with food.
3. **Walking properly as in the day** is synonymous with cleaning up one's life.
4. **Putting on the armor of light** speaks of the saints being revealed in light when Messiah returns and "we shall be like Him" (1 John 3:2). "Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:43). For He has "called us out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). And we "are all sons of light and sons of the day" (1 Thessalonians 5:5). For more on the implications of armor, see "Armor and Weapons", the Epistle lesson for the 27th Sunday after Pentecost.

The theme that the Day of the Lord is at hand (and thus the need for repentance and preparation) is repeated often throughout the Scripture to encourage watchfulness and discourage laziness and bad habits with respect to one's spiritual life. For example, 1 Thessalonians 5:4-9, also speaks of waking up and putting on the armor of God as does Ephesians 6:10-17. Ephesians 5:14 quotes a first century baptismal hymn, "Awake, you who sleep, and Christ will give you light." 2 Peter 3:9-11 suggests that the Lord's delay in coming is to give more people an opportunity to repent.

Judging Others - Romans 14

John Chrysostom stated that the issue Paul was addressing was a conflict centered on Jewish Christians. Some still adhered to the Jewish dietary laws (Leviticus 11) but didn't want to be obvious about it. So they became vegetarians and gave the appearance of fasting so they wouldn't have to eat pork. Like the Pharisees, they fasted twice per week (Luke 18:12), thus esteeming one day above another (v.5). Others saw through this ruse and became very critical and offensive toward them. Paul began with a gentle rebuke for those who eat all meat: "Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat" (v.3). But he also included a veiled rebuke for the Jewish Christians by referring to them as weak (v.2). That is, Paul implies that if they're still holding onto the Law, they may be in danger of falling from Grace (Galatians 5:4).

Paul also addressed another problem concerning foods in his letter to Corinth. There the issue was about eating meat offered to idols that was later sold in the public meat market. Paul's admonition was similar, "Food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse" (1 Corinthians 8:8; see also Colossians 2:16).

Regarding foods, Paul stated, "Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (v.5). Regarding doctrines, he stated: "If anyone preaches any other Gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed or anathema" (Galatians 1:9); even if it be "an angel from heaven" (Galatians 1:8). Paul further stated, "But I fear, lest somehow as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached..." (2 Corinthians 11:3-4). The conflict over food according to Paul, (v.1) was a "dispute over doubtful things" and not fundamentals (Homily XXV on Romans 14).

Beneath the surface of the Epistle lesson is a message of forgiveness and tolerance among the members of the Body which is very appropriate for “Forgiveness Sunday”. Some will fast; some won’t be able to, even if they wanted to. Part of forgiveness is the acceptance in love of our brothers and sisters the way they are without judging them or despising them as not being spiritual enough. Each person gets out of fasting according to what they put into it. And since that is to be done in secret between each person and the Lord, each person stands, falls and is rewarded by the Lord who sees in secret.

The Lord has said: “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you” (Matthew 7:1-2). The Lord applied this in the Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:22ff; compare Matthew 25:24-30) to the unprofitable servant. He also extended the definition of judging others even to idle words spoken without much thought (Matthew 12:36-37).

Dorotheos of Gaza (6th Century) wrote: “Why do we usurp God’s right to judge?It is for God alone to judge, to justify or to condemn. He knows the state of each one of us and our capacities, our deviations and our gifts, our constitution and our preparedness...according to the knowledge that He alone has. How do we know what tears (our brother) has shed about (his problems) before God? We may well know about his sin, but we often don’t know about the repentance. (Discourse on Refusal to Judge our Neighbors).

The whole point of the fasting, prayer and preparation is to turn our attention to the treasure in heaven, which is within us. The more we are diligent in this area, the more the gold gets refined and the more the precious stones get polished. For those that neglect so great a salvation (Hebrews 2:3), they run the risk of the servant with the one talent in the Parable of the Talents, where his treasure was taken away and given to someone else.

The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste¹

All of them were soldiers in the Roman army and steadfastly believed in the Lord Jesus. When the persecution of Christians began during the reign of Licinius, they were brought to trial before the commander. When he threatened to strip them of their honor as soldiers, one of them, St. Candidus, responded, "Not only the honor of being a soldier, but take away our bodies, for nothing is more dear or honorable, to us than Christ our God." After that, the commander ordered his servants to stone the holy martyrs. While the servants were hurling stones at the Christians, the stones turned and fell back on the servants, severely striking them. One of the stones struck the commander's face and knocked out his teeth. The torturers, angry as wild beasts, bound all of the holy martyrs and tossed them into the lake and stationed a guard around it so as to prevent any of them from escaping. There was a terrible frost and the lake froze around the bodies of the martyrs. So that their pain and suffering would be worsened, and in order to persuade one of them to deny Christ and acknowledge the idols of Rome, the torturers heated a bath by the side of the lake in sight of the frozen martyrs. Indeed, one of them was persuaded. He came out of the water and entered the bath. And behold, an extraordinary light appeared from heaven which warmed the water in the lake and the bodies of the martyrs. With that light, thirty-nine wreaths descended from heaven over their heads. Upon seeing this, a guard on the shore removed all his clothes, confessed the Name of the Lord Jesus and entered the lake so that he could become worthy of the fortieth wreath in place of the betrayer. Indeed, the last wreath descended upon him. The next day the entire town was astonished when they saw that the martyrs were still alive. Then, the wicked judges ordered that the lower part of their legs be broken and their bodies thrown into the water so Christians could not recover them. On the third day the martyrs appeared to Peter, the local bishop, and summoned him to gather their relics and remove them from the water. The bishop with his clergy went out into the dark of night and beheld the relics of the martyrs shining brightly in the water. Every bone which was separated from their bodies floated to the top and glowed like a candle. Bishop Peter gathered and honorably buried them. The souls of these martyrs, who suffered for all of us, went to the Lord Jesus, resurrected with glory. They suffered honorably and were crowned with unfading glory in the year 320 A.D.

¹ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, March 9.