

June 1 – Thursday of the Seventh Week of Pascha

John 16:23-33

Table Talk, continued – How to be Victorious: John 16:23-33, especially vs. 33: “*In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*” Many factors converge to keep victory in Christ beyond our reach. Most often it is our sins that hold triumph at bay. Other setbacks come about not as a result of our own doing, but from what the present reading calls *tribulation* (vs. 33).

And yet on the eve of history’s greatest tribulation – just before His death and apparent defeat – our Lord says with supreme confidence, “I have overcome the world” (vs. 33). How can we secure His confidence within ourselves in the face of our own moral failures and tribulations?

First, let us recall what Christ our God says: “And in that day you will ask Me nothing” (vs. 23). Of what day is He speaking, and why would His disciples ask “nothing” of Him then? The Lord’s farewell discourse to His disciples reflects His two-fold desire to equip them for coming tribulation and to ready them for victorious living after the Resurrection. The “day” of which He speaks is the age of the Resurrection – that present time in which we are now living.

Next, we remember the marked change that comes over the disciples after the Lord Jesus rises from the dead – a change effected by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Early in the Gospels, the disciples appear quite fallible, confused, and lacking in faith in spite of their three years of close association with Jesus. Yet after Pentecost their ineptitude seems to fall away; these same men are transformed into advocates of the faith who have no need to constantly ask the Master questions. Their illumination by the Holy Spirit radically renews them in heart and soul (Acts 2:33; 4:8; 5:32, *et seq.*).

Of course, every Christians needs strength, grace, and illumination from God. The Lord Jesus instructs us to “ask, and you will receive” (Jn 16:24). However, as we mature spiritually, our basic, introductory questions diminish. We become disciples whose primary need is to “take light from the Light that is never overtaken by night,” light that the Holy Spirit gives us in greater and greater measure.

This need for illumination by the Holy Spirit lies behind Saint Paul’s advice to exercise our hearts and minds “to discern both good and evil. . . . Leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God” (Heb 5:14-6:1).

If we are not living victoriously, the cause of the problem is that “we have become so inattentive to the work of our salvation that . . . we do not seek the grace of God, and, in the pride of our minds, do not allow it to dwell in our souls,” according to Saint Seraphim. “That is why we are without true enlightenment from the Lord, which He sends into the hearts of men who hunger and thirst wholeheartedly for God’s righteousness” (Moore, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov*, p. 182).

Christ tells us that “the Father Himself loves [us]” (Jn 16:27). We stand upon Christ’s victory in the Resurrection. There indeed come times when we are “scattered, each to his own,” and we leave Him “alone” (vs. 32). But who is actually alone in those moments?

The Lord knows the weakness of human flesh, for He became incarnate as one of us. He knows better than we that “in the world [we] will have tribulation ” (vs. 33). Still, this truth remains: *we are not alone!* As Saint Paul says, “I am persuaded, that neither death nor life. . . . nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39). Christ gives us victory now and ever, and to all ages.

O Christ our God, we commend ourselves and all our life unto Thee. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

June 2 – Friday of the Seventh Week of Pascha

John 17:18-26

Table Talk, continued – How to Pray: Saint John 17:18-26, especially vss. 22-23: “*And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.*” These verses come at the end of the Jesus’ great High Priestly Prayer, with the first segment read on the Sunday of the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council.

The primary theme running through this prayer is unity – among the Persons of the Holy Trinity, between the Church and God, and within the faithful. Unity, therefore, is our decisive mode for correct prayer. When we pray, we should strive to be at one with God in every purpose, choice, and manner of life.

As we study this prayer, we discover that the Lord provides for a variety of intentions as we pray. Today’s Gospel passage discloses eight specific intentions that we follow in the life of the Church, ensuring that the Lord’s will always shapes the purpose of our prayer.

First, Christ prays that the Church “may be sanctified through the truth” (vs. 19). During Orthros the priest offers this prayer: “Teach us Thy righteousness, Thy commandments, and Thy statutes, O God. Enlighten the eyes of our understanding, lest at any time we sleep unto death in sins.”

Second, our High Priest prays for us as believers through the preaching of the apostles (vs. 20), asking that the Church may share in that absolute, uninterrupted union that exists among the Divine Persons, “that they also may be one in Us” (vs. 21). Thus we ask God during the Divine Liturgy to “grant us with one mouth and one heart to glorify and praise Thine all-honorable and majestic Name.”

Third, the Lord Jesus asks the Father to establish our unity with each other within the eternal unity that pre-exists among the Persons of the Holy Trinity, “that they also may be one in us” (vs. 21). We in turn offer this prayer during liturgy: “Asking for the unity of the faith, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, let us commend ourselves, each other, and all our life unto Christ our God.”

Fourth, the Lord prays to the Father “that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me” (vs. 21). Our unity in prayer reveals to all mankind that Christ is among us and directs our lives. For this reason we pray during the mystery of baptism that the candidate “may prove himself a child of the Light and an heir of eternal good things.”

Fifth, Christ prays “that the world may know that You . . . have loved them, as You have loved Me” (vs. 23). These words inspire us in turn to pray, “O Master, Thou couldst not endure to behold mankind oppressed by the devil; but Thou didst come and didst save us. We confess Thy grace. We proclaim Thy mercy” (baptismal prayer).

Sixth, the Savior asks that we be granted Paradise: “Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me” (vs. 24). “Like the thief will I confess Thee,” we pray before holy communion. “Remember me, O Lord, in Thy Kingdom!”

Seventh, The eternal Son prays that the Father’s love “may be in [us]” (vs. 26). Therefore “we give thanks unto Thee, O Master who lovest mankind, Benefactor of our souls” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

Lastly, the Son prays that He may indwell us (vs. 26). This prompts our prayer, “Thou who art a fire, consuming the unworthy, consume me not, O my Creator; but rather pass through all my body parts, into all my joints, my reins, my heart” (pre-communion prayer).

Teach us to pray, and pray Thou Thyself in us. – Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow

Saturday of the Seventh Week of Pascha

John 21:15-25

Apostle Peter: John 21:14-25, especially vs. 20-22: “Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved. . . . Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, ‘But Lord, what about this man?’ Jesus said to Him, ‘If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.’” The Apostle Peter holds a place of singular importance in the Church, a position he occupied from the very beginning of the Lord Jesus’ ministry. He holds true primacy among the Twelve both before and after the Lord’s Resurrection.

An example of Saint Peter’s preeminence is demonstrated in the present passage, in which the Evangelist John invites us to reflect on Peter’s leadership while at the same time effacing himself (vs. 24). Three particulars concerning Saint Peter’s leadership stand out: his place as a major witness of the Lord’s Resurrection; the Lord Jesus’ command that Peter tend and feed His flock; and Peter’s final role as a martyr glorifying God.

The Evangelist Luke records Saint Mary Magdalene and her fellow myrrh-bearers describing to the apostles their encounter with the angels at the tomb. It is Saint Peter who “arose and ran to the tomb, and stooping down . . . saw the linen cloths lying by themselves” (Lk 24:9-12). Later, Simon Peter is the one who proposes to the disciples that they go fishing (Jn 21:3). When Christ appears on the shore, Peter puts “on his outer garments . . . and plunged into the sea” (vs. 7) in order to reach the Master.

Peter is present when the Lord Jesus ascends into Heaven (Acts 1:9-11). Afterward, he sees the need to safeguard the faith by providing a full complement of twelve apostolic witnesses (Acts 1:15ff). He is the first among the apostles to preach to the Gentiles (vs. 15:7). These acts confirm the decision of the risen Lord to establish him as chief apostle.

The Lord restores Saint Peter following his triple denial, and then assigns him a triple commission to “feed” and “tend My sheep” (Jn 21:15-17). Saint John Chrysostom explains that Christ, “to show him that he must now be of good cheer, since the denial was done away . . . putteth into his hands the chief authority among the brethren” (“Homily 88 on Saint John’s Gospel,” *NPNF First Series*, Vol. 14, p. 331).

The Church understands Peter’s primacy not as supreme power over the Church and his fellow apostles, but rather as a leadership which expresses unity and unanimity – a conciliar headship. As a pastor, teacher, and faithful witness of the Lord, Saint Peter’s authority in relation to the Gospel is primary. However, he shares with the other apostles the protective role of oversight. For instance, Saint James the Brother of the Lord functions as the *proistasian* (spokesman, primate) at the Council of Jerusalem, even though Peter is present (Acts 15:13-19). All are equal in the apostolate.

Finally, we recall Saint Peter’s destiny as apostolic martyr. The Lord, in His High Priestly Prayer, pleads that “the glory which You gave Me, I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one. I in them, and You in Me” (Jn 17:22-23). In this same prayer, the Lord declares that His glory will be supremely manifested in His Passion and Resurrection (vs. 17:1).

Christ thus foretells that Saint Peter will “glorify God” by his martyric death (vs. 21:19). Indeed, tradition confirms that Saint Peter truly shared in the glory of the Lord through his own crucifixion and martyrdom.

O Peter, chief of the glorious apostles and rock of the faith, as thou dost stand before the throne of God, intercede with Christ in our behalf. – Vespers for Saints Peter and Paul

June 4 – Sunday – Pentecost, Tone 7

John 7:37-52; 8:12

Acquiring the Holy Spirit: John 7:37-52, 8:12, especially vs. 39: “But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” Saint Seraphim of Sarov reminds us of how this promise of Christ is fulfilled at Pentecost: “Then on the day of Pentecost He solemnly sent down to them in a tempestuous wind the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire which alighted on each of them and entered within them and filled them with the fiery strength of divine grace which breathes bedewingly and acts gladdeningly in souls which partake of its power and operations” (Moore, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov*, p. 189).

“This same fire-infusing grace of the Holy Spirit,” he says, is “given to us all, the faithful of Christ, in the sacrament of holy baptism, [and] sealed by the sacrament of chrismation.” The saint describes in clear detail how this “fire-infusing grace” may be awakened and ignited within every believer. However, we must first desire to “drink the water which Christ gives, the drink which quenches thirst eternally” (vs. 7:37; 4:13-14). Second, we must believe in the Lord and trust Him. Finally, we must actually drink (vss. 7:37-38).

A driving thirst for God is our starting point. Such thirst comes to all of us naturally, but because we are fallen and sick, we easily confuse our thirst for God with fleshly or psychological cravings. The Church Fathers speak of our unbridled physical passions, which lead us to seek short-lived gratification in flattery, vanity, pride, gossip, temporal goods, and material success. Any one of these passions can supplant our natural thirst for the living God (Ps 41:1-2). The enemy likewise seeks ways to divert us from the “true drink” that can satisfy us eternally (Mt 4:2-3).

Once the deep thirst for God dawns on us, we must focus our efforts on the work of salvation if we are to avoid falling into these temptations and delusions. Our experience is rather like that of a pilot searching for a place to land – we need to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit, our controller. We follow the Spirit’s direction, devoting ourselves to God and His path to salvation. We obey the Life-giving Spirit in order to gain life, turning to His blessings in repentance and practicing the virtues opposite to our sins. We receive the Holy Gifts, which enable us to “taste and see how good the Lord is.”

We must exercise caution, however, for spiritual exercises and pious devotions cannot slake our deep thirst for God unless we practice them with the firm intention of receiving Christ. The Lord states that only he who “believes in Me” will drink this “living water” (Jn 7:38), that “miraculous vintage pouring forth from His tomb” (Paschal verse).

Saint Seraphim further cautions us that even good deeds, if they are done apart from Christ, are futile. “God’s all-saving will, consists in doing good solely to acquire the Holy Spirit, an eternal, inexhaustible treasure which cannot be rightly valued. . . . Every soul is quickened by the Holy Spirit . . . and mystically illumined by the Triune Unity.”

