

The Dynamic Love & the Rigid Attitude of the Pharisee

In the second Bridegroom Service on Holy Tuesday, the Holy Church commemorates the Wise Virgins. The Gospel passage we heard is divided into two parts.

The first part is an argument between Jesus and some believers from His time. In this argument the Pharisees ask embarrassing questions to trap Jesus. They asked Him about paying their taxes. Then, the Sadducees came to debate the subject of marriage with Him, and finally one teacher asked Him about the greatest commandment.

Here, there is a picture in the ascetic tradition in contradiction with the scene above. Some monks come to the teacher and elder in the wilderness and ask: "Teacher, give me a word leading me to salvation," or "Give me words to live by and be truly alive." The question here is in great contradiction with the questions directed to Jesus above.

The Gospel scene we saw clarifies for us the degree of spiritual deterioration of these religious leaders. Religion had led them to be in disagreement and contradiction with the Lord of Religion.

God hates such religion, which becomes a tool of separation between Him and those whom He bought by His precious blood. It ought to link people together and with God.

The second part contains the seven famous woes directed by the Lord to the religious people of His day. Jesus was not satisfied with the religious atmosphere of His time. Jesus reproached the Pharisees themselves because He loved them and admired their strict religious practices. At the same time he was sorry for them because they restricted their work of sanctification. This is the "pharisaic restriction."

"Be Vigilant" is the call of this second Bridegroom Service. What should we be vigilant about? We must be vigilant about our worship, so that it may be true and not superficial. Our tithing is not of use if we forget justice and mercy. This is the danger threatening the faithful: to sleep to death. This is similar to venerating the offering more than the Altar which sanctifies it, or the temple more than the one inhabiting it. And, as the popular saying goes, to strain at the gnat when we swallow the camel, and beautifying the cup from outside while inside is full of adultery and murder, are all symptoms of a basic sickness, the symptoms of a spiritual cancer threatening faith at all times. This sickness is about defining our relationship with God as a relationship of duties. Next, our "bazaar" of bargaining and self-righteousness begins. We fall in the deceitfulness of self-righteousness. And Religion turns upside down from being a ladder elevating us to God to being the deceit of self-content. Whoever thinks that he is giving God all proper honors due to God, that person wants to terminate his relationship with Him. Whoever

wants to love for love purposes, his love is limited. The love that does not grow is deceitful. Love contradicts duty. The latter knows its limits, but the former knows no limits. Love is attraction. In other words, it is a divine passion. Whoever loves, desires to love more, otherwise his love may not be true.

A question is asked: does keeping all the commandments lead us to the path of repentance? Yes, this is the pharisaic sickness through the ages. From a clear Christian point of view, the keeping of the commandments leads to repentance. Keeping the commandments makes us more sincere in repentance and warmer in love. What we know about those who progressed in the spiritual life is that they spent years repenting. St. Paul says, "I am the most sinful." Since Christian life means loving the bridegroom and sharing in His mission and suffering, every time we penetrate the depth of this paradise, we realize more its wideness. This is the paradise of the life with God. Every time we meditate on it, we will see it greater.

The struggle of the Lord with the religious people of His time was not about tithing but about the restrictions they put on the love of God. The dynamism of the relationship with God, when it starts well, ought not to end, but to grow always. The love of God demands from us to love Him more. Static love is false. Self-satisfaction is deceitful, meaning that we do not want to love, or love truly. Love is a potential and it is not a quantitative presence.

Let every person return to himself and examine the nature of his relationship with God. This relationship we often call duties. Let us work on our prayers, fasting,

worship and almsgiving. Are all our duties towards our neighbor, children, parents, and everybody our purpose, and thus limited, or are they our tools leading us to the dynamism of the divine love increasing beautifully in us.

If we believe that we have to pray for ten minutes, or for hours, we then do not know the meaning of prayer. I can start with minutes, but I know that the seed of prayer grows infinitely, reaching unceasing prayer. The language of passion is limitless.

We all love God but deceitfulness makes us "sleep to death." We design restrictions to this love, turning it into duties, instead of being life giving. Let's be vigilant about our worship.

If we enter a temple and stand up to pray and then leave without being taken by the love of God, we have not been praying. If we keep all fasts and not look passionately, seeking the face of Christ, then we would have tortured the body in vain. When the Pharisee asked Christ about the greatest commandments, He said "love" which is the purpose of all these commandments.

Chrysostom explains why Christ called the other five virgins foolish. They were foolish not for neglecting the commandments. To the contrary they kept all the commandments, and even more they remained celibate and virgin. Celibacy is not required from everyone. Their problem is that they forgot the most important commandment, is to love. The means became the purpose. It is like when Religion is deified to do away with the divine. Worship however is a tool and God is the goal.

Religion as a duty is a dark pharisaism that wastes all labors in vain, but Christianity is a loving passion making all labors light.

St. Gregory Palamas talked about the lamps of these wise virgins. The lamp's wick, he said, symbolizes love, and oil is the work of virtues and the flame is the Grace of the Holy Spirit. When the oil of works decreases, love gets extinguished and the flame of the Holy Spirit disappears, because this flame could not glow on a wick without oil, the oil of works.

Brothers and sisters, let us love passionately the Bridegroom and prepare our lamps shining with virtues, so that like the virgins of the Lord, we come earnestly to the wedding feast.

Amen.