

GOD HELPS US WHEN WE MAKE AN EFFORT FIRST

—by bishop Nikiforos Theotokis—

The God-man Jesus Christ observes and notices all things. He sees not only the things that are visible but also the things that are hidden—He even discerns the secret thoughts concealed within man's heart. If He was able to perceive what the Scribes were contemplating in their minds, then it was much easier for Him to detect what the people who were carrying the paralytic were up to. These people were holding the stretcher upon which the paralytic lay as they made their way to the entrance of the home wherein Jesus Christ was speaking. Unable to enter the house through this or any other entrance (on account of the multitude of people that were gathered there) and bring the paralytic before the Lord Jesus Christ, they climbed up onto the roof. **"And when they could not find by what way they might bring him in because of the multitude,"** says the divinely inspired Evangelist Luke, **"they went upon the housetop, and let him down through the tiling with his couch into the midst before Jesus" (Lk. 5:19).**

Unquestionably, ladders, ropes, and pieces of lumber were used, there was the sound of loud noise and banging, and many other things necessarily took place in order to lift the stretcher that held the paralytic up onto the roof. Who can doubt that Jesus Christ—Who detects and knows the hidden thoughts of man—both saw and heard all these things taking place? And yet, He remained silent. Eventually they climbed up onto the roof, they removed part of the house's covering and lowered the stretcher. As this took place, even louder banging and yelling could be heard: commotion that inevitably is produced when people attempt to lower a heavy weight from a great height. Undoubtedly, Jesus Christ saw and heard everything; however, He remained silent. Only when He saw the paralytic lying on the stretcher before Him did He open His mouth and speak. Only then did He declare, **"My child, your sins are forgiven" (Mk. 2:5)**, and in following, **"Arise, and lift thy bed, and make your way to your home" (Mk. 2:11).**

Was it not possible for Him Who knows everything and is capable of all things to have voiced these words when the people carrying the paralytic first arrived at the front door of the home, as soon as He saw that they were unable to enter the house, on account of the large crowd, despite their repeated attempts? Jesus Christ observed not only everything the paralytic's companions were attempting to do, but He also was aware of these people's faith. Why then did He

allow the paralytic to endure such a troublesome and tiring ordeal? Why did He make them who were carrying the paralytic go through such effort and only thereafter manifest His mercy and perform this amazing miracle?

This, my beloved Christians, serves as a holy lesson that is of much benefit for us both spiritually and physically. In this manner, the God-man makes known to us that He comes to our aid in times of need and fulfills our requests only after we make an effort first and do everything that is in our power.

The example of the paralytic sufficiently reveals that God wanted this paralyzed man to do everything he was capable of first, so that He may subsequently grant him forgiveness of sins and physical health. If you search the Holy Scriptures, you will find numerous examples confirming this very same thing. Amongst the many examples, however, one substantiates the truth of the matter so clearly, that it completely convinces man and casts away even the slightest doubt from his mind.

When the ruler Festus handed over the Apostle Paul as a prisoner unto Julius the centurion, in order to be taken securely from Caessaria to Rome to stand trial before Caesar, a storm developed at sea. Such a dark and turbulent tempest arose that everyone on the ship lost hope and ate nothing for several days. At that time, the Apostle Paul stood up before everyone, encouraging and advising them that none of them would drown at sea: **"And now I exhort you to be of good cheer. For there shall be no loss of any man's life from among you, except for the ship" (Acts 27:22).**

The divine apostle affirmed his words by testifying that an angel of God appeared to him that night and revealed to him that he would stand before Caesar, and that God granted him everyone sailing on the ship with him: **"For there stood by me this night an angel of God, Whose I am, and Whom I serve, saying, 'Fear not, Paul. You must be brought before Caesar. And, lo, God has given you all the people who are sailing with you'" (Acts 27:23-24).** This is why he urged everyone to take courage: **"Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer. For I believe God, that it shall be just as it has been told to me. We must be cast upon a certain island" (Acts 27:25-26).**

A few days later, the sailors discerned land in the distance, and desiring to save themselves from the danger, they lowered the life boats into the ocean in order to leave the ship. When Paul saw realized what they were about to do, he immediately said to the centurion and his soldiers, **"If they do not remain in the ship, you cannot be saved" (Acts 27:31).**

How strange indeed! God told the Apostle Paul that He would grant him every single passenger sailing with him, and He promised that not even one of them would be lost. The Apostle Paul believed God's promise: **"I believe,"** he

stated, **"in God that this is how things will turn out, exactly in the manner they were said to me."** Not only did he believe in God's promise but he also proclaimed the Lord's pledge before everyone on the ship, who altogether were **"two-hundred and seventy-six souls" (Acts 27:37)**. And yet, after all this he hinges the salvation of all those people not upon the things that God had said and promised but upon the help and aid of the sailors. He stated that if there was no help from the sailors, if the crew members flee and abandon the ship, it would not be possible for them to be saved: **"If they do not remain in the ship, you cannot be saved" (Acts 27:31)**.

