

December 1 – Wednesday of the Twenty-fourth Week after Pentecost

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Apostolic Goals, continued – Purity: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12, especially vs. 7: “For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.” Christ our Lord helps us move from faith to holiness, and from there to genuine love. But before such ultimate love can be attained, holiness must take root in us in order to purify our hearts, souls, and bodies.

We are aided in this work of purification by the Holy Spirit. As we engage in the life and worship of the Church, we commit ourselves to live in a way pleasing to God. In the today’s passage, the Apostle Paul addresses purity directly and encourages abstinence and the shunning of all immorality (vs. 3-4). He directs us to struggle against lust (vs. 5) by illuminating the damage wreaked on us by the lifestyles of others in our social communities (vss. 6-8).

The early Christians faced an indulgent pagan milieu very similar to what Church members faces in many societies today. The Greco-Roman world embraced every sort of carnal vice and gross sexual practice, even in its public religious rites. The Jews, who were called to be set part by God, naturally recoiled against the debauchery commonplace in the majority culture.

In the Wisdom of Solomon, we read how “the invention of idols was the beginning of fornication, and . . . the corruption of life. . . . For they either hold child-murdering rites of initiation, or celebrate secret mysteries, or engage in the frantic revelry of special customs.

“Moreover, they keep neither life nor marriages pure, but one either kills another in ambush, or one causes another grief when he corrupts his marriage. Everything is mixed together: Blood and murder, theft and treachery, depravity, unfaithfulness, tumult, perjury, confusion over what is good . . . corruption of family, breakup of marriages, disorder, adultery, and debauchery” (Wis 14:12, 21, 23-26).

The apostles carried on the godly attitudes taught in the Old Testament and by Christ our God. Naturally, they opposed vice. Of course, they knew that the strictures of the Mosaic Law did not provide salvation, yet they did not reject the morality of the Old Covenant. They understood the Law as a clear explication of the will of God.

However, they now set out to fashion a new, “holy nation, [God’s] own special people . . . once . . . not a people but . . . now the people of God” (1 Pt 2:9-10). They call the faithful to the will of God for sanctification “that [they] should abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thes 4:3). This attitude is assumed by Saint Paul and central in his teaching.

Most helpfully, the apostle focuses on our restraint of vice from its source in the passions and lusts. We Christians are to possess ourselves in sanctification, “not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God” (vs. 5).

How does one control “his own vessel in sanctification and honor” (vs. 4) so as to attain purity of heart and soul? We must watch over our inner life, for as Christ says, “whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:28). The key to living in purity is to maintain inner purity.

The worst aspect of immorality, as passage from Wisdom of Solomon reveals, is the destruction of trust, fidelity, and loyalty. Corruption destroys honest interaction among people (1 Thes 4:6-7). Adultery defrauds the spouse of the offender, even as debauchery affronts God, destroys trust in communities, and prevents true communion in Christ. The immoral sinner rejects “God, who has given us His Holy Spirit” (vs. 8), the Helper who assists everyone who wishes to attain purity, please God, and truly love his neighbor.

Thou, O God, dost unite us in purity and holiness; keep us in Thy ways all of our days. – Orthodox Marriage Service

December 2 – Thursday of Twenty-fourth Week after Pentecost

1 Thessalonians 5:1-8

Apostolic Goals, continued – Sobriety: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-8, especially vs. 6: “Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.” Just as Saint Paul calls us to live in purity, he also calls us to be watchful, for those “who are of the day” should live soberly (vs. 8). In modern times, any talk of sobriety raises the specter of substance abuse, for this widespread health issue affects marriages, destroys productivity and health, and corrupts every aspect of one’s physical, social, and spiritual life.

No doubt addiction and drunkenness were as prevalent in first-century Greco-Roman society as they are today. Yet the Apostle Paul does not focus primarily on this issue per se but assigns a broader meaning to the term sobriety. He stresses our need to be conscious of our ultimate accountability before God. Christian sobriety thus embraces not only the specific problem of substance abuse, but also irresponsibility, loss of direction, and hopelessness.

The present passage begins with instruction about “the day of the Lord” (vs. 2). This phrase refers to the end times: the conclusion of mortal existence and history upon the Lord Jesus’ return. Thus, Saint Paul’s call for sobriety is accompanied by a warning of the final judgment, while drunkenness is mentioned only in passing (vs. 7).

In fact, the apostle points toward what we may rightly call “eschatological sobriety,” from the word *eschaton* (“last”). “For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night” (vs. 2). With these words he reframes our brief lives and sets them in an end-time perspective. Sobriety, then, is our antidote to the casual, moment-to-moment indulgence that will strip our life of eternal meaning if we are not careful.

The contemporary world treats values, morals, and personal worth as relative. We are invited to think like the godless man who “says to himself, ‘Who sees me? Darkness encircles me. The walls of my house hide me, and no one sees me. Why should I be afraid? The Most High will not remember my sins.’

“His fear is the eyes of men. Yet he does not know that the eyes of the Lord are ten thousand times brighter than the sun and look upon all the ways of men and observe even the secret places” (Sir 23:18-19).

Today, many are awed by the sweeping pace of global change and upheaval. They become fascinated with prophecies of the coming end of time. They speculate when the day of the Lord will come, even seeking to predict the very hour. Such activity is contrary to the Lord Jesus’ warning that such calculations are useless (Mt 24:36).

Saint Paul directs us away from idle conjecture and focuses on the end goal of Christian sobriety: to place our energy on growing in the Spirit. Be vigilant against the assault of anyone or anything that distracts from growing closer to the Lord Jesus in heart and soul. “Therefore, let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober” (vs. 6).

Note how, throughout this passage, the apostle speaks with a confidence born of sure and certain hope. He appeals to us “who are of the day, [to] be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation” (vs. 8).

Consider how a helmet protects the vital area of the head and guards the locus of our senses and the center of our cognitive processing. As Christ’s own, we have a helmet to guard the deep center of the heart, a helmet of hope in our suffering and victorious God and Savior. He has trampled down death and “given unto us life eternal and great mercy.” Let us strive not to falter or stray, but to live soberly, protected by what God wrought for us and in us.

Let Thy mercy be upon us, O Lord, even as we have set our hope on Thee. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 3 – Friday of the Twenty-fourth Week after Pentecost
1 Thessalonians 5:9-13, 24-28

Apostolic Goals, continued – Peace: *1 Thessalonians 5:9-13, 24-28, especially vs. 13: “Be at peace among yourselves.”* We rightly stand in awe of the scope of the mission facing the Lord’s apostles as they set forth to disciple the nations. First, they had to gain a hearing for the gospel. Then, they had to help potential converts overcome treasured customs, antagonisms, and immoral lifestyles, so that they could unite themselves to Christ in baptism. Finally, they stood by to help the new Christians follow the Holy Spirit and walk in a purity and sobriety worthy of Jesus Christ – a tall order!

Yes, the mission was daunting. However, because they labored in the power of the Spirit of God, through them the Lord manifested remarkable success. They enabled countless people to find peace with God, with their fellow men, and within themselves.

Our Lord has passed this same mission on to us. Bringing peace on earth is difficult, however, as expressed by the motto of the State of Kansas (*Ad astra per aspera*, “to the stars through difficulties”). However, the apostles proved that Christ’s mission of peace is achievable.

In today’s passage, Saint Paul insists on the need for God’s peace not only in the world, but also among us, the faithful: “For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 9).

That we are appointed to “obtain” salvation indicates that we do not now possess salvation, only the opportunity to acquire deliverance. An appointment to a military academy, for example, does not guarantee a commission as an officer, even after four years of focused effort and discipline. The honor and the distinction of being an officer are very great, but one prepares through a regimen of study and training. Not all cadets will complete the course.

What is the connection between being “appointed” to salvation and being at peace with our brethren in the faith? “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (1 Jn 4:20).

In other words, we are appointed for peace – and to make peace. We should find it as unthinkable to be in conflict with our fellow Christians as it would be to frequent a prostitute (1 Cor 6:15-17). The Lord calls us to humble ourselves, to love one another, and to forgive as we are forgiven. Quarreling, resentment and discord are contrary to our commitment in Christ.

Yet God alone makes this peace possible as we labor for our salvation. Our Lord Jesus Christ “died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him” (1 Thes 5:10). Christ Jesus offers the help we require to finish the course in salvation. He is available to us day and night, especially when we confront antagonism and hostility from others. He promises us difficulty in this life, but sure salvation as well. Thus we persevere in the battle to love and bring peace to others who may not wish to be at peace with us.

How do we achieve peace? The apostle offers these guidelines in verses 11-12. First, we are to “comfort each other.” We recognize that behind much of the anger in the Church and the world at large is fear and pain. Rather than fight, we assuage fear by bringing comfort to others.

We “edify one another” by thinking first of building up believers, rather than defending ourselves. We also “recognize those who . . . are over [us] in the Lord and admonish [us.]” God has appointed shepherds to keep us as a flock. Their place among us is essential in the struggle to achieve peace among ourselves. They help us move toward God’s peace and bring us the mystery of reconciliation.

The Lord will give strength unto His people and bless them with peace. – Psalm 28:11

December 4 – Saturday of Twenty-fourth Week after Pentecost

2 Corinthians 11:1-6

Being Corrupted: 2 Corinthians 11:1-6, especially vs. 3: “*But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.*” Sectarian voices are often heard over the airwaves and the internet, with each spokesman insisting that he is approved by “the most eminent apostles” (vs. 5). While these “leaders” may seem to preach Christ, they transform the Lord Jesus into “a different gospel which you have not accepted” (vs. 4). Although they often accuse the Orthodox of being outdated and thus “inferior to the most eminent apostles” (vs. 5), we steadfastly follow the apostles appointed by Christ and perennially declare one holy and life-giving gospel.

History demonstrates how easily human “minds may be corrupted” (vs. 3) by cunning half-truths and distortions of the faith. We must remain on guard against every so-called “Christian” teaching that would overshadow the apostolic Church with more “complete” and up-to-date versions the faith. As Orthodox, we are united to the one, true God through holy baptism, having accepted the true faith delivered once and for all to the apostles (Jude 3).

The most dangerous heresies to assault us are those that diminish either the divinity or the humanity of the Lord Jesus or impugn the reality of His taking on human flesh from the Virgin Mary. God and man are joined eternally and irrevocably in the incarnate Christ. How often the Church reminds us that we worship “a Son without father, who before eternity was begotten of the Father without mother, the property and essence of each substance remaining intact.” Let us carefully attend to the message of the gospels, the icons, and the liturgy!

Our weak natures must learn discernment. If we are unprepared, we are susceptible to false modern ideas. The world does not encourage us to be critical of the spiritual assumptions on which its false teachings are based.

Under the banner of scientific rigor, contemporary wisdom brushes aside the idea of invariable truth and spiritual reality. Or we may be caught up in the reduction of Orthodox truth by heretical gospels that aim to be more palatable to the so-called modern mind. The apostles knew of such teachings; they coped with Christians who would “not endure sound doctrine . . . because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside to fables” (2 Tim 4:3-4).

We rely on the Holy Spirit to save us from error and “guide [us] into all truth” (Jn 16:13). Immature Christians, whether at Corinth or in one of our own communities, are those drawn toward “a different gospel which you have not accepted” (2 Cor 11:4).

We know and hear only the faith of the apostles during the Divine Liturgy. We ignore invented gospels, which are contrary to the gift of the Spirit in which we are sealed. We “have found the true faith, worshipping the undivided Trinity: for He hath saved us.”

The apostles and the Holy Church are jealous for us “with godly jealousy” (vs. 2). We are “betrothed . . . to one husband . . . as a chaste virgin to Christ” (vs. 2). However, we are only betrothed, for the wedding banquet of the age to come has not begun.

