

The Confessor's Tongue for November 9, 2008

21st Sunday After Pentecost: St. Nektarios of Aegina (+1920)

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

November 9: St. Nektarios of Aegina

One of the greatest modern saints, he was born to pious parents in Selyvria, Thrace, in 1846. From his youth, he felt the calling to become a priest and a preacher of the word of God. At first, he became a monk and then he pursued theological studies in Athens. He distinguished himself as a pastor (35 epistles), a loving and caring teacher (dean of Rizareios Seminary), a prolific theologian (he wrote more than 60 books in various fields), a spiritual hymnographer (500+ hymns), a thoughtful organizer of monasticism, a saintly hierarch (bishop of Pentapolis, Alexandria), and, above all, a truly holy and humble man. He set a unique example of unselfish humility, godly poverty, prudent love, unflinching endurance, and exemplary self-denial and forbearance. What made him best known in Greece and all over the world, however, is that he proved to be a clear vessel of the grace of God, who granted him the gift of working miracles even before his death. There are numerous books describing his countless miracles. He is among the most popular saints, and his monastery in Aegina is one of the most renowned shrines in Greece.

"Seek God daily. But seek Him in your heart, not outside it. And when you find Him, stand with fear and trembling, like the Cherubim and Seraphim, for your heart has become a throne of God. But in order to find God, become humble as dust before the Lord, for the Lord abhors the proud, whereas He visits those that are humble in heart, wherefore He says: 'To whom will I look, but to him that is meek and humble in heart.'" *St. Nektarios of Aegina*

Not Judging is Salvation without Effort

by *Archpriest Valery Lukianov*

The sin of judging others is found to be very prevalent in human actions because it can be so easily fallen into: censure of others human act can be uttered without any special effort and it even brings with it a certain pleasure. In judging someone else a person thus invents an excuse for himself, lulling his conscience with the self-esteem of thinking that there is no actual condemnation, but he only rightly blames the vice of the one guilty. While not noticing our own shortcomings and weaknesses which we generously excuse in ourselves, we nevertheless severely condemn the same vices in others. "Self-praise and condemnation of others are the most common things among us. The evil heart, the very rot of rottenness, nevertheless trumpets: 'I am not like the rest of them.' And how many ways of saying this there are is beyond counting" (Bishop Theophan the Recluse). "I have seen some committing the gravest sins in secret and without exposure; and in their supposed purity, they have harshly inveighed against

persons who have had a petty fall in public" (St. John of the Ladder, Step 10:13).

Much is said by the example from daily life mentioned by His Beatitude Metropolitan Anthony: "Go into the strictest of monasteries where fifty monks pray and read the word of God while Fr. Steward from morning til night fusses about cabbage, onions, and fish; he would excel more than the brethren in prayer and contemplation, but for the sake of obedience waits on tables ... And yet among those who waited at table, and first among them even, was St. Stephen the Apostle. Do not smite him with the rocks of judgements..." (*Collected Works*, Vol. II, p. 192).

Civil judges receive no small remuneration, for they find themselves engaged in the not-so-easy task of investigating the affairs of others. Why, then, does one so readily present himself as the severe judge of other men? There is one answer, and each of us always feels it: we have no desire to know ourselves! Someone was asked, What is most difficult for him? He replied: "To know oneself." "And what is easiest?" "To see the shortcomings of our neighbors." For this reason a person can ramble on for a whole hour on the vices of others, but about his own sins he can't even say a few words when he comes for confession. "He who has become aware of his sins has controlled his tongue, but a talkative person has not yet come to know himself as he should" (*Ladder* 11:4). "He who knows himself says when he openly sins: 'Woe is me! As they sin today, so will I not sin tomorrow?'" (Abba Dorotheus, Sermon 6) "Whatever sins we blame our neighbor for, whether bodily or spiritual, we shall fall into them ourselves. That is certain." (*Ladder*, 10:9) Therefore, the fine knower of the heart, St. Isaac the Syrian could conclude: "He who has come to see himself, will on high come to see the angels."

The injury of the sin of judgement is indeed great, for this sin generates innumerable pernicious consequences: It shatters the bonds between friends, enkindles quarrels among relatives, implants envy among people, discredits the good name of a person. In fact, if someone hears something defamatory about another, can he be in a position to think well of him? Will he not be prone to denigrate him in his mind and condemn him? And is this pleasing to God? Let us pay attention to how easily a slanderer begins to touch the weakness of a neighbor; as soon as he notices that we agree with his condemnation, there immediately comes from his mouth a thousand words and he covers the wretched victim with shame from head to toe. And the listener often not only does not stop the sinful conversation, but adds a little to it.

How then are we to battle with this sin that is so vastly predominant?

