

NOVEMBER 20, 2016

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

LUKE 12: 16-21

“GIVING THANKS”

During World War II, Dutch Christians Corrie and Betsie Ten Boom were arrested by the Nazi occupiers of Holland for hiding Jews from them, thus saving them from being killed in the death camps. Corrie and Betsie eventually got caught and were imprisoned in a concentration camp themselves.

A verse from one of St. Paul’s epistles became very important to them as they strived to remain thankful to God even while imprisoned. The verse was I Thessalonians 5: 18---“In everything, give thanks.” But Corrie had trouble applying that verse to one thing about the camp----the gradual increase in the number of fleas in their barrack. The fleas kept getting worse and worse, almost unbearable. How be thankful while scratching yourself all the time?

But as the fleas got worse, the sisters noticed something else was getting better. The sisters and some other prisoners liked to have Bible studies and the singing of hymns going on sometimes in the barracks. When they did this, the Nazi guards would come in and stop them. But gradually the guards came in to the barrack less and less often, until they never came it at all anymore. They would just open the door and announce it was time for lights off, or time to go to work.... That meant the Bible reading and hymns could go on as much as the prisoners wanted.

One day, it dawned on Corrie that these 2 changes in their barrack were connected. The fleas were getting worse and the guards weren’t intruding on them anymore----that was because the guards couldn’t stand the fleas! And from then on Corrie was able to be thankful even in the midst of the gross infestation of fleas! As St. Paul wrote---“In everything, give thanks.”

There are always lots to be thankful to God for----even if some thing aren’t pleasant (like fleas!). So we should always be thankful.

Being thankful is the theme for Thursday of this week when we celebrate Thanksgiving Day. Everyone will be talking about being thankful. But I’ve noticed in recent years that in much of media and advertising there has been a shift in language---less talk about actually thanking *God* and more talk about just being thankful in a general and vague way, but not thanking anyone in particular. Just to be “thankful”, but not thank God, is quite pointless! We need to not just be “thankful”, but actually say “thank you” to God.

Today’s gospel reading, Luke 12: 16-21, is relevant to all of this. It’s a parable our Lord Jesus Christ told about a very rich and successful man. He was rich and getting richer. Was he thankful? Well, in a sense, I guess.... He certainly was satisfied! He spoke to himself in verse 19---“Soul, you have ample goods stored up for many years. Take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.”

The man may have been thankful, but you notice he didn’t give any thanks to God. So God had something to say to him in reply in verse 20----“God said to him, ‘Fool! This

night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" And that night God did take his soul---and his soul was lost.

So lesson #1 from today's gospel reading-----Don't just "be thankful". Actually thank God for how He blesses you.

And Lesson #2 -----Just saying "thank you" to God really isn't enough. It is essential and we sure should do it! Essential, but not enough. Talk is cheap---more than just words are needed if we are truly thankful. *So two actions that we should take to show our thanking of God is real.*

First action----we should make an attitude adjustment. We should begin to focus our thoughts and lives less on our material possessions, such as: how big a house we have, how fancy a car, how secure our finances are, how nice our clothes, are, etc. Because in verse 15 of Luke 12, just before today's assigned reading, the Lord said this----"A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Jesus Christ said it, so we know it's right. He's always right! To repeat His important words----"A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

So---what does life consist of then? What is really important, most important, if it's not our houses, money, etc.? What is life all about? In another verse in Luke 12, a verse a while after our assigned reading, in verse 31, Jesus said this---"Seek God's kingdom." That should be the focus of our lives----to seek the kingdom of God. That's what life is all about.

So the first action to show our thankfulness to God is real is to make an attitude adjustment---to not focus so much on our material possessions and to focus totally on what is most important according to Jesus Christ---seeking God's kingdom.

Second action----this flows out of the first action of focusing our lives on seeking God's kingdom. Jesus, still in Luke 12, but a little later in the chapter, in verse 33, gives a very simple and brief command to us----"Give alms". Can't get much simpler or shorter than that---"Give alms." The way to be truly thankful is to help those in need.

For how can we, as the Lord's people, be at ease and just enjoy our abundance without helping those in need around us? One of our greatest Church Fathers, St. Basil the Great, clearly stated that we have an obligation to give thanks by helping the poor-----"The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry. The coat hanging unworn in your closet belongs to the person who needs it. The money you store up in the bank belongs to the poor. You do wrong when you could share and you do not share." (in The Message of The Sunday Gospel Readings, Volume I, Father Anthony Coniaris, Light & Life Publishing, p. 59)

Giving to the needy---that is the way to be truly thankful! And doing good to others is what God created us to do. As St. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:10---"We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." Thanksgiving is a great time to decide to start doing what we are created to do, to start helping the needy or to decide to start doing more than we have been doing.