Was the Almighty God in need of help from thirty or forty sailors in order for Him to keep everyone on that ship alive? It is both unreasonable and improper to make such a claim about God. Through this example, my brothers, God revealed to us nothing other than what He also communicated to us when He healed the paralytic: that He stretches out His almighty hand to help and save us only if we first carry out everything that we are capable of doing.

Why does God request action and effort from man in order to grant him not only physical aid but also salvation of his soul? What is the strength of a few or even thousands of sailors collectively in comparison to God's infinite power? What correlation is there between the brief difficulty endured by the paralytic and the small effort on the part of them who carried him, and the great gift of the forgiveness of sins and physical healing? What importance and value do our works have?

The prophet Isaiah says, **"All our righteousness is like a filthy rag" (Isa. 64:6)**. Christ Himself affirmed, **"Without Me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5)**. Additionally, the Apostle Paul states that, **"the sufferings of this present life are not worthy when compared to the future glory that will be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18)**. If man's works and efforts are so imperfect, inadequate, and negligible in comparison to God's blessings, why does God want man to make an effort prior to helping him in this life in some way or granting him eternal salvation? Why do the scriptures stress, **"He will repay every person according to his works" (Rom. 2:6)**? Why is there so much importance, honor, and exceptional recognition given for works that are so insignificant and trivial?

God is just, but He is merciful as well. As a just Being, He demands from us whatever we are capable of doing; as a merciful Lord, He simultaneously accepts our works and efforts as if they were great and significant—even if they are small and worthless—and He deems them worthy of His infinite blessings and rewards. As a merciful Being, He does not take into account the little importance and small value of our works; as a just God, however, He demands works and effort, without which He neither helps us nor saves us.

The God-man indeed helped the Canaanite woman. He said to her, "**O Woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire**" (Mt. 15:28), and thus healed her daughter. However, she first hastily journeyed to go meet Jesus Christ. Then she cried out behind Him, "**Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David!**" (Mt. 15:22). Thereafter she proceeded to stand before Him, and prostrating herself before Him she cried out in a loud voice, "**Lord, help me!**" (Mt. 15:25). Later, when she was likened to a dog, she gladly accepted the ridicule: "**Yes Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table**" (Mt. 15:27). In brief, she did everything she could first, and subsequently she received what she sought from the Lord.

Christ indeed granted vision to the person who had been blind from birth. However, the faith and the obedience of the blind man preceded the miracle. For as soon as he heard the Lord's words, "**Go, wash in the pool of Siloam,**" he rushed—even though he could not see—"**and he went and washed, and came back seeing**" (Jn. 9:7). Christ truly cleansed the ten lepers; however, first they cried out in a loud voice, "**Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!**" (Lk. 17:13), and in following they displayed their faith and obedience by making their way to the priests in order to show them their diseased body parts that were full of leprosy.

The Lord resurrected Lazarus from the dead; however, first Martha confessed Him to be the Son of God, then Mary shed tears upon His feet, and thereafter Lazarus' friends lifted the stone from the tomb (vid. Jn. 11:41). Jesus truly granted Paradise to the thief. But take a look at how even this thief first did everything he could possibly do. While hanging from the cross, he had no other body part free to move except for his tongue. Hence, he used this initially to advise the other evil thief in the following manner: "**Do you not even fear God,**" he said, "**seeing that you are under the same condemnation?**" (Lk. 23:40). Next, he confessed that on account of his sins he is worthy of death: "**And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward for our deeds. But this Man has done nothing wrong**" (Lk. 23:41). After all this, he cried out with a stentorian voice, "**Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom**" (Lk. 23:42). First, I underline, he carried out all these things, and afterwards he received entry into Paradise.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, let us not ask for impossible and inappropriate things. We want God to be only merciful. However, this is not possible, because He by nature is equally just and merciful. He possesses infinite mercy; He also possesses infinite justice. Listen to how His prophet does not separate mercy from justice, but rather how he exalts the Lord's mercy while simultaneously glorifying His justice: "**O Lord,**" he says, "**I will sing to You of mercy and judgment. I will sing and understand in a blameless way**" (Ps.

