

JULY 31, 2016

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

“THE LORD’S PRAYER---PART 5, ‘FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES’”

Over the years, due to a couple of my sons playing in baseball tournaments there, I’ve had the opportunity to be two times at Cooperstown, New York, the home of the Baseball Hall of Fame. I remember being in the hall and looking at the plaques for the various players. One I particularly noticed, and then read more in a book about him, was the not all that famous player named Burleigh Grimes. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1964, but I can’t remember specifically when he played. Burleigh Grimes’ nickname was “Old Stubblebeard” and he was an unusual player. He was a pitcher and, obviously, a great one. And he is remembered as perhaps the angriest man to ever play the game. He was very intimidating on the mound. Batters who looked out at him while waiting for the pitch usually saw him snarling at them. He specialized in throwing “high and inside”---the brushback, the beanball. He hit many a batter. Bean balls often result in fights. So he was in lots of those, too, and seemed to enjoy them immensely! Burleigh Grimes hitting a batter was certainly not unusual, but one day he outdid himself with the strangest beanball in baseball history. There was a player on the opposing team that Grimes was extremely angry at. It was the other team’s pitcher who had beamed Grimes himself earlier in the season. And Grimes certainly hadn’t forgiven him. And so that day he beamed that man. But what made it the strangest beanball in history was that Grimes beamed the fellow while he was still in the on-deck circle! (*It Ain’t Cheatin’ If You Don’t Get Caught*, Don Gutman, Penguin Books, 1990, p. 29)

Now that’s angry, that is truly a lack of forgiveness! Hopefully none of us ever get as angry as Old Stubblebeard, Burleigh Grimes. But we can get pretty perturbed sometimes. What should we do so that our anger doesn’t get as bad as Burleigh Grimes’? Our Lord Jesus Christ told us how to solve the problem of anger---in the Lord’s Prayer He taught us to pray: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

As I do some summers, I am currently preaching a series of homilies on a topic---the topic this summer is the Lord’s Prayer. It is the greatest prayer ever---taught to us by Jesus Himself. And we pray it all the time---in all our services and in our daily personal prayers. Because we pray it so often, it’s important that we know what it is we are saying when we pray it. And so we’re going through it week by week, line by line....Up to part 5 today which reads: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

In this part of the prayer we ask God to forgive us in the same way that we forgive others. Is there someone you’re angry with, upset with, offended by? What to do? Imitate Burleigh Grimes? No---the Lord says the solution is to forgive the other person. And He says that if we forgive the other person, God will forgive us. Of course, there is a flip side to this truth-----if we don’t forgive, then we ourselves won’t be forgiven. As the prayer says, “Forgive us our trespasses *as* we forgive.....”

Anger is a very destructive sin. It can get way out of hand very easily. It’s common for a little disagreement to turn into a big disagreement. And then sometimes the big

disagreement leads to a break between two people. And then, worse yet, sometimes that break becomes permanent as it develops into a grudge. And we hear those awful words, "Oh, he and I don't speak anymore."

Among Christians, such things just should not be. But it happens. Sadly enough, it even happens in congregations who have been called together to serve God.

And many times in the gospels, including in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus Christ tells us the solution----forgive.

Forgiving those we're upset at is partly for our own good. Because when we are angry at someone, when we bear a grudge, when "we're not on speaking terms" with someone, we cannot draw closer to God. Anger will gradually pull us away from God. And if we stay angry, even prayer isn't going to draw us closer to Christ. St. Isaac of Syria, 1400 years ago, was well aware of this. He wrote the following words---"someone who prays while at the same time having a grudge is like a person who plants seeds in the ocean and expects to get a harvest." (Daily Readings, St. Isaac of Syria, Templegate, 1989, p. 63)

But what about a situation where there is a problem with someone and you wish to get reconciled and solve the problem-----but the other person isn't interested in that. Forgive anyway---and take a first step at reconciliation even if it doesn't seem hopeful.

A woman named Sheila and her family moved into a house in a different neighborhood than before. They got to know their new next-door neighbor right away the first day---but it wasn't a pleasant occasion. Two of Sheila's children were playing catch in the back yard and the ball went sailing over the fence into the neighbor's back yard. One of them went into the neighbor's yard to fetch the ball---the neighbor man came charging out of his back door, quite upset, and roughly told the kids to stay out of his yard and keep their ball out of his yard, too. The next day, Sheila's dog was outside and a cat happened to walk by on the sidewalk. The dog barked furiously for about 2 minutes until the cat was out of sight. The neighbor hurried over and rang the door bell---when Sheila answered he very angrily complained about the dog barking and said if it ever happened again he would call the police. Sheila thought of some choice words to say but restrained the anger welling up in her and said very little.

