

9-1-2019 Conforming Our Will to God's Will
© S. Hinde

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As most of you know we are blessed with an exceptional church bookstore. Simeon has dedicated his life and countless hours to making it into what it is today. Of course, we miss Carol Necktaria working there as Simeon's assistant. She used to be the primary up-seller, if you will. You would go in and looking for one item and when she was done with you, you left with five items.

I stopped by a couple of weeks ago. I saw Simeon reading a book called The Sunflower. Now, the title of the book and the cover of the book would not have caught my interest. But Simeon said he was re-reading it. He had just finished it a week prior and it was so good he couldn't put it down. The subtitle was somehow captivating. The subtitle was "Conforming the Will of Man to the Will of God" and isn't that what life is about? Conforming our will to God's will. It's written by St. John of Tobolsk.

So of course, I had to buy the book and as I was reading it St. John immediately begins by pointing out that everything in life is caused by or permitted by the will and providence of God. So often in life we are confronted with events that we simply do not like, that we don't feel are fair, that feels perhaps like some kind of persecution or trial that we don't deserve and yet God has allowed it.

According to St. John, God allows everything for our salvation, sickness, poverty, persecution, abuse, slander, hardships of all kinds. God allows these things in our life. He allows them for our salvation. God alone knows the secret heart of each and every one of us. He knows exactly what it is that we need for our correction.

It seldom occurs to us at the time that God is giving us raindrops from heaven in order that we might grow, we might mature, we might overcome our weakness and spiritual infirmity. We must train ourselves to think in this way, to always look to God for our needs, to trust in his benevolent love and concern for our salvation. Thinking in this way we become less subject to worry and stress to hopelessness and despair. Thinking of this way, we are more inclined to accept with patience and hope God's providence, whatever circumstance we are confronted with.

Placing our hope in God, trusting in his Providence, accepting the directions and pathways that he has prepared for us brings peace to our soul. Even in the midst of the struggle. We have countless role models to follow. We have the saints, The Holy Fathers and Mothers of the church. We have our patron saint. We have the greatest of all the saints, the Theotokos as our intercessor.

There are many benefits to honoring and venerating the saints. Sometimes it's healing from sickness, sometimes it's rescuing from danger. Sometimes it's just peace of mind. I've mentioned it before and I've lost count of how many people that I have encountered that have gone to St. Maximovitch because they couldn't be pregnant or hold a pregnancy and they went asking for his intercessions. I've lost track of the number of children named in his honor as a result of his intercession.

9-1-2019 Conforming Our Will to God's Will © S. Hinde

It's important that we not forget our patron saints, to communicate with them, to seek their intercessions for our spiritual wellbeing. The saints are with us. We're all in the same church. They're in the church triumphant. We're in the church militant. But it's all the same church, the one holy catholic and apostolic church, the Orthodox church, I'm sure you're all familiar with the phrase, he sounds like a broken record. In other words, he says the same thing time and time again.

There are times when I'm preparing a homily that I think to myself; I know that I've said this before many times, in fact. However, for all of you who read the Gospels on a daily basis, or at least with some regularity, you will have to admit that there are certain themes, if the Lord emphasizes time and time again.

We certainly see that the Lord fulfills all of the prophecies from the Old Testament concerning the Messiah, the coming of the Messiah, the miracles, the healing of the sick, the restoring sight to the blind, feeding the thousands with just a few fish and little bread. We also see the characteristics of Christ, his love, mercy, patience, forgiveness, all of which we are to imitate in our own lives.

You hear me repeating the same script from last week, the last homily, the probably the homily before that. It is simply because it seems to me that there are certain commandments that Christ gives us that seems to stand out. Commandments that are especially important and necessary for our salvation. If these commandments are important enough that the Lord himself found it necessary to repeat them, it should not be burdensome, that we repeat them as well.

Of course, the preeminent commandment given by the Lord is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbor, not just as ourselves as we read in the Old Testament. But looking to John 13, when Jesus said, a new commandment I give you that you love one another even as I have loved you, that you also have love one for another. The Lord gives a lot of commandments on how we should live our lives, how we should act towards each other.

So much of our society has lost its spiritual and moral compass. People wonder about following this trend or that fad, forgetting about God, forgetting his instructions, forgetting the beatitudes, forgetting the commandments, forgetting the example that Christ has left for us, a light and a roadmap to salvation. God's Word is eternal and unchanging, and we need to take very seriously the commandments and instructions that Christ has given us.

One of the great commandments he has given us in today's gospel reading, it is the commandment of forgiveness. The commandment of forgiveness. It's such an important commandment that it can open the door to paradise, and it can close the door to paradise. We already know that we are sinners. I wish it were not true. 1 John, it says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." So, we must acknowledge that we are sinners and as such, we must also acknowledge that we need forgiveness. God's forgiveness. That's interesting.

In the verses proceeding today's gospel reading Saint Peter, apostle Peter asked the Lord about forgiveness. First, he asked a question, how many times must I forgive someone who sins against me? And then before the Lord has an opportunity to respond, he offers the answer. Peter says, "Up

9-1-2019 Conforming Our Will to God's Will
© S. Hinde

to seven times." Let's read it. Verse 21, then Peter came to the Lord and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I did not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." Now for you mathematicians, that doesn't actually mean 490 times. Seventy times seven is to be understood as an infinite forgiveness. The never-ending forgiveness, that perpetual forgiveness.

Now the following verses put this issue of forgiveness into perspective. You have a king who wanted to clear the books, get all the outstanding accounts taken care of. There was one account where he was owed an enormous amount of money. The slave owning the debt couldn't pay. He wasn't able to pay. So, the king ordered that he be sold and all of his family and his possessions and that the account be settled.

