

## SERMON on Forgiveness Sunday - February 18, 2018

In Matthew 5:23 our Lord says that if we are at the altar offering our gift and we remember that our brother has something against us, we must go and be reconciled with our brother before we can offer our gift. In I John 4:20 and Matthew 6:14 it says, "If we say that we love God and hate our brothers, we are liars...for if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Fr. Alexander Schmemmann said that "forgiveness stands at the very center of Christian faith and of Christian life because Christianity itself is, above all, the religion of forgiveness. God forgives us, and His forgiveness is in Christ, His Son, whom He sends to us so that by sharing in His humanity we may share in His love and be truly reconciled with God. Indeed, Christianity has no other content but love. And it is primarily the renewal of that love, a return to it, a growth in it, that we seek in Great Lent, in fasting and prayer, in the entire spirit and the entire effort of that season. Thus, truly forgiveness is both the beginning of, and the proper condition for, the Lenten season. Perhaps we may say that we have no open enmity, personal hatred or real animosity towards anyone. However, we also offend Divine Love when we are indifferent towards others, are selfish, or show a lack of interest in other people or any real concern for others. We all fail at some point in our relationship with others. When we fail, the Lord teaches us that we must ask for forgiveness. It is spiritually and physically unhealthy to live with anger and resentment. Forgiveness is a choice to let go of these feelings. Asking forgiveness of others, and forgiving others, does not necessarily result in automatic reconciliation. It is, however, the necessary first step and beginning of the healing process to work through a problem and reconcile with our brother. Sometimes you can forgive but the problem still needs to be addressed. Dr. Philip Mamalakis writes that "Forgiveness is saying you are sorry for something that you have said or done that hurts the other person, no matter what the other person said or did to you. Forgiveness is also taking responsibility and admitting when we are wrong and have made the wrong choice. Forgiveness means being willing to do things in a different way. Forgiveness is believing that God's mercy and love are greater than our sins and mistakes. Love means always being ready to say you're sorry. Forgiveness is not pretending a mistake was not made. Rather than, "*That's ok; I forgive you,*" you say, "*That was not ok; I forgive you.*" Forgiveness is not conditional. Rather than, "*I'll forgive you if...*," you say, "*I forgive you, and...we need to talk about what happened. We need help working through this. I am still sad or hurt.*" Dr. Mamalakis says that forgiveness is not forgetting. You will still remember the transgression, and it might still hurt, but when you forgive someone, you remember in a different way, without anger, resentment, or a desire to retaliate. Forgiveness is not impossible. "*I can't forgive you,*" means, "*I am not ready to forgive you,*" or "*I am too hurt to forgive you.*" Christ can forgive anything you ask Him to forgive, and He helps you to forgive those who have hurt you. Immediately after Divine Liturgy we will serve what is known as *Forgiveness Vespers*. During the service the colors in the church will be changed from the festive gold to the penitential purple of Lent. At the end of vespers we will hear for the first time the Lenten prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian. After the dismissal is the Rite of Forgiveness. All of us should make every effort to approach as many people in church as possible to ask forgiveness from each other. One says, "Forgive me, a sinner." The other replies, "As God forgives, so do I." Then the scene is repeated but the roles are reversed. The other person now says, "Forgive me, a sinner." And the other replies, "As God forgives, so do I." When asking and receiving forgiveness from each other, the practice is to make a full prostration to each other. A small prostration is also acceptable. Then you kiss each other three times. Then having asked for forgiveness and receiving forgiveness from everyone in church, we are ready to begin our Lenten journey. On Pascha we will approach each other again. At that time we will say, "Christ is Risen!", and the other will respond "Indeed He is Risen!" We will then kiss each other three times, this time not asking forgiveness from each other, but rejoicing and embracing in love with the Paschal kiss. Please do not be shy. Be bold and don't be ashamed to practice your Orthodox Christian faith. Don't be ashamed or shy to go up to your brethren and to ask for forgiveness. This practice is essential for the

salvation of your soul and so that you will begin Great Lent with the proper spirit and frame of mind. This Rite of Forgiveness is the standard practice in Orthodox churches, and it is very sad when I see parishes who no longer practice this very important and essential rite. As Fr. Schmemmann wrote, "*Forgiveness Sunday*: the day on which we acquire the power to make our fasting—true fasting; our effort—true effort; our reconciliation with God—true reconciliation." Amen.