

BLIND BARTIMAEUS OF JERICHO
Lord Have Mercy
Chief of Sinners

January 28, 2024
14th Sunday of Luke
Revision D

Gospel: Luke 18:35-43, Matthew 20:29-34, Mark 10:46-52

In the West, today’s Gospel lesson is also used in the weeks preceding Easter on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday.

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Blind Bartimaeus of Jericho

The healing of a blind man is covered at two other occasions in the Orthodox lectionary: The man born blind (John 9) on the 6th Sunday of Pascha and the two blind men of Galilee (Matthew 9:27-35) on the 7th Sunday after Pentecost. In each case, including today’s Gospel, a recurring theme is that some people who are physically blind have spiritual insight and that some who have good physical eyesight are completely blind to spiritual things. As John Chrysostom said¹, “Let us listen to these blind men, who were better than many that see”.

Whereas today’s Gospel took place in the Spring of 30 AD just before Holy Week, the man born blind was healed the previous Autumn and the two blind men of Galilee were healed a year before that. All of these have Messianic implications for those who have eyes to see it. Referring to the coming of the Messiah, Isaiah wrote: “Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped” (Isaiah 35:5; see also Isaiah 29:18, 42:7).

The context of today’s Gospel lesson is the final journey to Jerusalem, 30 AD. Jesus announced to the Twelve that they were going to Jerusalem and that He would be delivered to the Gentiles, mocked, insulted, spit on, scourged and killed. And He would rise on the third day. But this was hidden from them and they understood nothing (Luke 18:31-34).

As they passed by Jericho, they met a blind man who was begging. In the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark, some additional details are given. In Mark 10:46-52, the blind man was named Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus. In Matthew 20:29-34, Bartimaeus had a friend with him who was also blind. Together they continuously cried out, “Lord have mercy!” and neither the crowd nor the disciples could shut them up until Jesus responded to their request. Following his healing, Bartimaeus glorified God and so did all the people.

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¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXVI, 1.

Bartimaeus Teaches Us About Mercy

Bartimaeus and his friend together continuously cried out, “Lord have mercy!” and neither the crowd nor the disciples could shut them up until Jesus responded to their request. Their persistence teaches us a lot about our relationship with God.

Cyril of Alexandria comments² on the Faith of Bartimaeus by examining his use of the term Son of David. He stated that the blind men had some amazing insight into the identity of Christ.

“In what character then do they address to Him their prayer? Is it as to a mere man, according to the babbling of the Jews, who tried to stone Him with stones, saying in their utter folly, ‘for a good work we stone You not, but for blasphemy; because that You being a man make Yourself God’? (John 10:33). But must not the blind men have understood that the sight of the blind cannot be restored by human means, but requires, on the contrary, a divine power, and an authority such as God only possesses? For with God nothing whatever is impossible. The blind men drew near to Him, therefore, as to the Omnipotent God; but how then did they call Him the Son of David? What therefore can one answer to this? The following is perhaps, as I think the explanation. As they had been brought up in Judaism, and were by birth of that race, the predictions contained in the Law and the Holy Prophets concerning Christ of course had not escaped their knowledge. They had heard in the Temple the chanting of that passage in the book of the Psalms: ‘the Lord has sworn the truth to David, and will not reject it, that of the fruit of Your loins will I set upon Your throne’ (Psalm 131:11). They knew also that the Prophet Isaiah had said, ‘And there shall spring forth a shoot from the root of Jesse, and from his root shall a flower grow up (Isaiah 9:1). And again, this as well: ‘Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bring forth a son, and they shall call His Name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us’ (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23). As ones, therefore, who already believed that the Word, being God, had of His Own Will submitted to be born in the flesh of the holy virgin, they drew near to Him as to God, and said, ‘Have mercy upon me, Son of David (Luke 18:38). For Christ bears witness that this was their state of mind in offering their supplication, by saying unto them, ‘Your faith has saved you’” (Luke 18:42).

Cyril also pointed out that Bartimaeus:

- Referred to Jesus as Lord as well as Son of David (Luke 18:41)
- Asked Him to perform an act only God could do (Luke 18:41)
- Confessed his faith in spite of many rebukes (Luke 18:39)
- Glorified God following his healing (Luke 18:43).

² Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Gospel of Luke, Chapter 18, Homily 123, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 499.

John Chrysostom pointed out³ that Christ did not ask the blind men, “Do you believe?” as He had done with many others (e.g. Mark 5:36, 9:23, 11:22-24, John 11:40). Because their cry and their coming to Him was sufficient to make that obvious.

John Cassian described⁴ the bounty of God and how it is actually shaped according to the capacity of man’s faith. His aim is to draw mankind to salvation, but this can take different paths for different people. We hear the same words repeated, “Let it be done for you according to your faith”. There are many different circumstances where these words appear in the Scriptures, as described below. The bottom line is that God grants His healing not according to the uniform power of His Majesty, but according to the measure of the faith in which He finds each one, or as He Himself has imparted it to each one

“God’s ‘judgments are unsearchable and His ways past finding out!’ (Romans 11:33), by which He draws mankind to salvation. And this too we can prove by the instances of calls in the Gospels. For He chose Andrew and Peter and the rest of the apostles by the free compassion of His grace when they were thinking nothing of their healing and salvation (Mark 1:16-18). Zacchaeus, when in his faithfulness, he was struggling to see the Lord, and making up for his littleness of stature by the height of the sycamore tree, He not only received, but was actually honored by the blessing of His dwelling with him (Luke 19:2-9). Paul even against his will and resisting He drew to Him (Acts 9:1-6). Another He charged to cleave to Him so closely that when he asked for the shortest possible delay in order to bury his father, He did not grant it (Matthew 8:21-22). To Cornelius when constantly attending to prayers and alms, the way of salvation was shown by way of recompense. By the visitation of an angel he was bidden to summon Peter, and learn from him the words of salvation, whereby he might be saved with all his family (Acts 10:1-8). And so, the manifold wisdom of God grants with manifold and inscrutable kindness salvation to men; and imparts to each one according to his capacity the grace of His bounty. So that He wills to grant His healing not according to the uniform power of His Majesty, but according to the measure of the faith in which He finds each one, or as He Himself has imparted it to each one. For when one believed that for the cure of his leprosy the will of Christ alone was sufficient, He healed him by the simple consent of His will, saying: ‘I am willing; be cleansed’ (Matthew 8:3). When another prayed that He would come and raise his dead daughter by laying His hands on her, He entered his house as he had hoped, and granted what was asked of Him (Mark 5:22-43). When another believed that what was essential for his salvation depended on His command, and answered: ‘Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed’ (Matthew 8:8). He restored to their former strength the limbs that were relaxed, by the power of a word, saying: ‘Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you’ (Matthew 8:13). To others hoping for restoration from the touch of His hem, He granted rich gifts of healing (Matthew 9:20-22). To some, when asked, He bestowed remedies for their diseases. To others He afforded the means of healing unasked: others He urged on to hope, saying: ‘Do you want to be made well?’ (John 5:6) To others when they

³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXVI, 1.

⁴ John Cassian, 3rd Conference of Abbot Chaeremon, II, xiii, 15.

were without hope He brought help spontaneously. The desires of some He searched out before satisfying their wants, saying: ‘What do you want Me to do for you?’ (Matthew 20:32). To another who knew not the way to obtain what he desired, He showed it in His kindness, saying: ‘Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?’ (John 11:40). Among some so richly did He pour forth the mighty works of His cures that of them the Evangelist **says**, ‘And when Jesus went out, He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick’ (Matthew 14:14). But among others the unfathomable depth of Christ’s beneficence was so stopped up, that it was said: ‘Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed *them*. And He marveled because of their unbelief’ (Mark 6:5-6). And so, the bounty of God is actually shaped according to the capacity of man’s faith, so that to one it is said, ‘According to your faith let it be to you’ (Matthew 9:29). And to another: ‘Go your way; and as you have believed, *so* let it be done for you’ (Matthew 8:13); to another ‘O woman, great *is* your faith! Let it be to you as you desire’ (Matthew 15:28), and again to another: ‘Receive your sight; your faith has made you well’” (Luke 18:42).

John Chrysostom pointed out⁵ how these blind men had nothing else going for them in their poverty and hopelessness. All they had was their fervor and desire for Jesus to heal them.

“Let us learn that though we are very vile and outcast, but yet approach God with earnestness, even by ourselves we shall be able to affect whatever we ask. Notice these men, how, having none of the apostles to plead with them, but rather many to stop their mouths, they were able to pass over the hindrances, and to come to Jesus Himself. Matthew bears witness to no confidence of life in them, but earnestness sufficed them instead of all.”

“These then let us also emulate. Though God defers the gift, though there be many withdrawing us, let us not desist from asking. For in this way most of all shall we win God to us. See at least even here, how not poverty, not blindness, not their being unheard, not their being rebuked by the multitude, not anything else, impeded their exceeding earnestness. Such is the nature of a fervent and toiling soul.”

Cyril of Alexandria concluded⁶: “Understand from this, my beloved, that faith sets us also in Christ’s presence, and so brings us to God, as for us to be even counted worthy of His words. For when the blind men were brought to Him, He asked them, “What do you want Me to do for you?”” (Luke 18:41). This is an important question in that it directs us to what is our real desire. Do we just want something physical or does our desire go beyond that to true spiritual insight? Do I really want to be free of being enslaved to the passions or do I really like the passions and just want something temporary?

John Cassian pointed out⁷ how we are given the grace of opportunities for salvation and prosperous undertakings by God. But it is up to us to follow up the blessings which God gives us

⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXVI, 1.

⁶ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Gospel of Luke, Chapter 18, Homily 123, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 500.

⁷ John Cassian, Conference of Abbot Paphnutius, I, iii, 19.

with earnestness or indifference. Jesus passed by the blind men; this is grace. That they cried for mercy was an act of their own faith. The ten lepers were all healed after asking for mercy; that was grace. When one of them returned to give thanks, that was the response of a grateful heart that the Lord looks for.