So, what happens? Verse 26, so the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him saying, "Have patience with me and I will repay you everything." The lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. Notice he didn't give him more time as requested. He didn't give any more time. He forgave the debt, completely forgiven. The debt is canceled.

This part of the story, of course, represents the Lord. It represents the Lord forgiving us our debt of sin. Every sinful thought, every sinful word, every sinful deed. The Lord forgives us. He forgives us everything. Why does he do this? He does it because we ask him to, in humility and sincerity. We ask the Lord for forgiveness and he forgives us. Just like the slave that owed his master so much but couldn't pay the debt. That slave is us. That slave is us.

We owe a debt we cannot pay, but as a master felt compassion on him and forgave him all of the debt and released him. The king is the Lord and he has compassion on us. He forgives us the enormous debt of our sin. But of course, that's only half the story. It goes on. The slave who had just been forgiven, what does it say about him?

Verse 28, but that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a few hundred denarii, a little money, not much. He seized him and choked him saying, "Pay back what you owe." So, his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, "Have patience with me and I will pay you everything." But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison and tells him he should pay back all that was owed. This wicked slave, brothers and sisters, is us. The wicked slave is us when we refuse to forgive each other. When you and I refuse to forgive each other, we are the wicked slave in this gospel.

Verse 31, when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, "You wicked slave. I forgave you all the debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have also had mercy on your fellow slave in the same way that I had mercy on you." His lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should pay all that was owed.

Then the Lord says to those whom he were speaking to, he says, "My heavenly Father will also do the same thing to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from his heart." How could this be said

9-1-2019 Conforming Our Will to God's Will
© S. Hinde

with any more clarity, with any more certainty. The Lord has commanded us to forgive each other. If we refuse, then we will not be forgiven. What will be our excuse when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ?

So, it is without question that this commandment of Christ to forgive is an essential step on the pathway to our salvation. We must not let pride, hurt feelings, envy, or any other passion become a roadblock to forgiveness. Forgiveness is an act of love and without love we have nothing.

Matthew 5, "you have heard that it has been said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Why does the Lord say these things? He answers the question. Verse 45, "so that you may be the sons of your father who is in heaven. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do you know even tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more do you do than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same."

"Therefore, you are to be perfect even as your heavenly father is perfect." Now, that's a tall order, isn't it? To be perfect even as God is perfect. This perfection that the Lord refers to is I believe, a perfection of imitation. The perfection of doing what the Lord did, looking like the Lord in our behavior, our actions, and our words. What did the Lord do when the woman with the issue of blood touched the hem of his garment? He had compassion on her. He was merciful to her.

We may not be able to cure someone with a serious disease or illness, but we are certainly able to be compassionate, to be merciful. What did the Lord do when he saw the funeral procession going by and it was the dead son, the only son of a widow, the poor widow didn't even ask for his help, but that didn't matter. The Lord still had compassion on her, and he went over, and he raised her son to life again.

We may not be able to raise the dead, but we most certainly can be compassionate and merciful. What did the Lord tell the lawyer when he asked him, who is my neighbor? Do you remember this story? The lawyer was testing the Lord, asking the Lord what he must do to inherit eternal life. Lord answered with the parable of the good Samaritan. The Jews at the time would have nothing to do with Samaritans, but it was a Samaritan that stopped and showed compassion on the poor Jew who was beaten and left for dead.

It's simply another story of compassion, of mercy, and of love. So when the Lord said we are to be perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect, I believe it is at least a constant striving to imitate Christ, is a constant striving to be compassionate, merciful, loving, and forgiving of one another, both to those who love us, as well as those who hate us. Notice that the Lord clarifies the compassion, mercy, forgiveness.

It's not just words, it's not just rhetoric. The Lord said, it has to be forgiveness from the heart. It has to be real forgiveness. You can't fake it; it has to be from the heart. We can't fake our way into Paradise. We can't pretend to be Christians and expect to find our way into heaven. We can deceive ourselves. We can lie to our confessor. But we cannot hide from God. He knows all things. So first of

9-1-2019 Conforming Our Will to God's Will
© S. Hinde

all, we must be honest with ourselves. We have to have the courage to examine, to scrutinize our hearts, our intentions, and our motives.

Have I forgiven, truly forgiven from my heart? Everyone, anyone that has in any way ever offended me intentionally or unintentionally have I really forgiven? We have to be brutally honest with ourselves. We're talking about our salvation, not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven," Matthew 7. This is important. This is one of the commandments from the Lord that stands out that affects our salvation.

If any man says he loves God but hates his neighbor. He's a liar. How can you love God whom you have not seen when you hate your neighbor, whom you have seen? Most of you know the story of the monk that had a problem with another monk in the monastery. There are a number of these stories. But this particular one, he went to the Abbott and told him that he simply could not forgive this particular monk. The Abbott listened to his problem and simply told him, "If you can't or won't forgive your brother, then I have one obedience for you. When we say the Lord's prayer, when we get to the part that says, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, you dear brother are to remain silent."

The monk went away, and he thought about the Abbott instructions. He began to realize he was asking God to do for him exactly what he refused to do for his brother. We as Orthodox Christians believe in the commandments of the Lord. Believing means living, living in obedience to Christ commandments, striving to imitate Christ, to look like Christ, to love each other as Christ loves us, to be compassionate, to be merciful, to be forgiving. This brothers and sisters is the narrow path of the Christian.

May you be blessed. Amen.