

Sermon on the Gospel of the Last Judgement

by Metropolitan Philaret

Matthew 25: 31-46.

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

Because of my office as Metropolitan I visit many parishes and serve not only in this holy Temple, but also in other Churches, I must say that in other churches I find the people there to be more attentive listeners than here. There I never see people leaving before the sermon begins. The clergy and servers in the altar, the singers in the choir and all the praying people listen to the sermon. Unfortunately, in the Synod Cathedral Church we observe something different. Just now quite a few left the church, probably thinking they know everything anyway and need no instruction. And it is possible also that they did not hear today's Gospel and so they will not even learn what is awaiting them at the Last Judgment. The Church however offers us this discourse by Christ concerning this Judgment to make us note what will be expected of the human race at the threshold of eternity; at the end of mankind's history.

"When the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the holy Angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory." His words, as St. John Chrysostom says, become terrible to hear because He describes the heavens as empty, since the Angels will have descended with Him to the earth. Then the terrible Judge will divide the people into two portions, just as a shepherd separates the gentle sheep from the violent goats. He will place the sheep on His right side and the goats on the left. He will do this immediately, because in His divine all-knowledge, everything is known to Him.

Bishop Theophan the Recluse says that then will be opened the "book of conscience" in which everything that each soul ever thought, felt or experienced is written. And this will be opened to everyone; it will become clear to everybody. And because the truth will be then in full force and it "will be powerful at the Judgement", said the Bishop. Man himself will pronounce the rightful sentence, and the Lord, the Just Judge, will only confirm it. Everything will be finished forever; the everlasting seal will be placed on human existence for eternity.

But here we heard in the Gospel the sentence of the just Judge toward the righteous: "Come ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"; that is, prepared for you at the time when you did not even exist; the love of the Father prepared it even then for you. Why is there prepared for them such a high lot? The Lord says for the Righteous who stand before Him: "I was a hungered, and ye gave me meat, I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink, I was a stranger, and ye took me in." He lists the deeds of mercy and love which are accepted, by and understandable to all - Christians and non-Christians. Because it is said in the Gospel, that for the Judgement there will be gathered together "all nations", and every one will answer how and in which way they did serve their neighbor, But the humble and righteous, in answer to the gracious Lord's words will tell Him: "Lord, when saw we thee a hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?" But sitting before them now is not a needy pauper, or a traveler; before them there is the terrible unapproachable Judge, the King of Glory Himself, the

Creator and Master of the Universe. And from Him do they hear the merciful answer: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Or, what you did for them, you did it for Me.

The Lord never exaggerates and therefore everything that a man does out of love for his neighbor, the Lord directly credits it to Himself. (We know this from the history of Apostle Paul who before he became an Apostle was a persecutor of the Christians. The Lord appeared to him on the way to Damascus, and addressing him says: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me? (Acts9:4), although He Himself at that time was sitting in glory at the right hand of the Father.) But then, the King of Glory turns to the sinners and tells them with such wrath that the Universe will shudder: "Depart from me, ye accursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."

For whom is the fire prepared? Not for you, but for the devil and his angels. For you there was prepared the heavenly kingdom, but you made yourselves like the devil. Addressing the sinners He will also list the deeds of mercy. And now, standing at the inexpressibly horrible moment at the threshold of the everlasting condemnation the sinners will, for the last time, make the effort to offer their excuses: "Lord, when saw we thee a hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? We have not seen you; we did not minister to the drunkards, the lazy people, the parasites, those who were not worthy of our help; but if we would have met You, we would have helped You. But the Just Judge will not accept their excuse, and they will go to the everlasting suffering. An everlasting seal will be placed on their destiny and nothing will be able to change the terrible sentence which will be forever pronounced over all the deeds of humanity. How can we help but think of our future destiny, about what is to happen to us when we shall stand before the Just Judge.

The great Russian Bishop Theophan the Recluse pointed out that in His mercy, our great God warns us beforehand of His Last Judgment so that we would have a chance to correct ourselves before it is too late, meaning to fundamentally change our lives that we may be found worthy of the merciful call to the Heavenly Kingdom.

Very often one hears the complaints of parents about their children, saying that they try to teach the children the Church's Laws but in return they hear the fashionable contemporary slogan, "everyone can act as he pleases, because he has the right to his own opinion." And they do not know that the holy fathers had just this in mind when they warned that one of the distinguishing signs of the end of the world and the nearing Terrible Judgment will be that everybody will have "his own opinion." The Church restricts no one in his tastes and interests. She accepts and blesses everything, as long as it does not interfere with Her laws and demands. Does one want to sacrifice his life in the monastic order? She blesses and sanctifies his feat. Does one want to start a family? The Church shares his joy and in the radiantly solemn Sacrament of Matrimony blesses the creation of a new Christian family. Does he select some other way of life? This one too is blessed by the Church, as long as he does not forget Her rules and orders and will guide his life according to them.

There is only one special sphere, the sphere of dogma and morality, in which there can be no "personal opinions" of the faithful son or daughter of the Church. There can be only humble obedience to the Mother Church, for the teachings concerning Faith as well as the moral expectations which are preached by the Church are absolutely necessary for all Her faithful children.

The Lord said; "If he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican." (Matt.18) But note, that the heathen man and the publican are not guilty of the sin of

apostasy because for them this is a natural state. But for the Christians this state IS apostasy. Such a man Is not faithful to the Church and puts himself outside the Church¹'s bounds. Terrible will be the fate of these people!

Remember, beloved ones, that from all mankind the Lord will ask one question: "How did you serve your neighbor?" But of Orthodox Christians an additional question will be asked concerning faithfulness to the Church and Her teachings. And blessed will be the one who will be able to give a good answer regarding this question, because he will inherit a blessed eternity in which there is no sickness, sadness, or sighing but everlasting life.

Amen