

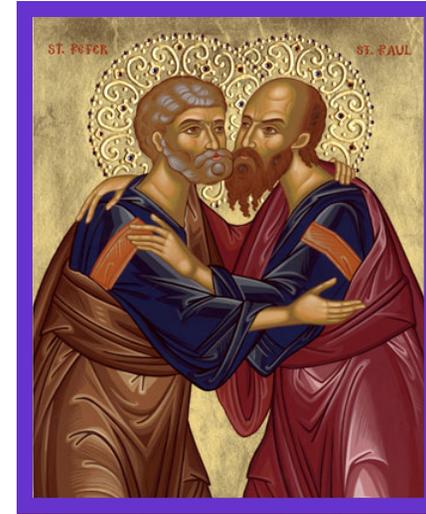
First: He will recognize his own sins and not be judgmental or critical of his brothers and sisters just as the prayer of St. Ephraim so beautifully and simply expresses: "Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother." The person who sees his own sins will turn to God's mercy and pray for God's forgiveness. In addition, a forgiving person will seek forgiveness from others, and when he receives their forgiveness, he will understand that this forgiveness is but a reflection of God's own forgiveness. A truly forgiving person fervently seeks the forgiveness of God whenever and wherever he can find it, just like a thirsty man fervently seeks for water.

Second: A forgiving person will recognize that when another sins against him, while this may hurt or offend, the sin is really against God. (David the Prophet and King in the Old Testament understood that his sins were always against God even though other people were involved, and he wrote these words in Psalm 50 "Against Thee only have I sinned and done this evil before Thee.") Instead of hating a person who has hurt us in some way and wanting revenge or retribution, we should love him and pray for him knowing that by sinning against us he has really separated himself from God—the result of which is corruption and death.

Third: The soft-hearted forgiving person will recognize that he or she has neither the authority nor the power to forgive sins. Only God can forgive sins (In Luke 2:7 even the Scribes and Pharisees understood this). The response of a truly forgiving person to another who has asked for their forgiveness should be to announce to this person the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ. And paradoxically, a truly forgiving person, instead of being quick to say "I forgive you," will confess that he himself is the chief of sinners and will respond with: "Please forgive me!"

Conclusion

On the evening of Forgiveness Sunday we pray Forgiveness Vespers and have the opportunity to put into practice the truth that our Lord expressed in our Gospel lesson. May we not be concerned with receiving apologies and admissions of guilt from others, but rather humbly turn to God first, accepting and proclaiming his forgiveness, and then to each other and say, "Please forgive me!" **Amen.**



"Forgive Me!"

"Paradoxically, a truly forgiving person, instead of being quick to say, 'I forgive you,' will confess that he himself is the chief of sinners and will respond with, 'Please forgive me!' "

Homily given at All Saints Orthodox Church
on the Sunday of Forgiveness, 2009
by Fr. Nicholas Sorensen



†Gospel: Matt. 6:14–21 (RSV)

The Lord said to His Disciples: If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father Who is in secret; and your Father Who sees in secret will reward you. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Introduction

On Forgiveness Sunday, we emphasize the need for forgiveness illustrated by Adam's lament outside of Paradise. But this can be understood in several ways. We might put the emphasis on our need to forgive all of those who have sinned against us, who have hurt us, or offended us. Yet another possible way we could understand forgiveness would be to emphasize our own need for forgiveness from God. Which of these ways to understand forgiveness should be considered this morning—which way is what Jesus wanted to teach us in this text. Let's consider exactly what Jesus said and meant.

Emphasis Is on God's Forgiveness of Me

When Jesus begins this teaching, He introduces two different but related perspectives on forgiveness: first forgiving men their trespasses and second our own need to be forgiven by our heavenly Father. "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

At first glance the emphasis here is on our forgiveness of others. That is, when I recognize a sin in someone else or when someone else sins against me, I need to forgive that person. This is most certainly true, but is the emphasis on this way of looking at forgiveness? The answer I believe is "No" not because we shouldn't forgive a person when he sins against us, but because another more important forgiveness needs to be experienced before we can be truly forgiving

of others. We need to experience the forgiveness of God for our own sins first, then and only then will we be able to sincerely forgive others.

Placing the emphasis on our forgiveness of others exposes us to a very grave danger—the danger that we will fall swiftly into the trap of being critical and judgmental of others. If what is most important is our forgiveness of others then we will find that we concentrate more and more on the sins of others and less on our own sins.

However the very structure of the sentence that Jesus uses suggests that God's forgiveness of us is to be considered of first importance. The sentence is what we call a hypothetical proposition—a statement that is expressed by the words "if" and "then." Let me illustrate: When I was a young boy, at supper my mother would say to me, "If you eat your peas and onions, then you may have dessert." It was very obvious to my mother and to me that eating my peas and onions was not a high priority item on my agenda. However, when it came to dessert, it was different. I loved dessert. It was the most important part of the meal for me. My mother understood this and like a farmer leading a donkey with a carrot on a stick, she dangled dessert in front of me so that I would eat my peas and onions. Before I could value eating peas and onions, I had to value eating dessert. And because I greatly valued eating dessert, I eventually learned to value eating peas and onions.

Jesus statement about our forgiveness of others and our own need for God's forgiveness establishes a relationship that is always true. But the most important part of this relationship is the fact that we need to be forgiven by God and that God does in fact forgive us. Just like the peas and onions and dessert, before we can value the need to forgive others, we need to value our own need to be forgiven. The emphasis needs to be on God's forgiveness of us, not on our forgiving of others.

Characteristics of a Forgiving Person

The bottom line of placing the emphasis on our need to be forgiven by God is that by so doing we will become forgiving persons—persons with soft hearts toward others who may sin against us. Looking at this even more specifically, a person whose main concern is his own repentance and the forgiveness of God will display three distinct characteristics: