

THE THREE FRIENDS

by

Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

When we were at New Skete on the Holy Mountain, Athos, in 1963, and I was about to become a rassophor monk, the Elder Arsenius wanted to speak to me in order to fortify my resolve in assuming the monastic life. Father Arsenius was the companion and fellow-ascetic of the saintly Elder Joseph the Cave-dweller and Hesychast, who had reposed in the Lord just four years before, in 1959.

On my part, I had just finished seminary, and as a young graduate, a "licensed theologian" so-called, my mind was aswirl with conflicting thoughts about everything, and so the Elder Arsenius wanted to help straighten out my brains. (You can be the judge as to how much he succeeded.)

He told me many edifying things, and among the many wonderful parables that he narrated in his simple and fatherly way, was the story of the three friends.

This parable is based on the account found in the Life of Ss. Barlaam and Ioasaph (chap. 13), by St. John Damascene (+760).

Father Arsenius' variation of this parable is as follows:

There was a certain man who had three friends. With the first two of these friends, he was very generous in his gifts. He spent all his time with them, and was extremely dedicated to them. All his thoughts, all his love and affection were directed to them.

With the third friend, on the other hand, he was somewhat cold and distant. He never showed him the love and dedication that was his due, but made only a show of some slight regard for him occasionally.

Well, it so happened one day that he was summoned to be tried at the courthouse because of some accusations that had been brought against him.

In his desperation, he ran to his first friend, seeking assistance. He explained his plight to him and begged him to come to the courthouse and be an advocate for him, to intercede for him.

To his amazement, his first friend answered, "My dear friend, you are correct. We have spent much time together and I know your dedication to me, and I understand your present need. But, you must know, I have this one habit: I *never* leave my residence for any reason whatsoever. I'm sorry, but I cannot come to the courthouse."

On hearing this, the man was flabbergasted. "But what about all the time we spent together? Doesn't my love for you mean anything to you?"

His words, however, fell upon deaf ears. His first friend was quite firm: he *never* left his "place of residence" for anything or anybody whatsoever.

Brokenhearted and shocked by his first friend's cold-heartedness, he made his way to his second friend, hoping for some assistance from him.

Again, he explained the plight he was in, and asked his friend to come to the courthouse with him.

The second friend replied: "My dearly beloved, you are the light of my eyes. I love you beyond words, and I will do whatsoever I can for you. I tell you what: I will come with you all the way to the courthouse, and I will come as far as the building's front steps. But I can go no further than that. How's that?"

The man could not believe his ears. After all that love and time that he had spent with his second friend, this is the response he received! "But that will do me no good whatsoever!" he exclaimed. "I need you *inside* the courthouse, not on the front steps!"

But, like the first friend, his second friend was very sorrowful, but steadfast in his affirmation that he could go no further.

Crestfallen by this unexpected turn of events, the man knew not what he could do. Finally, he remembered his third "friend" — the one he had neglected and avoided for so many years. If it were not for his desperate need, he was almost too embarrassed to approach him. But prompted by the urgency of his predicament, he swallowed his pride and approached the third friend.

With countenance ashamed and downcast, he said, "I can scarcely open my mouth to address you. I know full well that I have rarely greeted you or had any dealings with you. Nor have I shown you any kindness worth remembering. But a great misfortune has befallen me, and none of my

friends offer me any hope of assistance. Because of this, I address myself to you, hoping that, if it is in your power, you can afford me some help. Please do not bring to mind my former unkindness to you."

With a cheerful and gracious countenance, the third friend said, "Do not be downcast, my beloved. I have not forgotten those small services you offered me. I will repay you today with interest. I will go with you into the courtroom and entreat the judge for you, and will by no means allow you to fall into the hands of your enemies. So, be of good courage and do not consume yourself with worry."

On hearing these words, the man was pricked to the heart and wept. "Woe is me! Which should I lament or deplore first? Should I condemn myself for my preference for my first two friends who cannot or will not help me in my time of need, or should I lament over my ingratitude toward you, my sincere and true friend?"

Now, the interpretation of the parable is this:

The first friend is a man's possessions, his home, his place of business, his properties, his orchards, etc. Out of love for these things, a person spends much time, much effort, many expenses and labors. But when the appointed day of death comes, they do not leave "their place of residence" to come to the dread judgment hall to help him in his time of need. They stay where they are.

The second friend is a man's relatives, his spouse, his children, his friends, and the others to whom he is passionately attached, and can hardly tear himself away. They can come only as far as the front steps of the courthouse — that is, the edge of the grave, but no further. No man can derive any help from them at that dread moment. All they can do is follow us to the grave with tears, weeping and lamentation, but then they must turn back. They must return to their own homes again and busy themselves with their own cares and preoccupations.

But the third friend — the one that was neglected and forgotten and held in low esteem, whom the man rarely approached — is the whole company of virtues: faith, hope, love for God and our neighbor, almsgiving, kindness and the like. They can go before us when we depart from this life, and they can plead with the Judge in our behalf, and deliver us from the hands of our enemies, the demons.

This is the grateful and true friend, who remembers those small kindnesses that we showed him, and he repays us the whole sum with interest when we really need his help.

Thank you, Father Arsenius.