“Scripture declares that it was the free gift of God that Israel was brought into the land of promise, that many nations were destroyed before them, that nations more numerous and mightier than them were given up into their hands. But whether Israel utterly destroys them, or whether it preserves them alive and spares them, and whether or not it makes a league with them, and makes marriages with them or not, it declares lies in their own power. By this testimony we can clearly see what we ought to ascribe to free will, and what to the design and daily assistance of the Lord. It belongs to divine grace to give us opportunities of salvation and prosperous undertakings and victory: but that it is ours to follow up the blessings which God gives us with earnestness or indifference. This same fact we see is plainly taught in the healing of the blind men. For the fact that Jesus passed by them, was a free gift of Divine providence and condescension. But the fact that they cried out and said ‘Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!’ (Matthew 20:31), was an act of their own faith and belief. That they received the sight of their eyes was a gift of Divine pity. But that after the reception of any blessing, the grace of God, and the use of free will both remain, the case of the ten lepers (Luke 17:12-19), who were all healed alike, shows us. For when one of them through goodness of will returned thanks, the Lord looking for the nine, and praising the one, showed that He was ever anxious to help even those who were unmindful of His kindness. For even this is a gift of His visitation; that he receives and commends the grateful one, and looks for and censures those who are thankless.”

Cyril of Alexandria referred⁸ to Bartimaeus as being freed from a double blindness: first from the blindness of his eyes, and second from a blindness of heart and mind. The vision of his heart was infectious also in that it caused “all the people when they saw it, to give praise to God” (Luke 18:43). Thus, even the people that had rebuked Bartimaeus now began to see spiritually themselves. This happens to us also: as we see and hear from God, we help those around us to do so also. However, there will always be those who refuse to see: like the Scribes and Pharisees who crucified Jesus a few weeks after this.

John Chrysostom stated⁹ that Jesus seemed to always ask people what they wanted Him to do for them. This is to demonstrate their virtue and to show that they were worthy. After He healed them, they proved He was right by being grateful for the gift.

“Why does Jesus ask them what they wanted Him to do for them? Lest anyone should think that when they wish to receive one thing, He gives them another thing. This is usual with Him on every occasion, first to make clear and demonstrate to all the virtue of those He is healing, and then to apply the cure, that He might lead on the others likewise to emulation. Another reason He did it this way is to show that they were enjoying the gift worthily. This He did with respect

⁸ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Gospel of Luke, Chapter 18, Homily 123, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 501.

⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXVI, 1.

to the Canaanite woman also (Matthew 15:22-28), this too in the case of the centurion (Matthew 8:5-13), this again as to her that had the issue of blood (Mark 5:25-35), or rather that marvelous woman even anticipated the Lord's inquiry. He didn't pass her by, but even after the cure singles her out. Such earnest care He had on every occasion to proclaim the good deeds of those that came to Him, and to show them to be much greater than they are; and He does this here also."

"Then, when they said what they wished, He had compassion on them, and touched them. For this alone is the cause of their cure, for which also He came into the world. But nevertheless, although it is mercy and grace, it seeks out the worthy. That they were worthy is clear, both from what they cried out, and from the fact that, when they had received, they did not hasten away, as many do, being ungrateful after the benefits. No, they were not like this, but were both persevering before the gift, and after the gift were grateful, for 'they followed Him'".

In early 30 AD, a few months before He was crucified, Jesus healed this pair of blind men near Jericho. They cried out to Jesus as He passed by, "Son of David, have mercy on us!" (Matthew 20:29-34) Jerome applied¹⁰ the wisdom of these blind men to our everyday life.

"Imitate those blind men for whose sake the Savior left His home and heritage and came to Jericho. They were sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death when the light shone upon them (Matthew 4:15-16). When they learned that it was the Lord who was passing by, they began to cry out saying: 'Son of David, have mercy on us' (Matthew 20:30). You too will have your sight restored, if you cry to Him, and cast away your filthy garments (Mark 10:50) at His call. 'When you turn and bewail yourself then you shall be saved, and then you shall be able to see where you have been'. Let Him but touch your scars and pass his hands over your eyeballs. Although you may have been born blind from the womb (John 9:1) and although your mother may have conceived you in sin (John 9:2-3), he will purge you with hyssop and you shall be clean, he will wash you and you shall be whiter than snow (Psalm 51:5, 7).

Other Blind Men Are Healed

Jesus healed other blind men; for example, earlier during His 3-year public ministry, Jesus was followed by two blind men. This event is covered in more detail on the 7th Sunday of Pascha.

"When Jesus departed from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out and saying, 'Son of David, have mercy on us!' And when He had come into the house, the blind men came to Him. And Jesus said to them, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' They said to Him, 'Yes, Lord'. Then He touched their eyes, saying, 'According to your faith let it be to you'. And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, saying, 'See that no one knows it'. But when they had departed, they spread the news about Him in all that country" (Matthew 9:27-31).

These two men were not very well off physically, but were strong in the Faith. The two blind men, whose only lot in life was begging, kept crying out as they followed Jesus (i.e. following

¹⁰ Jerome, Letter to Sabinianus, CXLVII, 9.

the noise of the crowd), “Son of David, have mercy on us!” (Matthew 9:27). This expression indicates that they recognized Jesus as Messiah. John Chrysostom stated¹¹ that the prophets also used the term “Son of David” when addressing the king, whom they wished to honor and declare great (compare Isaiah 37:35). Jesus allowed the blind men to continue crying out to Him along the way as He traveled to the house He was to stay at that evening.

Chrysostom explained¹² that there was a lot going on at this time. Jesus was trying to draw out the faith exhibited by the blind men; also, He was trying to show us to repel the glory that comes from the multitude. He was also instructing the Jewish leaders, who did exactly the opposite of the blind men. We note that the blind men progressed from calling Jesus “Son of David” to calling Him “Lord”. Jesus did similar things for the paralytic, Jairus’ daughter, the centurion, and His disciples from the storm.

Why can it be that Jesus put the blind men off, while they were crying out? Here again, He teaches us utterly to repel the glory that comes from the multitude. For because the house was near, He led them there to heal them in private. This is evident from the fact that He charged them to tell no one.

But this is no light charge against the Jews. When these blind men, though their eyes were struck out, receive the faith by hearing alone, but the Jews beheld the miracles, and having their sight to witness what was happening, do just contrary. Notice the earnestness of the blind men, both by their cry, and by their prayer itself. For they did not merely approach Him, but with loud cries, and saying nothing else but ‘mercy’.

And they called Him ‘Son of David’, because the name was thought to be honorable. In many places, for instance, the prophets likewise so called the kings, whom they wished to honor, and to declare great. Having brought them into the house, Jesus put to them a further question. In many cases He made a point of healing after people asked, lest any should suppose Him to be rushing upon these miracles through vainglory. And not on this account alone, but to indicate also that they deserve healing, and that no one should say, ‘If it was of mere mercy that He saved, all men ought to be saved’. For even His love to man has a kind of proportion; depending on the faith of those that are healed. But not for these causes only does He require faith of them, but since they called Him ‘Son of David’, He wanted to lead them up to what is higher. To teach them to entertain the imaginations they ought of Himself, He said, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ He did not say, ‘Do you believe that I am able to entreat my Father, that I am able to pray’ but, ‘that I am able to do this?’

What then is their word? ‘Yes, Lord’. They didn’t call Him Son of David any more, but soar higher, and acknowledge His dominion. And then at last He for His part lays His hand on them, saying, ‘According to your faith let it be to you’. And this He does to confirm their faith, and to show that they are participators in the good work, and to witness that their words were not words of flattery. For neither did He say, ‘Let your eyes be opened’, but, ‘According to your faith let it be to you’; which He said to many of them that came unto Him. Before the healing

¹¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXXII, 1.

¹² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXXII, 1.

of their bodies, He wanted to proclaim the faith in their soul; so, as both to make them more approved, and to render others more serious. Thus, with respect to the paralyzed also; for there too before giving nerve to the body, He raised up the fallen soul, saying, 'Son, your sins are forgiven you' (Mark 2:3-5). And the young damsel too, when He had raised her up, He detained, and by the food taught her who her Benefactor was (Mark 5:42). In the case of the centurion also He did in like manner, leaving the whole to his faith (Matthew 8:5-13). When delivering His disciples from the storm on the sea, He delivered them first from their lack of faith (Matthew 14:24-32). Just so likewise in this case; He knew, even before their cry, the secrets of their mind; but that He might lead on others also to the same earnestness, He makes them known to the rest as well, by the result of their cure proclaiming their hidden faith.

Irenaeus of Lyons stated¹³ that man has free will and that this is under his own control. Man's faith is his own, just like his opinion is his own. With respect to faith, man is in his own power and we should cultivate that.

"Not merely in works, but also in faith, God has preserved the will of man free and under his own control, saying, 'According to your faith let it be to you' (Matthew 9:29); thus, showing that there is a faith specially belonging to man, since he has an opinion specially his own. And again, 'If you can believe, all things *are* possible to him who believes' (Mark 9:23); and, 'Go your way; and as you have believed, *so* let it be done for you' (Matthew 8:13). Now all such expressions demonstrate that man is in his own power with respect to faith. And for this reason, 'He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him' (John 3:36). In the same manner therefore the Lord, both showing His own goodness, and indicating that man is in his own free will and his own power, said to Jerusalem, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate'" (Matthew 23:37-38).

Basil the Great stated¹⁴ that worship follows faith and faith is confirmed by power. The believer knows from what he believes and believes from what he knows. We may not comprehend, but still we know.

When did Abraham worship God? Was it not when he believed? And when did he believe? Was it not when he was called? Where in this place is there any testimony in Scripture to Abraham's comprehending? When did the disciples worship Him? Was it not when they saw creation subject to Him? It was from the obedience of sea and winds to Him that they recognized His Godhead (Matthew 8:27). Therefore, the knowledge came from the operations, and the worship from the knowledge. 'Do you believe that I am able to do this? They said to Him, "Yes, Lord"' (Matthew 9:28); and he worshipped Him. So, worship follows faith, and faith is confirmed by power. But if you say that the believer also knows, he knows

¹³ Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, IV, xxxvii, 5.

¹⁴ Basil the Great, Letter to Amphilochius, CCXXXIV, 3.

from what he believes; and *vice versa* he believes from what he knows. We know God from His power. We, therefore, believe in Him who is known, and we worship Him who is believed in.

Clement of Alexandria stated¹⁵ that nothing is lacking to faith; it is perfect and complete in itself. Having in anticipation grasped by faith that which is future, after the resurrection we receive it as present, as Christ said, “According to your faith let it be to you”. In illumination (Baptism) what we receive is knowledge, and the end of knowledge is rest.