Some specific options for helping the poor are available right here through our parish. Here are 5 of them....

1. Our monthly meal serving at St. Herman Orthodox Homeless Shelter. It happens to be today, 5:30 p.m. and we could use a few more people to help today.
2. Our monthly delivery of food, clothing, blankets, etc. to the homeless on the streets of

Cleveland. For November, that happens to be next Sunday..... You can help by bringing in things to be given out and/or by putting something in the alms box in the narthex. And it's possible you could go along sometime.....

3. Shoeboxes for kids--- It happens in late winter but we're getting everything ready now. What happens is that shoeboxes full of school supplies, personal items, and fun "stuff" are given to inner city school children. What is needed now is the bringing to church of empty shoeboxes and the various items that will go in them. For the details, check bulletin or newsletter or the collection box in the hall....
4. Parish food pantry---Today and the next day or two are big days for our food pantry as we will be distributing canned food, turkeys, and grocery gift cards to needy families both in our parish and outside our parish. If you can still help for Thanksgiving you would need to bring it in either later today or tomorrow morning. And we do it all over again in a month for Christmas.....
5. Christmas gifts for kids-----At Christmas time we distribute gifts and gift cards for toys and clothing to children in needy homes. Again, both in the parish and outside of the parish. You can start bringing in already.....

And then, of course, there are all kinds of good ways to help the needy outside the parish---through International Orthodox Christian Charities, direct help to St. Herman's, and all other kinds of charities. And there are the beggars on the streets to help as well.....or that neighbor of yours that you know is hurting.....

In our parish budget we do budget for the parish, as a parish, to help the needy. That is very good and essential for us to do. But it is also important for us as individuals to give alms, too; not to just figure that the church budget will do it. It will do some, but it's very good for us to do it "on our own" as well.

And when you help the poor, you are helping Jesus. You probably remember the gospel lesson from Matthew 25 that we hear every year shortly before Lent when Christ describes Judgment Day and how He will separate the sheep from the goats. And when you read that passage it's pretty strong---the criterion of judgment mentioned is: did we help the needy or not? Which means---did we help Christ or not? Just to read one verse, Matthew 25: 40, that Christ speaks to those who have helped the needy-----"Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

How does this work? Who knows! It's greatly mysterious. But it's true, because the Lord clearly said it's true.

So....let's say you decide to go help with our serving the meal at St. Herman's at 5:30 today. As you hand that plate of food to a shabby looking fellow who looks extremely "down on his look", you are actually handing it to Jesus. When you bring in something for the inner city kids through our shoebox ministry, you are actually giving it to Jesus. When you give the beggar downtown or by the freeway ramp a dollar, you are actually giving it to Jesus.

And just a quick parenthetical note on giving to beggars---don't be too careful about who you give to. Some discretion is probably good but we shouldn't use caution as an excuse to never give. If you're sure that some fellow is going to use the money for whiskey, then make sure you give twice as much to some other fellow you think is legit. If you read in the Saints about such matters, they actually warn against being careful---better to err in giving to some one who may abuse it

than to not give at all! After all, you're really giving it to Jesus Christ! Be careful not to get too judgmental....

St. Martin, who lived about 1600 years ago, was a very important missionary monk in Gaul (now France). He traveled all over preaching the gospel. One cold winter day he was walking down a road and came upon a beggar who was nearly naked and obviously greatly suffering. St. Martin had no extra clothing along with him, but he was wearing a nice warm cloak. He looked at the beggar and had an inner struggle-----give him the cloak and be cold himself or turn the beggar away? He decided. He took off the cloak and handed it to the beggar. And then as the beggar put on the cloak, the Saint's eyes were opened and he saw that the beggar was actually Jesus Christ! (Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series, Vol. XI, p. 5, Eerdmans Publishing)

When we give to the needy, we give to Christ.

So help the needy—they need your help! And it is a way to give thanks, both at Thanksgiving and all year long. And, remember, as you give alms, you are giving it to your beloved Lord and Savior.

To conclude---we should always thank God. Don't be like the man in today's gospel reading---that man who was thankful in a general sense, but didn't thank God. Give thanks to God at Thanksgiving.

And then make your thanking more real by deciding how you can help the needy----and, thus, help Jesus Christ.

