



FORGIVENESS SUNDAY

February 26

THE GOSPEL READING

Matthew 6:14-21

[How to Pray, Fast, and Trust in God]

The Lord said, "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."

THE SERMON

Forgiveness Sunday is the last day before we begin our journey through Great and Holy Lent on our way to Pascha, the Feast of Feasts. On Holy Pascha, we celebrate the life-giving Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We celebrate the victory over death, as neither death nor the power of the grave could hold our Savior prisoner. However, this victory came through the Cross, for it is on the Cross that Christ frees us from the bondage of sin. Through faith in Him and because of His Resurrection, we are restored and



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transformed, again capable of eternal life. Therefore, our Lenten journey is a way for us to be united to Him in His Crucifixion and Resurrection.

The Lenten journey is also an opportunity for renewal and reorientation towards God as we strengthen our commitment to Him. It is an opportunity to intensify our ascetic struggle (ἀσκησις in Greek) and actualize our potential to become saints. Our efforts nurture the transformative and sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We fast to open the door to a deeper spiritual dimension during Great Lent. We also intensify our prayer life to strengthen our bond with God. We engage in works of charity to learn to love others more fully. The Gospel reading for Forgiveness Sunday prepares us for the beginning of our Lenten journey by setting out the Lord's essential teachings on fasting, praying, and giving.

There is a fundamental connection between forgiveness and prayer. Our Lord taught us to pray in simplicity and truth. He gave us the Lord's Prayer, where we call on God to "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Christ then tells us, "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."

We miss the mark throughout our lives, and it is only through the love and mercy of God that we can be reconciled to Him. *Missing the mark* is the literal meaning of the Greek word ἁμαρτία which we know as *sin*. We recognize that God is merciful to us because He loves us, not because we have done anything to merit His love and mercy. Therefore, we do not approach forgiveness as a contractual undertaking. Instead, we forgive because we trust and give ourselves entirely to God's infinite love and compassion.

This reconciliation with God requires that we take on His qualities of love and mercy towards humankind. In other words, we open our hearts to God's grace to become channels of His love. As Saint John Chrysostom says, "Nothing makes us so like God, as being ready to forgive the wicked and wrongdoers; even as indeed He had taught before, when He spoke of His making the sun to shine on the evil and on the good." Forgiveness may sometimes be a process that takes time. What is most important is our willingness to participate in the process. Aware of our sinfulness, we know how much we need forgiveness.

The Lord also teaches us about fasting. It is essential for us to understand both *why* and *how* we fast. We fast, in part, to share in the fasting of Christ at the beginning of His earthly ministry. As the ancient nation of Israel spent 40 years in the desert, the Lord was also led to the desert by the Holy Spirit, and there He fasted forty days and forty nights while tempted. He was victorious over all the temptations before He began His ministry on earth. The Lord Jesus, as the Second Adam, was victorious through fasting, whereas the first Adam failed to fast from the fruit of the tree and fell into sin. Saint Basil says, "We have been injured by sin; let us be healed by repentance. But repentance is futile without

fasting . . . It is because we did not fast that we were banished from Paradise. So let us fast that we may return to it.”

Following Jesus’s steps, we also fast so that we learn discipline. Through our efforts, with the grace of God, we learn to control the passions which seek to rule over us. We grow in self-control, so our appetites and passions no longer dominate us. As a result, our prayer life improves as we simplify our lifestyle, becoming less preoccupied with cooking, eating, and entertainment. The Church calls on us to become less materialistic and more spiritual, think more about our salvation, and take a few weeks during Lent to put aside worldly concerns.

Learning restraint and abstinence, we begin to experience spiritual growth and purity of heart. One of the most significant benefits of fasting is that it helps us grow spiritually. Fasting from food teaches us to fast from sin, as both involve denying our impulsive desires and urges. We also fast to understand and empathize with our sisters and brothers who are hungry and in need. We fast in preparation to receive our Savior during Holy Week and the Great Feast of Pascha.

However, it is essential to understand how to best approach the practice of fasting to maximize the spiritual benefits. Our fasting from food is only beneficial if we also seek fellowship with God and others. That is why fasting cannot be separated from prayer, forgiveness, and almsgiving. Active participation in the sacramental life of the Church is also necessary. Parishes worldwide offer Presanctified Liturgies during the week to spiritually sustain the faithful during Great Lent. Through Holy Communion, Christ Himself sustains our fasting efforts throughout the week. Fasting accomplishes its purposes only when it is not an end but a means of encountering Christ.

It is also important to remember that, as we fast, we focus on *our* struggle, not on the efforts of others. The Lord teaches us to fast with joy. He says, “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.”

Lastly, the Lord tells us not to store up treasures on earth, but treasures in heaven, for where our treasure is, there is our heart. We know this instinctively when we think of our loved ones. Our children represent our treasure, as do our parents, spouses, brothers and sisters, friends, and everyone we love. They are our treasures because we love them and hold them dearly in our hearts and souls. During Lent, we are presented with the opportunity to cultivate those relationships. We also can ask ourselves whether our hearts love money, possessions, status, or other worldly things. These may not necessarily be evil if used for God’s glory, but they are not an end in themselves.

To accumulate treasures in heaven means letting go of our attachment to worldly things, trusting in God, setting our hearts on Him, and serving others in love. In this way, we open ourselves to the love and grace of God as we begin Great and Holy Lent. This is a blessed time of renewal and growth for all of us. As we begin our Lenten journey, we

draw ever closer to God, forgiving all injuries and insults, learning discipline and self-control over food, thoughts, words, and actions, and growing in love towards God and each other. Our journey towards Pascha will place us on that path where His Cross can lead us to *our* resurrection.

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