“He says, ‘He who believes in the Son has everlasting life’ (John 3:36). If, then, those who have believed have life, what remains beyond the possession of eternal life? Nothing is lacking to faith, as it is perfect and complete in itself. If anything is lacking to it, it is not wholly perfect. But faith is not lame in any respect; nor after our departure from this world does it make us wait, who have believed, and received without distinction the earnest of future good. But having in anticipation grasped by faith that which is future, after the resurrection we receive it as present, in order that that may be fulfilled which was spoken, ‘According to your faith let it be to you’ (Matthew 9:29). And where faith is, there is the promise; and the consummation of the promise is rest. So that in illumination what we receive is knowledge, and the end of knowledge is rest — the last thing conceived as the object of aspiration. Just as inexperience comes to an end by experience, and perplexity by finding a clear outlet, so by illumination must darkness disappear. The darkness is ignorance, through which we fall into sins, completely blind as to the truth. Knowledge, then, is the illumination we receive, which makes ignorance disappear, and endows us with clear vision. Further, the abandonment of what is bad is the adopting of what is better. For what ignorance has bound, is by knowledge loosed; those bonds are with all speed slackened by human faith and divine grace, our transgressions being taken away by one Paeonian medicine¹⁶, the baptism of the Word. We are washed from all our sins, and are no longer entangled in evil. This is the one grace of illumination, that our characters are not the same as before our washing.”

Lord Have Mercy

The Church has taken the persistence of Bartimaeus and his friend to heart and the term “Lord have mercy” appears frequently in the Orthodox Liturgy. But there is a depth to this usage that often goes unappreciated.

The Greek word *eleos* meaning compassion or mercy is used widely in the New Testament as a noun, verb (to have mercy), adjective (merciful) and as a noun directed toward someone (compassionateness). This latter use of the root word *eleos* is often translated “*alms!*” Following is a summary of the use of *eleos*:

¹⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, I, 6.

¹⁶ This term comes from ancient Mesopotamia where the goddess Gula presided over health and healing. The rod, intertwined with serpents, which today is the insignia of the medical profession, originated with her son, Ninazu. See <https://www.ancient.eu/article/687/health-care-in-ancient-mesopotamia/>.

People Continuously Crying Out “Lord Have Mercy”:

- Blind Bartimaeus and companion
- Two blind men: (Matthew 9:27-31)
- Canaanite woman for her daughter; (Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30)
- Ten lepers: (Luke 17:11-19)

People Begging, Imploring, Trembling, Prostrating:

- Man for epileptic son: (Matthew 17:14-21, Mark 9:14-29, Luke 9:37-42)
- Jairus for daughter: (Luke 8:40-56, Matthew 9:18-26, Mark 5:21-43)
- Woman with hemorrhage: (Luke 8:43-48, Matthew 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34)
- One leper: (Luke 5:12-16, Matthew 8:1-4, Mark 1:40-45)

In these last three cases, *eleos* isn't mentioned but is implied.

Many Times, the Lord Shows Mercy Without Specific Requests:

- Virgin Mary at Incarnation (Luke 1:46-55)
- Elizabeth at the birth of John (Luke 1:57-58)
- Zachariah, regarding John's mission (Luke 1:67-79)
- The Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 7:25, 1 Timothy 1:13-16)
- The Gadarene Demoniac (Mark 5:19)
- Epiphroditus (Philippians 2:27)
- The Gentiles (Romans 15:9, 1 Peter 2:10)
- All believers (Romans 11:30-32, 2 Corinthians 4:1, Ephesians 2:4, Titus 3:5, 1 Peter 1:3, Jude 21)
- God has mercy on whom He will (Romans 9:15-18)

The Lord Desires Mercy, Not Sacrifice:

Under the Old Testament Law, animal sacrifice was required for forgiveness of sins. The animal sacrifice represented judgment on the animal in place of the offeror, and this foreshadowed Christ's sacrifice for us. However, without mercy in one's heart, sacrifice is pointless. For example:

- The Prophets Hosea and Micah had said it (Hosea 6:6, Micah 6:6-8)
- The Scribes and Pharisees didn't understand it (Matthew 9:13, 12:7, 23:23)
- Judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy (James 2:13)
- The wisdom from above is full of mercy (James 3:17)

Mercy is Often Called “Alms”:

Exploring further the depth of the word *eleos*, it is often translated “alms” from its use in context. But “alms” are merely mercy shown from one person to another in terms of money. Following are some examples where *eleos* could be translated either “mercy” or “alms”:

- The Good Samaritan showed mercy (Luke 10:37)
- Dorcas of Lydda was full of good works and of mercy (Acts 9:36)

- Cornelius of Caesarea showed much mercy to the people (Acts 10:1-2). His mercy went up as a memorial before God, (Acts 10:4) and was remembered in the sight of God (Acts 10:31).
- Paul took a collection in Achaia and Macedonia (Romans 15:25-28) at the end of his third missionary journey. He called this mercies and offerings for his nation (Acts 24:17).
- By showing mercy, we gain treasure in heaven (Luke 12:31-33)
- Jesus spoke to the Pharisees: “You clean the outside of the cup or dish, but the inside is full of robbery and wickedness. Give mercy and the inside is clean also” (Luke 11:39-41). Showing mercy cleans out our insides also.
- When we show mercy, we are exhorted to do so cheerfully (Romans 12:8). There is a lot to be cheerful about.
- And also, secretly, that our Father who sees in secret will reward us openly (Matthew 6:1-4), where only God sees the good stuff.

All this is quite a depth to the simple request, “Lord have mercy” that we say so often for ourselves and others. Mercy was a major focus of the message of the Twelve Apostles. We see this in their greetings in their writings: “Grace, mercy and peace...” (2 John 3, 1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 1:2, Titus 1:4). “Mercy, peace and love...” (Jude 2). “Peace and mercy on the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). With this as a background, it’s hard to imagine that we could say “Lord have mercy” too often.

Chief of Sinners

January 28, 2024
31st Sunday after Pentecost
Revision B

Epistle: 1 Timothy 1:15-17

Today's Epistle lesson is used in the West on either the 13th or 19th Sunday after Pentecost (August or September).

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God Wishes to Save Sinners

Paul stated, “This *is* a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15).

Today's Epistle lesson addresses how far God will go in showing mercy to mankind. The Jews of Paul's day had a hard time with this. John Chrysostom stated¹⁷ this very well:

“The favors of God so far exceed human hope and expectation, that often they are not believed. For God has bestowed on us such things as the mind of man never looked for, never thought of. It is for this reason that the Apostles spent much discourse in securing a belief in the gifts that are granted us by God. Those, who were enemies and sinners, who were neither justified by the Law nor by works, were immediately through faith alone advanced to the highest favor”.

To the Jews of Paul's day, “It seemed to them incredible that a man who had misspent all his former life in vain and wicked actions, should afterwards be saved by his faith alone”.

Some of the Gentiles, on the other hand, misinterpreted this grace in the other direction, thinking that the more sin God forgave the better (Romans 5:20-6:1, 6:15, 3:8). Paul had to set them straight: they died to sin when they were baptized (Romans 6:2-3).

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¹⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, IV, v. 15.

Basil the Great encouraged¹⁸ us to think of our last day on earth before we die. When we consider all the evil we will face at death in our next waking moment, we should try to escape now! We should never despair, for there is a way of salvation. Considering what we face without repentance, it makes no sense whatever to do anything else.

“Let us think of our last day, for we will surely not, live forever. Think of the distress, the gasping for breath, the hour of death, the imminent sentence of God, the angels hastening on their way. The soul will be fearfully dismayed, and lashed to agony by the consciousness of sin, turning itself piteously to things of this life and to the inevitable necessity of that long life to be lived elsewhere. Picture as it rises in your imagination, the conclusion of all human life, when the Son of God shall come in His glory with His angels, ‘Our God shall come, and shall not keep silent; a fire shall devour before Him’ (Psalm 50:3). He shall come to judge the living and the dead, to render to everyone according to his work; when that terrible trumpet with its mighty voice shall wake those that have slept through the ages, those that have done good shall come forth to the resurrection of life, and those that have done evil to the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:29). Remember the vision of Daniel, and how he brings the judgment before us. ‘I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment *was* white as snow, and the hair of His head *was* like pure wool. His throne *was* a fiery flame, its wheels a burning fire. A fiery stream rushed forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, and the books were opened’ (Daniel 7:9-10). This clearly discloses in the hearing of all, angels and men, things good and evil, things done openly and in secret, deeds, words, and thoughts all at once. Those men who have lived wicked lives, where then shall that soul hide which in the sight of all these spectators shall suddenly be revealed in its fullness of shame? With what kind of body shall it sustain those endless and unbearable pangs in the place of fire unquenched, and of the worm that never dies in the depth of Hades, dark and horrible. There will be bitter wailings, loud lamenting, weeping and gnashing of teeth and anguish without end! From all these woes there is no release after death; no device, no means of coming forth from the chastisement of pain.”

“We can escape now! While we can, let us lift ourselves from the fall; let us never despair of ourselves, if only we depart from evil. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. ‘Come, let us worship and fall down before him; and weep before the Lord that made us’ (Psalm 95:6 LXX). The Word Who invited us to repentance calls out, ‘Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’ (Matthew 11:28). There is a way of salvation, if we will. ‘Death has prevailed and swallowed *men* up; but again the Lord God has taken away every tear from every face’ (Isaiah 25:8 LXX) of those that repent. The Lord is faithful in His words and holy in all His works (Psalm 145:13 LXX). He does not lie when He says, ‘Though your sins be scarlet they shall be as white as snow. Though your sins are as purple, I will make them white as snow; and though they are as scarlet, I will make *them* white as wool’ (Isaiah 1:18 LXX). The great Physician of souls, Who is the ready liberator of all who are enslaved by sin, is ready to heal our

¹⁸ Basil the Great, Letter to a Fallen Virgin, XLVI, 5-6.

sickness. From Him come the words, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance’ (Matthew 9:12-13). What excuse does anyone have when He speaks thus? The Lord wishes to cleanse us from the trouble of our sickness and to show us light after darkness. The good Shepherd, Who left those that had not wandered away, is seeking after the lost. If we give ourselves to Him He will not hold back. He, in His love, will not refuse even to carry us on His own shoulders, rejoicing that He has found His sheep which was lost.”