Of course good works must follow, for we must “drink.” God appears to those who not only believe in Him but also act on that belief. As we pray, watch, fast, and practice the virtues, let us search ourselves carefully, as Saint Seraphim urges us to do, asking, “Am I in the Spirit of God or not?”

O Heavenly King, O Comforter, come and dwell in us and cleanse us of every stain. – Prayer to the Holy Spirit

June 5 – Monday after Pentecost – Holy Spirit Day
Matthew 18:10-20

God's Guidance: Matthew 18:10-20, especially vs. 11: *“For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.”* We see the world of God's creation spread before us, its splendor awakening us to offer thanks to Him who crowns us “with glory and honor” (Ps 8:5). Science itself invites us to open our eyes to the complexities and wonders of creation. How wonderful are the myriad ways by which God draws us to Himself! He is ever active, seeking “the one that is straying” (vs. 13). He searches for us with the gracious compassion of His loving heart so that not “one of these little ones should perish” (vs. 14).

In today's reading, Saint Matthew reveals four specific ways by which the Lord our God guides us to Himself. We begin with the angels (vs. 10). Here Christ is not referring to little greeting-card figures, but rather to those majestic beings we see reverently depicted in icons. These incorporeal spirits are capable of rolling great stones away from the sepulchre of sin in which find ourselves entombed.

The angels serve God day and night on our behalf. They guard us soul and body; they watch over every Christian from the hour of baptism; they are messengers of God's peace who bring us out of the pit of misery, set our feet upon a rock, and order our steps aright (Ps 39:2-3). At all times they protect us from the temptations of the evil one, praying continually to the Lord (Mt 18:10). God's holy angels are guiding us to Him!

Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, is the Good Shepherd (vss. 11-13). As the Son of Man, He came as one of us into the crags and valleys of this unforgiving wilderness we call the world “to seek the one that is straying” (vs. 12). The icon of Jesus as the Good Shepherd complements Saint Paul's depiction of Christ as one who emptied Himself of His splendor as God (Phil 2:6-8) and took “the form of a bondservant . . . coming in the likeness of men” (vs. 7).

The Good Shepherd's determined search for His lost sheep takes place within human history. His quest is a permanent witness to God's constant activity in our individual lives and within each objective moment of time. He “came to His own” (Jn 1:11) recorded, once and for all, His indelible promise: God is present to guide us home to Himself – right now!

The Church (vss. 18:15-18), the living Body of our God and Savior, is our nurturing family. The Lord Jesus provides the Church so that we may be re-created as brethren. Yes, our holy Orthodox, Catholic, and Apostolic Church forms a community guided homeward by the Holy Spirit to the God of all. The Church is our true home. She corrects us when we sin, heals us from the ravages wrought by our sins, and provides brothers and sisters who love and uphold us.

Thanks to the tangible relationships we find within the Church, we are permitted to see the dire results of our sins and willfulness. At the same time, the Church is a family within which we may begin to correct the hurts we have caused and restore the bonds of love (vs. 15). Guided by our godly pastors, we make an effort to set right the wrongs of this life. The purpose of the holy discipline of the Church (vss. 16-18) is to guide us toward our Father, who has reconciled us to Himself in Christ (2 Cor 5:19).

Finally, worship guides us back to God (Mt 18:18-20). The priests' vestments priests and the respect we show to the clergy serve to remind us that Christ is present. The Divine Liturgy guides our hearts and minds toward the will of God the Father and His only begotten Son and All-holy Spirit. We are invited to “worship and fall down before Christ.” The Holy Spirit, supreme guide and guardian of our souls, assures us that our Lord Jesus is ever present; His Body and Blood feed us in the holy mysteries. He guides us to follow His commandments, nurtures us in His grace, and prepares us for the unimaginable good things yet to come.

Lord, I have fled unto Thee: teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God. – Doxology

June 6 – Tuesday of the First Week After Pentecost
Matthew 4:25-5:13

The Sermon on the Mount – Beatitudes: Matthew 4:25-5:13, especially vs. 3: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” In the days immediately after Pentecost, the Church begins reading through the famous Sermon on the Mount, which appears in chapters 5 through 7 of Saint Matthew. The prologue to this sermon, called the Beatitudes, sets forth the major themes of his Gospel. Just as the stalk of a plant supplies nourishment to the branches, the Beatitudes carry life to the structure of the whole work.

The taproot of the Beatitudes is poverty of spirit (vs. 5:3). Drawing from the rich loam of humility (called by Saint John Chrysostom the “mother of virtues”), poverty of spirit infuses the Beatitudes with the life of Christ. Whenever humility is active in the heart, the disciple’s life is filled with the Kingdom of God. A grace to long for!

If we lack humility, we continue indulging the “old man” (Eph 4:22) with the bitter acids of self-centered pride, leading to the uncontained growth of our passions. We find it easy to embrace the ways of the world and exult in our own righteousness even though our actions lack mercy. We view life through a distorted lens and war against all who oppose us. Rather than rejoicing when we are persecuted for our faith, we merely cry over our misfortune.

We find the way to true spiritual brokenness through mourning and tears (Mt 5:4). These virtues water the branches of meekness (vs. 5) and the leaves of righteousness (vs. 6), which naturally turn toward the Sun of Righteousness.

Fed by God’s merciful rays, these “leaves” in turn produce mercy (vs. 7) and purity (vs. 8) as God reveals Himself to us. The shade cast by those who embrace lowliness in turn brings peace to others. If, however, we remain enmeshed in the darkness of sin and hatred, we will perceive others only as weeds – nuisances to be cursed, struck down, and uprooted.

Saint Simeon the New Theologian speaks of the Beatitudes as a composite, calling them “the true imprint of the seal of Christ” (Manley, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 147). He insists that we must acquire the ability to recognize the presence of Christ stamped in us, and even more so in others. When the Lord’s true imprint is embossed on our hearts, we develop a peculiar sorrow “that is full of joy.”

The Christ-filled soul “begins eagerly to bring forth the fruit of the other virtues for Christ and for itself.” As God’s gift of compunction manifests divine humility moving within the heart, a truly impoverished spirit forms in us. “And naturally,” says Saint Simeon, “for when [a heart] is being watered and made fruitful by tears and wholly extinguishes its temper, it becomes meek and incapable of being moved to anger.”

Our hunger and thirst to learn God’s ways soon become irrepressible. The soul becomes compassionate, “and by all these things its heart will become pure, and as has been promised, thus attain to the vision of God.” Those who attain such a spirit are, in truth, peacemakers (vs. 9). They will “endure every labor and every tribulation” and gladly accept insults and reproaches for His name’s sake. They exult because they have been found worthy of suffering dishonor for Christ’s sake.

How can we hope to attain such a high spiritual state? “First of all, with an unquestionably firm faith and warm love, you ought to approach God and decidedly renounce this world,” says Saint Paisius Velichkovsky. “And then through Christ’s grace a holy zeal will be kindled in perfected souls. . . . Hunger and thirst after righteousness shall appear, that is a fiery effort to behave in everything according to His commandments and to achieve humility” (*Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 148).

Remember us, O Holy One, when Thou comest in Thy Kingdom. – Ninth Hour Prayer

Wednesday of the First Week after Pentecost
Matthew 5:20-26

The Sermon on the Mount, continued – Reading Scripture: *Matthew 5:20-26, especially vs. 20:* “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” The Sermon on the Mount is a compact collection of wisdom from God. As its prologue, the Beatitudes establish the major themes of the Lord Jesus’ teachings. Throughout His entire sermon, Christ emphasizes the Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Mt 4:17). He vividly contrasts this kingdom with the traditions taught by the scribes and Pharisees, who were the accepted first-century experts on Old Testament scripture.

As Matthew 5:20 suggests, the Lord Jesus expects us to follow His higher reading of Scripture rather than living as the scribes and Pharisees did. The key to the this higher way is found in verses 21-22. In verse 21, He quotes one of the commandments given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai: “You shall not murder” (Ex 20:13). The Lord at once expands the application of this commandment beyond the traditional reading.

Then, in verse 22, the Lord counters the scribal reading with His own higher teaching. Indeed, His teaching calls the entire traditional interpretive framework into question. He attacks the existing tradition both for narrowing the scope of the commandment and for what it does *not* teach. Of course, His challenge to the method of the scribes attracts the attention of the populace and the experts alike (Mt 7:28-29, 9:3).

With His repeated statements of contradiction – “but I say to you” – Jesus exposes the most serious weakness in the scribal approach: its use of endless quotations from the experts. In Judaism, large collections of quotes, called Mishnah, were and still are the standard texts for scribal training and interpretation. However, such endless quoting obscures the deeper implications of the sins addressed by the Law’s commandments. The condition of one’s heart is what is primary with God.

In the case of the commandment concerning murder, the tradition that “whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment” is certainly correct. Moses taught that capital cases should be brought to courts of law and the perpetrators sentenced with proper punishment (see Ex 21). The problem with this tradition is its failure to understand that murder is an act that begins as a sin of the heart against God.

The Ten Commandments, of course, are God’s Law. What the Lord reveals to us in the Beatitudes is that underlying every sinful act is the corrupt state of the heart. Our hearts are the source of every corrupt passion. Even when these passions do not result in murder or other wicked deeds, our sin flaunts God to His face.

When King David commits adultery with Bathsheba and then murders her husband Uriah, he is confronted with his foul deeds by the Prophet Nathan. David cries to God, “Against Thee only have I sinned and done this evil before Thee” (Ps 50:4). David understands rightly that the sin in his heart is against God alone. He confesses his deep and foremost wrongdoing.

We observe how the Lord often focuses attention on our disdain for one another. We encounter this common attitude in ourselves every day. Even when it does not lead to murder, the Lord teaches that such disdain puts us “in danger of hell fire” (Mt 5:22). Whenever there is antipathy, disdain, or anger in our hearts, reconciliation with God is our foremost need, followed by reconciliation with our brother (vss. 23-26).

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. – Psalm 50:10

June 8 – Thursday of the First Week after Pentecost
Matthew 5:27-32

The Sermon on the Mount, continued – Managing the Heart: *Matthew 5:27-32, especially vs. 28:* “*But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” In the opening verses of this passage, the Lord Jesus continues the same pattern established earlier in His sermon. The Lord’s style stands in sharp contrast to the approach of the scribes and Pharisees, who focus strictly on action and behavior. Much like the earlier prophets of Israel, the Lord Jesus is intent on cautioning us against “the evil pleasures of [the] heart” (Jer 16:12).

If we observe ourselves with care, we find that sinful attitudes and thoughts invariably precede wicked acts. Our external behavior is simply visible evidence that we have already been conquered by sin. Furthermore, corruption of our heart occurs more frequently – and far more universally – than do our overt acts of wrongdoing.

The present portion of the Sermon on the Mount focuses on three related issues: adultery, divorce, and remarriage. When the Lord says “whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:28), He is expressing God’s foremost concern in every relationship between men and women: the attitude of the heart toward the opposite gender.

A primary vulnerability for every human being comes through the eye. When the Lord Jesus says that our *eye* can cause us to stumble, He is using an Hebraic idiom for the imagination – the inner working of the heart. The physical eye is an innocent bodily organ; it merely receives light impulses and transfers them through the optic nerve to the brain. We are, however, responsible for what we do with the information the physical eye delivers to our imagination.

The Prophet Jeremiah reinforces the Lord’s claim that the real problem is spiritual – a matter of the heart. When we think to ourselves, “We will act like men and walk after our inclinations, and each one of us will do the evils pleasing to his heart” (Jer 18:12), we merely affirm that the problem originates in our heart.

