

SERMON - The Paralytic and the Forgiveness of Sins, 2nd Sunday of Lent, March 24, 2019

After baptism, from time to time, all of us soil our baptismal garment with sin. The rhythm of struggling with temptations and repenting for sinful thoughts, words and deeds is a constant in the life of the Christian. In today's Gospel our Savior forgives the sins of the paralytic. Through the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus passes the baton to the Apostles so that they may continue the work that He began, and the Lord gives His disciples authority over many things. We see the Apostles casting out demons the same as the Lord did during His earthly ministry. We see the sick being healed through the intercessions of the Apostles. Healings even occur by just coming into contact with a handkerchief belonging to St. Paul or just passing through the shadow of St. Peter. In Matthew 16:19 our Savior says to Peter and all the Apostles, "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven." In John 20:23 our Savior breathes on the Apostles and tells them "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Salvation, brothers and sisters, is multi-faceted. There are some who believe that all you need to do is to be baptized and you are saved; nothing else is necessary. There are others who believe that all you need to do to be saved is to receive Holy Communion. There are others who believe that you do not need Holy Communion or any of the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) of the Church but can just stay home and be saved. They are all wrong. Let me draw your attention to one necessary component in particular that is necessary for our salvation and cannot be neglected — Confession. In the Old Testament the pious Jew verbally confessed his sins to the priest before the sacrificial offering was made for the forgiveness of sins. In the early Church it was the practice that each Christian would verbally confess his or her sins in the presence of the entire congregation. As Christianity spread and this became impractical, the current practice of verbally confessing your sins individually with the priest who acts as a witness became the norm. I remember Fr. Hopko of blessed memory saying that he had a parishioner who did not want to go to Confession in front of a priest. Fr. Hopko said that in his younger days he was a bit more feisty, so he told the parishioner, "That's fine, you don't have to confess your sins in front of the priest. Instead you can confess your sins in front of the entire congregation. That's your choice. But you have to do one or the other." It is very burdensome to carry the weight of sin on our shoulders. The Lord has arranged that through the Holy Mystery of Confession we can be liberated and freed from this heavy burden. The Lord is quick to forgive those who sincerely repent and are sorrowful for their sins, but there is no forgiveness or release from our sins if we don't confess those sins out loud in Confession. In his pamphlet "If We Confess Our Sins" Fr. Hopko writes: "Some say that there is no need to confess sins openly and publicly. They say that people can confess directly to God. Such an idea is total nonsense. Confession to God in secret is no confession at all. It is simply the acknowledgment before the Lord that we know what He knows! Confession by definition is open and public. If it is not, it is simply not confession." Fr. Hopko further writes, "When the people were repenting in preparation for Jesus at the preaching of John the Baptist, it is written that they were baptized "confessing their sins" (Mk. 1:5). This does not mean that they were telling God in the privacy of their hearts what He already knew. It means that they were proclaiming the evils that they had done for all to hear. And when St. James commands Christians: "Confess your sins to one another!" he is not advising them to be aware of their transgressions in the secrecy of their souls. He is ordering them to reveal their wickednesses to each other so that they might be healed (Jas. 5:16). Great Lent is a time for confession. All Christians should make their confession during this holy season. A person who fails to do so is hardly a Christian. He is certainly not Orthodox.

In his spiritual diary, Fr. Alexander Elchaninov gives advice about confession. Advice is also found in the writings of Fr. John of Kronstadt, and in such books as Unseen Warfare and The Way of the Pilgrim. Christians should read writings of this sort to help them with their

confession. Theophan the Recluse advised those preparing for confession to study the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7) and the first letter of John, together with 1 Corinthians 13 and Romans 12 to 14. These, and other sections of the scriptures, focus sharply on what is expected of Christians in their daily behavior. Fr. Elchaninov writes that confession “springs from an awareness of what is holy, it means dying to sin and coming alive again to sanctity.” It begins with “a searching of the heart.” It moves to a sincere “contrition of the heart.” It expresses itself in the “oral confession of sins,” accomplished “with precision, without veiling the ugliness of sin by vague expressions.” It is fulfilled in the resolution never to sin again, although realizing that we will fall because we are not God. It is sealed by our subsequent sufferings to remain steadfast in our struggle against sin. Such confession is at the heart of our spiritual efforts, especially during the Lenten spring.

I was brought up as a young man when private Confession was the norm before the reception of Holy Communion. When I studied in seminary, I received Holy Communion weekly and was required to go to Confession every week as well. I will not discuss at this time how historically frequent reception of Holy Communion but going to Confession only once a year, if that, came to be the current practice. Don't get me wrong. I believe in frequent reception of Holy Communion. But I also believe in the necessity of frequent Confession. The Holy Synod of the OCA officially requires private Confession at least once a month for frequent Communicants. Otherwise, there is no accountability and there is no relationship between Spiritual Father and spiritual child. Neglecting and omitting private Confession is a great spiritual tragedy and, I believe, the reason for many of the spiritual woes that we face in the church. I leave you with the final prayer said by the priest in the rite of Confession before the penitent makes his/her confession:

“Behold, my child, Christ stands here invisibly and receives your confession. Wherefore be not ashamed or afraid and conceal nothing from me, but tell without hesitation all things which you have done, and so you shall have pardon from our Lord Jesus Christ. Lo, His holy image is before us, and I am but a witness, bearing testimony before Him of the things which you have to say. But if you shall conceal anything you shall have the greater sin. Take heed, therefore, lest having come to the physician, you depart unhealed.”