

August 1 – Tuesday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 18:18-22; 19:1-2, 13-15

The Worthy Heart Receives God in Parish Life: *Matthew 18:18-22; 19:1-2, 13-15, especially vs. 18:19:* “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.” The verses appointed for today’s Gospel reading address aspects of the life in Christ – admission to the Holy Mysteries, prayer, worship, forgiveness, healing, the participation of children – commonly experienced in our parish communities. Each element involves the laypeople, clergy, and above all God Himself, who actively reveals Himself in and through our collective life. Each Orthodox Christian of a worthy heart seeks God and perceives His presence in everything that takes place within the parish.

Since worship is such a regular feature of parish life, we may think of church services as just one of many activities undertaken by our community. Some parishes list announcements in their weekly bulletins under headings which separate “Divine Services” from “Meetings and Activities.” Such a separation calls attention to the reality that each service is a unique gathering and action in its own right.

How so? The divine services are especially appointed by God for revealing Himself among us. Saint Paul stresses this truth when he asks, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16).

Because God is miraculously present in the mysteries, our priests must guard the Holy Gifts from profanation. They are responsible for protecting the chalice, which means turning away those not yet united to the Body of Christ and those members who have broken communion with the Church and are not yet reconciled. What the priests *bind* and *loose* is also bound and loosed in heaven (Mt 18:18).

The Lord Jesus reminds us that our Father in heaven always responds to our requests. Whatever we ask “will be done,” particularly as we “agree on earth” (vs. 19). In the original Greek, the word “agree” implies reaching harmony with others through talking over a matter. God’s response to our prayers is neither automatic nor guaranteed – we must work with each other and be led by the Holy Spirit to attain deep unanimity of heart.

Let us never conclude, however, that God is obligated to violate His will simply because two of us happen to agree on a given matter. Agreement comes to us when our Lord leads and is included: “Your will be done” (vs. 6:10). God reveals Himself as we agree in the Holy Spirit in prayer.

Forgiveness is a great miracle experienced by God’s people. May this sacred wonder bless all our relationships “seventy times seven” (vs. 18:22) and reveal God’s forgiveness through a thousand reconciliations. The Church sets aside specific times when we forgive one another, such as Forgiveness Vespers at the start of the Great Fast. However, forgiveness begins through repentant confession at every season!

God’s miracle of healing takes place frequently in parish life. Our Lord heals the multitudes who come to Him (vs. 19:2) with holy water, with the oil by which we are anointed in the mystery of holy unction, in the Holy Gifts, and through our constant intercessions.

Lastly, God reveals Himself visibly in parish life through the children who steadily grow in Christ. Let us pray for the infants who are churching when they are forty days old, at every baptism, and for our Church School classes. Christ reveals Himself miraculously through the earthly hands of our priests who anoint, bless, and touch our children, for “of such is the kingdom of heaven” (vs. 19:14).

Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone doeth wonders. – Psalm 71:19

August 2 – Wednesday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 20:1-16

The Worthy Heart Is Grateful: *Matthew 20:1-16, especially vs. 15:* “*Is it not lawful for Me to do what I wish with My own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?*” In the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, our Lord concludes with the declaration that “the last will be first, and the first last” (vs. 20:16). This same statement appears at the end of the preceding chapter (vs. 19:30). By bookending today’s parable, these words take us directly to the essence of the Lord’s teaching.

We can best understand the meaning of the parable by first reviewing Christ’s challenge to a man who says he wishes to follow Him (vs. 19:16): “If you want to be perfect, go, sell all that you have and give to the poor” (vs. 21). Sadly, the man cannot forego his possessions, and he departs (vs. 22).

The stringency of Christ’s requirement perplexes the disciples, who ask, “Who then can be saved?” (vs. 25). Peter quickly applies the message to them all: “See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?” (vs. 27).

Our Lord assures His disciples that they will enjoy a place as rulers “judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (vs. 28). Indeed, if anyone gives up the goods of this world to follow Him, he will be rewarded “a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” (vs. 29). However, He concludes with the statement that leads us into today’s reading: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (vs. 30).

Plainly, the Lord Jesus seeks to reassure His disciples and sustain their commitment to Him. He still desires that we, as his followers, avoid becoming “reward oriented.” Rather, we are to express gratitude to Him as our Savior and greatest Good. God indeed rewards those who are committed to Him. However, He rejoices in those who gratefully embrace Him, as did Abram (Gn 15:1).

The parable that follows this first bookend contains the paradoxical truth that every laborer receives equal pay. Our ordinary human reason expects the compensation to vary in proportion to the labor we expend, but our Lord is explicit on this point. The kingdom of God operates by its own rules, shattering our tidy categories for measuring reward. Distinctions between *first* and *last* are rendered meaningless by the avalanche of God’s unmerited grace toward all men.

The Paschal homily of Saint John Chrysostom draws upon this parable:

If anyone has labored from the first hour, let him today receive his just reward. If anyone has come at the third hour, with thanksgiving let him keep the feast. If anyone has arrived at the sixth hour, let him have no misgivings; for he shall suffer no loss. If anyone has delayed until the ninth hour, let him draw near without hesitation. If anyone has arrived at the eleventh hour, let him not fear on account of his delay; for the Master is gracious and receives the last even as the first. . . . Enter all of you, therefore, into the joy of our Lord, and whether first or last receive your reward. . . .