When she prayed her morning prayers the next day she asked God to help her be forgiving and asked for guidance as to how to improve the situation. Later that morning she decided to bake blueberry muffins for her family. As she was getting the ingredients out, she had an idea---why not bake an extra dozen and give them to the grouch next door? So she baked them and she and the kids delivered them. The man was pretty surprised and hardly knew what to say, stammering out a "thank you." From that point on, Sheila and her husband and the kids had a little campaign going. They would fairly often do some little kind deed for the neighbor and always speak kindly to him, even if he was grouchy about something. Over a few weeks he got more polite and eventually they all ended very good friends. All because she took the first step with a dozen muffins! (in "Our Daily Bread", 3/14/91)

If . when reconciliation is needed, we take the first step and persist, it is often true that the other person will soften. And reconciliation and forgiveness all around can happen. But even if it never works, if the person just stays mad, at least then you will know you did what you could. You can feel at peace with God and yourself.

But if we don't forgive, we're not going to be at peace. And if we don't forgive, that means our own sins will remain unforgiven. As the Lord so clearly said in the Lord's Prayer----"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us."

It is by forgiving others that we make it possible for ourselves to receive God's forgiveness. If we don't forgive others, then our hearts begin to become hard. And they eventually will become too hard to receive forgiveness from God.

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive....." Easy words to say; we pray them every day. But scary words to say. For what we are saying to God is, "Please forgive me as much as I forgive others." *Very* scary words.

St. John Cassian lived around 400 A.D. He's unusual because he died in a leap year on February 29 so his actual "annual" day of commemoration only rolls around once every 4 years! St. John Cassian traveled a lot, especially visiting monasteries in different areas. Apparently, he took notes on what he saw because he wrote a couple of books about his visits. In one of the two books, Conferences, he describes a monastery where something unusual, the same thing every time, took place in every worship service he attended there. As the monks prayed the Lord's Prayer in the services, they would just boom along nicely together----until they got to the line we're looking at this morning. Then the booming ended because, except for one or two monks, they all closed their mouths and did not say that line. Then, when the reciting of the prayer got past that line, they would all boom out the rest of the prayer together again.

St. Cassian noticed this happening at every service at this monastery and finally asked someone what it was all about. He was told that most of the monks were frightened by that part of the prayer. They were afraid that, because they had not forgiven others, that asking God to forgive them the way they forgave might mean praying themselves right into hell. So they just kept their mouths shut! ("Conferences", St. John Cassian, Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. XI, 2nd Series, p. 395)

That is really not a very good way to deal with this line of the Lord's Prayer. It's much better to pray it, but never to pray it lightly. Carefully say the words, while thinking, "Who is there I need to forgive?"

We pray it daily so if we do this, that means at least once a day we will be examining our lives with the intent of thinking--"Who is there I need to forgive?". Maybe it's a friend (or former friend!), your spouse, a relative, a co-worker, someone at church, someone at school..... Maybe it's a recent time you were upset by someone.....or maybe it's an old grudge going back a while.....

Maybe it was harsh words between your spouse and you today. Maybe it's an old problem with that cousin of yours of whom you say, "We don't talk anymore". Maybe it's some disagreement at work that's gone beyond simply disagreeing and now is getting nasty. And maybe it's right here at church. It's especially sad when members of a church, who are supposed to be united in serving Christ and loving one another, have a falling out. If that is your situation, rush to reconcile, hurry to forgive. Think about it every time you pray the Lord's Prayer until you do something about it.... But do it quickly!

Whoever it may be you need to forgive and to reconciled with---say the words in the prayer and then forgive. Don't make come true the fear of those monks 1600 years ago and pray yourself right into hell by refusing to forgive.

So every time we pray this part of the Lord's Prayer, be sure you are forgiving whoever it is who has upset or angered you. We need to do this so that we might receive God's forgiveness of our own sins.

As our Lord said in Matthew 6:14---"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father also will forgive you." May the Lord have mercy on us all.