

HOMILY FOR THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (12 Matthew).

By Father Filip Lommaert

Sunday, August 30, 2020

St. Matthew. (19:16-26)

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

In today's Gospel reading, we hear how Christ, our Lord and Saviour, is visited by a young man, who asks Him: "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?"

How many people, in the last 2,000 years have asked themselves this question? And how many more people are still asking themselves this question? It is a question that has been in people's minds ever since that day.

Christ does not respond immediately to the young man's question. Instead, he rebukes him, and tests the young man's faith, saying, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God."

The young man did not come to test Jesus, but to seek advice from one he considers no more than a good Teacher. Christ's response here does not deny that He is God, but is designed to lead the rich man to this knowledge. Thus, the young man's encounter with Christ becomes, first, a question about who Christ is, and second, who we are and what our calling is.

The young man made a mistake in the way he asked and phrased his question. His intentions are right, he is a serious young man. Some of the holy fathers say he was sincere in his desire for salvation. St. John Chrysostom goes so far as to say that he was good rich soil, although there was a problem with this soil, as we will see in a moment.

The mistake the young man made was to ask for the one thing he should do? Christ answers him to keep the commandments, and so He tells the young man: 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'Honour your father and your mother,' and, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

To which the young man answers that he has been keeping all these commandments since he was young. So, what was still missing?

And then comes the answer of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, which seems to shatter the young man's world: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

Why? Because the young man was rich and he had much money and possessions. The young man just walked away, never to be heard of again. This was such a tragedy. The young man had come so far and yet, he gave up at the last hurdle. And that hurdle was: MONEY and WEALTH.

In scripture, money is mentioned quite a few times and sometimes it is called mammon, as in Matthew chapter 6, verse 24: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

In scripture, money and wealth have always played an important role in people's lives, just as it does now. The love of money, the love of possessions, the love of the comfort that comes from having money, the so-called "security" it brings. All this has been strangling Christians from the beginning.

As Christians, we are supposed to fulfill a law that is higher than what was fulfilled in the Old Testament. And what law am I talking about? I am talking about the law in the Old Testament that ordered everyone to pay a tithe.

In the New Testament, the new covenant teaching is not that we should give a tithe to the Lord, but rather, that everything we have should be offered up to God as a 'first fruit', hence Christ's invitation in today's gospel reading: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

Unfortunately, now more than ever, everything is about money. Everything has a price. It is difficult to find anything that is free anymore. Soon we will be charged for the air we breathe.

But there is one thing we can do. Instead of worshipping Mammon, we could entrust ourselves and our loved ones to the Lord our God, our rightful Master, and try and follow this Old Covenant teaching. This has been widely practiced in the New Covenant Orthodox Church as well. We read that Saint Vladimir, called the Great of Russia in the 11th century, upon his conversion, gave a tithe of all that he had to the Church.

What does tithing do for us? Well, tithing helps us to understand the following truth: everything we have is a gracious gift from God. He alone is worthy of our trust, not our possessions. We need to place God above our financial wealth and materialism. As long as we consider our financial wealth to be more important than God, we will remain slaves to Mammon, and we will put our salvation at risk.

If we can't entrust our finances to God, how do we trust Him to take care of our children and even, the healing of our souls, our very salvation?

God does not expect nor demands of us that we sell everything we have and give it to the Church. What He does expect is, that each one of us needs to deny ourselves, that we need to give up whatever it is that tempts us to put our trust in materialism. We need to give up whatever causes us to consider Jesus anything other than the God-man, the Logos (Word) of God, who He is revealed to be.

What we do not need is a 'watered-down Jesus' or a Jesus who conforms to what we would like Him to be. As Orthodox, we reject and should be rejecting any historic and modern revisionist efforts to "re-imagine" Jesus Christ or proclaim a different Gospel, such as is happening in some heterodox churches. As Orthodox Christians, we affirm that Christ is our Lord and God, the only Saviour of mankind, as all generations before us in the Church have also affirmed.

The church has never looked at wealth as something evil. It is the holding on to wealth that is evil. And this is what most people struggle with. Most of us at some time or another, and even members of the clergy, have been found wanting for attaching too much interest in acquiring wealth, for being seduced by what money can give us. This has caused us to become blind and insensitive to spiritual matters and our higher calling.

For centuries man struggled to provide even basic food and shelter for his family. But in the last half-century, this has drastically changed for us citizens of the Western World. We do not just acquire items necessary for our survival, but just because we like them, we can afford them, because we want to show off to friends and neighbours.

Again, as I have said before, we should take a moment, and in stillness think about all this. And not just think about this but pray, pray for our salvation. We should look deep inside ourselves and carefully consider our obsession with money, wealth, comfort, and our being secure for the future. Next Tuesday, on September the first, we are starting the Orthodox New Year. This is a very opportune moment to take some time to think about all this.

But, whatever you do, do not try to be like this rich young man. He had many things going for him: he had virtues, he was zealous, he adhered to the law, and he even wished to know more. And yet, he could not be saved, because he would not let go of his wealth. So, in the next few days, take some time out from the material world, and see if you cannot make any changes to your life in the New Year, which will greatly benefit your spiritual life and also your path to salvation.

Amen.