

Cheerful Giving

II Cor. 9:6-11

Luke 7:11-16

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning's epistle reading from St. Paul we heard the following: "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."

Here of course the reference—"sowing"—is to planting seeds, either in a garden or in a field, and it follows logically that if we don't plant very much then there won't be much of a harvest. And the reverse is true: the more we plant, the more we will harvest.

This is obvious to anyone who has ever planted a garden or a field. But this principle applies also to the spiritual life: whatever work we put into our own personal spiritual life is what we will receive back. If we do little, or none, then we can't expect much if any spiritual growth. The more time and effort we spend on our spiritual life, the more improvement we'll see.

It's just that simple; and that difficult. But we must keep in mind that just as with plants in a garden, there will come a time for harvest in our own spiritual life, too. And that time, that moment, is when we die. The Lord will be waiting, watching, carefully looking over the "harvest" that we bring with us into the next life. The question is, will it be an abundant harvest, or just a single sheaf of wheat, or perhaps nothing at all? Remember: our guardian angel will be there, and he will open the books so that you and I and the Lord Himself may see the handwriting there of our virtues and sins. It will be a time of reckoning, for sure, and for some a time of wailing and tears.

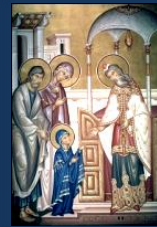
Spiritual life doesn't happen by itself any more than flowers grow in a garden or wheat and corn in their fields without sowing seeds, and then working hard, tending, watering, harvesting. Some people think that just by accepting Christ as their Savior, or just by being Greek or Russian (and, only secondarily, also "Orthodox"), they think they have a ready-made spiritual life and all is "okay." After all I pray in the "sacred language" of

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my childhood, I hear the services in a “sacred language”—never mind that I don’t actually understand it. But the idea that we are “okay” couldn’t be farther from the truth.

This Epistle reading is about more, much more, than the effort we put into our own spiritual lives, however, and it’s summarized by another of those famous phrases from Scripture that we all grew up with and know well, but usually don’t remember where exactly it comes from in Scripture—and that phrase is this: *“God loves a cheerful giver.”* How many times we’ve heard that; how many times we ourselves have said it!

This theme is the second part of this morning’s Epistle—that we must also “sow” or give generously and cheerfully to the Church, to the poor, and in general to all who are in need or who ask our help about *anything*.

No exceptions allowed. And we are to give without hesitation, without reluctance, without scrimping or holding anything back...for God has held nothing back from us, in terms of our real day to day needs. In fact, we are to give “until it hurts.” And at the same time, we must give “cheerfully,” happily, willingly. No grudging and long faces here.

This Epistle also promises us that if we do these things—“sowing” generously in our own spiritual life and giving readily and generously to others—then there will be a reward from God, a blessing. For God, “who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food, will also supply and increase *your* store of seed and will *enlarge* the harvest of your righteousness. *You will be enriched in every way.*”

And as we read in Psalm 41(v. 1) *“Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble.”*

We often forget that everything we have belongs to God anyway and we are only stewards or caretakers of these material blessings, for which reason the Lord said: *“Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”* Matthew 6:32-33.

What we often don’t remember is that when we are generous about planting and nourishing our own spiritual life and growing the flowers of virtue, and when we are equally generous in sharing with others the fruits of our material labors as well as our time and our talent, we are in fact preaching the Gospel, we are giving a

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clear witness of Gospel truths... Remember last week's sermon about this? And remember what the Lord also said in the Gospel of St. Matthew?—*"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."* ((Mat 5:16)

This is why we, as Christians, must remind ourselves that we are always "on view", "on display," as it were. People watch us; they see how we talk and how we behave.

They see whether we bring light into a conversation or darkness. You know, for most of our co-workers and acquaintances and neighbors all that they will ever know or see of our Orthodox Faith is what we show them in our own lives. In that sense, we are not private people. So we can ask ourselves: are others seeing in us someone who really cares about them and their soul?

Are they seeing that our lives have been transfigured by Christ through our Church? Or, on the contrary, are they seeing us as very self-centered, selfish, and uncaring people who just want to get their own opinion out there and everyone else be damned? And, parents: first ask yourself what your children think and conclude about your Faith when they look at you, live with you, and watch you day after day, in all kinds of circumstances and situations.

It is a sign of increasing Christian maturity when we invest well in our spiritual lives, sowing the seeds of virtue generously in our souls and ruthlessly pulling out the weeds of vice. Similarly it is a sign of maturity when we are graciously generous with our time, our treasure, and our talent in terms of the needs of the Church, our neighbor, the poor and any others whom God happens to put right in front of us.

What we need is to continue *growing* in that maturity and never standing still! May it be so, brothers and sisters!

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.