Do you not know that the Lord considers non-judgement such a virtue that He promises forgiveness

for all sins and reconciliation with Himself—deliverance from judgement and eternal torment: "Judge not, that ye be not judged," (Matt. 7:1), "for if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you" (Matt. 6:14). The remembrance of this evangelical testament should bring our thoughts to our earthly end, to the standing before the terrible and righteous judgement of God.

If God Himself judges no one, as the Scripture says, but has committed all judgement to the Son (John 5:22), and if the Son of God came to earth to save sinners, and therefore says: "I judge no one" (John 8:15), how then can you alone judge him whom the Lord wishes to save? He doesn't judge, but shows mercy.

"I have known a man who sinned openly," relates St. John of the Ladder, "and repented secretly; I condemned him as a profligate, but he was chaste before God, having propitiated Him by a sincere conversion" (Step 10:6). He adds: "You will begin to be wary of judging the sinful, if you always remember that Judas was in the company of Christ's disciples, and the thief was in the company of murderers; but it is a wondrous thing how in a single instant they exchanged places" (Step 10:4). It may be that you were shown the wounds of your brothers so that you might be concerned for them as the Samaritan cared for him who was harmed by the robbers. O, beloved friends, remember these words: "Friendship is written on stone, enmity on water!"

Consider the following circumstances: judgement penetrates into the heart through frivolous talk about others, whether it be of visitors, or in society, or, regrettably, in church. Knowing where you are slipping, carefully go around such a place. Thus also with frivolous conversations—when you meet someone anywhere, either a guest or of your own family—immediately adopt a "defensive" attitude and do not utter doubtful criticisms of neighbors.

One elder advised his spiritual son to always have a small rock at hand and, "as soon as you open your mouth idly, then take the rock and hold it, and bring the conversation imperceptibly around to some other, inoffensive subject. Then you will gain your neighbor as a friend and peace for your heart." On this the wonderful *Ladder* says: "He who knows the fragrance of the fire from on high, runs from a concourse of men like a bee from smoke; for as the bee is routed by smoke, so is man hampered by company" (Step 11:11).

The virtue of non-criticism is closely bound up with the gift of silence, which is compared to a pure, precious metal: talk is silver, silence is golden, for silence is the mystery of the age to come. Quiet and silence in behavior are the greatest adornment of the Christian. St. Nilus the Faster advises: "Do not seek greedily the expanses of life, but it is better to seek out the narrow and close path. For this reason we are given two ears, and one tongue, so that we might hear more for our salvation than we say." How just also is the ethical teaching of St. Gregory the Dialogist: "it

is more praiseworthy to silently endure insult, than to conquer it with a reply." And the Venerable Batiushka Seraphim adds: "No one has ever repented of silence." Therefore it becomes clear why many pages of the patristic, soul-saving works are dedicated to the consideration of silence.

Thus the judgement of our neighbors belongs solely to the Lord God, while for us it would be more proper and better to maintain silence when we see the falls of brethren and flee frivolous gatherings. The days of our lives are not so many; time flies, and eternity inevitably come nearer to us with each passing hour. And when will we succeed in repenting of our own lawlessness? O friends, look into your own souls, "for if anyone could see his own vices accurately without the veil of self-love, he would worry about no one else in this life, considering that he would not have time enough for mourning for himself, even though he were to live a hundred years, and even though he were to see a whole River Jordan of tears streaming from his eyes. I have observed such mourning and I did not find in it even a trace of calumny or criticism" (St. John of the Ladder, Step 10:10).

To be unaware of one's own sins, but not those of others is the result of diabolic temptation and suggestion, for in the words of Climacus, "The demons, murderers as they are, push us into sin. Or if they fail to do this, they get us to pass judgement on those who are sinning, so that they may defile us with the stain which we ourselves are condemning in another" (Step 10:11). Truly it is sometimes better to sin than to judge the sinner, for sin humbles the soul, while criticism makes one like unto the devil.

The Christian is obliged not only to restrain himself with care, but never to be ashamed to restrain someone who calumniates another in his presence. "It is better to say to him: 'Stop, brother! I fall into graver sins every day, so how can I criticize him?' in this way you will achieve two good things: you will heal yourself and your neighbor with one plaster" (*Ladder*, 10:7).

Surely we all have experienced the feeling of remorse of conscience when we see someone that we have judged die and thus become unable to make an objection to our words. How often we catch ourselves suddenly beginning to remember not how bad, but how good someone, who was so annoying to us before, becomes when he passes away. Listen to the following story which is exceptionally instructive: "A young boy came for the first time into a cemetery. He read with interest the laudatory epitaphs on the monuments and tombstones. Having read some ten inscriptions he turned wonderingly to his father: 'Papa, tell me, where are all the bad people buried?' ...