Leo the Great emphasized¹⁹ that Christ marvelously took our place in the consequences of death that we might join Him in the Resurrection. We need to show our gratitude by daily progress, and by running with the steps of faith, by the works of mercy and by the love of righteousness.

“Paul said, ‘This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’ (1 Timothy 1:15). For God’s mercy towards us is the more wonderful in that Christ died not for the righteous or for the holy, but for the unrighteous and wicked; and though the nature of the Godhead could not sustain the sting of death, yet at His birth He took from us that which He might offer for us. Of old He threatened our death with the power of His death saying, ‘I will deliver *them* out of the hand of Hades, and will redeem them from death. Where is thy penalty, O death? O Hades, where is thy sting?’ (Hosea 13:14 LXX). By dying He underwent the laws of hell, but by rising again He broke them, and so destroyed the continuity of death, so as to make it temporal instead of eternal. ‘For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive’ (1 Corinthians 15:22). Let that come to pass of which Paul speaks, ‘those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again’ (2 Corinthians 5:15). Because the old things have passed away and all things have become new, let no one remain in his old carnal life, but let us all be renewed by daily progress and growth in piety. However much a man is justified yet so long as he remains in this life, he can always be more approved and better. If he is not advancing he is going backward; and he that is gaining nothing is losing something. Let us run with the steps of faith, by the works of mercy, in the love of righteousness, that keeping the day of our redemption spiritually, ‘not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened *bread* of sincerity and truth’ (1 Corinthians 5:8), we may deserve to be partakers of Christ’s resurrection.”

Leo the Great further pondered²⁰ the enormity of what Christ did. This was truly the wisdom of God in that even many of His murderers were saved afterward. He used the madness of the blinded people and changed the evil of the wicked into the goodness of the believing. He even tried to recall Judas from the awful crime he had conceived; but Judas refused, such that he had no excuse for his crime at all.

“The case of the Crucified is so different from that of His crucifiers that what Christ undertook could not be reversed, while what they did could be wiped out. He Who came to save sinners did not refuse mercy even to His murderers, but changed the evil of the wicked into the goodness of the believing. God’s grace was

¹⁹ Leo the Great, Sermons, LIX, 8.

²⁰ Leo the Great, Sermons, LXVII, 3.

so wonderful, being mercifully put in force, not according to men's merits, but according to the multitude of the riches of God's wisdom and knowledge, that they who had shed Christ's blood were received into the baptismal flood. When the preaching of Peter pierced the hearts of the Jews, they acknowledged the iniquity of their crime, saying, 'Men *and* brethren, what shall we do?' Peter said, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call'. The Scripture goes on to say, 'those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*' (Acts 2:37-41). In being willing to suffer their furious rage, the Lord Jesus Christ was in no way the Author of their crimes. He did not force them to desire this, but permitted them to be able, and used the madness of the blinded people just as He did also the treachery of His betrayer. By kind acts and words He tried to recall Judas from the awful crime he had conceived; by taking him for a disciple, by promoting him to be an apostle, by warning him with signs, by admitting him to the revelation of holy mysteries²¹, Judas lacked no degree of kindness to correct him; he had no excuse for his crime at all."

Paul: Chief of Sinners

To illustrate how much God will forgive, Paul used himself as an example. Prior to his conversion, Paul had not just rejected the truth, but had hunted down other Christians, pursuing them to foreign cities, causing them to blaspheme and putting them to death (Acts 26:9-11). In doing so, Paul stated in the verses prior to our Epistle lesson that he blasphemed himself (1 Timothy 1:13). And not only did God forgive Paul, but He counted him faithful and put him into the diaconate with the Apostles (1 Timothy 1:12). Chrysostom stated²² it this way:

"No one who should see a prisoner admitted into a palace could doubt whether he obtained mercy. This was visibly the situation with Paul, for he makes himself the example. Nor is he ashamed to call himself a sinner, but rather delights in it. By thus doing, he can best demonstrate the miracle of God's regard for him and that He had thought him worthy of such extraordinary kindness".

John Chrysostom stated²³ that we can take comfort in looking at the life of Paul. No matter how bad we have been, we have not been worse than Paul. Paul referred to himself as "the chief of sinners" due to what he did; yet he became an Apostle rather quickly! We have no excuse for delaying our repentance.

"Even though we may be a reviler, covetous, or whatever we are, let us not despair; consider what Paul was (1 Timothy 1:13). He was 'a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man, and the chief of sinners' (1 Timothy 1:15). Suddenly he rose to the summit of virtue; his former life proved no hindrance to him. No one clings to vice with so great frenzy as Paul did to the war against the Church; he put his life into it. Because he didn't have ten thousand hands that he might stone Stephen with all of them, he was upset. Nevertheless he found how he might stone Stephen with more hands; namely those of the false witnesses (Acts

²¹ This especially refers to the Eucharist, of which Judas was a partaker just before his betrayal of Christ (Matthew 26:14, 25, 47).

²² John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, IV, v. 15.

²³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XXII, 6.

6:12-14) whose clothes he kept (Acts 7:57-58). When he entered into houses like a wild beast (and in no other way did he rush in), he hauled them to prison, tore up men and women, filled all things with tumult, confusion and innumerable conflicts (Acts 8:3, Galatians 1:13). So terrible was he that the Apostles, even after his most glorious change, did not venture to join themselves to him” (Acts 9:26).

Others of the great saints also accuse themselves as sinners, just like Paul did, to emphasize their unworthiness before God. John Chrysostom stated²⁴ that we should speak evil of our own sins, but we should not busy ourselves about those of other people; and he listed some of the saints who did this.

“The Saints accuse themselves indeed, but they spare others. Paul said he was the chief of sinners, and that God had compassion on him who was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious (1 Timothy 1:13), and called himself one born out of due time, not even thinking himself worthy to be called an Apostle (1 Corinthians 15:8-9). Peter said ‘Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord’ (Luke 5:8). Matthew styled himself a publican even in the days of his Apostleship (Matthew 10:3). David cried out, ‘My transgressions have gone over mine head: they have pressed heavily upon me like a weighty burden’ (Psalm 38:4 LXX). Isaiah lamented, ‘I *am* a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips’ (Isaiah 6:5). The three children in the furnace of fire, confessed that they have sinned and transgressed, and have not kept the commandments of God (Daniel 3:28 LXX). Daniel again makes the same lamentation” (Daniel 9:4-14)

How did Paul manage to obtain such great mercy from God? Not only did he persecute the Church, but he caused those of the saints that he was persecuting to blaspheme God (Acts 26:11). Paul states that he obtained mercy, because he did so ignorantly in unbelief (1 Timothy 1:13). John Chrysostom pointed out²⁵ what Paul meant by “ignorantly in unbelief”. Others knew what they were doing; Paul didn’t.

“Why then did other Jews not obtain mercy? Because what they did, they did willfully, not ignorantly, well knowing what they did. John stated, ‘Even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess *Him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God’ (John 12:42-43). Christ said to them, ‘How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that *comes* from the only God?’ (John 5:44) The parents of the blind man ‘said these *things* because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed *that* He *was* Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue’ (John 9:22). The Jews themselves said, ‘You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!’ (John 12:19). Thus their love of power was in their way everywhere. When they admitted that no one can forgive sins but God only, and Christ immediately did that very thing, which they had confessed to be a sign of divinity (Mark 2:7-11), this could not be a case of ignorance.”

²⁴ John Chrysostom, Against Those Who Say that Demons Govern Human Affairs, I, 1.

²⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, III, v. 13.

John Chrysostom described²⁶ the reaction of the Apostle Paul to Christ after his conversion. Paul did not hide his former life, but admitted that he was totally unworthy to be called as an Apostle. Paul describes why he referred to himself as the “chief of sinners”.

“‘Christ came to His own’ (John 1:11), not for His personal need, but to do good to His own people. Yet not even so did His own receive Him; they repelled Him, cast Him out of the vineyard, and slew Him (Matthew 21:33-44). Yet not for this even did He shut them out from repentance, but granted them, if they had been willing, after such wickedness as this, to wash off all their transgressions by faith in Him, and to be made equal to those who had done no such thing. Paul’s history loudly declares this. Paul, after the Cross, persecuted Christ and stoned His martyr Stephen by those many hands (Acts 7:57-58); yet he repented, condemned his former sins, and ran to Him whom he had persecuted (Acts 26:11-18). Christ immediately enrolled him among His friends, and the chief of them, having appointed him a herald and teacher of the entire world, who had been ‘a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man’ (1 Timothy 1:13). Rejoicing at the loving-kindness of God, Paul has proclaimed aloud, recording in his writings as on a pillar, the deeds formerly dared by him. He thought it better that his former life should be exhibited in the sight of all, so that the greatness of the free gift of God might appear. Paul could have obscured God’s ineffable and indescribable loving-kindness by hesitating to parade before all men his own error. But he describes his persecution, his plotting, his wars against the Church, at one time saying, ‘I am not worthy to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God’ (1 Corinthians 15:9). At another time he said, ‘Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief’ (1 Timothy 1:15). And again, ‘You have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to destroy it*’” (Galatians 1:13).

Paul referred to himself as the chief of sinners: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Timothy 1:15). Yet elsewhere, he refers to himself as “blameless concerning the righteousness which is in the Law” (Philippians 3:6). That is, he kept the Law, as interpreted by the Pharisees, perfectly²⁷. Yet keeping the Law was not a substitute for faith, since, “all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Therefore, Paul limited his former righteousness to that which is in the Law. John Chrysostom stated²⁸ about this that if Paul kept the Law perfectly (according to men), no one else can be called righteous.

“How is it, that Paul calls himself a sinner, and, the chief of sinners, whereas he elsewhere asserts that he was ‘blameless concerning the righteousness which is in the Law’. With respect to the righteousness which God has done and the justification which is really sought, even those who are righteous in the Law are sinners, ‘for all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God’. Therefore he does not say righteousness simply, but ‘the righteousness which is in the Law’. A man that has acquired wealth, with respect to himself, appears rich; but upon a comparison with the treasures of kings he is very poor and the chief of the poor. So it is in this case. Compared with Angels, even righteous men are sinners; and if Paul, who wrought the righteousness that is in the Law, was the chief of sinners, what other man can be called righteous? He says not this to condemn his own life as impure, let not this be imagined; but comparing his own legal righteousness with the righteousness of God, he shows it to be worth nothing; and not only so, but he proves those who possess it to be sinners.”