In holy communion, we receive a foretaste of that unending Mystical Supper. Let us confess the Lord like the good thief and not be condemned by accepting false spirits, nor for investigating strange and diminished gospels.

Establish us in Thy sanctification, O Lord, that all the day long we may meditate upon Thy righteousness.

– Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 5 – Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Tone 7

2 Corinthians 4:6-15

Enlightenment: 2 Corinthians 4:6-15, especially vs. 6: “God who commanded light to shine out of darkness . . . has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” We know Saint Paul’s dramatic conversion occurred while he was an ardent opponent of the faith. He was traveling to Damascus when the Lord Jesus Christ confronted and transformed him amidst a “light . . . brighter than the sun” (Acts 26:13) that “shone around him from heaven” (Acts 9:3). In a moment he was changed from one who “persecuted the Church of God” (1 Cor 15:9) into an ambassador for Christ (see 2 Cor 4:6).

The New Testament indicates that Saint Paul’s experience made him “turn around,” the literal meaning of the Greek words for conversion (*epistrepho* and *metanoeo*). Previously, as Saul of Tarsus, he was obsessed with “threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). Afterward, the light and glory of the Lord Jesus impelled him to the great task of bearing the Lord’s name before the nations of the earth (Acts 9:15).

In today’s passage, the Apostle Paul presents the three fundamental purposes for which the Lord called him – and all of us – into service: first, to enlighten the world’s peoples with the glory of God in Jesus Christ (vs. 6); second, to manifest the Lord’s life to many (vss. 9-11); and third, to “cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God” (vs. 15).

At creation, God gave birth to light by His Word, saying “Let there be light” (Gn 1:3). Now, in the new creation, He causes His Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, to illumine human hearts, so that we may be united to Christ and His mission. The Apostle Paul declares that it is the same “God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

Steeped in the Hebrew heritage of God’s people, Saint Paul uses the Greek word, *prosopon* (“face” or “person”) to indicate a personal encounter. God the Word places His wonder and majesty within reach of the human race in the person of Jesus Christ. He can be touched and handled (1 Jn 1:1) as a man: someone human beings can receive and recognize.

Humanity’s concept of knowing God has changed entirely. We no longer know *about* Him; now we may *know* Him. In time, the Fathers of the Church would give this concept of *person* “an absoluteness which still moves modern man even though he has fundamentally abandoned their spirit” (Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 35).

God enlightens our hearts within the “earthen vessels” (2 Cor 4:7) of our bodies, so “that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (vs. 9). One may press a true Christian, even perplex him, but it is not possible to crush him into despair (vs. 8). When the Romans threatened to kill Saint Polycarp, he prayed: “I bless [Thee] because [Thou] hast considered me worthy of this day and this hour” (Sparks, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 146).

We see that the Lord is wondrous “in the saints that are in His earth” (Ps 15:2). Christ the Lord is “the light of the world” (Jn 8:12), transforming those united to Him so that they in turn may become “the light of the world” (Mt 5:14).

God’s uncreated light enlightens us so “that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor 4:11), and His grace “spread through the many [causing] thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God” (vs. 15). When light of God shines through one human being who knows the Lord, it spreads to another, and another. As Christ enables those whom He enlightens to worship, praise, and give thanks, they are renewed – and they in turn renew others.

Illumine our hearts, O Master who loveth mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge and open the eyes of our minds to Thy gospel teaching. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 6 – Monday, Feast of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker of Myra in Lycia
Hebrews 13:17-21

Submission: Hebrews 13:17-21, especially vs. 17: “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account.” In Orthodox churches there is a custom of every altar server, reader, and chanter coming to the priest for a blessing before beginning their service at liturgy, vespers, or orthros.

What is the message behind these actions? Submission! We are to come under the rightful leadership of those designated to rule within the Church, even as they themselves submit to the Lord. Acts of submission demonstrate our respect and our readiness to obey those appointed to watch over our souls.

Saint Paul believes that true submission should be undertaken readily, with heartfelt delight, “with joy and not with grief” (vs. 17). Let us all, whether we are actively serving or not, have truly submissive hearts toward our spiritual fathers ordained in Christ to care for our souls.

What is the apostle’s point in admonishing us to submit to those in the Church? Foremost, submission relates to the eternal destiny of our souls. Saint Paul points to our stance before God when he reminds us that our pastors “watch out for [our] souls” (vs. 17). Consider this pastoral burden: every priest and bishop will give account to Christ the Lord concerning those submitted to him. Submission is the warp interwoven into the woof of Christian faith.

When a candidate is ready to be baptized, he is asked: “Do you unite yourself to Christ?” Then, “Do you believe in Him?” When both desire and commitment are established, there follows a repeated questioning: “Have you united yourself to Christ?” But once the candidate answers, “I have:” no further questions follow, nor is a statement made. Rather, a command is given: “Bow down also before Him.” Submission is the essence of life in Christ!

A further act of submission follows: after the candidate bows down, he kneels before the icon of the Lord. The fact and reality of submission continues. Not only is it unprofitable for us (vs. 17) if we fail to submit to the Lord in our hearts and deeds, but also when we refuse to submit to the godly pastors He appoints. For then we may be judged incomplete “in every good work to do His will” (vs. 21). Rebellion and resistance are attitudes with both temporal and eternal consequences.

How do we manifest our compliance under the Lord? In today’s reading, the apostle speaks for every pastor of the Church as he pleads, “Pray for us” (vs. 18). Let us ask God for hearts ready to obey the Lord in and through all our relationships, so that we may realize a holy submission to each other that is “well pleasing in [the Lord’s] sight” (vs. 21).

When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Hebrews, he was absent from his flock. Therefore, he asks them, “I especially urge you to [pray for me], that I may be restored to you the sooner” (vs. 19). Do not overlook the double entendre here: if there is resistance within us, then prayer will function to restore us to our pastors and superiors “the sooner.” Let us learn to watch for any sign of resistance, restiveness, or rebellion within us, praying for a wholesome submissiveness so that our souls will not fall into mortal danger.

As we consider wholesome submission, we also recognize that there is such a thing as obsequiousness and servility, as well as inappropriate domination and “lording it over” the faithful, as some are given to doing (Mt 20:25-28). Our priests and bishops are to submit to the Lord as they rule, even as the faithful submit first to the Great Shepherd, and only then to the pastors and bishops who represent Him on earth.

O Master, unite us to Thee that we may be Thy children, ever submitted to Thee. – Baptismal Prayer

December 7 – Tuesday of the Twenty-fifth Week after Pentecost

2 Thessalonians 1:10-2:2

God's Good Pleasure: 2 Thessalonians 1:10-2:2, especially vs. 11: “Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power.” Saint Paul tells us that the Lord Jesus is coming again to give rest to “those who are troubled” (vs. 1:7), but how will He address the persecutions that His people now suffer? Part of the apostle’s answer is that the Lord, in flaming fire, will wreak “vengeance on those who do not know God, and . . . do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 8).

To this eye-for-an-eye retribution, Saint Paul adds that the opponents of the faith will also be excluded “from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (vs. 9). He then goes on to describe how the Lord will requite those who have believed in Him, and have suffered affliction and harsh treatment for His sake.

“Those who believe” (vs. 10) will receive more than release and rest from afflictions, for God will count His faithful worthy to have “all the good pleasure of His goodness” fulfilled in them (vs. 11). What is this “good pleasure” of God’s goodness? Saint Paul states that the Lord Jesus will “be glorified in His saints” (vs. 10), implying that they will be fulfilled by having Christ glorified “in” them.

Yet does Scripture not teach that glory belongs God, as something exclusive to His nature (Ex 15:11)? “Lift up your gates, O ye princes . . . and the King of Glory shall enter in. Who is this King of Glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory” (Ps 23:9-10).

Indeed, we read that God’s glory exceeds anything man can bear. For example, the great Prophet Moses found grace before God, yet when he asks the Lord to manifest Himself before him, he is told, “‘I will pass before you in My glory’ . . . But He said, ‘You cannot see My face; for no man can see My face and live. . . . So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen’” (Ex 33:19, 22-23).

The awesome otherness of God’s glory is repeated on Mount Tabor, when the Lord Jesus manifests His divine light to the three disciples “in as much as they could bear it,” according to the festal hymn. The icon of the Transfiguration depicts them humbled on the ground by the overpowering radiance of the glory of Christ our God. Even a brief moment of His glory is too much for them.

How, then, will God give glory to His saints? According to Saint Isaac the Syrian, “Just as each man enjoys the physical sun according to the clarity and receptive power of his sight . . . so in the age to come all the righteous shall dwell in one place indivisibly, but each of them is illumined by the one noetic Sun according to his own measure” (*Ascetical Homily 56*).

The Apostle Paul thus declares that the acquisition of *glory* by God’s people will be “the work of faith with power” (2 Thes 1:11). The work of the righteous and God’s power together can result in “theosis,” so that human beings overflow with God’s grace and acquire a touch of glory to whatever measure possible.

We find examples of this transforming power of God in the saints even here in this present life, as when Saint Seraphim of Sarov shone with God’s glory before his friend Motovilov, becoming radiant. In the age to come, this glory will fill all the faithful in the kingdom by God’s power, and He will “be admired among all those who believe” (vs. 10).

O Thou who reignest over the courts of Thy saints, remember us also in Thy kingdom! – Orthodox Funeral Service

December 8 – Wednesday of the Twenty-fifth Week after Pentecost

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Deception: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, especially vss. 3-4: “Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple, showing himself that he is God.” Two thousand years have passed since our Lord Jesus Christ walked among us in the flesh. This passage from Second Thessalonians has often been used to trouble the souls of the faithful (vs. 2) and mislead them with a host of deceptions (vs. 3) and delusions (vs. 11).

Such frauds usually are promoted by demagogues who will not accept the “foolishness of God” (1 Cor 1:25), but favor “the wisdom of this world” (vs. 20) instead. They spread ideas and schemes devised in their own deceived minds. Saint Paul warns us against such deception. We must always be attentive to protect the pure gospel truth that all may be saved (2 Thes 2:10).

Saint Paul begins by alerting us to some of the means used to deceive: “by spirit or by word or by letter” purported to have apostolic source and authority (vs. 2); through “power, signs, and lying wonders” (vs. 9); and through bald, outright unrighteous deception (vs. 10).

Fraudulent teachers usually advance their agenda by claiming private inspiration from the Holy Spirit, or use words that purportedly have the authority of Christ or the apostles. Working from the vortex of pride and ambition, purveyors of the “latest thinking” and “new truths” quote selectively from Holy Scripture or the Fathers to support their teachings. Some use an attractive personality, along with false signs and wonders, to captivate the faithful and lead them away from the gospel and holy tradition.

Of foremost importance, the apostle directs our attention in this passage to the underlying causes that motivate such deceived and deceiving innovators. As a prelude, he observes that deception is preceded by “falling away” (vs. 3) from the basics of the faith. This term “falling away” (*apostasia* in Greek) means denying those basic truths of Christianity without which it cannot be understood.

Behind this “mystery of lawlessness” (vs. 7), however, lies a deeper, more sinister rebellion that seems to well up from nowhere. The Apostle Paul, however, firmly identifies the source of all apostasy as “the working of Satan” (vs. 9). God permits the devil, our fellow men, and even ourselves to make wrong and evil choices (vs. 11).

Let us not be shocked at this divine permission, for He extends freedom of choice to us all (Gn 2:16-17). We must choose to exercise our hearts and minds to embrace His truth, rather than seeking “pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thes 2:12).