“Seeing is believing,” runs a popular aphorism, but the actual truth is the other way around – believing is seeing. As Christians, we do well to adopt the practice of the Prophet Job: “I have made a covenant with my eyes, and I will not think upon a virgin” (Job 31:1). Let our energy be directed toward managing our thought-life, for this is what the Lord means by the diseased “eye” of the heart that we are to “pluck . . . out and cast . . . from [us]” (Mt 5:29).

If the eye of our heart enjoys evil thoughts, we will tend toward improper behavior. Our contemporary society constantly bombards us with sexually charged images designed to provoke lust. “Covenanting with the eyes” is a proven and godly means for establishing and maintaining purity of heart.

When the Lord speaks of the “right hand” (vs. 30), he is addressing the powers of the human will. The hand, in Scripture, always refers to the active power of the will (see Gn 41:44; Ps 30:5). With the aid of the Holy Spirit, we are to labor to follow God’s will and respond to the Spirit’s bidding from the heart; we must cut off and cast away whatever we find in our heart that wills to disobey God (Mt 5:30). God graciously provides us with fasting, prayer, vigil, confession, and the holy mysteries in order to strengthen us in this struggle, which is the true life’s work of Christ’s disciples.

In verses 31-32, the Lord Jesus returns to His original pattern (“It has been said. . . . but I say”) as He attacks the casual attitude toward divorce found in first-century Judaism – and in our contemporary culture as well. Divorce is not God’s will, although the Lord does reveal here that divorce may in some cases be the lesser of two evils (vs. 32).

When my spirit was fainting within me, then Thou knewest my paths. . . . Attend unto my supplication, for I am brought very low. – Psalm 141:3, 8

June 9 – Friday of the First Week after Pentecost
Matthew 5:33-41

The Sermon on the Mount, continued – The Living Way: *Saint Matthew 5:33-41, especially vs. 39:* “*But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.*” In this segment from the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus addresses truth-telling (vss. 33-37) and teaches how to respond to the demands of others (vss. 38-41). He begins each topic with the familiar formula, “You have heard . . . but I tell you.” He then discloses to us another way of existence – a blessed life marked by relationships that are “not of this world” (Jn 8:23). He seeks to open the eyes of our hearts in the same manner as the Prophet Elisha, who prayed: “Lord, open their eyes and let them see” (4 Kgs 6:20).

When discussing the swearing of oaths, our Lord does not deny that oaths have a legitimate place. In legal disputes and government matters, men are not always inclined to tell the truth. In such cases, the power of the state is applied through an oath in order to obtain trustworthy testimony.

When He gives the Law to Moses, God in fact commands this type of coercive pressure: “You shall not . . . deal falsely, nor lie to one another” (Lv 19:11). “If you should make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you” (Dt 23:22). These are among the familiar commandments to which the Lord refers when He says, “You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord” (Mt 5:33).

What Christ rejects, however, is the use of legalistic schemes and devices to qualify an oath. The scribes and Pharisees deemed that as long as a man swore by something other than God, he was not bound absolutely by his oath. They would swear fidelity by other things on the assumption that they were then freed of the obligation to tell the whole truth (vss. 34-36).

Consider this modern analogy: When a salesman tells us, “It’s the honest-to-God truth,” we often suspect his motives. When we abuse a vow of fidelity, we miss the intent of the commandment that we tell the truth at all times. Were this commandment to be honored, the need for oaths would be eliminated. As disciples, we are to speak “the truth in love . . . [to] grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ” (Eph 4:15).

After His discussion of truth-telling, the Lord Jesus educates us concerning the undue demands made upon us by others. He refers to the law of “an eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth,” (Mt 5:38; see Ex. 21:24), known as retributive justice. For the faithful, there are no grounds for seeking revenge and taking the law into one’s own hands. Rather, Christ our God reveals the more perfect approach of the Kingdom of Heaven: non-resistance to evil. We are to turn the other cheek, surrendering our goods, and go the extra mile (vss. 39-41).

Is such a radical approach even possible? Yes! The Lord is the living Way (Jn 18:22-23) and calls us, by example, to follow Him (1 Pt 2:23) – even if His way seems contrary to our human nature. “To men not initiated into the mystery of Christ’s suffering, the connection between suffering and life, between pain and glory, is, to this day, not clear,” asserts Saint Nikolai of Zicha. “They would always want, in some way, to separate life and glory from suffering and pain, blessing the one and making it their own, but cursing and rejecting the other” (*Homilies*, vol. 1, p. 177).

We are drawn to Christ’s way, but our fallen flesh inquires, “How can I walk this way?” According to Saint Nikolai, the apostles “achieved this . . . when the Spirit of God descended as tongues of fire into their hearts, setting them on fire with love for Christ” (p. 178). We are even now at the starting line, for Christ has broken the power of death and given us His Spirit. Let us act on the basis of His love!

O Holy and Life-giving Spirit, fill us with streams and passages of grace as Thou doth water all creation with refreshing life, that we may be purified for the Kingdom of Heaven. – Orthros Prayer

June 10 – Saturday of the First Week after Pentecost
Matthew 5:42-48

The Sermon on the Mount, continued – The Challenge: Matthew 5:43-48, especially vs. 48: “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” As we read the Sermon on the Mount, we discover how the Lord Jesus would free us from the dark ways of mankind. The logic of fallen mankind is to love our neighbors, friends, and family, ignoring or despising those who differ from us or who oppose us (vs. 43). Our Lord reveals a new logic, a theo-logic: we are to love all men in the manner in which God loves us (vss. 44-45).

“To love some men, that is, one’s own friends, and to hate others, is imperfection,” says Theophylact of Ochrid. “Perfection is to love everyone” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 55). These words encapsulate the journey on which the Lord invites us to embark – an ascent to the land of peace and joy known as the Kingdom of God. The journey is long and arduous, requiring us to redefine love itself. Our Lord challenges us to adopt His strenuous definition as our own, relying on Him to show us how, where, and when to love (vss. 43-48).

Christ our God’s definition of love is to “bless those who curse [us], do good to those who hate [us], and pray for those who . . . persecute” us out of spite (vs. 44). Being weak and corrupt, we wonder how we may hope to attain to such a lofty peak. Who is capable of meeting such a challenge?

Let us thank God for disclosing the path; He provides us not only with the grace to follow Him, but also with a *cloud of witnesses* – the saints – to accompany us (Heb 12:1). The testimony of the saints includes those ascetics and monastics, fools for Christ, and ordinary people who recognized the necessity of God’s way of loving.

The Lord’s first instruction to us is that we “return to [our] own house, and tell what great things God has done for [us]” (Lk 8:39). Once many demons have been cast out, we return to society as people who are being healed. We bear a vital message that we are to live out among our neighbors, offering love as a visible, unqualified, and pure gift to our families, friends, and enemies alike.

The parched, infertile lives around us are thirsting even now for the waters of the Spirit and languishing for the food of the loving God. The evil and the good, the just and the unjust, the heroes and the scoundrels of this world all await such love. Let us begin today to act like our Father and shed a little bit of warmth on all. We do not base our actions on others’ worthiness; rather, we pour out drops of blessing and sow good deeds while allowing God to nurture our neighbors’ unproductive lives by our poor prayers (vs. 45).

As children, we are to imitate our Father in heaven without fear of clumsiness, rejection, or rebuff. The Lord calls us to extend our love beyond those whom we prefer. Let us strive to love the unjust as well as the just, the spiteful and abusive as well as those who are kind to us.

Saint Nikolai of Zicha recommends reckoning “all men as your brothers, and sick brothers at that. And if you come to feel that God has given something healthier to you than to them, know that is given through mercy, that, as a healthy man, you may serve your frailer brethren. Who could take pride in that – as if health were all your own doing rather than God’s? As if a stagnant pool could clear itself and not be cleared by some spring, deeper and purer” (*Prologue From Ochrid*, vol. 1, p. 352-3).

By the power of Thy blessing, O Lord, enable me at all times to speak and act to Thy glory with a pure spirit, with humility, patience, love, and wisdom: aware always of Thy Life-giving presence. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

June 11 – First Sunday after Pentecost – Sunday of All Saints, Tone 8
Matthew 10:32-33, 37-38; 19:27-30

Confessing Christ: Matthew 10:32-38; 19:27-30, especially vs. 32: “Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.” When Saint Maximos the Confessor was on trial in Constantinople in AD 654-55, political pressure was applied to gain his cooperation with an imperial order of silence imposed upon all parties engaged in the Monothelite controversy. Many dignitaries testified of their efforts to convince Saint Maximos to cease speaking and writing in support of the teaching that Christ has two wills, human and divine.

One witness recalled visiting the monk in jail, seeking to gain his support for the reestablishment of communion between Rome and Constantinople over the issue. However, the wise Confessor said plainly, “This, I think, is an impossible thing; for the Romans will not consent that the illuminating statements of the holy Fathers be annulled together with the voices of impure heretics, or that the truth be extinguished with falsehood, or that the light disappear along with the darkness. . . . Silence according to the divine Scripture is denial as well” (*Selected Writings*, p. 20).

For his refusal to remain silent, Saint Maximos had his tongue cut out and died in exile in AD 662. The doctrine of Christ’s two wills finally prevailed at the Sixth Ecumenical Council in AD 681, upholding Maximos’ position as dogmatic truth.

Today’s collection of sayings from the Lord Jesus has a common message: we are to confess Him truly and fully before men. The word “confess” (*homologizi*) means “to say the same thing” – to speak on basis of the same assumptions and outlook, upholding the same truth. The case of Saint Maximos reveals that confessing the Lord is much harder than merely claiming to believe. All parties said they were Christians, but the truth could reside only with one side or the other, and not with both.

Many forces today encourage us to compromise our Orthodox confession. Relatives and friends are the source of one kind of pressure. Financial and business ties pull at us along with our social obligations and loyalties. There is an implication that unpleasant consequences will follow if we speak the full truth of Christ.

Perhaps we are asked to tone down our remarks, or refrain altogether from speaking out. Family or friends remind us to be nice, to cooperate and let things ride, so that there can be peace. On occasion we may be reminded of the pain we might inflict on someone else – or that will come down upon us – if we persist in defending the truth.

With such pressures encouraging us to rationalize our response, how do we make a truly God-pleasing confession? We begin by learning to recognize those occasions when silence extinguishes the truth as effectively as falsehood. We need not always respond using the language of faith; Christ’s name need not be invoked in order to confess Him before men. Our duty before God is to stand for what Christ teaches, remaining as mindful of the implications of silence as of those for speaking out.

The Lord never insists that we must leave “houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands” for His sake (vs. 19:29). However, He does say that our *eternal life* depends on our speaking and living “for [His] name’s sake” (vs. 29). The Lord directs us to be with Him through the Holy Spirit, so that when the time come we may *bear witness* like His saints in word and deed, despite the world’s pressures (Jn 15:26-27).

O Master, overshadow my acts with the spirit of Thy fear; and by Thy sovereign Spirit strengthen mine unstable mind, that I may do Thy commandments unto that which is profitable. – Kneeling prayers of Pentecost

June 12 – Monday of the Second Week after Pentecost
Matthew 6:31-34; 7:9-11

The Sermon on the Mount, continued – The Watershed: Matthew 6:31-34; 7:9-11, especially vs. 33: “*But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.*” Prior to baptism, we are asked two questions: “Do you renounce Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his service, and all his pride?” and “Do you unite yourself unto Christ?” These questions are direct, personal, and pointed to remind us that more is involved than a one-time choice. Our Christian commitment is life-long.