Paul Obtained Mercy

²⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, X, 1.

²⁷ The Pharisees, however, had a lower standard than the Lord Jesus. For more discussion on this, see the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, “Doers of the Law”.

²⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, IV, v. 15.

Paul stated, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life” (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

John Chrysostom used²⁹ an analogy to illustrate how Paul was a pattern to those who are going to believe on Christ. If Paul could be forgiven, anyone can be forgiven! God could not find a sinner greater than Paul that so required all His pardon, all His long-suffering. This gives us comfort that none of our sins are so great that the Lord cannot pardon us. And thus we say so often: “Lord have mercy.”

“Paul having obtained mercy on account of his ignorance does not so much imply that he who obtained mercy was a sinner, or under deep condemnation. But to say that he obtained mercy in order that no sinner hereafter might despair of finding mercy, but that each might feel sure of obtaining the like favor, this is an excess of humiliation. Even in calling himself the chief of sinners, ‘a blasphemer and a persecutor’ (1 Timothy 1:13), and one ‘not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God’ (1 Corinthians 15:9), he had said nothing like it before. We can see this by an example. Suppose a populous city, all whose inhabitants were wicked, some more so, and some less, but all deserving of condemnation. Let one among that multitude be more deserving of punishment than all the rest, and guilty of every kind of wickedness. If it were declared that the king was willing to pardon all, it would be readily believed, if they were to see this most wicked wretch actually pardoned. There could then be no longer any doubt. This is what Paul says, that God, willing to give men full assurance that He pardons all their transgressions, chose, as the object of His mercy, him who was more a sinner than any. When I obtained mercy, he argues, there could be no doubt for others. Colloquially we might say, ‘If God pardons such a one, he will never punish anybody’. Thus Paul shows that he himself, though unworthy of pardon, for the sake of others’ salvation, first obtained that pardon. Therefore, he says, since I am saved, let no one doubt of salvation.”

John Chrysostom stated³⁰ that the gifts bestowed on Paul were beyond mercy, but came from the excess love of God. Paul’s contribution was faith and love, which is all that we can contribute with our free will.

“Not only has God released us from the impending punishment, but He has made us ‘righteous’ too, and ‘sons’, and ‘brethren’, and ‘heirs’, and ‘joint-heirs’. Therefore it is that ‘grace was exceeding abundant’. The gifts bestowed on Paul were beyond mercy, since they are not such as would come from mercy only, but from affection and excessive love. Paul thus enlarged upon the love of God which was not content with showing mercy to a blasphemer and persecutor, but also conferred upon him other blessings in abundance. Paul guarded against that error of the unbelievers which takes away free will, by adding, ‘with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus’ (1 Timothy 1:14). Thus much only, he says, did we contribute.”

²⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, IV, v. 16.

³⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, III, v. 14.

Cyprian of Carthage applied³¹ Paul's words about blaspheming in ignorance to those who have been baptized and illumined by the Holy Spirit. Once illumined, they have no excuse for their former sins.

“It is in vain that some who are overcome by their reason oppose us on their customs, as if their customs were greater than the truth that has been revealed by the Holy Spirit. One who makes a simple mistake may be pardoned, as Paul says of himself, ‘I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief’ (1 Timothy 1:13). But after inspiration and revelation made to him, he who intelligently and knowingly perseveres in that course in which he had made a mistake, sins without pardon for his ignorance. He resists with a certain presumption and obstinacy, when he is overcome by reason. Let no one say, ‘We follow that which we have received from the Apostles’; the Apostles only delivered one Church and one baptism, which is only ordained in the one Church. We cannot find that anyone, when he had been baptized by heretics, was received by the Apostles in the same baptism, and communicated in such a way as that the Apostles should appear to have approved the baptism of heretics.”

Blessed Are the Merciful

Paul stated, “For this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life” (1 Timothy 1:16). Paul received a great deal of mercy; but then we also receive mercy, especially as we are merciful to others.

Jesus said, “Blessed *are* the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7). Also, “Love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful” (Luke 6:35-36). David stated that it helps in keeping good company: “With the merciful you will show yourself merciful; with a blameless man you will show yourself blameless” (Psalm 18:25).

John Chrysostom stated³² that Paul was not the only one who received a great deal of mercy; we all receive mercy a lot. Chrysostom notes how Epaphroditus, Peter and John also received mercy.

“God pities and is kind to man. ‘You are merciful to all, for You can do all things’ (Wisdom of Solomon 11:23). For this cause they were anointed with oil; and it was from mercy that He appointed the priesthood. Kings were anointed with oil; and if one would praise a ruler, he can make mention of nothing so becoming him as mercy. Pity is peculiar to power. Consider that the world was established by pity, and then imitate your Lord. ‘The mercy of man is for his neighbor, but the mercy of the Lord is for all living beings’ (Ecclesiasticus 18:13). What does it mean, ‘on all flesh?’ Whether it means sinners or just men, we all need the mercy of God; we all enjoy it, whether it is Paul, Peter or John. Listen to their own words.

³¹ Cyprian of Carthage, Epistles, LXXII, 13.

³² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Philippians, IV, v. 30.

Paul says, ‘I obtained mercy because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief’ (1 Timothy 1:13). Afterwards there was still need of mercy. Paul says, ‘I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God *which was* with me.’ (1 Corinthians 15:10). Of Epaphroditus Paul said, ‘He was sick almost unto death; but God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow’ (Philippians 2:27). And again he says, ‘We were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver *us*’ (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). Again, ‘I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. The Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve *me* for His heavenly kingdom’ (2 Timothy 4:17-18). Everywhere we find him glorying in this, that by mercy he was saved. Peter, too, became great, because mercy was shown him. Listen to Christ saying to Peter, ‘Satan has asked for you, that he may sift *you* as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail’ (Luke 22:31-32). John, too, became great through mercy, and in short all of them. Listen to Christ when He says, ‘You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you’ (John 15:16). We all have need of the mercy of God, as it is written, ‘The mercy of God is on all flesh’. If the Apostles needed the mercy of God, what should one say of the rest of us?”

John Chrysostom spoke³³ of how the Lord has been merciful to us; we in turn need to be merciful to others. We need to go well out of our way to extend mercy to others if we expect the Lord to continue being merciful to us.

“Prayer is a preservative of our souls. But it is great when we do things worthy of it, and do not render ourselves unworthy. When we go to the priest for confession, and he shall say to us, ‘The Lord will have mercy on you, my son’, do not confide in the word only, but add also works. Do acts worthy of mercy; God will bless us, if we do things worthy of blessing. He will bless us, if we show mercy to our neighbor. For the things which we wish to obtain from God, we ought first to impart to our neighbors. But if we deprive our neighbors of them, how can we wish to obtain them? ‘Blessed’, He says, ‘are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy’ (Matthew 5:7). If men show mercy to such, much more will God, but to the unmerciful by no means. ‘Judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy’” (James 2:13).

“An excellent thing is mercy! Why then have we not done it to one another? Do we wish to be pardoned, when you offend? Why then do we not ourselves pardon him who has offended us? We come to God, asking of Him the kingdom of heaven, and we ourselves do not give money when it is begged of us. For this cause we do not obtain mercy, because we do not show mercy. Has not the Laver saved us, who had committed infinite evils? It has delivered us from them, not that we should commit them again, but that we may not commit them. For ‘how shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?’” (Romans 6:2).

³³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Philemon, III, Moral.

Clement of Alexandria stated³⁴ that one can be merciful even though one is poor. Desiring to be merciful, even if economically or physically unable, counts the same before God as one who has the means to do so.

“There are two kinds of penitents. The more common are the ones who fear on account of what they’ve done. The other feels the shame which the spirit feels arising from conscience. For either kind, God says, ‘Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy’ (Matthew 5:7). Mercy is not, as some of the philosophers have imagined, pain on account of others’ calamities, but rather something good, as the prophets say. God said, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’ (Hosea 6:6, Matthew 9:13, 12:7). He means by the merciful, not only those who do acts of mercy, but also those who wish to do them, though they are not able. Sometimes we wish by the gift of money or by personal effort to do mercy, as to assist one in want, or help one who is sick, or stand by one who is in any emergency. But we are not able either from poverty, disease or old age to carry out our purpose, in reference to the things to which we are impelled. Those, who have entertained the wish, share in the same honor with those who have the ability, although others have the advantage of resources” (2 Corinthians 8:12).

John Chrysostom pointed out³⁵ that obtaining mercy from God is a whole lot greater than any act that we can do to show mercy to our fellow man. Therefore those who show mercy really are blessed.

“If those, who don’t covet other men’s goods, enjoy so great abundance from God, much more will they who give up their own goods. He said, ‘Blessed are the merciful’. Here He seems to me to speak not of those only who show mercy in giving of money, but those likewise who are merciful in their actions. There are many ways of showing mercy, and this commandment is broad.”

“What is the reward for this? ‘They shall obtain mercy’ (Matthew 5:7). While it may seem to be a sort of equal recompense, obtaining mercy is a far greater thing than the act of showing mercy. Whereas those who show mercy as men, they obtain mercy from the God of all; and it is not the same thing, man’s mercy, versus God’s. As wide as is the interval between wickedness and goodness, so far is being merciful removed from obtaining mercy.”

John Chrysostom cautioned³⁶ about asking for mercy from God when we are showing no mercy to our fellow men. If we can’t let go of anger, we are thrusting a sword into ourselves. A good practical example of how we appear before God is for us to beg God for mercy at the same time that we are beating one of our fellow men with a club.

“If we make intercession to God against our fellow man instead of forgiving him, what hope of salvation will we then have? We ought to appease God, but instead we provoke Him; putting on the garb of a suppliant, but uttering the cries of a wild beast, and darting out against ourselves those shafts of the wicked one. Paul makes mention of prayer, requiring nothing except the observance of this commandment: ‘I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy

³⁴ Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, IV, 6.

³⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XV, 6.

³⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XIX, 11.

hands, without wrath and doubting' (1 Timothy 2:8). When we need of mercy, not even then do we let go our anger; we are rather exceedingly mindful of it. We know that we are thrusting the sword into ourselves; when will it be possible for us to become merciful, and to spew out the evil venom of this wickedness?"