Let us strive to be aware of the diabolical machinations at work whenever we feel lured from the faith. According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “We must always be attentive to the assaults of the devil; for can we hope that he will leave us without temptation, when he did not leave alone our Founder and Source of faith and Perfecter, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself?” (*Little Russian Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 57).

Having helped us to see the nature of deception, the apostle spells out what happens when we allow ourselves to be taken in by Satan: our minds are shaken, our lives troubled, and disorder reigns in our communities (vs. 2). Our embrace of lies ends in our condemnation by God (vs. 12), and finally we will perish (vs. 10) along with Satan, when the Lord Jesus returns to destroy him “with the breath of His mouth” and “the brightness of His coming” (vs. 8).

O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance, granting to Thy people victory over all their enemies; and by the power of Thy Cross preserving Thy kingdom. – Hymn for the Exaltation of the Cross

December 9 – Thursday of the Twenty-fifth Week after Pentecost

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

Consider the Gospel: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5, especially vs. 14: “God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” A fruitful way to approach today’s epistle is through the word “gospel” (vs. 14). The Greek word *evangelion* can be translated “good news” or “glad tidings.” Thus, the gospel is a kind of message, but one which can only be understood in context, as Saint Paul uses the word in this passage.

He qualifies this message in two ways. First, he refers to it as *our* gospel (vs. 14). Second, if we follow his logic through the verses, he reaches the conclusion that we must obey and carry out the gospel as he and the other apostles have delivered it: “We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, both that you do and will do the things we command you” (vs. 4).

The next consideration is what sort of command Saint Paul is issuing in relation to the gospel. He adds the modifying pronoun “our” to the word “gospel,” giving it a double reference. He speaks as one of the apostles, sent by the Lord Jesus Christ to deliver the message, but he also speaks to us, as the Lord’s disciples.

Note that the message is not Saint Paul’s property, nor does it belong to the apostles. They do not speak for themselves, but for Christ (Mt 28:19-20). The word *apostolos* means “one sent with a message.” This usage is consistent throughout the New Testament. The gospel is a proclamation of an official message from Christ our Lord, by God the Father (1 Thes 2:16). It is delivered by the appointed apostles as an urgent proclamation from God on High.

Let us consider God’s aim in making this proclamation. There are two phrases that capture the Lord’s purpose: “God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” (vs. 13), and “for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 14).

God’s aim is to save the faithful, who are defined by the sharing in and obtaining the glory manifest in Christ our God. This divine aim is carried out by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, as we put our trust in what God proclaims and work with Him. Our cooperation with the Holy Spirit is essential, for Saint Paul emphasizes that we must “stand fast and hold the traditions which [we] were taught, whether by word or [his] epistle” (vs. 15). He even offers a prayer in verses 16-17 to encourage us. A good prayer to use!

The concluding verses speak to the immediate circumstances faced by Saint Paul and his fellow apostles, as well as the evils besetting the Thessalonian congregation. This is why Saint Paul urges them to have confidence, and to stand fast in the faith.

The proclamation of God that the Apostle Paul outlines here has immense significance. We are the beloved of the Lord (vs. 13, 16). We are like a bride in relation to her bridegroom, for God from the beginning *chose* us for salvation (vs. 13).

Eternal significance is added to our lives as a result of being selected by God for salvation (vs. 13). Life beyond the grave is assured us, as we confessed at baptism and as we were anointed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. We can hope to obtain the glory that Christ revealed by His radiant appearances after the Resurrection (vs. 14).

The point that Saint Paul would have us grasp is this: we are to stand fast, hold onto the traditions (vs. 15), and pray along with him. Then God will “comfort [our] hearts and establish [us] in every good word and work” (vs. 17). May God make His love known to us and give us true patience (vs. 5)!

O Merciful God, grant us Thy grace, life, peace, health, salvation, and visitation always. – Baptismal Liturgy

December 10 – Friday of the Twenty-fifth Week after Pentecost

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Disorderly Brethren: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18, especially vss. 14-15: “*And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*” In dealing with disobedience, the Apostle Paul declares that when the Lord Jesus returns from heaven, He will “give you who are troubled rest . . . taking vengeance on those who do not know God [nor] obey the gospel” (vss. 1:7-8). Some infer from these words that the Lord will come again soon.

Two thousand years after the apostle’s time, the Lord has not yet returned. Still, what Saint Paul conveys is certain: Jesus *will* return. Thus, our life in Christ is marked by urgency, because our Lord’s return remains imminent. However, we are at peace, for we know what the Lord teaches: we cannot know the times and dates, but we can prepare ourselves (Acts 1:7).

More immediately, all of us face the certainty of death – a reality that draws closer to us daily. Urgency and readiness are pertinent, even if we tend to neglect them, for at death “the righteous [final] judgment of God” (2 Thes 1:5), our eternal destiny, will be settled (Heb 9:27).

Some in Thessalonica apparently drew wrong conclusions concerning the Lord Jesus’ return, assuming that there was no point in working to support themselves because life would soon end. With no income to buy food, such people were eating others’ bread and burdening the community (2 Thes 3:8). Furthermore, with nothing to occupy their time, they were busying themselves in other’s affairs (vs. 11).

The congregation sought Saint Paul’s counsel for coping with these burdensome and disruptive people. His counsel remains timely, for in every generation there are Christians who abuse the goodwill of their communities. We may profit from the apostle’s answers to these issues when we encounter disruptive people, in our personal life or our congregation. Who does not know profligate and burdensome brethren?

Saint Paul clearly teaches us to “withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition” (vs. 6). There are good reasons for not keeping company (vs. 14) with those who take advantage of others. First, the more time and energy we invest in those who are out of control, the more such persons are encouraged to act inappropriately (vs. 14).

Second, we may discover suddenly that we have become part of the problem, for our efforts to help the unruly may actually fuel their confusion. It is easy to fall into the trap of helpfulness, only to discover that we have exacerbated the problem by interfering. Third, frustration builds up when we persist in trying to change an unchangeable situation. The likelihood of our being drawn into quarreling or abuse increases.

Detachment is our best course: to remain quiet and apply wholesome energy to our own concerns (vss. 7,12). The apostle states a dictum, now become proverbial, for dealing with those who will not apply themselves in life: “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (vs. 10).

The application of this pronouncement must be grounded in love: to bring offenders to repentance (vs. 14). Saint Paul encourages us to admonish erring members as we would a brother, with loving concern. Confrontations devoid of love are counterproductive. Thus, we pray to the Lord for the grace to admonish constructively, and to be prayerful in such matters.

While we encourage the freeloader and the overly dependent to be accountable to the Lord, we never neglect those who are truly in need and require our help. Classifying brethren in any sense verges on judgment, and that is God’s prerogative. Let us never “grow weary in doing good” (vs. 13)!

O Lord, lead us to do Thy will and become worthy of a place at Thy right hand. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 11 – Saturday of the Twenty-fifth Week after Pentecost
Galatians 1:3-10

The Gospel Essence: Galatians 1:3-10, especially vs. 3-4: “Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. . . .” When an apostle of Christ consigns someone to God’s curse, it calls on our attention. Let us read Saint Paul’s words with care: “if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed” (vs. 9). He earnestly repudiates anyone who would modify his teaching “to please men” (vs. 10). Let us not fall under this apostolic curse in our teaching, belief, or practices!

Saint Paul speaks to us, for we have united ourselves to Christ. The personal pronoun “our” is repeated three times in verses 3 and 4. He reminds us that the gospel calls us “in the grace of Christ” (vs. 6). God honors us! Peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ is offered to us so that it might pass “through all my body parts, into all my joints, my reins, my heart” (post-communion prayer).

In other words, Saint Paul pleads that we not take our faith lightly. The possibility of separating ourselves from the grace of God – and thereby losing His peace – is real. The apostle makes “turning away . . . from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel” (vs. 6) a live possibility. Self-induced perdition lies within our power.

Because the blessing of our life in Christ may be under threat, Saint Paul starts this passage with a reminder of the gracious, life-giving gospel that is ours. We address Jesus as Lord, calling Him Christ or God. As Lord, He is the master and owner: this title is similar to “Your Honor,” “Mister,” or “Father.”

Unlike these examples, however, He *owns* us. The title Christ means “anointed one,” a translation of the Hebrew word Messiah. Jesus is our anointed King (1 Kgs 8:19-22; 9:17; 10:1). Holy Scripture teaches us how to speak to God: “O God, my God, attend to me” (Ps 21:1); “Give ear, O God, unto my prayer” (Ps 54:1); “Have mercy on me, O God” (Ps 55:1); “I will exalt Thee, O my God” (Ps 144:1), “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28).

In the first century, when the Jewish nation was subservient to the Roman Empire, the people longed for God to send a ruler to free them from subjugation. They were eager for a Messiah, a Christ. In such circumstances a teacher appeared who drew around Him dedicated disciples and great numbers of other followers. This Jesus of Nazareth was often called Lord (e.g., Mt 18:21) and identified as both Messiah (cf Mt 16:15-16) and God (Jn 20:28).

What is the essence of the gospel that the Apostle Paul wants us to confess? How should we ward off any false concepts that might be called “gospels?” The answer is simple: Jesus of Nazareth is our Lord, King, and God. We are called to submit to Him who, “when He had come and had fulfilled all the dispensation for us, in the night in which He was betrayed . . . gave Himself up for the life of the world” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

When He gave Himself up “for the life of the world,” the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled God’s deliverance of mankind “from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Gal 1:4). The pure gospel cuts across eternity and time, uniting them. Saint Paul declares the grace of God, and His peace in our hearts, as our rule for living in this world. Who “would not be a bondservant of Christ” (vs. 10) and join Saint Paul in giving glory to God?

O Master, open the eyes of our hearts to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings; for Thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 12 – Sunday of the Holy Forefathers. Tone 8

Colossians 3:4-11

Future, Present, Past: Colossians 3:4-11, especially vss. 5-7: “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth. . . . Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked. . . .” In this opening quote, the changing grammatical tenses refer to the passage of time. They serve cover the entire working of salvation, from the past into the present and future. All of time is summarized in these three verses. Thus, while the Apostle Paul primarily exhorts us concerning the labors and tasks of this present life, he also sketches the future in swift, impressionistic strokes while referring to the past. Then he returns again to the present, where we must daily evaluate, decide, and act.

At the start of today’s passage, the apostle indicates our present condition: “Christ who is our life” (vs 4). However, even as he speaks of this life in Christ, he places the present in the context of the future. In the time yet to come, the Life-giver will appear, and “then you also will appear with Him in glory” (vs 4). Participating in the Christian mystery now places us on the path toward the glory that shall be.

Those of us who firmly hold to Christ in the depth of our being will share in His magnificence when He is manifested in glory. Wondrously, we who are now motivated by our belief in Him will be glorified together with Him (Rom 8:17). We would be utterly at a loss to receive these words if we did not have the revelation of the glory of God in the flesh, the gospel of Savior who was born among us, in all humility, so that our finite senses could comprehend God. We can now project from the limited present to an eternal future!

In this reading the apostle invites us to consider what is demanded of us now by the future that will surely come. We are to “put to death [our] members which are upon earth” (vs. 5). Saint Paul lists what must be mortified: “fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry” (vs. 5). Are these sins operating in us now?

Why must we continually mortify our passions? Saint John Chrysostom asks us to imagine someone who “has scoured clean a statue that was filthy, or rather who has recast it, and displayed it bright afresh.” He can truly say that the rust “was eaten off and destroyed, and yet [still] recommend diligence in clearing away the rust. He doth not contradict himself, for it is not that rust which he scoured off that he recommends should be cleared away, but that which grew afterwards” (“Homily 8 on Colossians,” *NPN Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 13, p. 294).

