

This morning's Gospel begins with what I consider to be one of the most frightening of all of Jesus' teachings. He 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."

How often do I hear someone say to me that someone has gotten me so angry I cannot forgive him? She has done something that is unforgivable. This frightens me because the teaching that Jesus said in this morning's gospel comes to my mind. If we do not forgive the things that other people do to us, then God will not forgive us our sins.

Our Lord Jesus tells us clearly:

Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. And to the one who strikes you on the one cheek, offer also the other cheek (Luke 6:27-29).

Rather than resenting those who wrong us, we are to love them, and we express this love by blessing them and praying for them. We do this because we are commanded to do so by Christ. He has commanded this for our own sake, for our own salvation, because He loves us; and we do it for His sake, because we love Him.

Often anger at others is evoked in us because of our pride. This again is a function of our fallen nature: that part of us that wants to be God. As would-be gods, we want to be in control, we want things to go our way. When things don't go our way, when other people don't follow our lead and go along with our program, we get angry. This leads us to judge others. Judging others is one way of playing God.

If left unchecked, anger and judgment will pass into what the Holy Fathers call "secret anger," "remembrance of wrongs," or "resentment." This anger is deadly to the soul.

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk says:

"Just as fire if it is not extinguished quickly will swallow many houses, so anger if it is not stopped right away will do great harm and will cause many troubles.

The Holy Apostle Paul tells told the Ephesians:

"Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil." (Eph. 4:267).

St. John Cassian tells us that

“If we take St. Paul’s saying literally, it does not permit us to keep our anger even until sunset. What then shall we say about those who, because of the harshness and fury of their impassioned state, not only maintain their anger until the setting of this day’s sun, but prolong it for many days? Or about others who do not express their anger, but keep silent and increase the poison of their anger to their own destruction? They are unaware that we must avoid anger not only in what we do but also in our thoughts; otherwise, our mind will be darkened by our anger, cut off from the light of spiritual knowledge and discrimination, and deprived of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”

If for whatever reason we do not forgive someone and hold onto our anger, it will truly be to our own destruction. It can poison our entire lives, make us the captives of the devil, and eventually prevent us from entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

Abba Dorotheus, a Desert Father of the sixth century, says that we can be healed of the sickness of resentment “by prayer right from the heart for the one who has annoyed us. We can pray such words as, O God, help my brother, and me through his prayers.”

“In this,” says Abba Dorotheus, “we are interceding for our brother, which is a sure sign of sympathy and love, and we are humiliating ourselves by asking help through our brother’s prayers.

When we continually force ourselves to bless and pray for others in this way, we will find that our Lord Jesus Christ will change, renew, and refresh our hearts. It may take some time and persistence, but gradually, almost imperceptibly, we will be changed. The poison of resentment, by the Grace of Christ, will leave our system.

The cure for anger, judgment, and resentment is forgiveness, pure and simple. No matter what terrible afflictions and unspeakable injustices have befallen us, we can be free of their negative effects on us through forgiveness.

A Romanian Orthodox priest named Fr. George Calciu was asked about this. For twenty-one years he had been locked in Communist prisons, where he had endured the most unimaginable horrors ever perpetrated by human beings. When he was finally free, he came to America. He was happy, joyful, like a child, totally free of any negative effects of this torture on his soul. He had found the secret of forgiveness.

He was asked,
“How can people overcome judgment?”

He replied, almost with astonishment,
“It’s simple. Just don’t judge!”

It’s truly simple. But we must keep in mind that we can’t do it on our own: We need God’s help to heal our fallen, wounded nature, to humble our pride. Therefore, as we pray for those who have hurt us, we should pray that God will help us to forgive, that He will soften our hard hearts, warm our cold hearts, and grant us a loving, merciful, and forgiving spirit.

The Elder Sampson (Seivers) of Russia, was a man well-equipped to speak on the subject of forgiveness. As a young novice monk, he was arrested by the Communist authorities, shot in a mass execution, and thrown into a common grave. By Divine Providence he survived the shooting and was pulled out of the grave still breathing by his brother monks and nursed back to health.

Later he was arrested again and spent nearly twenty years in Communist concentration camps. But he never held onto bitterness and resentment: He completely forgave both his executioners and his torturers.

In his later years, when he was serving as a spiritual father to many people, he was especially tough when his spiritual children refused to forgive someone, even for some petty annoyance.

He said:
“I’ve always concluded: this means that they still have not gotten the point, that the whole secret, that all the salt of Christianity lies in this: to forgive, to excuse, to justify, not to know, not to remember evil.

“The Holy Fathers are the children of the Grace of the Holy Spirit. The result of this action of Grace is when the heart excuses. It loves, it can speak well of someone and pray for him. It does not remember offense or evil.”

He was asked,
“What can an angry person do?” He replied, “He must pray and pray for healing. For the sake of his faith, for the sake of his insistence, the Lord will change his heart.”

It is important to cut off angry and judgmental thoughts at the time of their provocation.

St. John Cassian writes:

“If we wish to receive the Lord’s blessing, we should restrain not only the outward expression of anger, but also angry thoughts. More beneficial than controlling our tongue in a moment of anger and refraining from angry words is purifying our heart from rancor and not harboring malicious thoughts against our brethren. The Gospel teaches us to cut off the roots of our sins and not merely their fruits.”

The more we entertain thoughts of anger, the more they will grow and harden inside of us, making it harder to uproot them later on.

Our struggle should not be *against* thoughts, but *towards* remembrance of God. It is enough just to observe our thoughts through the practice of watchfulness. We will thereby recognize our angry and judgmental thoughts right away. We see them, we know that we don’t want them because they separate us from God, and we simply let them go. If we do not align ourselves with the thoughts, they will naturally disappear.

The thought may come again and again, but each time we are to cut it off in the same way. When the thoughts are continual, it is *especially* important to turn to God in prayer, asking for His forgiveness and for deliverance from the continual thoughts. This prayer should include a prayer of good will for the person at whom we are angry or irritated.

As we seek to forgive people for whom we feel bitterness, we should also call upon the Mother of God to help us forgive. When Elder Sampson was once asked how he was able to forgive his executioners and torturers, he said:

“One need only pray to the Mother of God and the offense is taken away. It is taken away if you only ask the Mother of God. It is enough for your heart to have some kind of direct contact with the Mother of God, and that horror, offense, injury, sorrow and slander will be taken away.”

May God bless this Lenten season for us and guide us to grow closer to Him every day!