"Suppose someone should approach us seeking to obtain mercy. Then, in the midst of his lying prostrate on the ground begging us, he should see an enemy; leaving off supplicating us, suppose he began to beat his enemy with a club. What would be our reaction? (He obviously doesn't treat others like he is asking us to treat him.) Would we not be angrier with him than we were before he began supplicating us? Consider that this takes place with regard to God all the time. We make supplication to God; yet we leave off our supplication and smite our enemy with our words, thus insulting the Laws of God. He made a Law to dismiss all anger (Matthew 5:22-24); yet we summon Him against those that have bothered us, and require God to do things contrary to His own commandments. Is it not enough for us in the way of revenge, that we ourselves transgress the Law of God; but we ask God to do so likewise? Has He forgotten what He commanded? Is He just a man who spoke these things? This is God, who knows all things, and whose will is that His own Laws be kept with the utmost exactness. So far from doing these things which we ask of Him, He regards us, who say these things, with aversion and hatred, and exacts of us the most extreme penalty. How then do we seek to obtain from Him things that He very seriously asks us to avoid?"

The Only God

Paul stated, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, *be* honor and glory forever and ever" (1 Timothy 1:17). There are many implications in Paul's words. Let us explore some of the known characteristics of God.

Who is the King Eternal? Father or Son?

One might ask Who Paul is referring to here, the Father or the Son? As we will see below, it could be either or both.

Ambrose of Milan stated³⁷ that Jesus, an Eternal King and the Son of an Eternal King, came to receive a kingdom from us. This world to Him was a far-off country.

"In divine fashion Jesus gave that parable of the rich man, who went to a far-off country to receive a kingdom, and to return, thus describing Himself in the substance of the Godhead, and of His Manhood. He being rich in the fullness of His Godhead, 'was made poor for us though He was rich and an eternal King' (1 Timothy 1:17), and the Son of an eternal King. He went to a foreign country in taking on Him a body, for He entered upon the ways of men as though upon a strange journey, and came into this world to prepare for Himself a kingdom from among us."

³⁷ Ambrose of Milan, Exposition of the Christian Faith, V, xii, 145-146.

“Jesus therefore came to this earth to receive for Himself a kingdom from us, to whom He says, ‘The kingdom of God is within you’ (Luke 17:21). This is the kingdom which Christ has received, this the kingdom which He has delivered to the Father. How did He receive for Himself a kingdom, Who was a King eternal? ‘The Son of Man therefore came to receive a kingdom and to return’ (Luke 19:12-15). The Jews were unwilling to acknowledge Him, of whom He says, ‘But bring here those enemies of Mine, who did not want Me to reign over them, and slay *them* before Me’” (Luke 19:27).

Irenaeus of Lyons summarizes³⁸ the Scriptures by saying that Jesus is the only man that is called God and Lord. As such, He was born eternally from the Father, and born in time from the Virgin.

‘Who shall declare His generation?’ (Isaiah 53:8) Since ‘the heart is deep, beyond all things; and it is the man, and who can know him?’ (Jeremiah 17:9 LXX) But he to whom the Father which is in heaven has revealed Him (Matthew 16:16), knows Him, so that he understands that He who ‘were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God’ (John 1:13), is the Son of man, this is Christ, the Son of the living God. The Scriptures show that no one of the sons of Adam is as to everything, and absolutely, called God, or named Lord. He is Himself in His own right, beyond all men who ever lived, God, Lord, King Eternal, and the Incarnate Word, proclaimed by all the prophets, the Apostles, and by the Spirit Himself. This may be seen by all who have attained to even a small portion of the truth. Now, the Scriptures would not have testified these things of Him, if He had been a mere man. He had, beyond all others, in Himself that pre-eminent birth which is from the Most High Father. He also experienced that pre-eminent generation which is from the Virgin (Isaiah 7:14); He has no comeliness; and he had no form or beauty (Isaiah 53:2 LXX).

Tertullian pointed out³⁹ what the Scriptures say about the Father and the Son. The Father was never seen; it was always the Son that was seen. The Father acts by mind and thought; while the Son, who is in the Father’s mind and thought, gives effect and form to what He sees. Thus all things were made by the Son, and without Him was not anything made.

“The Scriptures say, ‘No one has seen God at any time’ (John 1:18). What God does he mean? He has already said: ‘*Him* we have seen with our eyes, we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life’ (1 John 1:1). It is of course the Father, whom no man has seen or can see (1 Timothy 6:16), with whom the Word was, the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, and has Himself declared Him (John 1:18). He was both heard and seen and, that He might not be supposed to be a phantom was actually handled. Paul saw Christ also; but yet he didn’t see the Father. ‘Have I not seen Jesus *Christ our Lord*?’ (1 Corinthians 9:1) Paul expressly called Christ God, saying: ‘whom *are* the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ *came*, who is over all, *the* eternally blessed God’ (Romans 9:5). The Son of God, which is the Word of God, is visible, because He who became flesh was called Christ. Of the Father, however,

³⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, III, xix, 2.

³⁹ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, II, vii, 15.

he says, ‘Whom no man has seen or can see’. He continues the description, ‘Who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see’ (1 Timothy 6:16). It was of Him, too, that he had said, ‘Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to the only God’ (1 Timothy 1:17); so that we might apply the contrary qualities to the Son Himself — mortality, accessibility. Paul testifies that ‘He died according to the Scriptures’, and that ‘He was seen by himself last of all’ (1 Corinthians 15:3, 8). He was seen by means of the light which was accessible, although it was not without imperiling his sight that he experienced that light (Acts 22:11). If Peter, John, and James were unable to endure the glory of the Son, they must have died then and there if they had seen the Father at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:6). ‘No man shall see God, and live’ (Exodus 33:20). This being the case, it is clear that He was always seen from the beginning, who became visible in the end; He was not seen in the end who had never been visible from the beginning; thus there are two — the Visible and the Invisible. It was the Son, who was always seen, and the Son who always conversed with men, and the Son who has always worked by the authority and will of the Father. ‘The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do’ (John 5:19). The Father acts by mind and thought; while the Son, who is in the Father’s mind and thought, gives effect and form to what He sees. Thus all things were made through the Son, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:3).

Cyril of Jerusalem stated⁴⁰ that we can’t speak of a beginning of the Son in time; only of His humanity. The Father is the Beginning of the Son timelessly and incomprehensibly.

“Don’t think just of Him who came out of Bethlehem, but worship Him who was eternally begotten of the Father. Don’t allow anyone to speak of a beginning of the Son in time, but as a timeless Beginning acknowledge the Father. For the Father is the Beginning of the Son, timeless, incomprehensible, without beginning. The fountain of the river of righteousness is the Father, who begot Him as Himself only knows. Do you know that our Lord Jesus Christ is King Eternal? Hear Him saying, ‘Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it, and was glad’ (John 8:56). When the Jews had trouble receiving this, He said what to them was still harder, ‘Before Abraham was, I AM’ (John 8:58). Again He said to the Father plainly, ‘Now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:5).

The Relation of the Father to the Son

Jesus referred to God the Father often; but what is the exact relationship between the Father and the Son. This is a difficult question because the Father is invisible and is spirit only. The Son, while one person is both spirit in His Divinity and human in His humanity. When He speaks in the Scriptures, we need to understand whether He is speaking about His humanity, with its limitations, or His Deity, which has no limitations.

⁴⁰ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, XI, 20.

Hilary of Poitiers stated⁴¹ very eloquently that the glory of the Son of God is the same as that of the Father. To neglect the Son is to neglect the Father and vice versa. The honor of the Son is inseparable from the honor of the Father.

“Those do not have the love of God in them, who rejected Christ’s coming in the name of the Father, but accepted another, who came in the same name, and received glory of one another, but neglected His glory of Him, Who is the only true God. Is it possible to think that He separates Himself from the glory of the only God, when He gives as the reason why they seek not the glory of the only God that they receive Antichrist, and Himself they will not receive? To reject Him is to neglect the glory of the only God. At its beginning we read, ‘That all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him’ (John 5:23). It is only things of the same nature that are equal in honor; equality of honor denotes that there is no separation between the honored. With the revelation of the Eternal Birth of the Only Begotten, the demand for equality of honor is amplified. Since the Son is to be honored as the Father, and since they seek not the honor of Him, he that honors not the Son, honors not the Father and he who seeks not the honor of the only God, seeks not the honor of Christ also. Accordingly the honor of Christ is inseparable from the honor of God. By His words, when the news of Lazarus’ sickness was brought to Him, He illustrates the complete identification of Father and Son in honor. ‘This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it’ (John 11:4); thus Lazarus dies for the glory of God. Is there any doubt that the glory of the Son of God is the glory of God, when the death of Lazarus, which is glorious to God, glorifies the Son of God? Thus Christ is declared to be one in nature with God the Father through His Eternal Birth. The sickness of Lazarus is for the glory of God, and at the same time the Mystery of the faith is not violated. The Son of God is to be regarded as God, yet He is none the less to be confessed also as Son of God. By the mystery of the divine nature we are forbidden to separate the birth of the living Son from His living Father.”

Hilary also noted⁴² that there is no eternal life in the confession of God the Father without Jesus Christ. The Father glorifies the Son in Himself; the Son laid aside this glory in becoming man at the Incarnation, but He took it up again at the Ascension.

“Every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:11). The Father has glorified the Son in Himself, therefore the Son must be confessed in the glory of the Father. If the Son is to be confessed in the Father’s glory, and the Father has glorified Him in Himself, is the Son not plainly all that His Father is? He is not merely in the glory of God, but in the glory of God the Father. The Father glorifies Him not with a glory from without, but in Himself. By taking the Son back into that glory, which belongs to Himself, and which the Son had with Him before, the Father glorifies the Son with Himself and in Himself. This confession is inseparable from Christ even in the humiliation of His manhood, as He says, ‘This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent’ (John 17:3). First, there is no life

⁴¹ Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, IX, 23-24.

⁴² Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, IX, 42.

eternal in the confession of God the Father without Jesus Christ; and second Christ is glorified in the Father. If the Father glorifies the Son in Himself, and the Father is the only true God, Christ is not outside the only true God. In that the Son is glorified by the only true God in Himself, He is not estranged from the only true God.