New and former sins continue to flare up in our hearts and souls. We are called to continually purify and cleanse every trace of sin that grows within us, so that we may be found worthy of the glorious future appearing of our Savior.

Having encouraged us by means of a God-promised, ineffable future, the Apostle Paul reminds us of another of God’s promises: there will be retribution for those who disobey. The “sons of disobedience” will face wrath when the Lord returns (vs. 6). Further, Saint Paul reminds us, we too “once walked . . . [in] . . . anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, [and] filthy language” (vss. 7,8). We are to “put off” all traces of these wrongs (vs. 8)!

At the beginning, in the waters of baptism, we were illumined, we were sanctified, we were washed. Now, “even unto a ripe old age,” we are to ascribe glory to God by putting “on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (vs. 10). We labor now so that “Christ is all and in all” (vs. 11): in us, and also in everyone we influence by our life. Let us remain “rust free” until He appears in glory, so that we too shall appear with Him (vs. 4).

Grant a Christian ending to our life and a good defense before Thy dread Judgment seat. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 13 – Monday of the Twenty-sixth Week after Pentecost

1 Timothy 1:1-7

A Pure Heart and Sincere Faith: 1 Timothy 1:1-7, especially vs. 5: “Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith. . . .” Saint Paul directs his disciple Timothy to command those at Ephesus to “teach no other doctrine . . . than godly edification which is in faith” (vss. 3-4). Fables, genealogies, and disputes are contrary to edification. The apostle’s commandment is given so that we may know true love: God’s love, which alone renews and refreshes our souls.

Specifically, Saint Paul calls us to labor for “a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith” (vs. 5), for these alone secure us in the renewing and refreshing love of Christ. A *pure heart* commands and directs the soul, dispelling any evil thoughts that enter it, so that we do not receive “[our] soul in vain” (Ps 23:4). Such a heart will draw close to God, and the Lord will dwell within us to help our heart continue in purity (Jas 4:8).

“Notice that God does not tolerate the slightest impurity,” observes Saint John of Kronstadt, “and that peace and God Himself leave you immediately after the admittance of any impure thought into your heart. And you become the abode of the devil if you do not immediately renounce the sin” (*My Life in Christ*, p. 301).

We are easily corrupted by contact with the evil spirits around us, for the “skirmish line” of spiritual warfare is within our mind. Evil thoughts must be stopped there if we hope to attain the pure heart that knows Christ.

“Once we have in some measure acquired the habit of self-control, and have learned how to shun visible sins, brought about through the five senses, we will then be able to guard the heart with Jesus, to receive His illumination within it, and by means of the intellect [i.e., the nous] to taste His goodness” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 18).

We are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is the invincible ally of our five senses in destroying the dark enemies – if we are willing to seek His aid. Our *good conscience* is also the ally of the pure heart, but the conscience must first be purified also. Mercifully, God gave us a guardian angel at baptism who warns the conscience.

We must heed our guardian angel’s warnings and observe our thoughts and actions. Only then will we learn to grieve before the Lord. “Do not be surprised that you fall every day; do not give up, but stand your ground courageously. And assuredly the angel who guards you will honor your patience” (Saint John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 5.30, p. 64).

A lively conscience guards our love for God and others. On the other hand, a deadened conscience is like a switched off alarm that fails to sound at mortal danger. “We must carefully consider whether our conscience has ceased to accuse us, not as a result of purity, but because it is immersed in evil,” says Saint John Climacus. “Many from long neglect become incurable, but with God all things are possible” (p. 65).

Thus, we come to *sincere faith*, the third essential of true love. Purifying the heart requires our trust in God, which explains why Saint Paul yokes faith with “a good conscience” (vs. 5). According to Saint Herman of Alaska, “Faith and love of Christ make a true Christian. Our sins in no way hinder our Christianity, as we can tell from the words of the Savior Himself. He stated that He had ‘not been called to judge the righteous, but to save the sinful - there is more joy in Heaven at one sinner who repents than at ninety-nine righteous men’” (Mt 9:13; Lk 15:7) (Oleksa, *Alaskan Missionary Spirituality*, pp. 44-45).

O Lord, heal my soul, enlighten the eyes of my heart, grant peace to my spiritual powers, that with faith unashamed I may love and obey Thee to the attainment of Thy kingdom. – Post-communion Prayer

December 14 – Tuesday of the Twenty-sixth Week after Pentecost

1 Timothy 1:8-14

Everything in Christ: 1 Timothy 1:8-14, especially vs. 12: “*And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry. . . .*” The “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) continues to exist in the Church as it has from apostolic times. This faith is illumined for us by the Holy Spirit so long as we remain “in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” (Jude 21).

The so-called pastoral epistles (two addressed to Timothy, one to Titus) offer an early record of how the faith “delivered to the saints” is handed on to subsequent leaders. Aging and death, or the need to transfer leaders into new ministries, means that the Church’s pastors must find way to entrust the saving truths of the faith to new hands. Hence, in First Timothy, the Apostle Paul writes to his young protegee, addressing him as “a true son in the faith” (1 Tim 1:2).

To Timothy, his “true son,” the apostle offers a message applicable to all, leaders and laypeople alike. If we are to find the strength, grace, and mercy of God, we must draw upon the Lord Jesus (vss. 12-14).

In the present passage, we observe how Saint Paul uses his own life as an example of what Christ accomplishes when He places His call upon those who serve Him. He empowers each of us for discipleship – but especially those whom He appoints to lead the ministries of the Church, whether locally, regionally, or worldwide.

First, Saint Paul focuses on the Law of God, summarized in the Ten Commandments (vs. 8). Next, he reviews the condition of the hearts and souls of the godless, for whom the first four commandments are given. These individuals disdain any relationship with God. Saint Paul characterizes them as lawless, insubordinate, God-denying, and profane (vs 9).

Such people serve fabricated idols, rather than the true God. They worship created things and invest energy in their gods of wealth, pleasure, power, status, and the like. They disdain the law, which they do not consider sacred, and the guidance of their superiors. Instead, they favor whatever pleases and satisfies their own desires.

The apostle next lists the sins forbidden by the last six commandments. These mandates concern our relationships with one another. As the apostle lists these sins (vss. 9-10), he follows the same order found in Scripture (see Ex 20:12-17).

His review of these fundamentals of the Law establishes a background and foundation for his review of the sound doctrine of “the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to [his] trust” (1 Tim 1:11). To this topic he now turns his attention.

With the phrase “committed to my trust” (vs. 11), the apostle sets the stage for addressing how God’s grace transformed him from a persecutor of the Church into an apostle. He profoundly thanks the Lord for granting him mercy, as He does with any sinner who repents.

Saint Paul sets his former life as a “blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man” before us to serve as an example (vs 13). Here he refers to his early life when he was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” and bringing men and women “bound to Jerusalem” for prosecution, trial, imprisonment, and death (Acts 9:1-2).

The Apostle concludes with the assertion that “the grace of our Lord [is] exceedingly abundant with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 1:14). In other words, there is no sin God will not forgive. If we continue striving to live in Christ, He is faithful to us.

O Lord, help me to sin no more and always do that which is pleasing unto Thee.

December 15 – Wednesday, Hieromartyr Eleutherios of Illyria

2 Timothy 1:1-2, 8-18

Godly Successors: 2 Timothy 1:1-2, 8-18, especially vss. 8-9: “Share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us...according to His own purpose....” The martyred Eleutherios, Bishop of Illyria, is described in the Church’s hymnody as a “high priest...a Martyr unsubdued for Him Who bare the Passion for all of us” and as “a contender for sacred fame.” To celebrate his feast is to remember thankfully all our Bishops and Priests who strive faithfully to maintain the Gospel received from the Apostles. These are, like Saint Timothy, men who must be reckoned as true Apostolic witnesses (vs 2).

Certainly, the Apostles themselves, standing next to Christ in the heavenly realms, remember these clergy in their “prayers night and day” (vs 3) as should we all, regularly. Many of these clergy, the best of them, surely are men of tears (vs 4). They weep with us their people in our sufferings, at our weaknesses, and for us in our moments of triumph in struggling to live out the Faith well and commendably.

There always is critical finger-pointing at the Church because of those among us who appear at or serve the Liturgy but who do not seem to live the Faith with integrity. Can we do anything less than rejoice for our clergy who consistently evince “genuine faith” (vs 5)!

No doubt the reason for invariable evidence of faith among many clergy lies in the fact that they have “the gift of God...in [them] through the laying on of...hands” (vs 6). In the Mystery of Ordination we recognize that “grace divine...always healeth that which is infirm and completeth that which is wanting...through the laying-on of hands.”

Hence, to be Orthodox and not know the blessing of the “spirit...of power and of love and of a sound mind” (vs 7) ministered by one of our clergy means to be an exception among the faithful, for a great many of our Priests and our Bishops truly are spirit-filled, godly men.

One watershed marker that identifies the clergy who stand in the place of the Apostles is their unhesitating willingness to “share with [the Apostles] in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God” (vs 8). Without hesitation, they speak up for the truth of the Faith no matter the personal cost to themselves. When others falter; they do not.

These men are marked by the attention they pay to words - their own speech and the words of others. They know that words have great power, so they “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which [they] have heard from [the Apostles], in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (vs 13). They speak not to punish and flail with words, but to heal and minister the truth in love.

Following the advice of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, godly clergy keep that good thing that was committed to them by the Holy Spirit who dwells in them (see vs 14). They are able to do this foremost because their ministries are grounded in earnest, disciplined prayer.

To emphasize all this evidence concerning clergy who are evident and godly successors of the Apostles, consider what Saint Paul says of his fellow worker, Onesiphorus: “he often refreshed me” (vs 16); so do the good men who minister to us. “he sought me out very zealously and found me” (vs 17). Remember, the Apostle Paul was in prison awaiting trial on life-or-death charges, and Onesiphorus did not hide, delay or protect himself, but sought out the Saint in these dark circumstances. The mark of a consecrated man is to put himself on the line, which should be true of all of us. At Ephesus, Onesiphorus ministered to Saint Paul in “many ways” (vs 18). True Pastors search for many ways to bring life and light to the people. This is the blessing of being an Orthodox Christian – even today we have so many clergy like this.

Remember in mercy, O Lord, those who are kind to us and minister unto us.

December 16 – Thursday of the Twenty-sixth Week after Pentecost

1 Timothy 3:1-13

Selecting Clergy: 1 Timothy 3:1-13, especially vs. 10: “*But let these . . . first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless.*” Here is godly counsel from the Apostle Paul on the need to identify, appoint, and train competent leadership for the Church. He continues to explore a major concern of his in this letter: how we are to transmit the faith to succeeding generations. His first concern is that without blameless, competent, and mature clergy, any effort to pass on the faith will falter, leaving the Church weak and ineffective.

We present-day Orthodox Christians reading this first-century letter will discover some differences between contemporary practices and those of the early Church. For instance, bishops at that time appear to have been drawn from the ranks of married men (vs. 2) with children (vs. 4). What is important to remember is that the clergy of the early Church, very much like our clergy today, were men with common weaknesses and strengths, even though their social and marital circumstances differed.

The unfolding of the Church’s ministry over the centuries has a certain analogy to the development of a living organism. For instance, many seeds will sprout and push up through the soil, first appearing as simple two-leaf plants that look much different when they grow into maturity. Similarly, the earliest historical records concerning the clergy reveal that the ordained ministry took a somewhat different shape than do the holy orders as we know them in the Church today.

As the ministry grew and developed within the Church, taking slightly different forms over its long development, the clergy through time nevertheless remain organically related within the Body of Christ. As Saint Paul instructs, the Church has always required men who are morally pure, personally mature, and who enjoy a good testimony in all of their relationships. Such words describe our God-pleasing clergy, both past and present.