The Church intends for us live by the new, eternal communion into which we are grafted when we receive baptism, chrismation, and the holy Eucharist. These life-giving mysteries are a watershed in our lives. Once we are regenerated and illumined, we vow to leave our former life behind and freely assume an entirely new mode of living.

The present passage encourages us to revisit that demarcation between our old life and our life in Christ, recalling the divide over which we crossed when we entered the gracious realm of the Spirit. The three commands of the Lord Jesus (vss. 31, 33, 34) remind us of that initial boundary and the great parting of the ways. These commands apply to everyone who embraces a life of discipleship, saying, “I believe in Him as King and God.” They point to the former life we spat upon – the same life pursued by the majority of people around the world (vs. 32).

As we examine these three commands of the Lord Jesus, we discover that they will help us to defeat the temptation to retreat back over that divide. First, the Lord alerts us that our worries about material needs – what to eat or what to drink, what to wear (vss. 31, 34) – are a red flag. We receive this life-giving warning lest we turn away from the Kingdom and let go of the wondrous, true life that is ours in Christ.

When material satisfactions consume our thoughts, we are to recognize such cravings as a dangerous state of the heart. Such thoughts creep in like cancer until we reach the verge of no longer trusting in our Father. God is the giver of all good gifts to His children (Jas 1:17)! In these verses the Lord reminds that our Father supplies us with the basic needs for this existence. He sustains our bodies (Mt 7:9-11).

When God consigned our race to toil and sweat because of Adam’s disobedience, He declared that we should eat bread and herbs (Gn 3:18-19). “He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle,” Scripture tells us, “and green herb for the service of men, to bring forth bread out of the earth; and wine maketh glad the heart of man. To make his face cheerful with oil; and bread strengtheneth man’s heart” (Ps 103:15-17).

Our pagan, materialistic world predicates our continued existence either on fate or on statistical probability. God, however, commands us to base our life, decisions, and actions on the Lord’s will. Is God faithless? We reject such thoughts!

Anxious cares may haunt the faithless mind, but when God’s kingdom becomes our priority, we align ourselves to that one goal. We diligently pursue the work God sets before us in order to attain the necessities of this brief life. Our labor may be based on worry, or it may become an occasion to seek and reveal God’s righteousness (vs. 33). May we not cross back over the watershed of life to serve the enemy!

O Lord, grant us grace ever to be faithful and to avoid all godless anxieties and cares.

June 13 – Tuesday of the Second Week after Pentecost
Matthew 7:15-21

The Sermon on the Mount, continued – False vs. True Prophets: *Matthew 7:15-21, especially vs. 20:* “*Therefore by their fruits you will know them.*” The Orthodox Church faces a great challenge in carrying out its divinely mandated task of bringing the true faith and the worship of the undivided Trinity to our secular society. One dimension of this challenge is that the Church exists today in the midst of many communities calling themselves “Christian” and proclaiming the Gospel.

Indeed, a smorgasbord of entities claim to represent Christ’s truth to the world today, especially in North America. Every day we encounter members of these so-called churches in our workplace, recreational, and social gatherings. If we examine the teachings of these Christians, we find that they range from reasonably orthodox to dangerously heretical. We are deeply thankful that God’s one true vine – the holy, catholic, and apostolic Church – perseveres in the midst of this diverse milieu.

The Lord Jesus warns, “Beware of false prophets” (vs. 15). Likewise, the apostles teach us not to believe “every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn 4:1). If we pay close attention to this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, we will discover powerful insights into how to conduct ourselves with those who call themselves Christians.

If we are to grasp the Lord’s message and apply it to today’s confused society, we need a working knowledge of what Christ means by “prophecy” and “prophets.” First of all, prophecy must not be confused with the foretelling of events. In Holy Scripture, prophecy is understood as *forthtelling*, i.e., speaking the truth as led by the Holy Spirit. Of the false prophet Balaam, Saint John Chrysostom says, “Balaam was an alien both from faith and from a truly good life. Nevertheless grace wrought in him for the service of other men (Nm 23-24)” (“Homily 24 on Saint Matthew,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 10, p. 168). The Holy Spirit makes the difference.

Nor should we link prophecy with performing miracles, for the Lord Jesus says, “False prophets will rise and shall show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Mt 24:24). Although they may look like sheep, “inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Mt 7:15). Since only God is capable of judging the hearts of men, we must “know them by their fruits” (vs. 16). When we are invited to hear great teachings and “real” prophecies, we are to weigh them against Orthodox doctrine, for “whoever . . . does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son” (2 Jn 1:9).

The *fruits* that we ought to be gathering are the doctrines which the Church teaches and defends before every self-styled prophet. The Church’s teachings come from the true, living Body of Christ; they nourish and give life. These truths lead us to God’s grace and result in a cleansing repentance.

The false preaching and teachings we hear today may sound true, but they do not ultimately yield good fruit. Like all false prophecy, they are rooted in theologies constructed from human philosophies and ideas. We rely upon the prayer-derived theology of holy tradition – the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) and transmitted within the Church by *faithful men* (2 Tm 2:2).

O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance, preserve the fullness of Thy Church; sanctify those who love the beauty of Thy house, and glorify them by Thy divine power. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

June 14 – Wednesday of the Second Week after Pentecost

Matthew 7:21-23

The Sermon on the Mount, continued – Calling Jesus Lord: *Matthew 7:21-23, especially vs. 21:* “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” The Apostle Paul assures the faithful that “if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). He goes on to quote a promise from the Prophet Joel: “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom 10:13; Joel 3:5).

Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers teach us to cry out to the Lord for our deliverance. In his baptismal instructions, Saint John Chrysostom asserts that our “understanding must be strongly fixed in pious faith, and the tongue must herald forth by its confession the solid resolution of the mind” (*ACCS New Testament*, vol. 6, p. 276). At Vespers, we hear the familiar words of the Prophet David: “Lord I have cried unto Thee, hearken unto me” (Ps 140:1). In the course of Matthew’s Gospel, more than twenty people call out to the Lord. None are refused – neither lepers nor pagans, nor His own disciples.

When Saint Paul speaks of God’s promise of salvation, he includes one qualification. In addition to crying to the Lord, we must also “believe in [our] heart” in the Lord Jesus risen from the dead (Rom 10:9). Concerning our appeals to Him for salvation, Christ adds a similar qualification. We may anticipate salvation if we call Him “Lord” – but we must also do “the will of My Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21).

All of these promises, whether they come from the Lord or from His apostles, are consistent on this point. If we believe in our hearts that God has raised Jesus from the dead, we will strive to do the will of God. Right belief and right action are inseparable.

In today’s religious milieu, we may encounter believers who stray far from this evangelical truth. They call upon the name of the Lord but approach Saint Paul’s promise superficially, ignoring his qualification and the Lord Jesus’ caution in today’s passage. Let us meditate carefully on what the Lord means by doing *the will of His Father* in heaven. Merely doing works we consider to be good in God’s eyes may not result in salvation (vs. 22). We must be *known* by Christ and strive to live within the Law of God (vs. 23).

How is it possible to do “many wonders” in Christ’s name, yet still not carry out the will of God the Father? We find the answer in Romans 10:9, where Saint Paul links the *name* of the Lord with *belief* in Him and His Resurrection. If we do great wonders in Christ’s name without uniting ourselves to Him from the heart, we will not gain salvation. According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “Only the good deed done for Christ’s sake brings us the fruits of the Holy Spirit . . . but to this end we must begin with a right faith in our Lord Jesus” (Moore, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov*, p. 169).

Through a *right faith* in Christ we become *known* by Him (vs. 23). Our heartfelt cry to Him is essential, but we must unite it with the desire to know Him, to “unite [ourselves] unto Christ” and “believe in Him as King and God.” We are called to surrender from the heart, as Saint Peter discerns: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68).

When we know the Lord Jesus and are known by Him, when we have a life-giving relationship with the Him, our heart acquires a new orientation from which good works and virtues naturally develop. If we seek the Lord and His righteousness (Mt 6:33), our works become valuable in God’s eyes. “Through the virtues practiced for Christ’s sake [we] will acquire the Holy Spirit who acts within us and establishes in us the Kingdom of God,” says Saint Seraphim. He adds, “Such people at last actually appear before the face of God” (p. 190).

I tremble for the Day of Judgment, but trusting Thy mercy, I shout to Thee, have mercy! –Lenten Orthros

June 15 – Thursday of the Second Week after Pentecost
Matthew 8:23-27

Following: Matthew 8:23-27, especially vs. 26: “*Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?*” As the Lord Jesus “got into a boat, His disciples followed Him” (vs. 23). We observe that the Lord from time to time calls His disciples, including us, to follow Him (vss. 4:19-21). To this call He consistently adds: “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (vs. 16:24).

Following the Lord Jesus involves far more than simply getting into a boat. The *following* which Christ requires of us is the self-denial of bearing our cross. The boat is the Church, wherein we are joined to Him. This ship may seem frail at times before the tempests of this world, which threaten to swamp us (vs. 8:24) – yet in the Lord we find sure passage through the storms of this life.

Let us understand the Church as a boat in which we are pledged members of the crew. The owner and Master of this vessel sets the course. When we come aboard the Church and embrace the mystery of Christ, we accept both His authority and His destination. He blesses and trains us, the faithful, and provides us with a rightful place in the nave. (This word, applied to the gathering halls of our churches, derives from the Latin term for “ship.”)

As wise followers, we expect the Master to take us through alien lands where we shall confront demons and even madness (vs. 28). However, our discipleship also brings us to deserted places where we find rest (vs. 11:29).

As members of Christ’s crew, we are obliged to obey Him when He says, “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch” (Lk 5:4). At times we suspect that our boat is going to be “covered with the waves” while He sleeps (Mt 8:24). The Lord allows us to be tested by the tossing seas of the world around us, and yet He controls both storm and calm.

Yes, we are surrounded by a sea in the form of this present life across which we sail. When it is calm, we sail to shores of beauty, learning, healing, and refreshment (vss. 14:13-20). The Lord Jesus enables us to draw in “a great number of fish” until our nets threaten to break (Lk 5:6). And yet He tells us: “Do not be afraid . . . you will catch men” (vs. 5:10).

From the nave we see Christ our God perform miracles; we affirm, with the entire apostolic community, “Christ is among us! He is and ever shall be!” However, we also learn that the sea of life swells up “as high as the heavens,” then goes “down into the abysses” until our soul melts at evils (Ps 106:26).

Satan’s goal is to foster our obsession with the waves, convincing us of the impossibility of prayer and flooding us with fear. Sickness, pain, and the approach of death cause us to “reel like one drunken” only to be “swallowed up” (Ps 106:27). Never doubt that He who commands the tempests will heed our cry, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” (Mt 8:25).

Enough said! Christ knows our fears, sees our tiny faith, and with His great and merciful power quiets our souls as well as the seas of this life. The Lord Jesus’ first disciples “marveled, saying, ‘Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?’” (vs. 27).

Saint Nikolai of Zicha answers, “It is He who aforetime raised up the winds and calmed them, who stirred up the sea and subdued it. It is He who does this today. As man, He stood before men and rebuked the dancing wind and the unrestrained sea, in order to dispel the mistaken belief of the people that the winds and the sea move and are stilled by blind chance or by some evil power; that He might reveal the truth once and for all that the mind and beneficent power of the Creator directs and orders all the natural elements by His providence” (*Prologue From Ochrid*, vol. 1, p. 105).