100:1-2). Whenever we are in a difficult situation, we like to believe that if we utter only one "Lord have mercy" or voice one apathetic prayer God will immediately, on account of His infinite mercy, listen to our petition and deliver us from the difficult and trying circumstances. However, we do not at all take into consideration that God, as a just Being, wants us to do whatever we can as well, in order to achieve that which we desire. This is why we oftentimes ask but do not receive; why we plead but are not heard.

When you are ill, place all your hope in God and beseech Him with reverence and humility to restore your health; however, do whatever you are capable of as well. Go to be examined by a physician, follow the diet he suggests, take the medication he prescribes, and apply the ointment and patches that he gives you. God is He who will expel your illness and grant you health; however, He grants you health and life when you also use and take the appropriate medications. This is what king Hezekiah did. This king placed all his hope in God to be healed from his fatal disease, and he beseeched the Lord with many fervent tears to grant him life and health. Nonetheless, he also crushed the lump of figs and placed the resulting poultice upon his ailing body part just as the prophet Isaiah advised him: **"Take a cake of figs, mash them, and apply them as a plaster, and you shall be healed" (Isa. 38:21).** Do you see how God Himself wants us to use medicine, which He Himself made, when we are sick?

If you happen to be poor and destitute, place your hope in God and look to Him for relief in your time of need. However, do not cross your arms and sit idle; do not remain motionless expecting help to descend from Heaven. Rather, diligently attend to some task; serve wherever you can; do whatever you are capable of doing. Then God will open a door for you that will enable you to manage your needs and thus bring your privation to an end. There were two women, a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law, Naomi and Ruth, who were penniless and destitute. They were looking to God for consolation and hoping for His help in their time of need; however, they did not remain idle and indolent. On the contrary! Ruth said to her mother-in-law, **"Let me now go to the field and glean ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace" (Ruth 2:2).** Naomi, in turn, agreed with her suggestion gladly: **"And she said unto her, Go, my daughter" (Ruth 2:2).** Consequently, Ruth proceeded to the field that was owned by Boaz, and she followed behind the reapers, and she gleaned **"from morning until evening" (Ruth 2:7),** collecting the useful remnants of the crop that the reapers failed to notice and had left on the ground. It was precisely then that God poured upon her His mercy. Not only did He free her and her mother-in-law from their privation, but He also chose her to become the wife of Boaz and rendered her the ancestor of the Prophet and King David.

But what will happen in the event that we are truly unable to do anything ourselves? Does God abandon us in such an instant? No! This is not the case! God is a just and righteous Being, and thus He does not ask for the impossible but, rather, for that which is possible. If indeed there is nothing we can do, then God's righteousness and His mercy do not abandon us. In such instances God justly shows His compassion to us and bestows to us His divine aid. Tobit was a rich man; subsequently, he became both poor and blind. His wife Anna also became poor, but she remained healthy. On account of his blindness, Tobit was incapable of doing even the slightest job, and thus God enlightened a man named Ahikar to feed him. Conversely, Anna (who was capable of working) would weave and comb wool in her chamber, and God provided for her through the work of her own hands. **“Then Ahikar supported me,”** states Tobit, **“until he left for Elymais. And my wife Anna worked for hire at what women do. She would send her work to the owners and they would pay her. They paid her wages and once also gave her a small goat” (Tobit 2:10-12).**

Do you want to be freed from the sin to which you have become enslaved since youth? Believe with all your soul and heart that without God's help and conquering grace you will not be able to break the bonds of sin. However, do not sit idle and motionless waiting for your freedom to descend from Heaven. Instead, fast, get up at night to pray, beseech the Lord at every moment, exercise abstinence and self-denial, and—above all—avoid and flee from the causes that lead to sin. Then God's justice and mercy will free your soul from the devil's captivity and deliver you from the mouth of Hades.

Do you desire the salvation of your soul? Hope that God will grant this to you. Wholeheartedly believe that He is the Savior of our souls and that He alone is capable of saving us. However, do not allow your own will power to remain passive and unproductive. Rather, put your volition into action so it can become fruitful. Love, humility, meekness, righteousness, abstinence, purity, truth, the keeping of all of God's commandments: If you not only desire but also make a conscientious effort to carry out these works and produce these virtues, then God's righteousness and mercy will open the gate of the Heavenly Kingdom for you, where you will enter and enjoy the eternal glory and bliss of our Lord Jesus Christ. To Him belongs all glory, righteousness, and mercy unto the ages of ages. Amen.