We note in particular the emphasis of the apostle on worthy moral character. He asserts that the clergy must be blameless (vss. 2, 10), of good behavior (vs. 2), not given to wine (vss. 3, 8) nor violent or greedy (vss. 3, 8), nor quarrelsome or covetous (vs. 3), nor filled with pride (vs. 6), nor double-tongued, i.e., deceptive (vs. 8). Rather, they should hold “the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience” (vs. 9).

Certainly, everyone is aware of how much mischief befalls a community because of clergy who give themselves over to immorality. We thank God that the great majority of our ordained priests are men who lead pure, moral, and faithful lives.

The Apostle Paul admonishes Timothy to be very careful that both bishops and deacons are mature men. He mentions that they must be “the husband of one wife,” meaning neither polygamous nor divorced (vss. 2, 12). They must be sober-minded (vs. 2), temperate (vs. 2), and gentle (vs. 3).

Novices in the faith are not ordained (vs. 6), for the observation of candidates over time helps the Church identify their capacity for “blamelessness” (vs. 10). The pressures of pastoral life are such that clergy must be balanced and settled as persons, which is why our hierarchs today take care to assure that they have gained good general education, seminary training, and other testing in life before ordination.

Finally, the Apostle Paul urges that all clergy have “a good testimony among those who are outside” (vs. 7). They must be able to rule their own household as well (vss. 4, 12). Here again are two arenas where criticism will weaken a priest’s witness. Pray for our pastors!

O Master, Christ, may Thy Holy Spirit ever guide the Church in choosing and ordaining men worthy to stand before Thy Throne, to edify Thy people, and to feed the flock of Thy pasture.

December 17 – Friday of the Twenty-sixth Week after Pentecost

1 Timothy 4:4-8

Good Doctrine: 1 Timothy 4:4-8, especially vs. 6: “If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.” In today’s passage the Apostle Paul begins and concludes with an important topic: he is most concerned that Timothy should instruct the faithful in good doctrine (vs. 6). As we follow his thought in this passage, we note that he not only directs Timothy to teach the brethren good doctrine, but also commands him to follow, continue, and practice what he teaches.

According to Bishop Kallistos Ware, “It is not enough simply to give intellectual assent to a system of doctrine, for tradition is far more than a set of abstract propositions – it is a life, a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit. Tradition is not only kept by the Church – it lives in the Church, it is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church” (*The Orthodox Church*, p. 206).

Those who teach prove themselves to be good ministers of the Lord when they are themselves “nourished in the words of faith” with which they “instruct the brethren” (vs. 6). If he is pass on his faith in the Lord, a teach must transmit doctrine to others both by instruction and by example – a manifestation of his own struggle for knowledge, faith, and salvation.

Consider the apostle’s phrase “nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine” (vs. 6). How do words of teaching and doctrine “nourish?” How does doctrine feed us?

When the Lord came to the Samaritan city of Sychar (Jn 4:4-43), He and the disciples stopped near Jacob’s well. While the disciples go “away into the city to buy food” (vs. 8), an extensive conversation takes place between the Lord and a woman who has come to draw water. As the discussion is ending, the disciples return with food.

The disciples urge the Lord, “Rabbi, eat” (vs. 31). He replies, “I have food to eat of which you do not know” (vs. 32). They are puzzled, and so the Lord Jesus explains, “My food is to do the will of Him Who sent Me, and to finish His work” (vs. 34). Teaching and doctrine are what nourish the Lord.

Something in us hungers for a kind of food that no bread in this world can ever satisfy, for “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from of the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). The words of God and His holy doctrine are the “bread of the kingdom” that we receive (Lk 14:15) – although often we are able to take only the milk of doctrine, not its strong meat (1 Cor 3:2).

Still, our spirits hunger and thirst for the word of God and for good teaching. “Blessed are these who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Mt 5:6). Only those who are nourished on sound doctrine can in turn transmit the faith.

When we, as God’s people, are nurtured on good doctrine, we are better able to follow what we have received and to *exercise* ourselves toward godliness (vs. 7). In the original Greek, the word for exercise is *gymnaze*, the root of our word gymnasium, or place of exercise. Truly our faith disciplines, trains, and exercises our spirits!

As our hearts grow in godliness through the practice and exercise of good doctrine, we grow and mature. We gain faith not only for this life, but also for “that which is to come” (vs. 8). Let us be like good athletes, refusing that which offers little profit: the profane, the false, and the trivial (vs. 7). We continue, rather, in holy tradition, which saves us and all who hear (vs. 16). This is the Orthodox faith, known and worthy of passing on.

Feed us, O Lord, with Thy pure words that we may increase in stature, unto ripe old age. – Chrismation Prayer

December 18 – Saturday before the Nativity of Christ
Galatians 3:8-12

Blessed in God's Sight: Galatians 3:8-12, especially v. 8: *“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed.’”* We are confronted in these verses by a cluster of truths united around the words *justify* (vs. 8) or *justified* (vs. 11). To “justify” is to make right, to balance, to avouch to be true or good, or clear. However, as Saint Paul develops the term in this passage, exploring the process of being justified in God's sight, he demonstrates that one may or may not be justified in the sight of God (vss. 8,11) – something for sober consideration!

When God deems a person justified, obviously the person is blessed (vs. 8), while anyone who seeks to be justified in God's sight by doing all the works of the law will fail in the attempt (vs. 11). This is so necessarily, because living by the works of the law requires “the man who does them [to] live by them” (vs. 12).

The problem with gaining justification in God's sight by keeping the law is that everyone is cursed “who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them” (vs. 10). Now if Holy Scripture documents any fact plainly, it is that no human being can keep the law exactly in every detail. The universal problem of sin defeats our attempts to obey the law of God to perfection. It simply does not happen.

The apostle advises us not even to try to be justified by keeping rules, for we will wind up failing and being cursed in the sight of God. However, he still holds out the possibility that some may yet be justified in God's sight. First, he returns to the era of Abraham, that great patriarch of Israel, and notes that when God preached to Abraham, He promised that He would justify the Gentiles by faith (vs. 8). “Gentiles” refers to the other peoples in the world besides God's chosen people, the Jews.

According to Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Paul is assuring us that “faith is older than the law. That is obvious from Abraham's time, since he was justified before the appearance of the law.”

This insight is most significant because God, who later gave His law to the His chosen people through Moses, “was the one who decreed before the law was given, that the Gentiles should be justified. And Paul does not say ‘revealed’ but ‘preached the gospel’ [beforehand to Abraham], so that you may understand that even the patriarch rejoiced in this kind of righteousness and greatly desired its advent.”

Soon we will celebrate the birth in the flesh of Christ our God, the advent of righteousness. Although we “Gentiles” are not ethnically related to Abraham, we certainly are “those who are of faith [and] blessed with believing Abraham” when we declare our faith in Christ. At our baptism we said, “I believe in him as King and God.” Then, as now, we offer a statement of faith called the Nicene Creed.

So long as we hold fast to faith in Christ, we “are blessed with believing Abraham” (vs. 9)! We have a good hope of being justified in God's sight, if we continue seeking to “live by faith” as Abraham did (vs. 11).

Being greatly ill and wounded, O Lord, I thank Thee for justifying me by Thy holy birth! – Festal verse

December 19 – Sunday before the Nativity of Christ, Tone 1
Hebrews 11:9-10, 17-23, 32-40

Faith: Hebrews 11:9-10, 17-23, 32-40, especially vss. 39-40: “And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.” In our Paschal icon of the Harrowing of Hades, we see Christ the Life-giver standing astride the gates of Hades. Death is bound in chains beneath His feet while he lifts Adam and Eve from their tombs. For the first time, the righteous men and women of the Old Covenant come face to face with the Messiah whom they anticipated and served faithfully while they were on this earth.

Indeed, they lived by faith. According to Bishop Kallistos Ware, “Faith is not the supposition that something might be true, but the assurance that someone is there.” It is now our turn to be instructed in faith by these saints of old, who understood faith as confidence in God, a willingness to trust in His promises, and a full acquiescence to His will.

Faith means living confidently in every circumstance, without tangible proofs. The materialist culture around us insists that such a life is foolhardy, for it is not based on hard, measurable facts. However, the righteous servants of God in today’s reading lived confidently because they knew in their hearts that God “is there.”

Abraham migrated to a land where settlers already had well-established cities, fields, wells, and a way of life. Finding open pasture for his flocks and herds, he lived and even thrived, yet he always remained a nomad – an alien (vs. 9) among people with fixed boundaries and title to all the land that he could see (Gn 13:14-15).

Nevertheless, he dwelt comfortably in this place because he knew God was at work. The Lord had promised to deliver this land to his descendants. Thus, with patience “he waited for the city . . . whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:10). He trusted God’s promises.

We find it admirable when someone calmly takes a great risk, despite contravening evidence, and is justified by the final outcome. Abraham, for example, seemed destined never to father a son of his own flesh, and yet in old age he held Isaac, his own infant son, in his arms.

Later, he was prepared to offer that very son upon the altar of God, even at the risk of losing the one in whom his “seed shall be called” (vs. 18; Gn 21:12). He took a great risk, contrary to the evidence, because God assured him that he would be justified beyond all reason by such a sacrifice.

The Apostle Paul points out that Abraham reached the conclusion “that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead” (vs. 19). He chose to obey the instructions of the God who “is there,” trusting Him although he did not see Him physically. Thus, Abraham shows us that faith means acting at personal risk when God reveals the course that we are to follow.

However, when God discloses such a course to us, we are blessed only when we prepare for it, work at it, and do everything we can to complete what God sets before us. When Joseph made his heirs promise to remove his bones from Egypt (vs. 22), he bound their consciousness to the promises of God. He reveals to us that faith means preparing for what is already promised by God.

“The Lord is well pleased in them that fear Him, and in them that hope in His mercy” (Ps 146:12). The righteous prophets of old were able to “subdue kingdoms . . . obtain promises and stop the mouths of lions” (vs. 33). They were “made strong” (vs. 34), above all, because they accepted death by the sword, destitution, affliction, or whatever came to them as from God’s hand. May we be worthy of such a faith, so that we may live confidently, take holy risks, and fulfill the will of God.

O Lord, grant us unwavering faith in Thy presence amidst all that befalls us in this life.

December 20 – Monday of the Twenty-seventh Week after Pentecost

1 Timothy 5:1-10

The Church as Community – Caring for Widows: 1 Timothy 5:1-10, especially vs. 3: “Honor widows who are really widows.” According to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, “Before Christ men were able with their own spirit and effort to create great civilizations . . . [but] it was not possible to arrive at a proper concept of God . . . as love.” (“A Century of Lessons in Divine and Christian Love” 5) “How would men know about charity had God not first acted with His?” Only with Christ does a worldwide community of caring, love, and charity come into being – one which exists with imperfections to this day, extending hands-on care to a membership of great diversity.

It seems natural to us that the Church, filled with the Holy Spirit, is meant to be a caring, loving community. “As there are plants that grow only in one region, so this rare plant, this rare love, grows and flourishes only in Christ’s Church. If anyone would be convinced . . . he must read the lives of Christ’s apostles, the fathers and confessors of the Christian faith”(*Homilies: A Commentary on the Gospel Readings*, vol. 2, p. 191, 195). It is God who makes love the norm and mode within the community of the Church.

This week we read four passages that conclude the first epistle to Timothy. Each is concerned with the status and needs of a particular group or class of persons within the Church: widows, presbyters, slaves, teachers, and the wealthy. Since all are members of the Body of Christ, all are of special concern to the Church as a loving community.