O all-wise and almighty Lord, still Thou the winds of sin and calm the storm of our filthy and unworthy passions. To Thee be glory and praise for ever. Amen. – Saint Nikolai of Zicha

June 16 – Friday of the Second Week after Pentecost
Matthew 9:14-17

Fasting and Feasting: Matthew 9:14-17, especially vs. 15: “*The days will come when the Bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.*” We often neglect the Fast of the Apostles, which follows soon after Pentecost and lasts until June 29. During the other three fasting seasons (Great Lent, Nativity, and the Dormition of the Theotokos) we hold special services at church, reminding us of the call for increased ascetic struggle. What, then, is the purpose of the Apostles’ Fast? Today’s Gospel passage provides us with answers from the Lord Jesus.

The followers of Saint John the Forerunner observe that Jesus’ disciples do not conform to the common fasting practices of the Jews. Seeking a reason, they come and ask the Lord directly (vs. 14). He explains that the time is indeed coming when His disciples will fast, “when the Bridegroom will be taken away” (vs. 15). He adds that it is right for the disciples to fast after their Lord is taken away from them, but *not* while He is present.

If we apply the Lord Jesus’ statement to the four seasonal fasts of the Church, we may wonder how the faithful, who participate in the Mystery of the Resurrection, can say that the Bridegroom is *taken away*? After all, Christ is risen – He has trampled down death by death. Christ is among us, and ever shall be! We are communicants in the mystical supper, receiving His life-giving Body and Blood at the Divine Liturgy.

The ineffable reality of our risen Lord necessarily gives the fasting practices of the Church a distinctive mark. These fasts differ qualitatively from the fasting practiced by the ancient people of God. The seasonal fasts of Judaism were, and are, sad days of bereavement and mourning for what is lost. They commemorate the destruction of Solomon’s Temple by the Babylonians and the Temple of Herod by the Romans.

For the faithful in Christ, however, our fasting is never separated from feasting. We fast in joyful repentance so that we may enter the portals of the bridal chamber with our wedding garment radiant and pure. Our temple was rebuilt in three days (Jn 2:19-21) and our Lord is alive forevermore. Christ is risen!

Indeed, fasting heightens our awareness of the ineffable, living presence of Christ among us. He is risen, and we are endowed with life! The gates of Paradise once again stand open. In the Great Fast we prepare to celebrate the mystery of the Resurrection. Similarly, prior to our celebration of the Lord’s Nativity and Theophany, we prepare to receive the Incarnate Lifegiver. During the Dormition Fast in August, we prepare to celebrate the deification of the Mother of God – a sure promise for our own struggle.

In the person of the ever-virgin Birthgiver of God, we find perfect union with the risen Lord fully manifest. The same is true of Christ’s holy apostles, Saints Peter and Paul. They are united to Him for eternity by virtue of their self-offering for His name. Their struggles and deaths are exemplary for us and for all the faithful. The apostles reign with Christ in His eternal kingdom. Thus we celebrate the presence of God and our union with Him during the Apostles’ Fast, just as we do during the Dormition Fast.

When the Lord foretells a future time when He will be *taken away*, it reminds us that each celebration of the Lord Jesus’ eternal presence is connected to momentary separation. During Great Lent and Holy Week, we must re-enter Christ’s Passion and Burial before we experience His Resurrection. Prior to the Lord’s Nativity, we remember the long ages before He came in the flesh.

At the Dormition, we recall how the apostles mourned the passing of the Theotokos before her victory in Christ was revealed. Now, during the Fast of the Apostles, we grieve over their suffering and martyrdom but greatly exult with them in their victory.

Let us extol the apostolic martyrs who walked the narrow way to dwell in Paradise. – Vespers for Saints Peter and Paul

June 17 – Saturday of the Second Week after Pentecost

Matthew 7:1-8

Moral Evaluation: Matthew 7:1-8, especially vs. 5: *“Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”* We continually make judgments concerning the ideas, offers, and invitations we encounter in daily life. Most such choices involve some degree of moral evaluation – that is, they force us to decide whether the option before us is good or bad, whether it pleases God or not. We may find our relationships and even our personal integrity on the line in such situations. We first gather facts and examine the implications of our choices, then pray for guidance as we search our hearts.

In the present passage from the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus provides us with a single guideline to apply to every moral evaluation we make (vss. 1-2). He also describes the basic character of our life as we make choices (vss. 3-5), sets forth God’s standard for facing obvious wrong (vs. 6), and encourages us to pray whenever we face choices (vss. 7-8).

The chief standard that we must heed when making moral evaluations is not to usurp the Lord Jesus’ place as judge. The judgment of all men belongs to Christ our God (Acts 10:42). Who are we to judge another’s salvation? As the Prophet David reminds us, in God’s sight “shall no man living be justified” (Ps 142:2).

There is much in the hearts of others, both good and bad, that remains unknown to us, but God knows the hearts of all men (Jer 11:19). “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and will reveal the counsels of the hearts” (1 Cor 4:5). We avoid judgment by beginning with ourselves. As sinners, we are wary of judging others falsely, pridefully, or rudely. Our Lord vehemently discourages us from acting as the judge of others, for to do so presumes against Him, which is a great sin.

Let us approach the moral decisions we must make every day by following the Lord Jesus’ admonition to “remove the plank from your own eye” (Mt 7:5). This is the essential starting point for every Christian faced with the temptation to judge. Our Lord focuses specific attention on the eye – how *we* see others – and on our own moral perception. He urges us to invest our primary energy in correcting our own words and deeds.

Jesus knows perfectly well that we must make evaluations. Out of devotion to Him, we seek to purify the eyes of our heart and refrain from taking the moral inventories of other people. However, this state of life, which necessarily requires us to focus on our own faults, does not mean that we are to ignore wrongdoing and blithely pass over evil.

When the Lord says, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (vs. 1), He does not mean that we should live as if there is neither sin nor wrongdoing in the world. We will surely meet reprobate, godless, and immoral people; our fellow Christians may also fall into sin. For this reason Saint John the Evangelist urges us to “test the spirits whether they are of God” (1 Jn 4:1).

Not every attitude, choice, and lifestyle is “of God.” We do not accept relative morality; there is right and wrong. The Lord Jesus directs us not to give “what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine” (Mt 7:6). According to Saint Paul, “many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame” (Phil 3:18-19).

May we rely on the Holy Spirit guide us into all truth (Jn 16:13). The Lord teaches us, in every situation involving right and wrong, that we are to pray incessantly. Knock at heaven’s door until all is made clear (Mt 7:7-8).

O Christ our God, Thou dost guide the meek and give light to Thy people: grant us the grace of Thy Holy Spirit that we may be saved from all false choices and, in Thy Light, see light. – Book of Common Prayer

June 18 – Second Sunday after Pentecost, Tone 1

Matthew 4:18-23

Being Called: Matthew 4:18-23, especially vs. 19: “Then He said to them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.’” The Evangelist John describes the Lord Jesus summoning the three disciples (Jn 1:35-42) whose call is also recorded in Matthew 4:19. These same men were called twice, for on this occasion, as Saint John Chrysostom notes, “They were called in another manner. Therefore it is evident that this was a second call . . . for . . . they were well-instructed beforehand. . . . For though they were in the midst of their work . . . they forsook all and followed” (“Homily 14 on the Gospel of Matthew,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 10, p. 87-88).

The instant response of the fishermen to the Lord Jesus’ summons is understandable in light of their earlier contact with Christ, as reported by Saint John. The disciples’ immediate decision to follow indicates that spiritual growth took place in them between the first and the second call. Although at first they are drawn into general allegiance to Jesus, the summons by the lake involves a specific ministry and leads them to their eventual work of apostleship.

The development of these disciples into apostles takes place over three years of extended training. The entire process, from their very first contact while still disciples of the Forerunner until the Day of Pentecost, may be divided into stages as the Lord leads them from careers as “fishers of fish” to become “fishers of people,” to use the terminology of Saint Ephraim the Syrian. It is, in short, a process of hands-on training.

If we understand the stages through which the first disciples passed, we will better grasp the kind of training required of all Christians. The enlistment of the disciples begins with the Lord Jesus’ call (Jn 1:35-42). Their initial training takes the form of immersion in ministry. The Lord provides His future apostles with substantive content such as the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) that fosters in them a vision of the Kingdom of God.

Subsequently, the disciples-in-training witness the coming of that kingdom through the Lord’s acts of healing (vss. 8:1-17). They discover that Christ’s ministry extends to peoples of all nations as well as the Jews (vss. 5-13). Commitment to the Lord Jesus is defined (vss. 18-22). Through His control of the natural elements, the Lord demonstrates His divine powers and prepares them to grasp the reality of His deity (vss. 23-27). He shows them His mastery over demons (vss. 28-34), His authority to forgive sin (vss. 9:2-6), and His power over death itself (vss. 18-26).

This initial phase of immersion comes to an end when the Lord Jesus specifically selects twelve from among His large group of followers and appoints them as an inner cadre (vss. 10:1-4). He then sends these twelve out in pairs to try their hand on their own (10:5 ff). This stage (chapters 10-20) is the equivalent of field experience. Afterward, they continue serving Him and learning how to confront tangible opposition.

We might call the next stage (vss. 21-26:46) training for how to minister in crisis. This stage begins when the Lord Jesus is acclaimed Messiah, for He must now prepare the disciples for the shock of His Passion and the glory of His Resurrection. At the conclusion of this penultimate season of training (vss. 26:47-28:20), His disciples are prepared to become “teachers of the universe” (hymn of Saints Peter and Paul) and martyrs for the kingdom.

After the Resurrection, the Lord “presented Himself alive . . . by many infallible proofs . . . speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). This final period concludes with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. These stages remain necessary today for every leader and member of the Church.

Christ our God, pour out Thy Holy Spirit of self-offering upon all the faithful in our several vocations and ministries, that we may truly and godly serve Thee and Thy kingdom. – Book of Common Prayer

June 19 – Monday of the Third Week after Pentecost
Matthew 9:36-10:8

Laborers for the Harvest: *Matthew 9:36-10:8, especially vs. 1:* “*And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power. . . .*” The Gospel of Matthew reveals how the Lord Jesus connects the ministry of the Twelve to His compassionate personality as the Good Shepherd and to His mission – the harvest of souls across the world. The Lord intends for the apostles to embody His compassion as they labor in His ministry, and He asks that we, who follow in the footsteps of the apostles, likewise show compassion. We are to care for His flock and labor in His harvest among the peoples of the whole earth.

Christ “went about all the cities and villages” of Galilee teaching, preaching, and “healing every sickness and every disease among the people” (vs. 9:35). The Lord Jesus, as the evangelist reminds us, accomplishes His work while being “moved with compassion” (vs. 36). Humbling Himself by becoming one of us, He inculcates His future apostles with a deep and holy care for those who suffer (vs. 10:8).

Such godly compassion remains the primary path that every member of the Church should follow. To be Orthodox is to be compassionate, caring. “All of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another,” says Saint Peter; “love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing” (1 Pt 3:8-9).

We are to let our compassion be evident in our actions toward all. “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn 3:17-18).

What moves the Lord Jesus to have compassion on the people He encounters? “He saw the multitudes . . . were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd” (Mt 9:36). This weariness still haunts the world, including the Church itself. All around us we see fatigued hearts, exhausted souls, and worn-out minds and bodies.

Our Lord uses the shepherds of Palestine as images of true caring. The shepherd accompanies his flock on foot, facing privations, predators, and inclement weather along with his sheep and goats.

Similarly, we members of the Church are to care for, provide for, and defend our fellow members of the flock of Christ. We are to walk together in one another’s trials and joys. As the Apostle Paul says, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble” (Rom 12:15-16).

It is a mistake to narrow our concepts of pastoral care to the clergy alone. Our clergy, as pastors, remind us that we too are pastors and should care for Christ’s people. We are to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2).