Hilary of Poitiers trembled⁴³ at speaking about the relationship between the persons of the Trinity for fear that he might say something amiss. This represents a healthy respect for God. The bottom line is that the Son is equal to the Father and the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him bodily.

“The Father is what He is, and as He is revealed, so we must believe. The mind shrinks in dread from treating of the Son; at every word I tremble lest I be betrayed into treason. The Son is the Offspring of the Unbegotten, One from One, true from true, living from living, perfect from perfect. He is the Power of Power, the Wisdom of Wisdom, the Glory of Glory, the Likeness of the invisible God, the Image of the Unbegotten Father. Yet in what sense can we conceive that the Only-begotten is the Offspring of the Unbegotten? Repeatedly the Father cries from heaven, ‘This is My beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased’ (Matthew 3:17, 17:5). It is not a rending or severance, for He that begat is without passions, and He that was born is the Image of the invisible God and bears witness, ‘The Father is in Me and I in Him’ (John 10:38). It is not mere adoption, for He is the true Son of God and cries, ‘He who has seen Me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9). The Son did not come into existence in obedience to a command as did created things, for He is the Only-begotten of the One God; He has life in Himself, even as He that begot Him has life. He says, ‘As the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself’ (John 5:26). There is not just a portion of the Father resident in the Son, for the Son bears witness, ‘All things that the Father has are Mine’ (John 16:15), and again, ‘All things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine’ (John 17:10). Paul testifies, ‘For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily’ (Colossians 2:9); and by the nature of things a portion cannot possess the whole; if the Son only had a portion of the Godhead, He couldn’t possess the fullness. He is the perfect Son of the perfect Father, for He Who has all has given all to Him. We must not imagine that the Father did not give, because He still possesses; we must not imagine that the Father has lost something, because He gave to the Son.”

John Chrysostom directed⁴⁴ some comments toward the Arians of his day who claimed that the Son of God was a lesser being than the Father. Yes, the Father generated the Son in eternity past, but the Son is of the same essence as the Father. It is not that the Father is the ruler and the Son is the workman – and thus the lesser. Both rule and both work!

“We glorify not the Son only, but the Father. Speaking of the Father, Paul says, ‘To the only God’. Is the Son then not God? Paul calls Him, ‘The only immortal’ (1 Timothy 1:17). Is the Son then not immortal? Does the Son not possess that Himself, which He will give to us at the end of the age? Yes, the heretics say, He is God and immortal; but not such as the Father. Is He of inferior

⁴³ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, II, 8.

⁴⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Timothy*, IV, v. 17.

essence, and therefore of inferior immortality? What then is a greater and a lesser immortality? Immortality is nothing else than the not being subject to destruction. There is a greater and a lesser glory; but there is no such thing as a greater and lesser immortality. A thing must either be destructible, or altogether indestructible. Are we men immortal as He is? God forbid! Surely not! Why? He has it by nature, but we have it as a result of faith. Why then do we make the difference? Because the Father, he says, is made such as He is by no other; but the Son is what He is, from the Father. This we confess, not denying that the Son is generated from the Father incorruptibly. We glorify the Father for having generated the Son, such as He is. Thus we see the Father is most glorified, when the Son has done great things. The glory of the Son is referred again to Him. Since He generated Him omnipotent and such as He is in Himself, it is not more the glory of the Son than of the Father, that He is self-sufficient, self-maintained, and free from infirmity. It has been said of the Son, 'Through whom also He made the worlds' (Hebrews 1:2). There is a distinction observed among us between creation and workmanship. One works, toils and executes, another rules; he that executes is the inferior in human affairs. But it is not so there; nor is the sovereignty with One, the workmanship with the Other. When we hear, 'By whom He made the worlds', we do not exclude the Father from creation. Nor when we say, 'To the King immortal', do we deny dominion to the Son. These are common to the One and the Other and each belongs to Both. The Father created, in that He begat the creating Son; the Son rules, as being Lord of all things created. He does not work for hire, or in obedience to others, as workmen do among us, but from His own goodness and love for mankind."

Gregory Thaumaturgus outlined⁴⁵ some of the properties of the Trinity and the relation of the Persons of the Trinity to each other.

"There is one God, the Father of the living Word, who is His subsistent Wisdom, Power and Eternal Image; perfect Begetter of the perfect Begotten, Father of the only-begotten Son. There is one Lord, Only of the Only, God of God, Image and Likeness of Deity, Efficient Word, Wisdom comprehensive of the constitution of all things, and Power formative of the whole creation. He is the true Son of the true Father, Invisible of Invisible, Incorruptible of Incorruptible, Immortal of Immortal and Eternal of Eternal. There is One Holy Spirit, having His subsistence from God, revealed by the Son to men; Image of the Son, Perfect Image of the Perfect; Life, the Cause of the living; Holy Fount; Sanctity, the Supplier, or Leader, of Sanctification; in whom God the Father is revealed. The Father is above all and in all, where God the Son is through all. There is a perfect Trinity, in glory, eternity and sovereignty, not divided or estranged. There is nothing either created or in servitude in the Trinity; nothing was added later, as if at some former period it was non-existent, and at some later period it was introduced."

How Is the Son the Image of the Father?

⁴⁵ Gregory Thaumaturgus, Declaration of Faith, Part 1, I.

The Scriptures speak in a number of places that Christ is the Image of God the Father. How is He His image? An image is crafted to look exactly like the person it represents. How does this work with Christ?

John Chrysostom spoke⁴⁶ about Christ as the Image of God the Father; as His Image, He is exactly like Him. Similarly, angels are never called the image of God, but men are so called. It is not in our bodies that we are His image, but in our soul.

“Paul, discoursing on the dignity of the Son, says ‘He is the Image of the invisible God’ (Colossians 1:15). If He is God’s image then he is exactly like Him. If we see Him only as a man’s image, we are madmen. But if as God, God’s Son and God’s image, he shows the exact likeness. Consider that no Angel has anywhere been called either ‘image’ or ‘son’, but man has been called both. Why? The exaltedness of the nature of angels might have led many into this impiety. But with humans their low nature is a pledge of security against this. Yet the Scripture boldly asserts that men are given this honor as the image of God (Colossians 3:10). However ‘The Image of the Invisible’ is itself also invisible; otherwise it would not be an image. An image, so far as it is an image, ought to be exactly similar, as, for example, in features and likeness. Thus humanity fails to be an image of God in many respects, if we examine accurately. So how can man be an Image of the Creator? A horse is not the image of a man; it’s different. If by saying that man was created in the Image of God, ‘the Image’ doesn’t mean an exact likeness to the invisible, nothing would hinder the Angels from being His Image, since they too are invisible; but that’s not the case. Instead ‘the image’ refers to the human soul, which is invisible; and because it is invisible, it is on that account an image of God.”

Hilary of Poitiers explained⁴⁷ how Christ can be the “Image of the Invisible God”. It is not in His bodily human form; it in His (invisible) Deity. He could not be the “Image” or “Likeness” unless He was exactly like what He is the image of. When He said “He who has seen Me has seen the Father”, He is referring to seeing the invisible being and the works of the Father by means of the human activities of the Son.

“Our Lord said, ‘He who has seen Me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9). But did Paul forget the meaning of the Lord’s words, when he says, ‘He is the image of the invisible God?’ (Colossians 1:15) I ask whether Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God, and whether the infinite God can also be seen in the likeness of a finite form? A likeness must repeat the form of that of which it is the likeness. Let those, who think that the Son has a different nature, determine what sort of likeness of the invisible God they wish the Son to be. Is it a visible bodily likeness moving from place to place with human gait? No, but let them remember that according to the Gospels and the Prophets, both Christ is a Spirit and God is a Spirit. If they confine this Christ the Spirit within the bounds of shape and body, such a corporeal Christ will not be the likeness of the invisible God, nor will a finite limitation represent that which is infinite.”

“The Lord did not leave us in doubt. He said, ‘If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me’ (John 10:37), teaching them to see the Father in

⁴⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Colossians*, III, v. 15.

⁴⁷ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, VIII, 48-50.

Himself in that He did the works of the Father. Through perceiving the power of His nature they might understand the nature of that power. Therefore Paul proclaimed that this is the image of God, ‘He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. It pleased *the Father that* in Him all the fullness should dwell; and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself’ (Colossians 1:15-20). Through the power of these works He is the image of God. Assuredly the Creator of things invisible is not compelled by any necessity inherent in His nature to be the visible image of the invisible God. And lest He should be regarded as the likeness of the form and not of the nature, He is styled ‘the likeness of the invisible God’ in order that we may understand that that nature is in Him.”

“He is accordingly the first-born of every creature because in Him all things were created. That everyone might know that He is the Creator of all things in Himself, Paul says, ‘All things have been created through Him and in Him, and He is before all, and for Him all things consist’ (Colossians 1:16-17). This describes the origin of created things. But concerning the dispensation by which He assumed our body, Paul has assigned to the spiritual mysteries their material effects. He Who is the image of the invisible God is Himself the head of His body, the Church, and He Who is the first-born of every creature is at the same time the beginning, the first born from the dead. In all things He has the pre-eminence, being for us the Body, while He is also the image of God. He Who is the first-born of created things, is at the same time the first-born for eternity; things spiritual, being created in the First-born, owe it to Him that they abide. All things human also owe it to Him that in the First-born from the dead they are born again into eternity. He is Himself the beginning, because the image is of God.”

The Subjection of the Son to the Father

Paul stated, “Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28). What does Paul mean by this? Some interpret this to mean that the Son of God is some lesser being than the Father. It’s real interpretation has to do with “Take My yoke upon you”.

Ambrose of Milan discussed this in detail. Ambrose set forth⁴⁸ in his Exposition what Paul meant in his statements about the Son being subject to the Father. This was one of the “proof texts” that the Arians used to say that Christ was not equal to the Father. Ambrose explores various meanings of the term “subjection” and concludes that it can’t refer to His Deity. Instead it refers to “Take My yoke upon you”, which all beings in heaven and the saints on earth do.

⁴⁸ Ambrose of Milan, Exposition of the Christian Faith, V, xiii, 153-159, 163-167.

“If the one Name and right of God belong to both the Father and the Son, since the Son of God is also true God, and a King eternal, the Son of God is not made subject in His Godhead. Let us think how we ought to regard His subjection.”