Saint Paul’s remarks concerning care for widows in the first-century Church prompt us to consider how to apply the truths he teaches to our contemporary circumstances, especially with respect to any dependent women who live among us. We learn that a monastic-style order of widows was established in the early days to avert any abuse of the Church’s goodwill. The criteria for admission: “sixty years old” and “the wife of one man, well reported for good works” (vss. 9, 10).

Younger widows were refused admission, “for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry, having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith” (vss. 11-12). “Younger widows [should] marry, bear children, manage the house” (vs. 14), Saint Paul insists. As Tertullian notes, they can then take “the whole course of probation whereby a female can be tested” (“On the Veiling of Virgins,” ANF, vol. 4, p. 33).

The apostle counsels Timothy that care be given to widows “who are really widows” (vs. 3) and truly require the help of the Church. Note, however, that he distinguishes widows who have “children or grandchildren” (vs. 4) from any widow “who is . . . left alone” (vs. 5). The latter are of special concern because they have no natural family who might seek to “repay their parents” (vs. 4).

Where families are capable of assisting, they should bear the burden of caring for their dependent relatives, “for this is good and acceptable before God” (vs. 4). When one who calls himself a Christian but “does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (vs. 8).

On the other hand, women who have no recourse except to make “supplications and prayers night and day” to God for help (vs. 5) are the genuine responsibility of the Church. However, such an obligation should not be thrust on the Church in every case. If a woman “lives in pleasure (or indulgence),” though technically she may be a widow, she is in fact, “dead while she lives” (vs 6). Christ’s Church should shelter her dependent members but is right to expect others to live diligently.

Heavenly Father, guide Thy Church to administer justice for the fatherless and widows. – Based on Deuteronomy 10:18

December 21 – Tuesday of the Twenty-seventh Week after Pentecost
1 Timothy 5:11-21

Church as Community – Presbyters and Pastors: 1 Timothy 5:11-21, especially vs. 17: “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.” Our readings this week from First Timothy address the status and needs of particular groups or classes of persons within the Church. In the present passage, the Apostle Paul instructs us concerning elders or “presbyters” (the clergy known as “priests” today). The presbyter provides onsite, pastoral leadership in the local church on behalf of the bishop.

In 1 Timothy 3:1-13, the apostle does not mention the presbyters. Earlier, we noted that the organization of the ordained ministry had a different appearance in the first century from the pattern we are accustomed to today. Toward the end of his letter, Saint Paul offers counsel concerning the presbyters. We take note of his wise principles, which still apply to the Church today.

In the earliest churches, the pastors of local congregations appear to have been the bishops. These men were directly appointed by the apostles (vss. 3:1-7). As the Church grew, there soon came to be multiple congregations of the faithful in different neighborhoods, all under the supervision of a single bishop. The bishops would assign presbyters to carry on the pastoral work in their subsidiary congregations. These temporary assignments led to the development of the diocese, as we understand it today.

In the era during which First Timothy was written, however, presbyters formed a committee, assisting their bishop in “word and doctrine” (vs. 5:17). The deacons during this period bore much of the responsibility for the management of money and material assets.

The official laborers in ministry have remained constant throughout history: bishops, presbyters (elders, priests, pastors), and deacons. Today, as in Saint Paul’s day, any man who serves in these capacities with a local congregation “is worthy of his wages” (vs. 18). The need for fair and equitable compensation does not change.

However, in some congregations of the contemporary Church, there is a lack of adequate compensation for pastors. These clergy give up time with their own families to serve the people of God. Let us do all we can to see that their expenses and material needs are met.

Another issue that arises today, as it did in Saint Paul’s day, is criticism of the presbyters. It is so easy to criticize a pastor! Much of what he does happens unseen: preparations for the services, teaching, counseling, organizational meetings, community relations, and diocesan responsibilities. Other duties, equally time-consuming, are more public, such as hearing confessions, baptisms, marriages, funerals, and hospital visits.

The apostle is explicit in cautioning us against negative remarks concerning the clergy: “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses” (vs. 19). When matters reach the point where there are specific charges of violations of morality or Church teaching, then it is necessary for the bishop to intervene. On the other hand, gossip and whispering about the clergy serves only to degrade fellowship within the Church.

When there are problems locally, it is up to the bishop to rule on such matters. Our hierarchs are to “observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality” (vs. 21). Our bishops must be careful about each ordination, so as not to “lay hands on anyone hastily” and thereby “share in other people’s sins” (vs. 22). Let us never fault our bishops when the clergy fail the Church, for not every sin or good work is plainly evident, and our chief pastors have much to sort through in the relations between parishes and their priests.

Bless, O Lord, our bishops, the honorable presbytery, the diaconate and all Thy people. – Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 22 – Wednesday of the Twenty-seventh Week after Pentecost
1 Timothy 5:22-6:11

Church as Community, continued – Slaves & Teachers: 1 Timothy 5:22-6:11, especially vs. 6: “*Now godliness with contentment is great gain.*” The faithful of the first century knew all too well the living conditions of their fellow members who were slaves. Some were owned outright, while others were indentured servants of non-Christian masters. When both masters and slaves converted to Christianity, these relationships could become complicated, as we read in Saint Paul’s letter to Philemon.

The counsel of the Church to slaves, which Saint Paul sets forth in this reading, was not intended to change or challenge the social institution of slavery. Rather, the apostles encourage slaves to “count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed” (vs. 6:1). Likewise, the apostle advises those who have Christian masters to serve honorably, “because those who are benefited are believers and beloved” (vs. 2).

These first-century admonitions of Saint Paul apply quite well to the arena of employment in contemporary society. We who have managers, employers, supervisors, and directors ought also to count them “worthy of all honor” (vs. 1) for the same reason explained above, “that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed” (vs 1).

Every relationship in the workplace, whether with superiors and subordinates, peers and colleagues, or customers and others, should be honored for God’s sake. We render to society its rightful claims on us, retaining always for God those things that are His prerogative (Mt 22:21).

Let each of us, in whatever station we find ourselves, remember that we are teachers and examples. Our lives instruct in the “wholesome words . . . of our Lord Jesus Christ, and . . . the doctrine which accords with godliness” (vs. 3). Otherwise, we betray Christ.

To live the faith is more than words and pious gestures. Rather, it involves the determination to “flee . . . [all kinds of evil] and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness” (vs. 11).

We guard against pride in the grace of our Lord Jesus, for He withholds His wrath against us, “slothful and sinful” as we are, and does not destroy us in our transgressions. In compassion He seeks to raise us up as we “lay in heedlessness” (Morning Prayer to the Holy Trinity). He calls us to fill our lives with His light. Perhaps He humbles us and makes us least among men, but He also calls us and claims us as His own. This is true joy!

The proud, as Saint Paul says, “knowing nothing . . . [are] obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth” (vss. 4-5).

If we reverse the image, we see a reflection of the humble (Lk 6:20-22). They know all things, are filled with peace, and have no quarrel with anyone. Their truth is the Incarnate Word who gives His peace to His own. Each one has Christ’s peace in his heart.

While the world tries to gain peace through wars and treaties, Christ tells us, “Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (Jn 14:27). We are tempted to envy the rich, but we have greater riches than the world’s wealthy. If we bring strife into the world (Mt 10:34-37), then it is because others prefer darkness (Jn 3:19). Let us never sow discord!

The Lord Jesus assures us that we are blessed when reviled, when men “say all manner of evil against [us] falsely for [His] sake” (Mt 5:11). He releases us from corrupt minds. He sets the Way before us that we might cleanse ourselves and be pure, “just as He is pure” (1 Jn 3:3). Let us celebrate our Teacher and Master “who hath saved us.” We may begin serving today, from this moment, for eternity is already present with Christ.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: both now and ever, and unto ages of ages.
Amen.

December 23 – Thursday of the Twenty-seventh Week after Pentecost

1 Timothy 6:17-21

Church as Community, continued – What of the Wealthy? 1 Timothy 6:17-21, especially vs. 17: “*Command those who are rich in this present age not . . . to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.*” When a wealthy young ruler faced the fact that he was unwilling to pay the price for acquiring the treasures of heaven, he went away sorrowfully. “Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God’” (Mt 19:23-24).

Our compassionate Savior knows the deceitfulness of riches, which pose uncertainty in the present age and have the potential to be a deadly spiritual obstacle. Deep down we all yearn for the true life in Christ, whether we are rich and poor, men or women, slaves or masters (1 Tim 6:19). For this reason, Christ Jesus enlightened His apostles to understand both the spiritual pitfalls and the potentials for good inherent in material wealth.

In the present reading, Saint Paul addresses the heart and soul of the wealthy disciple. He warns against the snares into which the heart can fall, while at the same time showing the way that riches may be used “to lay hold of life.”

First, let the rich “not . . . be haughty” (vs. 17). From the beginning Satan has used material things to distract us from God, leading us to believe that through knowledge we might “be like gods” (Gn 3:5). Things can be “pleasant to the eyes” (Gn 3:6), and a lie – for example, that one must be wise, since he has possessions – may appear as truth. Seeing material wealth instead of men’s hearts can seduce us into believing that possessions are the result of wisdom.

Awash in such a falsehood, we can easily become “lifted up and . . . forget the Lord your God” (Dt 8:14), who establishes us in true life through Christ. We may easily become haughty because of material riches, for wealth gives temporal power to those who possess it, tempting them to believe that they are superior or more important than others.

Thus, Saint Paul advises the wealthy not to “trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17). Of course, wealth does bestow power, influence, and status, and so the insidious deceiver suggests that we are wise to trust in riches. Such trust is a “devil’s bargain.” As the apostle reminds us here, material riches are uncertain, ephemeral, and passing: markets crash, technologies change, illness impoverishes.

First and foremost, let us trust in the living God, whether we are rich or poor. When we trust in Him, we are free to enjoy and do good with whatever He has given us, regardless of whether we are great or small among men (see vs. 18).

However, we must avoid confusion about the meaning of “doing good.” The apostle cites three aspects of using wealth to do good: “be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share” (vs 18). Each of us can be rich in good work by giving and sharing with those in need. By good works we store up “a good foundation for the time to come” (vs. 19).

In the original Greek, the literal meaning of “storing up” is *treasuring up*. It uses the same root word as the Lord’s promise to the rich young man: “You will have treasure in heaven” (Mt 19:21). According to Saint Maximos, “If . . . Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Eph 3:17), and all the treasures of wisdom and spiritual knowledge are hidden in Him (Col 2:3), then all the treasures of wisdom . . . are hidden in our hearts [and] . . . revealed in proportion to our purification” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 109).

O Lord, who providest far more than we require, enable us to love Thee in all things and above all things that we may obtain Thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire. – Orthodox Missal

December 24 – Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ
Hebrews 1:1-12

God Has Spoken: Hebrews 1:1-12, especially vss. 1-2: “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.” In our present age of mass communication, we are bombarded by messages from advertisers, politicians, and government agencies. And yet we note that the Apostle declares God “has . . . spoken to us” (vs. 2). Among all the messages pouring into our ears, the last and the final word is from the Almighty God Himself. for He “has . . . spoken to us by His Son” (vs. 2).

What better time could there be than the eve of our celebration of the Lord Jesus’ Nativity to consider the ultimate Word of God? His voice is not just another voice among many. The Apostle Paul insists that we not reduce the value of the message, nor of the Messenger. So now, for a moment, let us consider what it means to receive a message from God – and His *ultimate* Message, at that! We have a divine Word spoken to us by God in Person.

Does God speak to the human race? This is what the Apostle Paul tells us. In the past, God spoke to the holy forefathers and prophets “at various times and in various ways” (vs. 1). It would take too long to review every occasion, message, messenger, and means that God used. However, the Old Testament records the principal occasions and methods by which God spoke prior to the incarnation of Christ.