Let note that Christ characterizes His mission, which is the task of the apostles and of the Church, as *harvesting* (Mt 9:37). He commands us to pray for workers to go into His fields (vs. 38) – meaning the world – to gather His harvest of men and women.

What does it mean to live “where the fields are ripe”? US Highway 281 stretches from Mexico to the Canadian border, crossing the “fruited plains” from Texas to North Dakota. Along this road travel fleets of combines that harvest wheat for our tables. In a similar manner, God places us along life’s highway in the midst of fields ripe for harvest. Let us gather in those who hunger for the true life and the great mercy of our gracious God.

O Christ our God, put far from us all gloomy doubts and faithless fears, and by Thy grace stir up in us Thy compassion, let us take our part in the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ, that all Thy servants may join in gathering in Thy harvest from the world.

June 20 – Tuesday of the Third Week after Pentecost
Matthew 10:9-15

Requirements for Discipleship – Material Provisions: Matthew 10:9-15, especially vss. 9-10: “Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food.” When the Lord Jesus empowers His twelve apostles to minister in His name, He defines the mission before them as preaching, healing, and exorcising evil spirits (vss. 10:1-8). At the same time He teaches them about God’s provisions for His disciples. These are material (vss. 9-15), personal (vss. 16-23), and spiritual (vss. 24-31), including an ultimate provision (vss. 32-42).

In today’s gospel passage the Lord Jesus reviews the material provisions we need as we engage in the task of proclaiming the kingdom of heaven. Christ’s words have an austere, even severe, ring to them, for the disciple is to make no provision for anything, including finances, food, and clothing.

Does the Lord really believe that such a stringent standard can be met? Does He think we require no money, nor food and drink, nor clothing? Does He utterly disdain our material needs? Of course not!

When Christ our God commands us to “provide neither gold nor silver,” etc. (vs. 9), He uses a verb that implies possession, but with a lack of complete control. The Lord’s meaning is that we disciples should not invest our *foremost* life energy in guaranteeing ourselves a supply of money and material goods. If we seek to amass a strong cash reserve, it requires us to abandon our primary task as disciples. The Lord’s point is very simple: we cannot focus on two opposing life tasks. Our lives are dedicated to proclaiming His kingdom, whatever our work may be.

This message resonates with the Lord Jesus’ earlier statement in the Sermon on the Mount: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (vs. 6:24).

In this life, it takes intensive effort to achieve a financial position which gives us anything resembling complete control. Our life becomes consumed with achieving temporary fiscal security. This is why the Lord teaches us to rid ourselves of “worry about . . . life, what you will eat or what you will drink . . . or what you will put on. . . . For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (vss. 6:25, 32).

The Lord offers another reason for why He commands us to resist making material concerns our primary focus in life: “A worker is worthy of his food” (vs. 10:10). The Lord assumes that any disciple whose first concern is the kingdom will be deemed worthy to receive food from someone. The assumption is that there is a network, or fellowship, of disciples and supporters who are God’s servants, sharing the disciple’s commitment to preaching, healing, and exorcism.

Who belongs to this network? We do, of course, in the Church. The Lord assumes the existence of the Church when He directs the disciples to seek out those who are *worthy* in a city or town. He reminds us that we are not alone. Each of us must inquire, “Where is the Church?” Orthodox Christians in community share a common mission, and all who are worthy provide for one another in carrying out that common ministry.

The Lord Jesus knows that His disciples will encounter situations in which support will not be forthcoming. Nonetheless, His mission is for them to go forward. Those who understood the true missionary spirit – for example, Saints Paul, Thekla, Priscilla, and Aquila – worked at trades to supply their immediate needs. However, they always kept their focus on the Kingdom of God, giving freely as they had received from the Lord (vs. 10:8).

O all-provident Lord, deliver us from indifference to the mission of Thy Church, that we may spend ourselves in proclamation to, and the healing and deliverance of all people. – Saint Nikolai of Zicha

June 21 – Wednesday of the Third Week after Pentecost

Matthew 10:16-22

Requirements for Discipleship, continued – Inner Provision: Matthew 10:16-22, especially vs. 16: “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” Because we live in a world in constant rebellion against God, Christ is urgently concerned with protecting our hearts and souls. He intersperses various animal images in His directions in these verses, making us aware that we should expect the worst and remain faithful.

The Lord begins by describing the Church as His flock, while He is our shepherd (Ps 22; Jn 10:11). He calls us sheep, for we, as members of the Church in holy communion with Him, are privileged to be known as “His people and the sheep of His pasture” (Ps 99:3).

However, we must humbly admit that sheep are not especially bright animals. When frightened they often run blindly, stampeding away from the presence of perceived predators such as coyotes, noisy people, feral dogs, or large cats. In rough country many are killed, injured, or lost as a result of this mindless flight. Even under the best of circumstances sheep will wander away, necessitating that someone keep them together and guide them toward pasture and water.

These realities explain why certain Palestinian shepherds were “keeping watch over their flocks by night” (Lk 2:8) as well as by day. Our Lord Jesus Christ does this with us – He places us under the care of His shepherds day and night and reminds us that we are surrounded by predators that seek our souls.

Indeed, there are men who prey on others and seek to destroy the faithful (vss. 17-19). All over the world, martyrs have died for the faith as sheep taken down by predators. More difficult to discern is the fact that we wrestle not only “against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). The human race is directly targeted by Satan, who is often called the “wolf of souls.” God alone can defeat these “wolf packs” with their many devious ploys and strategies.

Let us expect a stealthy attack if we stray far from the sheepfold or wander away from the protection of our Good Shepherd and His earthly pastors. Aware of these dangers, the Lord Jesus warns us to be *wise as serpents* (Mt 10:16). “Just as the serpent allows all the rest of its body to be struck but guards its head,” explains Saint Theophylact, “let the Christian give all of his belongings and even his body to those who would strike it, but let him guard the Head” – Christ and the faith.

“And just as the serpent squeezes through a narrow hole and sheds its old skin,” the saint continues, “so too let us traverse the narrow way and shed the old man” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 86). The Gospel warns that some disciples will be delivered up to councils and brought before governors and kings for the Lord’s name, in order to testify to the nations of earth (vss. 16-18). However, we are to hold fast to our protector and defender, Christ the Good Shepherd.

Our ultimate provision from the Lord Jesus is the Holy Spirit (vs. 20). Hence, Saint Seraphim of Sarov insists that our main task is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit within our hearts, for He illumines our inner life for eternal survival. With His help we become mindful and faithful, which is why Christ uses the image of the dove. Doves neither harm nor deceive others. Although serpent-wise, we are also dove-like: harmless and guileless. We learn from the Master who is “gentle and lowly in heart: and you will find rest for your souls” (vs. 11:29).

O all-wise One, Thou Lamb of God who takest away the sin of the world, make us also wise by Thy Spirit, that we may, in all meekness and love, know what to do and to speak.

June 22 – Thursday of the Third Week after Pentecost
Matthew 10:23-31

Requirements of Discipleship, continued – Spiritual Provision: *Matthew 10:23-31, especially vs. 28:* “*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*” As Christ continues the orientation of His disciples, He gives them this command: “Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops” (vs. 27). This directive comes in the context of persecution against the Lord (vs. 23) and all “those of His household” (vs. 25). He encourages us not to fear people, but to keep our hearts and minds fixed on the ultimate judgment of God (vss. 26-28). We have infinite worth in the eyes of our Heavenly Father (vss. 29-31).

This message bears repeating: the Lord Jesus desires to free us from the fear of men, and to anchor our spirits in God the Father. Christ understands how fear defeats us and inhibits the mission of the Church in the world. How can the fearful disciple preach from the housetops and tell the world what he has learned from Christ? Only when God provides grace to our hearts do we develop certainty and confidence. God’s grace is neither a feeling nor an understanding so much as the very presence of God moving within us and strengthening our feeble spirits.

Speaking of how the Lord Jesus frees us from the fear of persecutions and suffering, Saint John Chrysostom notes that “deliverance from death is not nearly so great as persuading men to despise death. You see now, He does not push them into dangers, but sets them above dangers” (“Homily 34 on the Gospel of Matthew,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 228).

There are real dangers in this world – and persecutions such as those the Lord Jesus endured – but the true danger is losing one’s soul (vs. 28). God truly values our souls and bodies, which He created (vss. 30-31). This same God raised our Lord from the dead. Let us despise death, for God our Father will also raise from the dead everyone who is “of His household” (vs. 25).

We look to “Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). Christ Jesus is fully united to the Holy Spirit and the Father – and if we rest our hearts in the Holy Spirit, God will transform every oppression, abuse, and rejection. Since we are united to our Savior and Master (Mt 10:25), we too shall have occasion for joy.

Fear of men, with their finite power and unproven opinions, always rises from the wellspring of atheism. Those who fear men do not see the hand of God in *all things* – neither the great events of history, nor the fall of a tiny sparrow to the ground. If we cut out the spiritual aspect of life, what remains? Only existence without life!

God enables everyone who belongs to His household to taste Life and worship Him by the Holy Spirit (Jn 4:24). When our Father seals us with the Spirit, we cry out fearlessly, “God is with us!” (Is 8:10). Indeed, He remains with us in the best and the worst of circumstances.

“You should have the fear of God as a constant adornment, humility as a modest garment,” advises Elder Joseph the Hesychast. “The death of your soul is walking beside you; it precedes your steps, it hovers around your heart, flies in your eyes, wrestles with your thoughts. Be careful with your life, guard your soul greatly” (*Monastic Wisdom*, p. 231). Let us pray attentively to God that we may complete the remaining time of our life in peace and repentance, for God richly provides grace to all who call upon Him.

O Lord, teach me to treat all that comes to me with peace of soul, and with the firm conviction that Thy will governs all. – Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow

June 23 – Friday of the Second Week after Pentecost
Matthew 10:32-36; 11:1

Requirements of Discipleship, continued – God’s Ultimate Provision: *Matthew 10:32-36; 11:1, especially vs. 32:* “*Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.*” The indwelling of the Holy Spirit, whose presence is sealed within us at creation, is God’s ultimate gift to every true Christian. The Holy Spirit is an inestimable divine endowment which we must strive to retain, submitting all that we are and all that we have to Christ as King and God.

God’s provision of the Holy Spirit comes when we are initiated into the Christian mystery, at which time we declare: “I believe in [Christ] as King and God.” In that declaration, we hand over and deliver to the Lord Jesus full and unqualified rule over every aspect of our lives. “What, then, my brethren, follows from the Holy Spirit’s taking up His abode in us?” asks Saint Nikolai of Zicha. “It follows that we are no longer our own. When the Holy Spirit takes up His abode in our bodies, then He becomes Lord over us, and not we over ourselves. Then, my brethren, we are the property of God the Holy Spirit” (*Prologue from Ochrid* vol. 2, pp. 210-11).

However, such an unqualified surrender runs against the grain of American values, which emphasize personal independence and “doing one’s own thing.” It runs contrary to our ego’s deep desire for self-actualization and self-expression. How many of us fail to remember that we submitted ourselves to Christ at baptism and chrismation, giving little thought to His claim on our lives! We often live mindlessly, with only a vague awareness of God. Rarely do we place our decisions, activities, and relationships under the scrutiny and direction of the Holy Spirit, who is waiting to guide us toward what is best.

“The Holy Spirit is not constrained to remain with us, but does so according to our disposition,” warns Saint Nikolai. “If we sin against Him, He leaves us and Satan comes in His place, and our bodily temple turns into a pigsty.”