The aim of life is to be spiritually alive and dead to the senses. A brother came to Abba Macarius and said to him: "Abba, give me an edifying word on how to be saved!" The elder told him: "Go to the cemetery and revile the dead." The brother went, reviled them and threw stones at them. When he

returned he told the elder what had happened. The elder asked him: "And did they say nothing to you?" "Nothing," he replied. The elder told him: "Tomorrow go back and praise them." The brother went and praised the dead, saying: "Apostles, saints, righteous ones!" Then he went to the elder and said: "I extolled them." The elder asked him: "And did they not answer anything?" The brother said: "Nothing." The elder told him: "You see how much you reviled them and they said nothing, and how much you praised them and they said nothing to you. So you, if you wish to be saved, be like the dead and do not think about the insults of people, nor about the praises of people, and you can be saved."

Nevertheless, while we are called not to criticize, does this mean that we cannot expose wrongs in general? Are we really not to say anything against those who do wrong? Did not the Lord command: if your brother sins before you, then go and expose him? This is something completely different, that is, to expose the sins of a brother for his correction. The Lord commands one to tell another of his vices so that one may share in the salvation of a sinner. Only one should not be severe in discussing it, and not reprimand him in anger; one must compassionately and meekly awaken the soul which is weighed down with sins, which are heavy, not by one's condemnation, but with the fear of God. The greatest good you can do for a fallen brother or someone who has slandered you is to offer up prayer for him. "If you truly love your neighbor, as you say, then pray secretly and do not mock the man; for this is the kind of love that is acceptable to the Lord" (*Ladder*, Step 10:4).

In a wider sense the Christian should not keep silent when truth is trampled underfoot or when the teachings of the Church are attacked. With all one's powers and all one's abilities, each according to his rank and calling, Christians should oppose the powers of evil, denounce, admonish—through sermon, word, or pen.

Generally speaking, there are different degrees of censuring one's neighbor. "It is one thing to slander," teaches Abba Dorotheus, "another to judge, and another to disparage. To censure means to say of someone: this person has lied, or has lost his temper, or has fallen into fornication, or did something of this sort. But to condemn [judge] means to say: this person is a liar, a raving maniac, a fornicator. For thus one judges the very disposition of his soul, giving sentence upon his entire life. Disparagement means not only to judge another but to despise him, that is, to look down upon him and be disgusted with him as with some sort of filth: this is already judging and much more destructive." (Homily 6)

In as much as we are "the one body of Christ, we are all members of one another" (Romans 12:5), and should suffer for one another, help one another, especially in the task of salvation. The closer we are to each other, the closer we are to God. In his penetrating sermons Abba Dorotheus mentions a

marvellous illustration of the unity with one another: "Suppose that the world is a circle and the center of the circle is God; the radii, that is, the straight lines which go out from the center of the circle, are the paths of human life. Thus as the saints come further into the circle in their desire to be near God, so much do they come closer to one another, and the closer they are to one another the closer they are to God. And vice versa" (Homily 6).

From all that we have said one can draw the conclusion that each person must learn not to criticize, as the easiest method to salvation, for the truly, as the sages say: Not judging is salvation without effort. In confirmation of this we shall mention an example from *The Prologue*, where it is related concerning a monk who ate and drank as much as he wanted and had no desire to pray. He had only one virtue, which no one knew about: he judged no one but himself. Before he died he became extremely happy, so that the brethren who came to say farewell and ask his forgiveness noted this and asked: "Are you really unafraid to die?" And he replied: "Forgive me, I was careless; but therefore I judged no one; and then an angel showed me my sins and tore up the list saying that I might depart to the Lord in peace for this alone, that I judged no one." And he reposed in peace.

If this monk was raised to such heights for this one virtue alone, then what can one say of those "fought the good fight" and did not judge? How sweet shall be the celestial reward for their earthly virtues! Let us also strive on, while earthly life still breathes in us, to gain, if in even a small measure, the perfection in spirit of detachments from vanities and aspiration to the heights.

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No one should receive Holy Communion without tears. This is possible and truly suitable for all. Since no one is without sin, even if he lived but a single day, and no one is able to keep his heart pure, it is evident that a man must not spend one single day of all his life without penitence and tears, as far as he is able. Even if he has not tears, at least he ought to seek them with all his power and soul. In no other way can he become sinless, nor may his heart become pure."

St. Symeon the New Theologian, Discourses 4.12

Upcoming Events 2008

15 November: Nativity Fast Begins, Baptism of Marcos Garcia
12-13 December: All-Night Vigil & Liturgy for St. Herman of Alaska.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!