These Scriptures offer an illumination of the basics in the divine-human relationship. We find audible and visual experiences, visions, angelic messengers, interventions, prophecies (and their fulfillment), direct answers to prayer, confrontations with death and life, divine help in moments of human frailty, God’s mercy and justice, and much, much more.

However, we understand the apostle to say specifically that God has spoken to *us* (vs. 2). In the Old Testament, He spoke to our predecessors. Now He has spoken to us, who call ourselves Christians. And, by God’s mercy that “us” includes those who read this meditation. We count ourselves as primary recipients of God’s message.

For us, the faithful in Christ, this message is quite specific. Perhaps we think of the Lord Jesus Christ as a man who once lived on earth, and rightly accept Him as God. We address Him in prayer: “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner!” But have we considered Him as the Message for us from God? If we personalize the apostle’s words, we hear that “God has spoken to *me* by His Son.” Are we listening?

Next, note the ultimacy the apostle assigns to this great message: these are the “last days” (vs. 2). In other words, there will not be a subsequent message. All that God wishes to communicate to us He has spoken “by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things” (vs. 2). We receive God the Word today. Let us listen carefully, and put the Word into action, for the Messenger stands squarely before us for our eternal consideration.

The Lord Jesus is our Creator (vs. 2). He owns us, being heir to the entire universe (vs. 2). He is God, “the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person” (vs. 3). Were He to stop upholding us, we would cease to exist (vs. 3). All the heavenly powers worship Him (vss. 4-12). Do we worship too? In this celebration of His birth, we meet Christ directly and know Him as the Lord who loves righteousness and hates lawlessness (vs. 9).

What shall we render to Thee, O Christ, for that Thou didst appear as a man for our sake? – Great Vespers for the Nativity of Christ

December 25 – Saturday, Feast of the Nativity of Christ
Hebrews 1:1-12

The Gift: Galatians 4:4-7, especially vs. 7: “Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.” Christ, the Son of God, born into history of the Virgin Mary, became one of us “when the fullness of the time had come” (vs. 4). He remains so to this day. He is God’s amazing gift to mankind, giving us abundant reasons to be thankful for our creation, our preservation in this life, and for the host of blessings the Lord daily bestows on us.

Yet, nothing can compare with the Christ our God, the Gift of great wonder. The ineffable God came to us from above, from “the Orient on High.” Given and received, Christ changes everyone who embraces Him as God and King. The changes He makes are glorious, perfecting, elevating, and life-giving in every respect. What more can be said? Let us be joyful and praise Him for His glory!

This divine Gift offers us the grace necessary to discern Satan’s insidious slavery, which alters our consciousness, prevents us from realizing our God-intended purpose, and mocks the image of God within us. We see what evils this slavery works in us and on those around us. Indeed, we are forced into a living subjugation to sin that leads to death, no matter how hard we fight against our oppressor or rebel against his chains.

This slavery is the common lot of the human race. We are mocked by death, and our loves, our dreams, and our achievements are only fleeting. Every beautiful, rapturous experience we enjoy is transient, and terminal. Even artistry and familial love fade in face of the grave. They all are taken away, along with our tears of protest. According to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, “Men remember many things, but there is one thing that they can never remember, however often it is repeated: that they enter this world with nothing, and leave it with nothing” (*Homilies*, Vol. 2, p. 221).

Ye we do not despair, for we have a Gift that once and for all alters the terms of our bondage to death: “the Son, born of the Father before the ages without change, hath been incarnate in these last days of the Virgin, without seed.” He has redeemed our slave-existence, although at first glance we remain in bonds. Christ has raised us to the heights with Him: “God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into [our] hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’” (vs. 6).

Today the Spirit dwells in us, prays in us, and enlightens our spirits, leading us into all truth. Christ the Gift stands before us so we may see Him in His beauty. Now, in the midst of death’s slavery, our Savior has become our true Life-giver.

Today, through Christ, we are no longer slaves but sons and heirs of the eternal God. Today we are His children, sharing in Christ’s sonship with the Father. God is our Father, a relationship we received in the mystery of baptism. Death’s ownership has been severed.

“Death no longer has dominion over Him” (Rom 6:9), nor over anyone who receives God’s most precious Gift. Today we have true freedom, given to us by our immortal God. He has given us the power to say “no” to sin, “for sin shall not have dominion over you” (Rom 6:14).

Let us worship the Gift, the gracious Life-giver who humbled Himself and accepted our estate. In Him we choose to refuse sin and forever break the chains of the slave master!

Incline, O glorious Benefactor, to the praise of Thy servants, abolishing the boasting of the proud adversary. And help us who sing to Thee to overcome sin, and confirm us on the unshakable foundation of faith.

– Hymn for the Nativity of Christ

December 26 – Sunday, Synaxis of the Most Holy Theotokos, Tone 2
Hebrews 2:11-18

Brethren of Christ: Hebrews 2:11-18, especially vs. 17: “Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” The pleasures of family gatherings at this Holy Season are delightful! Great also were the joy, love, and sheltering warmth shared among Joseph the Betrothed, the Ever-Virgin Theotokos and the Holy Child, Jesus. To these joys let us add the blessings we share with our brethren as the Church gathers in glad praise of our Heavenly Father Who sent His Son into this world and calls us His brethren (vss 11,12).

The true wonder of the Nativity comes in knowing Christ our God Who deigned to be made one of us - even in temptation and suffering (vs 18). He is without shame pleased to call us brethren (vs 11). How can we plumb the depths of the Incarnation? He calls us brethren! He shares our humanity. We are adopted brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Consider the Word of God, Who is God (Jn 1:1): He is united to us in all respects now and forever, embracing all that we are and making all that we are His own, leaving aside no part of being human. “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same” (Heb 2:14). He assumed our flesh from His Mother, the Ever-Virgin Mary, whose Synaxis or partnership in the Incarnation we celebrate today. She joined herself fully to God in His purpose to unite Himself to us through her flesh and blood.

Did He set aside His Divine nature when He shared in ours? No, He did not! Rather, the Lord Jesus fully reveals the depth of Divine nature (Jn 14:9). Does this mean His Divine and human natures were merged into one nature? No, they were not. The human and Divine remain separate but function in a personal harmony and unity. Likewise, He wishes us to unite ourselves to Him freely. Cooperation between His Divine and human wills is a thing of beauty, revealing how to live as brethren - to will that which He wills, to love as He loves, and to do as He does.

God’s goal in uniting Himself to us is “that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb 2:14). Satan pours out untold grief on mankind, throwing the universal tragedy of death over us all. But consider the Cross of the Lord Jesus in the flesh and honor Him Who loved us even unto death; for, to destroy “him who had the power of death” (vs 14), Christ our God “gave Himself up for the life of the world” and “didst submit to the Cross willingly.” He Who is deathless Life, fully embraced death in an act of pure love - solely to restore us to Himself. Such is Divine love!

By His death and His Resurrection, the Lord Jesus our Savior made “propitiation for the sins of the people” (vs 17), thereby releasing “those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (vs 15). He did not accomplish this sanctifying work on behalf of those angels who fell into disobedience (vs 16), but for us men and for our salvation. Take note: it was in mankind that the Lord God placed His Own image (Gn 1:27). This is the miracle of our Creation. As exemplified by the woman who lost one of her pieces of silver, God lit a candle to illuminate His world, swept His house, and sought diligently till He found us (Lk 15:8).

As we plumb the depths of the Incarnation, behold One like ourselves, Who “Himself has suffered, being tempted [and is] able to aid those who are tempted” (Heb 2:18). Today He continues in willingness to aid us when we are tempted; for having faced the bitter struggle with sin and death Himself, He now offers us the imperishable riches of His eternal Kingdom.

O Lord, Thou hast dwelt in a cave and hast lain in a manger; O Thou Whose throne is in heaven, Thou didst condescend to the shepherds in order to save our race. Glory to Thee!

December 27 – Monday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost

2 Timothy 2:20-26

Servants of Honor – Good Works: 2 Timothy 2:20-26, especially vs. 21: “Therefore if anyone cleanses himself . . . he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.” As we approach Christ’s Nativity, we hear the words of the Apostl Paul to Timothy, his fellow worker for the Savior. Like Paul and Timothy, every believer is a servant of one Master – our Lord Jesus Christ. If we read with close attention, we may receive instruction from one of the Lord’s finest trainers, so that we may become honorable servants “in a great house” (vs. 20), with the prospect of becoming blessed vessels for honor (see vs 21).

Saint Paul teaches us to cleanse ourselves (vs. 21), for until we are purified, we will not be useful to the Master for good works. Cleansing is the primary effort required if we are to be “prepared for every good work” (vs. 21). It is the basic regimen of the entry-level servant.

This cleansing effort has both negative and positive aspects, both of which must be carried out simultaneously. We must flee from “youthful lusts” and at the same time pursue “righteousness, faith, love, peace . . . out of a pure heart” (vs. 22).

What does it mean to flee from “youthful lusts” (vs. 22)? The Fathers of the Church echo Saint Paul in stressing the necessity to struggle against lust (in Greek *epithymia*, a strong desire arising from the soul). According to Saint Gregory of Sinai, “The soul by virtue of its creation as a deiform . . . entity possesses an intrinsic power of desire and an intrinsic incessive power, and these lead it to manifest both courage and divine love.”

However, he cautions, “The soul has acquired the qualities of the passions or, rather, of the demons; and the powers of the body and the soul have . . . produced a single animal driven impulsively by anger and desire” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, pp. 227–28). And so, we find in ourselves licentiousness, a love of material things, and a desire for glory, wealth, and the pleasures of the flesh. Are we not familiar with the lust for such things in ourselves?

Indeed, no one is free from all traces of unlawful desire; there are many lusts after every kind of thing, even beyond those mentioned by Saint Gregory. We flee from them to begin to cleanse ourselves. If we pray and fast, the Holy Spirit will identify our most troublesome sins and strengthen us in this flight (see vs. 22). To flee is a most appropriate term, for it suggests earnestly running from the first sight or hint of sinful desires as they awaken within us.

The Apostle Paul includes two other activities as part of *cleansing* (vs. 21): avoiding “foolish and ignorant disputes” (vs. 23) so as not to fall into quarrels (vs. 24) and seeking from God the gift of repentance (vs. 25). He places greatest emphasis on this latter gift, which is attained by our striving to change the heart. By repentance alone will we “know the truth, and . . . come to [our] senses and escape the snare of the devil” (vss. 25-26).

Cleansing from sin cannot be separated from pursuing virtue (vs. 22), for the two activities must be carried on together, which is why Saint Paul interweaves them in his teaching. We read in the *Philokalia*, “Strive to love every man equally, and you will simultaneously expel all the passions.” Pursuing virtue is an active, purposeful acquisition of righteousness, faith, love and peace.

Saint Paul mentions other positive actions that are to be included in our overall pursuit of righteousness. We are to be gentle, understanding, and patient to all (vs. 24), and to correct others with humility (vs. 25). These good works are proven aids in attaining honor in God's service.

O Christ, keep us ever as warriors invincible, and make us victors even unto the end. – Chrismation Prayer

December 28 – Tuesday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost

2 Timothy 3:16-4:4

Servants of Honor, continued – To Serve God’s Truth: 2 Timothy 3:16-4:4, especially vss. 1- 2: “I charge you. . . . Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season.” In Saint Paul’s second letter to Timothy, we learn how to draw divine truth from God-inspired sources to insure a godly foundation for our life. The apostle helps us share the truth with others in an honest, helpful manner, always alert for the resistance we encounter within ourselves as well as others.