Let us pray that God may sound an alarm in our hearts before He withdraws, for the departure of the Holy Spirit takes away all true control over our lives. Our destiny passes into the enemy’s hands, and we become a plaything of the devil. If we find ourselves in such a state, we may speak the words, “Our Father who art in heaven,” but Christ denies us before the Father (vs. 33). How dreadful to find ourselves bereft of Christ and victimized by Satan!

Saint Symeon the New Theologian reveals that the gift of the Holy Spirit may be restored by means of repentance. “Before we have experienced inward grief and tears there is no true repentance or change of mind in us,” he says, “nor is there any fear of God in our hearts, nor have we passed sentence on ourselves, nor has our soul become conscious of the coming judgment and eternal torments.

“Had we accused ourselves . . . we would have immediately shed tears; for without tears our hardened hearts cannot be mollified, our souls cannot acquire spiritual humility, and we cannot be humble. If we do not attain such a state, then we cannot be united with the Holy Spirit. And if we have not been united with the Holy Spirit through purification, we cannot have either vision or knowledge of God, or be initiated into the hidden virtues of humility” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, pp. 38-39).

There is our answer – the path homeward begins with our determined turning back toward God, with full repentance. Then God the Holy Spirit will guide and enrich us in heart, soul, and body.

Open to me the doors of repentance, O Life-giver; for my soul goeth early to the temple of Thy holiness, coming in my polluted body. Purify me by Thy compassion and mercies! – Lenten Orthros Hymn

June 24 – Saturday of the Third Week after Pentecost
Matthew 7:24-8:4

The Wise Man: Matthew 7:24-8:4, especially vs. 24: “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock. . . .” In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus challenges us to be wise, heeding Him and setting our lives upon the foundation of His words (vs. 24). If we build on Christ’s life-giving teachings and accept His authority and power, we will pass through this life and gain eternal life. The wise man adopts Wisdom as his Lord and readily obeys Christ, the Author of life.

The afflictions which assault us in the course of our lives often cause us to fall short of the aspirations of the wise thief (Lk 23:42-43). However, it is possible to overcome these obstacles, fending off the *rain, floods,* and *winds* (Mt 7:25). According to Saint John Chrysostom, the Lord Jesus speaks metaphorically here of “the calamities and afflictions that befall men; such as false accusations, plots, bereavements, death, loss of friends, vexations from strangers, all the ills in our life that any one could mention” (“Homily 24 on Saint Matthew,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 169).

If we look ahead, paying attention to what causes others to falter, we may take the necessary steps to survive a host of misfortunes in this life. However, when we review the *whole* of the Lord Jesus’ sermon, we see that He does not praise the foresight of the worldly, savvy individual, but rather that of one who seeks life from our Father in heaven (Mt 7:11). The wise “enter by the narrow gate,” avoiding the destruction which is eternal (vs. 13). For “not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (vs. 21).

Christ is not offering us advice here on risk management – His goal is that we should achieve union with Him. If we hear His sayings and build upon His words, we will stand firm against the “rain, floods, and winds” of this present existence. Even more importantly, everything that happens to us now will help us to attain eternal life.

The core issue here is discernment. We must perceive the One who addresses us in these metaphors and then act, for blessed is the man who *hears* Christ’s words and *does them* (vs. 24). “Therefore nothing will shake the man who builds his soul upon the doing of Christ’s commandments,” Blessed Theophylact tells us. “Neither the rain, which is the devil who fell from heaven, nor the rivers, which are mean and harmful men filled to overflowing by such rain, nor the winds, which are evil spirits, nor, in short, can any temptation cast down such a man” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 92).

Above all, we must choose to stand before and with Christ in this life if we are to attain life in the age to come. Christ our God alone has authority to help us cope with this uncertain existence and to accomplish the work of attaining the glory of eternity!

Let us observe the sequence of events in today’s Gospel as the Lord Jesus concludes His teaching. He descends the mountain and many people follow (vs. 8:1), for they perceive that He has true power and authority (vs. 7:29). They recognize in Jesus more than a clever “risk manager” like the scribes. Lastly, “a leper came and worshiped Him” (vs. 2).

First we hear the news of eternal life. Then we behold a wise man who discerns that the Lord Jesus *is* Truth. This one “came and worshiped” (vs. 2). The leper indeed “built his house on the rock” (vs. 24). Then “Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, ‘I am willing; be cleansed,’ [and] immediately his leprosy was cleansed” (vs. 3).

We are all corrupted by the great leprosy of sin and death. Let us heed Christ’s message, like the discerning leper of Galilee, and hasten to be healed. Come, let us worship Him!

O come let us worship and fall down before Christ. Save us, O Son of God! – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

June 25 – Third Sunday after Pentecost, Tone 2

Matthew 6:22-33

Unifying Our Inner Life: Matthew 6:22-33, especially vss. 31 and 33: “Therefore do not worry. . . . But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” The daily news easily draws us into a twilight zone of anxiety and worry, for in this milieu apprehension and uneasiness are actually encouraged. What do those who gather the news and broadcast it via the radio, television, and the Internet seek to achieve when they give us up-to-the-minute bulletins on the state of the economy, politics, crime, conflict, and culture?

Perhaps we might consider journalists as society’s critical care unit, for their job is to monitor, observe, and report on the world’s vital signs. At the hint of threat in any sector, they mobilize their news-gathering resources. This incessant stream of reports increases our worries over how to meet our daily needs – something which the Lord Jesus warns us to avoid – and yet the news always attracts many listeners.

By fostering anxiety, the media assures its advertisers of an audience. Thus broadcasters do their best to infuse a mood of crisis into society’s consciousness. For many of us, the news may also serve to divert our anxiety from the shortcomings of our personal and spiritual life and focus on the more distant, serious, and “real things” taking place around the world.

Nevertheless, on three occasions in the present reading the Lord Jesus commands us to cease worrying (vss. 25, 31, 34). The very concerns which He commands us to strike from our hearts are among the matters on which broadcasters focus our attention: food (“The wholesale index of commodities rose sharply today in the Grain Mart, driving up food prices. A new treaty among Central American nations is causing an increase in coffee prices retailers report”) and clothing (“Manufacturers announced today that the International Garment Workers strike, now in its third month, will mean a substantial rise in prices for this fall’s jackets and coats”).

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on” (vs. 25). Do we hear the point Christ is making? In these few verses, our Lord reveals that *His* foremost concern is for the state of our inner life. He begs us to integrate our thoughts and energies so that they center first of all on our relationship to Him, our Master (vs. 22-24).

In verse 22, Christ calls the eye the “lamp of the body.” Truthfully, whatever occupies our hearts and minds can bring either darkness or light. When we focus on attaining union with God, who is light, our whole being fills with light. Conversely, by concentrating on earthly concerns, we increase the darkness within.

In order to integrate our inner life so that it centers around Christ our Lord, we must quiet our anxiety and lay aside “all earthly cares,” as we sing in the Cherubic Hymn. In verse 25, Christ our God provides the reason for this stilling our inner life: each of us, as a child of God, is of great value to our Father (vss. 26, 29, 30). Let us trust God as we labor to meet our basic needs and mundane necessities.

In His second command (vs. 31), the Lord questions our worry concerning events yet to occur. What *shall* we eat, drink, or wear? The secret is to resist anxiety before it starts!

The last command is positive: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (vs. 33). Knowing how little good it does to simply tell us to stop fretting, our Lord directs us to replace anxiety with a dominant concern for God’s will and His presence. If we do so, Christ promises that “all these things” will fall into place (vs. 33). According to Elder Joseph the Hesychast, “the Lord will help you with His grace. Temptations are *never* stronger than grace” (*Monastic Wisdom*, p. 52).

Help us; save us; have mercy on us; and keep us, O God by Thy grace. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

June 26 – Monday of the Fourth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 11:2-15

Faithful to the End: Matthew 11:2-15, especially vs. 2-3: “And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’” King Herod Antipas imprisons Saint John the Forerunner after prophet preaches against the king’s marriage to Herodias. The wife of Herod’s brother Philip, Herodias left her lawful husband for Herod Antipas in violation of the Mosaic Law and Israel’s prophetic teaching (Lv 20:21; Mal 2:16).

As a client of Rome, Antipas has good reasons to fear negative publicity, which might lead to a groundswell of protest against his rule. He thoughtfully places John in protective custody. Queen Herodias, however, is not satisfied with silencing the prophet by imprisonment (Mk 6:17-19). Before the conniving queen can find way to bring about his execution, the Forerunner sends two disciples to ask the Lord Jesus if He is the Messiah.

Why does the Forerunner send his disciples to ask this question now? After all, he understands that his mission is to “prepare the way of the Lord” (Mt 3:3). He has demonstrated his spiritual insight into our Lord’s identity, calling Him the One who is to come after him (Mt 3:11,14; Jn 1:32). According to Saint John’s account, He directs his disciples to Christ as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29, 33-37). What then might be the motive behind his inquiry?

In his God-given wisdom, Saint John knows that death will soon come to him. Furthermore, as Saint Theophylact tells us, his disciples are jealous of Christ (Jn 3:26-36). “John sent them to acquire more evidence,” he explains, “so that by seeing the miracles they might believe that Christ is greater than John” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 92).

The Forerunner is persistent in his efforts to direct his disciples to Jesus as the Christ. He is a faithful man of God – to the very end! Some of his disciples come early to our Lord (Jn 1:40). Others of Saint John’s followers spend years searching before they find the Way and unite themselves to Christ (Acts 19:1-7).

Saint John expounds on four signs to be fulfilled when the Messiah comes. First, the Christ will introduce a baptismal rite very different from John’s – a baptism “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Mt 3:11). Second, the Messiah will “winnow” the race of men with His teaching. Some will fall away like chaff, while others will be gathered into the Master’s granary (vs. 12).

Third, because He is the light of the world, the Messiah will illumine all who join themselves to Him (Jn 1:7, 12). Finally, as the Lamb of God, the Christ will take away men’s sin by the sacrifice of His own life (vs. 1:29).

When the Forerunner’s two disciples come to the Lord Jesus, what do they find? Their own rabbi’s teaching is completed in Jesus of Nazareth. Christ has already introduced baptismal rites among His disciples (Jn 3:26, 4:2) and proclaims the baptism of “water and the Spirit” (vs. 3:5). The Spirit of God is visibly evident in Him. However, opinions concerning the Lord vary widely at this early stage of Jesus’ ministry (Mt 9:33-34). Some people follow Him, while others are turning away.

In his answers to John’s inquiry, the Lord Jesus reveals that He illumines those who are physically and spiritually blind. He opens men’s hearts to hear God’s revelation, heals the lame and the crippled, and cleanses moral and physical leprosy. Those who do not take offense at Him are blessed with healing and new life (vs. 11:5-6).

Let us consider the Forerunner’s question and ask the Holy Spirit to heal us. May He gather us to Christ our God, illumine us and, by the power of His Cross, deliver us from our sins.

Grant us, O Lord, the forgiveness of our sins, and all things profitable for our souls. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

June 27 – Tuesday of the Fourth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 11:16-20

Repentance: Matthew 11:16-20, especially vs. 20: “Then [Jesus] began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.” Our modern world is very similar to those cities rebuked by the Lord in this passage, for many people today proudly ignore God. Like the men and women of the first century, we expect God to be at our beck-and-call (vs. 17). Or perhaps, since we have never examined Jesus Christ nor sorrowed for our sins, we dismiss repentance as something arcane, guilt-inducing, and in no way applicable to us.

