

Interpretation of “Lord Have Mercy” (Part II)

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To understand this better, just think that in this world, people who are without means and live in poverty and who want to take alms from somebody rich, go to them and say “Have mercy upon me” [Or “Give me alms”. Anglo-Saxon *alamosna* from Greek *ελεημοσύνη* (eleïmosyni). So *Kyrie eleïson* means *Lord have mercy*, but also *Have pity on my poverty and provide me with what is needful*]. Or again, when people are in debt and want their creditor to forgive them the debt, they go and say “Have mercy upon me”, meaning “Forgive me my lack of funds and write off what I owe you”. In the same way, people who’ve done wrong go to those they’ve wronged and said “Have mercy upon me”, that is, “Forgive me for what I’ve done to you”.



photo: Nik Charisis

And so sinners cry out to God “Have mercy upon me” and don’t know what they’re saying or why they’re saying it, nor even what this mercy of God is that they’re asking to be given. They don’t know how it’s in their interests to ask for mercy, and

they just say “Lord have mercy” out of habit, without understanding a thing. How can God give such people His mercy when, without knowing it, they despise it and lose it as soon as they’ve received it and sin again, all the more? God’s mercy is nothing other than the grace of the Holy Spirit, which we sinners have to ask from God and say without ceasing “Lord have mercy”.

In other words: “Have mercy on me, Lord, sinner that I am, in the wretched situation I find myself in, and receive me again into Your grace. Give me the spirit of strength, to resist the temptations of the devil and the evil habit of sin; give me the spirit of emotional control, so that I can feel my real self and correct my life; give me the spirit of fear, so that I may fear You and observe Your commandments; give me the spirit of love so that I may love You and no more wrench myself away from you; give me the spirit of peace, to keep my soul tranquil and concentrate all my thoughts and be still and untroubled; give me the spirit of purity, to keep me unblemished by any defilement; give me the spirit of meekness, so that I may be calm towards my fellow-Christians and keep myself from anger; give me the spirit of humility, so that I don’t think too highly and become proud of myself”.

So those who know the need they have for all this and seek it from our merciful God, by saying “Lord, have mercy”, are certain to receive what they ask for and will be granted the mercy and divine grace of the Lord. But those who know nothing of what we’ve been talking about and say “Lord have mercy” merely out of habit cannot possibly receive the mercy of God ever. Because they’ve already received many gifts from God at an earlier time, but didn’t acknowledge them and didn’t thank God for giving them.

They received the mercy of God when they were made and became human; they received the mercy of God again when they were baptized and remade and became Orthodox Christians; they received the grace of God when they evaded spiritual and bodily dangers that threatened their lives; they received the mercy of God all the times they were able to partake of the spotless Holy Sacraments; they received the mercy of God every time they sinned against Him and saddened Him and weren’t utterly destroyed or even punished for their instruction, as they should have been; they received the mercy of God in a variety of ways, when they were granted blessings by Him and didn’t recognize them and, instead, forgot about them all and took no heed for their salvation. So how can Christians like this receive the mercy of God, without feeling and without knowing that they’re receiving such grace from God? As we’ve said, all they’re saying, all they’re doing is repeating “Lord have mercy”, without any aim or purpose, apart from habit.

Source: Φιλοκαλία των Ιερών Νηπτικών [Philokalia of Holy Neptics], τ. Ε΄. Εκδ. Το Περιβόλι της Παναγίας, σ. 289 -292.