Isaiah the Prophet declares, “Behold, God is my Savior and Lord. I will trust in Him and be saved by Him. I will not be afraid, for the Lord is my glory and my praise. He has become my salvation. You will draw water with gladness from the wells of salvation” (Is 12:2-3).

What are these wells that yield the true water of salvation? Saint Paul offers us two. First, there is Scripture, which is “given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim 3:16). Holy Scripture is one source of truth. Secondly, he says, “I charge you . . . before God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 4:1). Another source of truth is that body of oral instruction given by the apostles to the Church.

Together, these constitute the building blocks of holy tradition. Note that when Saint Paul speaks of Scripture, he is referring to the books of the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. He confidently places what he teaches alongside those Scriptures, for he knows that the truth we encounter in Christ is the “key” to all Scripture.

Like Saint Paul, the other apostles are direct recipients of divine truth from Christ. Thus, their writings came to be called Scripture in the New Testament. Some apostolic teachings “we have received . . . from written sources, while others have been given to us secretly through apostolic tradition,” notes Saint Basil the Great. “Both sources have equal force in true religion. No one would deny either source – no one, at any rate, who is even slightly familiar with the ordinances of the Church” (*On the Holy Spirit*, p. 98).

In *The Orthodox Church*, Bishop Kallistos Ware lists non-scriptural sources of the true “water of salvation.” They include the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils, the writings of the Church Fathers, our liturgical texts, canon law, and the holy icons. Saint Basil’s observation is worthy, for not everything is written down. Truth, however, remains in the Church, made present and given authority by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, we look to the Church to find the “wells” of which Isaiah speaks. To draw truth, we need to remain within the Church. Here, the sources of truth are available, along with training in how to pull up true, living water.

Saint Paul not only teaches us where to find truth, but also charges us to present it to others in helpful ways. He says, “Preach the word!” (vs. 4:2). The Greek verb “to preach” also means to impart, share, inculcate, proclaim, or announce.” All these words imply a *public* activity – a ministry of edifying, such as the one upon which Timothy has engaged.

For those of us who live in the arena of the world, Saint Paul’s admonition applies to our workplace, neighborhood, and other associations beyond the Church. Our lives, actions, and words are the means by which we share the truth of the gospel according to our position and opportunities. They need not always be cast in “religious” terms. When we meet genuine interest in the faith, let us “convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (vs. 2) in a life-giving way.

The implication is that we must be *watchful* and guard against self-serving and resistance to the truth (vs. 5). We may nurture a lingering unwillingness to “endure sound doctrine” (vs. 3). This we must fight against, along with the preference of men in the world to live “according to their own desires” (vs. 3). God help us to be faithful to the truth!

Help us, O Lord, to uphold truth by Thy truth, and to remain watchful against all error.

December 29 – Wednesday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost

2 Timothy 4:9-22

Servants of Honor, continued – Distinguish Yourself: 2 Timothy 4:9-22, especially vs. 16: “*At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them.*” Although some early Christians failed the test of faith, the names of steadfast disciples such as Timothy, Luke, Mark, Priscilla, Aquila, and Onesiphorus, are well known to readers of the New Testament. These servants of the Lord distinguished themselves by their diligence, usefulness in ministry, obedience, loyalty, and prayer on behalf of the brethren. Certainly, the Master commends such followers with the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Mt 25:21).

The Apostle Paul encourages us to show forth the virtues these disciples expressed. Note how he presses Timothy to be *diligent* in coming to him quickly (2 Tim 4:9). Diligence is widely respected in every culture. Among his proverbs, Solomon affirms that “the hands of the courageous are diligent” (Prv 13:4), while the idle never accomplish their desires.

Even the pre-Christian Greek historian Xenophon recognizes that “the gods do not give what is really good and beautiful without effort and diligence.” Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century English author, says, “Few things are impossible to diligence and skill.” Along with the grace of God, our own diligence in Christ helps us “preserve our baptismal garment and the earnest of the Spirit pure and undefiled unto the dread Day of Christ our God.”

Even if we are diligent, we must focus our efforts and carry them out if they are to be “useful . . . for ministry” like Saint Mark (2 Tim 4:11). His usefulness causes Saint Paul to single him out, because he has served so effectively and productively in the apostolic tasks of ministry. We can all be of use to the Church’s ministry, even at the entry level, but it requires love for the beauty of God’s house and a willingness to strive for fruitfulness and righteousness.

Especially, the Church prays that our priests be marked by innocence, a worthiness to minister the word of God’s truth, and a desire to renew His people through all the days of their lives. May each of us strive to assure that the ministry of our parish community is useful in the hands of God for carrying out His mission in the world.

The obedient servant is distinguished in the Lord’s eyes as the one who stands by the apostolic faith when truth is brought to trial (vs. 16). Although the disciples fled from the Garden of Gethsemane in the dark of night, Saint Peter followed along after the arresting party (Mt 26:58). Furthermore, Saint John the Beloved Disciple stood at the Cross until Christ’s death (Jn 19:26-27).

But what happens in a parish when there is a string of disasters involving the clergy or lay leaders? It is then that we discern who are the obedient servants, the ones who do neither desert, nor flee, nor wander off.

One of the marks of the great servants of God is their persistence in beseeching God not to charge the faults of other brethren “against them” (2 Tim 4:16). Saint Paul demonstrates this very quality in his epistle. Thus, whether others are diligent or diffident, obedient or rebellious, fruitful or unproductive, loyal or apostate, the true servant of God prays for them all.

We recall that “prayer is energy of an especial order. It is the fusing of two actions – ours (the creature’s) and that of the uncreated divine. As such, it is both in the body and outside the body; even outside this world of space and time.” Thus the faithful disciple prays, “To [the Lord Jesus] be glory forever and ever. Amen!” (vs. 18) and “the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Grace be with you” (vs. 22).

O Holy Apostles, intercede with the merciful God to grant our souls forgiveness of sins. – Festal Hymn for the Apostles

December 30 – Thursday of the Twenty-eight Week after Pentecost

Titus 1:5-2:1

The Faithful Word: Titus 1:5-2:1, especially vss. 7, 9: “For a bishop must be blameless . . . holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.” From bits of information in Saint Paul’s letters, we learn a great deal about the process the apostles followed in establishing the first churches. With clear goals in mind, they fostered fellowships capable of nurturing the faithful to live in purity despite a society corrupted by lying, inhumanity, laziness, and gluttony (vs. 12).

The apostles knew that if the churches they were founding were to thrive, they would need blameless leaders capable of “holding fast the faithful word” (vs. 9), teaching and manifesting the Lord Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such leadership is necessary if men and women are to be refashioned as saints. Hence, the importance of the search for “stewards of God” able “both to exhort and convict” – men of sound doctrine and mature in “holding fast the faithful word” (vss. 7, 9).

In every age it is difficult to raise up godly leaders for the Church, for the world prefers insubordination and self-indulgence to obedience and purity. Today’s epistle encourages the selection of clergy from men of integrity, for they alone can heal the wounds of their flock.

Saint Paul observes that “there [are] many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers . . . whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not” (vss. 10-11). He reminds Titus: “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking and appoint elders in every city” (vs. 5).

Christian leaders are to be marked by holiness, justice, and blamelessness (vss. 6-8). Further, each clergyman must be “the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination” (vs. 6). A leader submits himself to Christ as Lord and displays true virtues: being fair and just in all things, sustaining a faultless life, remaining faithfully with the wife of his youth (Mal 2:14-15) and raising up obedient, respectful children.

Those selected for leadership must have a capacity to grow in these virtues despite the context of the immoral world surrounding them. Today the Church still requires such men to serve as priests [presbyters], bishops, and lay leaders.

Saint Paul indicates to Titus the causes of insubordination, but also praises its opposite: blamelessness. A true Christian purges himself of quick temper. He avoids over-indulgence in wine, violence, stubbornness, and greed (Tts 1:7).

In the contemporary world, as in the first century, many people enthusiastically promote all kinds of things they ought not to teach, “for the sake of dishonest gain” (vs. 11). However, Church leaders in every generation should be self-denying, even-tempered, sober-minded, peaceful, and lovers of what is good (vs. 8).

Indeed, purity of heart is the goal of every Christian. For Christian leaders, however, holiness is an absolute essential: “To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled” (vs. 15). The pure in heart shall see God (Mt 5:8). They follow the Lord, being qualified “for every good work” (Tts 1:16), for we “know them by their fruits” (Mt 7:16).

Men who hold “fast the faithful word” are “able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict” (vs. 9). Often, the Lord Jesus’ opponents tried to silence Him with contrary teaching, but He silenced them by faithful words. Likewise, we Christians are victors when we speak “things . . . proper for sound doctrine” (vs. 2:1).

Grant, O Lord, to Thy priests, by Thy Holy Spirit, pureness of life and unswerving faith. –Service for the Ordination of a Priest

December 31 – Friday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost

Titus 1:15-2:10

Exhibit Your Integrity: Titus 1:15-2:10, especially vs. 7: “*In all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility. . . .*” According to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, right doctrine is inseparable from how we live our faith. He writes, “We Orthodox attach great importance to preserving the faith, just because we know that when the faith is distorted, the cure is automatically distorted. . . . Theology is the teaching of the Church about spiritual health, but also about the path which the sick must follow in order to be healed. That is why we Orthodox give great weight to keeping the doctrine intact” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, pp. 42– 43).

The careful reader of today’s epistle passage will perceive that the Apostle Paul held this same conviction. There is a direct correlation between right doctrine and right behavior. Such unity of belief and action is evidence of our personal integrity.

Seeking to help us integrate our belief and action, Saint Paul urges Titus to “speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine” (vs. 2:1). He also insists “that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate . . . the older women likewise . . . reverent in behavior . . . that they admonish the young women to love their husbands [and] children” (vss. 2:2-4).

The apostle is calling Titus to uphold both sound doctrine and a definite “pattern of good works” (vss. 7-8). Saint Paul’s teaching flows from doctrine to resulting behavior while barely distinguishing between them, always assuming the full integrity of belief and action.

How do we keep intact our Orthodox doctrine, which shows us the true path to health and salvation and guides us along that right path? According to Metropolitan Hierotheos, “Christ said that the kingdom of heaven is within us, indicating that the divinity dwells in our hearts. When God dwells in our hearts, He teaches and writes His doctrines and His law in our hearts and minds; for supremely, the heart is the site where God’s commandments are written” (p. 168).

The Apostle Paul understands that purity and defilement both begin in our *nous* – the spiritual center of a person’s heart and the seat of our conscience. “To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and the conscience are defiled” (vs. 15).

If our *nous* and our conscience are pure, then we know God and our works affirm Him (vs. 15). However, if our heart is defiled, it does not matter if we profess to know God. We will deny the Lord, “being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work” (vs. 16).

The communities Saint Paul formed were composed of young and old, men and women. He urges sobriety, love, reverence, temperance, and patience to all, but especially to the older men. He knows that the virtues flow naturally from them to the other members of the community, so long as the elders remain “sound in faith” (vs 2:2). Hence, the apostle urges older men to speak “the things which are proper for sound doctrine” (vs. 1).

Saint Paul reminds Titus that he will necessarily have to exhibit integrity in his own “pattern of good works,” carefully matching it to the integrity of his doctrine (vs. 7). For example, the apostle commands Titus to instruct the faithful who are slaves to be obedient to their masters and “well pleasing in all things, not answering back, not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity” (vss. 9-10), and thus adorning “the doctrine of God our Savior” (vs. 10).

What of *our* integrity? May God help us purify our hearts so that He may dwell within us, teach us to hold fast to His laws and exhibit His grace on a daily basis.

Holy Father, deliver us from the sorrow of sin that we may serve Thee in spirit and truth. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov