

January 13, 2008
The First Sunday after Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Gospel of St. Matthew, after listing the differences between Gospel righteousness and the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (5:17-48), extends that series of contrasts in a discussion of practical piety (6:1-18).

The chief practical deeds of traditional piety were almsgiving, prayer, and fasting—a triad first codified in the Book of Tobit: "Prayer is good with fasting and alms more than to lay up treasures of gold" (12:8).

Through the Gospel of Matthew this inherited Jewish triad passed directly into the Christian Church and gave practical structure to the Gospel life. From the second century we find it in Hermas of Rome (*Shepherd*, "Vision" 3.9-10) and the Pseudo-Clementines (*Second Clement* 16.4). Among those later proclaiming this threefold discipline as normal to Christian piety were St. John Chrysostom (*On Matthew* 57.4; *On Second Timothy* 6.3) and St. Maximus the Confessor (*Chapters of Charity* 1.79).

Because of the readings from Matthew 6 in the ancient Christian lectionaries near the beginning of Lent, this triad of piety especially came to the fore in connection with that season of renewal and repentance. Thousands of preachers over the centuries, following the example of St. Leo of Rome (*Sermons* 12.4) have stressed that almsgiving, prayer, and fasting constitute the proper pattern of Lenten observance.

It may be noted, however, that the Gospel of Matthew does not actually enjoin us to pray, fast, and give alms. On the contrary, that sacred text presumes that we already have such an obligation. Jesus says simply, "*When you give alms . . . when you pray . . . when you fast.*" That is to say, the Christian's responsibility to pray, to fast, and to give alms is entirely taken for granted.

The divine exhortation in this regard is directed, rather, to the purity of the heart's intention. "Take heed," says our Lord, "not to do your righteousness [*ten dikaiosynen hymon me poiein*] before men, in order to be seen by them" (6:1). This is the same "righteousness" that the Lord explained at length in the previous chapter, the righteousness of which He warned His disciples, "unless your righteousness exceeds the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). Following that exhortation, the Lord went on to list a series of contrasts in which Gospel righteousness exceeded that of those recognized Jewish leaders.

The spirit of those contrasts is then extended to embrace almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Thus, the Lord instructs us not to give alms "as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men" (6:2). Similarly

He tells us not to pray "like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men" (6:5). Finally He admonishes us not to fast "like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance, for they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting" (6:16).

Those who in chapter five were called "scribes and Pharisees" are in chapter six called "hypocrites," but they are the same people. In Matthew's idiom the word "hypocrite" appears as a synonym for the contemporary Jewish leadership. In the last public sermon in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus begins by declaring seven "woes" to the "scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" (23:13,14,15,23,25,27,29).

There is nothing particularly Jewish about hypocrisy, however, which is the reason Christians are put on guard against that sin. Even as they endeavor to excel the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, the disciples of Jesus are warned not to "do righteousness" for human approval and praise. If this should be the case, then they must be satisfied with that approval and praise, for no further reward awaits them (6:2,5,16).

This dominical caution is directed to the purity of the heart's intention. Jesus is not forbidding public almsgiving, public prayer, and public fasting. Indeed, during Lent especially, these three things are very public. The moral difference accented by the Lord does not pertain to the act, but to the intention. Christians are to pray, fast, and give alms for one purpose only-to please the Father who reads their hearts and recognizes His children. The Christian moral life consists in living steadfastly under that divine gaze.

©2008 Patrick Henry Reardon

**All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor

phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php