“How is the Son of God made subject? As the creature is subject to vanity? But it is blasphemous to have any such idea of the Substance of the Godhead.”

“Or as every creature is to the Son of God, for it is rightly written, ‘You have put all things in subjection under His feet?’ (Psalm 8:6) But Christ is not made subject to Himself.”

“Or as a woman to a man, as we read, ‘Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord’ (Ephesians 5:22); and again, ‘Let a woman learn in silence with all submission?’ (1 Timothy 2:11) But it is impious to compare a man to the Father, or a woman to the Son of God.”

“Or as Peter said, ‘Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake?’ (1 Peter 2:13) But Christ was certainly not so subject.”

“Or as Paul wrote, ‘Submitting to one another in the fear of God?’ (Ephesians 5:21) But Christ was not subject either in His own fear, or in the fear of another Christ. For Christ is but one! But note the force of these words that we are subject to the Father, while we also fear Christ.”

“How, then, do we understand His subjection? We see that the Scripture states that He is not yet made subject, but that this is to come. Therefore now the Son is not made subject to God the Father. In what, then, do we say that the Son will be made subject? If in His Godhead, He is not disobedient, for He is not at variance with the Father; nor is He made subject; for He is not a servant, but the only Son of His own proper Father. Lastly, when He created heaven, and formed the earth, He exercised both power and love. There is therefore no subjection as that of a servant in the Godhead of Christ. But if there is no subjection then the will is free.”

“But if the heretics think of this as the subjection of the Son, namely, that the Father makes all things in union with His will, let them learn that this is really a proof of inseparable power. The unity of Their will is one that began not in time, but always existed. Where there is a constant unity of will, there can be no weakness of temporal subjection. If He were made subject through His nature, He would always remain in subjection; but since He is said to be made subject in time, that subjection must be part of an assumed office and not of an everlasting weakness. Especially since the eternal Power of God cannot change His state for a time, neither can the right of ruling fall to the Father in time. If the Son will ever be changed in such wise as to be made subject in His Godhead, then also must God the Father. If the Father gains more power, and has the Son in subjection to Himself in His Godhead, the Son would be considered inferior according to the heretics' explanation.”

“But what fault has the Son been guilty of, that we should believe that He could someday be made subject in His Godhead? Has he as man seized for Himself the right to sit at His Father's side, or has He claimed for Himself the prerogative of His Father's throne, against His Father's will? He Himself says, ‘I always do those things that please Him’ (John 8:29). Therefore if the Son pleases the Father in all things, why should He be made subject, Who was not made subject before?”

“We need to see that there is not a subjection of the Godhead, but rather of us in the fear of Christ; this is a truth full of grace, and full of mystery. Let us again weigh Paul’s words: ‘When all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:28). Are not all things now subject to Him? Are not the choirs of the saints made subject? Are not the angels, who ministered to Him when on the earth? (Matthew 4:11) Are not the archangels who were sent to Mary to foretell the coming of the Lord? Are not all the heavenly hosts? Are not the cherubim and seraphim; are not thrones, dominions and powers which worship and praise Him?”

“How, then, will they be brought into subjection? In the way that the Lord Himself has said, ‘Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me’ (Matthew 11:29). It is not the fierce that bear the yoke, but the humble and the gentle. This clearly is no base subjection for men, but a glorious one, ‘at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth; and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father’ (Philippians 2:10-11). But for this reason all things were not subject before, for they had not yet received the wisdom of God, not yet did they wear the easy yoke of the Word on the neck as it were of their mind. ‘As many as received Him, as it is written, ‘to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name’” (John 1:12).

How the Son of God Relates to Us

In considering how we relate to Christ, we first need to consider Who He is. He existed with the Father and the Holy Spirit in eternity past, and with the Father and the Holy Spirit, He created everything we know. In becoming man at the Incarnation, He never left His Father’s Throne; He is omnipresent in His Deity, but limited in His humanity. He is one person with two natures; at the Incarnation, He didn’t cease being God. By becoming man, He was able to take our place at the Cross and save the image that was created like God.

Gregory the Theologian summarized⁴⁹ what Christ did by becoming man. This was more marvelous than His creating the heavens and the earth out of nothing.

“The Word of God Himself, Who is before all worlds, the Invisible, the Incomprehensible, the Bodiless, the Beginning of beginning, the Light of Light, the Source of Life and Immortality, the Image of the Archetype, the Immovable Seal, the Unchangeable Image, the Father’s Definition and Word, came to His own image⁵⁰, and took on Him Flesh for the sake of our flesh. He mingled Himself with an intelligent soul for my soul’s sake, purifying like by like; and in all points except sin was made Man. He was conceived by the Virgin, who first in body and soul was purified by the Holy Spirit, for it was needful both that Child-bearing should be honored and that Virginity should receive a higher honor. He came forth then, as God, with that which He had assumed; one Person in two natures, flesh and Spirit, of which the latter deified the former. O new commingling; O strange

⁴⁹ Gregory Nazianzen, Second Oration on Easter, XLV, 5.

⁵⁰ That is, us! We are created in the image of God ().

conjunction! The Self-existent comes into Being, the Uncreated is created, that which cannot be contained is contained by the intervention of an intellectual soul mediating between the Deity and the bodily existence of the flesh. He who gives riches becomes poor; for He assumes the poverty of my flesh, that I may assume the riches of His Godhead. He that is full empties Himself; for He empties Himself of His Glory for a short while, that I may have a share in His Fullness. What is the riches of His Goodness? What is this mystery that is around me? I had a share in His image and I did not keep it; He partakes of my flesh that He may both save the image and make the flesh immortal. He communicates a Second Communion, far more marvelous than the first, inasmuch as then He imparted the better nature, but now He Himself assumes the worse. This is more godlike than the former action; this is loftier in the eyes of all men of understanding.”

John of Damascus noted⁵¹ that Christ became man without leaving His Father’s bosom. He is both God and man; one person, two natures; He is omnipresent in His Deity, but limited in His humanity. As man He is called “compound” and “circumscribed”: compound in that He has more than one nature; circumscribed in that His humanity can be contained. How He was conceived in Mary’s womb is known only to Himself.

“The divine subsistence of God the Word existed before all else and is without time, eternal, simple, uncompound, uncreated, incorporeal, invisible, intangible, uncircumscribed, possessing all the Father possesses. Since He is of the same essence with the Father, He differs from the Father’s subsistence in the manner of His generation and the relation of the Father’s subsistence, being perfect also and at no time separated from the Father’s subsistence. In these last days, without leaving the Father’s bosom, He took up His abode in an uncircumscribed manner in the womb of the holy Virgin, without the instrumentality of seed, and in an incomprehensible manner known only to Himself. He caused the flesh derived from the holy Virgin to subsist in the very subsistence that was before all the ages.”

“He was both in all things, above all things and also dwelt in the womb of the holy Mother of God, but in it by the energy of the incarnation. He therefore became flesh and He took upon Himself thereby the first-fruits of our compound nature; that is, the flesh animated with the intelligent and national soul. The very subsistence of God the Word was changed into the subsistence of the flesh, and the subsistence of the Word, which was formerly simple, became compound. His nature was compounded of two perfect natures, divinity and humanity; He bore the characteristic and distinctive property of the divine Sonship of God the Word as distinguished from the Father and the Spirit. He also bore the characteristic and distinctive properties of the flesh, where His holiness differs from the Mother and the rest of mankind.”

John Cassian pointed out⁵² that the Apostles were very careful to state that Christ is one person with two natures and that Christ at the end of time is the same person who created the world at the beginning.

⁵¹ John of Damascus, Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, III, 7.

⁵² John Cassian, On the Incarnation, V, 7.

“The Apostles took every possible precaution that it might not be thought that there was any division in Christ, or that the Son of God being joined to a Son of man, might come by wild interpretations to be made into two Persons. He who is in Himself but one, by our wrongful and wicked notions, might be made into a double Person in one nature. Most excellently and admirably Paul’s preaching passes from the only begotten Son of God to the Son of man united to the Son of God. Paul’s exposition of the doctrine follows the actual course of the things that happened. He continues with an unbroken connection, as a sort of bridge, that without any gap or separation we find at the end of time Him whom we read of as in the beginning of the world. We cannot say that some division exists and speculate that the Son of God was one person in the flesh and another in the Spirit. Paul’s teaching so linked together God and man through the mystery of His birth in the body, that he showed that it was the same Person reconciling to Himself all things on the Cross, who had been proclaimed the image of the invisible God before the foundation of the world.”

Irenaeus of Lyons pointed out⁵³ that Christ could have come in His immortal glory instead of humbling Himself to be born of the Virgin. He did what He did because we needed to be nourished by milk; we were not ready for solid food.

“Our Lord in these last times, when He had summed up all things into Himself, came to us, not as He might have come, but as we were capable of beholding Him. He might easily have come to us in His immortal glory, but in that case we could never have endured the greatness of the glory. Therefore it was that He, who was the perfect bread of the Father, offered Himself to us as milk, because we were as infants. He did this when He appeared as a man, that we might be nourished by His flesh, and have nourishment by such a course of milk. As we become accustomed to eat and drink the Word of God, we may be able also to contain in ourselves the Bread of immortality, which is the Spirit of the Father.”

Cyril of Jerusalem challenged⁵⁴ us to consider the Cherubim when we try to understand God. Even though we are given descriptions of them we cannot understand them. The same is true about God and more so.

“Comprehending the nature of God is impossible! The Three Children in the furnace of fire, as they hymned the praises of God, said ‘Blessed art You, who sit upon cherubim and look upon the deeps, and to be praised and highly exalted forever’ (Prayer of Azariah 1:32 RSV). What is the nature of the Cherubim; once we know that, then we can look at Him who sits on them. Ezekiel the Prophet made a description of them, as far as was possible, saying that ‘each has four faces, one of a man, another of a lion, another of an eagle, and another of a calf. Each one also has four wings; they have eyes on all sides; and that under each one was a wheel of four sides’ (Ezekiel 1:5-20). Nevertheless though the Prophet makes the explanation, we cannot yet understand it even as we read. But if we cannot understand the throne, which he has described, how shall we be able to comprehend Him who sits on it, the Invisible and Ineffable God? To scrutinize the nature of

⁵³ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, IV, xxxviii, 1.

⁵⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, IX, 3.

God is impossible; but it is in our power to send up praises of His glory for His works that are seen.”