Even among those of us who call ourselves Christians, the concept of *godly sorrow* (2 Cor 7:10) is not well understood. How easy it is to settle into spiritual languor, remaining content with externals, satisfied with routine righteous acts and a limited idea of God. We either join our secular neighbors in thoughtless avoidance, or else we assume a false righteousness that does not respond to the call of Christ. And yet, since “wisdom is justified by her children” (Mt 11:19), we know that our refusal to hear and respond to Christ is foolishness, bearing tragic results.

The Lord Jesus and Saint John the Forerunner both preach repentance from the beginning of their ministries. Their styles and approaches differ, however, as our Lord observes in this reading (Mt 11:18-19). The Baptist lives in the wilderness, in austere asceticism. His stark manner of life becomes a wake-up call for many people, alerting them to the need to redirect their lives (Lk 3:10-14).

By contrast, the Lord Jesus brings His urgent message of repentance into the cities, towns, and individual homes. He reaches out in love to those who would not go to the Jordan wilderness to hear John. He readily enters the houses of sinners and the much-hated tax collectors, dining with those who have little sense of ascetic discipline. Indeed, the Physician of repentance is available to every fallen soul in need of healing. He testifies to repentance as a way of life required of us whether we live isolated in the desert or occupy ourselves with the bustle and activity of society.

Furthermore, our Savior teaches that God alone assesses our repentance. He offers this parody of the non-repentant: “We played the flute for you / And you did not dance; / We mourned to you, / And you did not lament” (Mt 11:17). He know that we are far too indulgent with ourselves! Saint Ambrose of Milan notes that Adam concealed himself “when he knew that God was present and [wished] to be hidden when called by God” (“Concerning Repentance,” NPNF Second Series, vol. 10, p. 358).

The Lord, by exposing the ways of the undisciplined heart that wishes to avoid repentance, invites us consider why we resist self-examination and godly confession. The pundits of the first century disparaged God’s messengers of repentance, including the ascetic John (vs. 8) as well as that convivial companion of sinners, Jesus. Admittedly, there is something in all of us that rejects the idea of change. “We resent abandoning our own desires,” observes Saint Peter of Damascus, “and we think that we can carry out both God’s wishes and our own – which is impossible” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 84).

The Lord Jesus ultimately links repentance with wisdom: “But wisdom is justified by her children” (vs. 19). If we are wisdom’s children, we will awaken to our need for repentance and actively embrace the blessedness of mourning (vs. 5:4).

Through repentance, Saint Nicetas Stethatos suggests, “the soul sees . . . things clearly, gives ear to them with knowledge and grasps them with understanding.” “At the same time it acquires knowledge of God,” adds Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, “and as a result through God’s wisdom it tells the good wonders of God to all” (*Orthodox Psychology*, p. 142).

If I think upon the multitude of my evil deeds, I tremble for the terrible Day of Judgment. But trusting the compassion of Thy mercy, I shout to Thee like David, Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy great mercy.
– Lenten Orthros Hymn

June 28 – Wednesday of the Fourth Week after Pentecost

Matthew 11:20-26

Receptivity: Matthew 11:20-26, especially vs. 24: “*But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.*” The Lord Jesus continues to upbraid the Galilean cities of Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum, foretelling a terrible divine judgment more painful than the one to befall pagan cities such as Tyre and Sidon – or even the infamous Sodom. Why on that final day will it be better for places that are avowedly pagan than for these three Jewish fishing villages?

Bethsaida, of course, is the home of the Apostles Philip, Andrew, and Peter; these communities are the ones “in which most of His mighty works had been done” (vs. 20). Their outstanding sin, however, is their rejection of Christ. They did not receive the Lord Jesus, for if they had, they would have repented. They would have given Him thanks, worship, and praise, embracing His gospel of humility.

The manner in which we receive Christ Jesus is entirely unlike our reception of our fellow men, for while Jesus is human in every respect, He is also God. As a sinless man, He discloses the fullness of human potential. Since the days of Adam and Eve we find no record of a sinless man until coming of the Lord Jesus, the eternal Word of God. He is truly man – although unique, unprecedented, unimaginable, unrepeatable – and thus He reveals the potential inherent in our human nature.

As sinners, we take our fallenness for granted. In our encounters with other human beings, we live as if this is a normal state. Our sinfulness affects our receptivity to others and restrains our openness and our very willingness to reach out to others. Only because the image of our Creator is found within us do we have sufficient vitality to even form relationships or to give and receive love.

Having taken on our flesh, our humble God came and did “[His] mighty works” before men’s eyes (vs. 21). He still comes to us in the Church, where we encounter His openness and self-disclosure. We are blessed through His grace to recognize our sinfulness, which in turn enables us to repent.

However, we tend to discount His message; taking His works for granted, we rely on other explanations of our own devising. Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom never knew the gift of the Incarnate One. We, like the citizens of Bethsaida, Capernaum, and Chorazin, know Him. What shall we say in our defense on the dread Day of Judgment? Let us repent now, while there is still time, for God lovingly awaits our tears in order to receive us.

As we have noted, to receive the Lord Jesus is to have His mighty works done *in* us and not merely in our presence. Perhaps the residents of the three Galilean cities saw the *mighty works* (vs. 23), but never received Christ. They never felt the impact of His mighty works on their hearts and souls. Only those few who became His disciples discovered His power *in* them.

Let us remember that “as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). To receive the Lord is to worship, offering thanksgiving and praise to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let us receive Him to our endless and unimaginable good.

Finally, if we receive the Lord we become foolish, because open-hearted receptivity to Christ includes embracing the Cross and the gospel of the God who empties Himself unto death. Such receptivity requires joining ourselves to the scandal and foolishness of Christ Jesus (1 Cor 1:23). Worldly wisdom is always opposed to our salvation, for God chooses to reveal Himself to spiritual babes and innocents (Mt 11:25,26).

Let us praise the Master in faith like babes, purifying our souls of all passions and crying to Him, “Blessed art Thou, O Savior, Thou who didst come into the world to save us.” – Orthros for Palm Sunday

June 29 – Thursday of the Fourth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 11:27-30

Contrasts: Matthew 11:27-30, especially vs. 27: “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” The four verses in today’s short reading contain three important contrasts that the Lord Jesus wishes to call to our attention. He first speaks of the enormous gulf between God and all created beings (vs. 27). He then juxtaposes His exaltation as God with His gentle lowliness of heart (vs. 29). Finally, having revealed the two extremes of His Person, He contrasts our difficulties in living apart from Him with the buoyancy of a relationship lived under His rule (vss. 29-30).

The Lord Jesus begins by alluding to “all things” (vs. 27) – meaning all of creation, all that is. However, nothing can be imagined apart from God, who is king over all the earth. In His “hand are the ends of the earth, and the heights of the mountains are His. For the sea is His, and He made it; and the dry land His hands have fashioned” (Ps 94:3-5). We cannot point to a moment when all things were not in the hand of Christ our God, for “all things were made through Him; and without Him nothing was made that was made” (Jn 1:3).

The Lord here discloses an aspect of the dynamic within the Godhead, as He describes the exchange between the Father and the Son. From before time and forevermore, “all things have been delivered to” the Son by the Father (Mt 11:27). Let us approach this statement in the same spirit as Saint John Chrysostom, who warns, “But when thou hearest, ‘they are delivered’ do not surmise anything human. For He uses this expression, to prevent thine imagining two unoriginate Gods” (“Homily 38 on the Gospel of Saint Matthew,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 252).

In other words, when our Lord speaks of the relationship of *all things* to their Creator and God, we are not to suppose that all things were delivered to a servant or subordinate. Rather, they were given to the only begotten Son of the Father from eternity – from before time. God Himself is speaking to us here, revealing that we are quite other than He, since we ourselves are part of *all things* that He made. We thus come face to face with the greatest of contrasts: the gulf between God and the creation of which we are but a tiny part.

While this contrast is where the Lord begins, He immediately leads us to a second – and equally stunning – contrast. Having reminded us that He is Creator of the entire universe, He brings us back to the Jesus of Nazareth described in the Gospels, a man “gentle and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29). He speaks to us compassionately in our state of sickness unto death. The God of thundering power stands before us as vulnerable and accessible as a fellow man. He is one of us, approaching us gently and humbly.

Why should God come to us in this humble manner? He knows that we “labor and are heavy laden” (vs. 28). Here we come to the third contrast He offers: the difference between our struggles in this world – within the creation that we upset through our rebellion against Him – and the *yoke* He offers. The world frustrates and exhausts us, but He extends a better way: “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me” (vs. 29).

He offers us not greater fatigue, but rest; not greater difficulties, but a royal and blessed mercy; not the heavy burden of failure, confusion, bitterness, and emptiness, but a new life that is light and bearable, now and forever. Let us never disdain this invitation but come willingly to learn from Him and accept His yoke.

Praise, O creation, with every breath, and bless Him whom the hosts of heaven do glorify, and whom the cherubim and seraphim dread. Exalt Him yet more unto all the ages. – Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete

June 30 – Friday of the Fourth Week after Pentecost

Matthew 12:1-8

The Sabbath: Matthew 12:1-8, especially vss. 6-8: “Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” In recent times observance of the Sabbath has virtually disappeared among Christians. Most businesses remain open seven days a week, and we shop whenever we wish. However, the Sabbath still retains an important place in our Orthodox tradition, second only to the Lord’s Day (Sunday). Its significance is apparent in the design of the Orthodox lectionary, which assigns special Scripture readings for Saturdays and Sundays, and in the modification of fasting rules on those days, even during Great Lent.

Why then does the Sabbath generate such controversy, even venom, on the part of the Pharisees who oppose Jesus? The word Sabbath comes from a Hebrew verb meaning “to cease.” In Moses’ time, God commanded His people to “remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work, neither you, nor your son, your daughter, your male servant, your female servant, your cattle, nor your stranger who sojourns with you” (Ex 20:8-10).

The Prophet Amos reproves the people for asking, “When does the month end so we can barter? and the Sabbath end so we can open the storehouses? So we can falsify the balancing scales to our favor, and thereby receive greater profit by deceit?” (Am 8:5). How familiar these words sound to us, many centuries later!

The Prophet Isaiah also upholds the Sabbath ideal: “If you turn away your foot from work because of the Sabbath, so as not to do your desires on the holy day, and if you shall call the Sabbath joyful, holy to your God, and not take away your foot for work, nor speak a word in wrath from your mouth, then you shall trust in the Lord; and He will bring you to the good things of the land, and feed you with the inheritance of Jacob your father” (Is 58:13-14).

According to Saint John Chrysostom, “the Sabbath did at the first confer many and great benefits; for instance, it made them gentle towards those of their household, and humane; it taught them God’s providence and the creation, as Ezekiel saith (Ez 20:12), it trained them by degrees to abstain from wickedness, and disposed them to regard the things of the Spirit” (“Homily 39 on the Gospel of Matthew,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 10, p. 257).

By the first century the traditions protecting the Sabbath had grown burdensome, with scores of rules and the imposition of man-made hardships. Our Lord opposes these rules because they violate the purpose of the Sabbath. As He makes clear, His intention is not to abolish the Sabbath but rather to elevate it as a day for mercy and good works (Mt 12:7, 12; Jn 5:16-17).

If we read carefully, we observe that the Lord Jesus does not justify breaking the Sabbath law. By referring to David and others who broke the Law (Mt 12:3-5), He merely emphasizes the true spirit of the commandment. Saint Mark’s parallel account of the event makes this purpose clear, for the Lord says: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27).

The early Christians indeed celebrated the Sabbath along with the Lord’s Day. The Church Fathers likewise teach us to take a day of rest, in addition to celebrating the Resurrection, so that we may align ourselves to the joy of the new creation accomplished in Christ (2 Cor 5:17).

O Savior, Thou has blessed the seventh day, restoring it to its true state. – Orthros for Great and Holy Saturday