The saint insists that our gratitude must brush aside every notion of compensation! In the merciful economy and saving love of our Lord, gratitude gains us life. “O give thanks unto the Lord and call upon His name; declare among the nations His works” (Ps 104:1). Commenting further on this parable, he asks us to ponder “whether the first have gloriously approved themselves, and having pleased God, and having throughout the whole day shone by their labors, are possessed by the basest feeling of vice, jealousy, and envy” (“Homily 64 on Saint Matthew,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 10, p. 394).

May God’s grace elevate our gratitude and keep us from every form of envy and dissatisfaction. Let us never question what God gives us, especially in relation to what He bestows upon others.

O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; His mercy endureth for ever! – Psalm 105:1

August 3 – Thursday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 20:17-28

The Worthy Heart Longs to Serve: *Matthew 20:17-28, especially vss. 27-28:* “Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” In these verses the Lord Jesus draws attention to service, a quality of heart required of the citizens of His kingdom. Called by Isaiah “the just One who serves many well” (Is 53:11), Christ reveals through His life and teaching the high calling of servanthood.

Christ Jesus illumines service and transforms serving. He raises service from a common activity and establishes it as a blessed, divine attitude of heart! A heart worthy of the kingdom of God longs to serve in the manner – and by the grace – of God Incarnate. Here our Lord Jesus describes service to His faithful disciples (Mt 20:17) in the context of His Passion (vss. 18-19).

Indeed, the largest portion of all four Gospels concerns the Passion and Resurrection. For the faithful, the Lord’s servanthood dominates even our approach to the passage of time. We mark the week with fasts on Wednesday and Friday, commemorating Christ’s betrayal and Crucifixion, and we celebrate the Resurrection on the first of the week, calling it the “Lord’s Day.” Through Great Lent, Holy Week, and Pascha, the mystery of service is constantly held before the hearts of the faithful.

When the time comes for the Lord Jesus to go up to Jerusalem, He takes His disciples aside and shares with them the fearful events that lie ahead: betrayal, condemnation, death, and ultimately resurrection. By His own actions, the Suffering Servant (Is 52:13-53:12) reveals the profound blessing to be found in serving others, whether it is done menially or regally.

Indeed, Christ our Lord invites us to see His teaching and actions in the context of His Passion (Mt 20:18-19) – as a “service” rendered for us. In the Passion, He exposes the illusory nature of the grandeur, majesty, and prestige that men seek. True status and honor are given eternally by God our Father to “those for whom it is prepared” (vs. 23): the Lord’s servants.

The incident involving James and John (vss. 20-24) immediately follows the Lord Jesus’ disclosure of the necessity of death to self (vss. 18-19) as a condition of embracing service. James and John are captivated by Jesus’ power over sickness, disease, nature, and death. Impressed by their status as His disciples, they spin images of themselves in the trappings of prestige and power.

We must never forget the words of the funeral service, which remind us that “in the grave . . . kings and beggars are the same.” Like the disciples, we all too easily forget that death levels all. Even as our Lord speaks of mocking, scourging, and crucifixion (vs. 19), James and John remain charmed by what Saint Macarios the Great calls “the inconstant dreams of this world.”

Let us ever remember that we are baptized into Christ in order to share His cup of service (vss. 22-23) and give our lives as “a ransom for many” (vss. 28). May we listen to our Savior as He exalts the blessing of service and brushes aside our fantasies! In the solemn mysteries of holy baptism and the Eucharist, the Lord Jesus reveals the riches to be found in service. He sobers our hearts and shows our minds the importance of quietly serving behalf of others (vss. 25-27).

When a slave is ransomed by someone who pays the price of his release, his benefactor knows the true joy of seeing someone like himself released from bondage. Thus Saint Paul reminds us that Christ knew joy as He “endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb 12:2). Surely our Lord is calling us also to share in His joy by serving with Him in freeing others (Mt 20:27-28).

O Lord, illumine our hearts to serve Thy glory and the welfare of Thy people.

August 4 – Friday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 21:12-14, 17-20

The Worthy Heart Bears Fruit: Matthew 21:12-14, 17-20, especially vs. 19: “*And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, ‘Let no fruit grow on you ever again.’ Immediately the fig tree withered away.*” In His conversation with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:6-26), the Lord Jesus describes the character of true worshipers. They “will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such to worship Him” (Jn 4:23).

In today’s passage Christ repeats this message, offering us a graphic demonstration by driving out those who are defiling His Temple (Mt 21:12-13) and healing those who come to Him (vs. 14). He fills with life those who bear fruit for Him – and withdraws life from those who fail to bear Him fruit (vss. 17-20). Those of worthy hearts trust God, worship Him truly, and bear fruit worthy of Him.

Let us not overlook the fact that Jesus comes to the Temple in Jerusalem as the Master of the house. God Incarnate appears as a man, yet He is deserving of all honor, glory, and worship as He enters His holy Temple. Instead, He finds buying and selling: profane exchanges of various denominations and forms of money, as well as animals for sacrifice. This bustling trade by the merchants thrives by providing a convenience store for those coming to offer sacrifice.

By driving out the sellers and overturning the tables, the Lord Jesus dramatizes His ownership of the Temple and expresses His displeasure with these business operations. He reiterates the same truth that He revealed in His conversation with the woman at Sychar (Jn 4:7-26): God’s Temple is far less of a place than it is a condition of the heart, for the human heart is designated as a temple for the Lord.

Of course, we may sinfully set up other “businesses” in our heart and thus displace the true worship of God for which our hearts are consecrated through the holy mysteries. Blessed Theophylact pleads with us: “O reader, look and see whether perhaps you have made God’s temple, that is your mind, a den of thieves, that is a demon’s lair. It will be such a den if we have thoughts full of the desire of material things, of buying and selling and a love of money” (*Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 177).

When the Lord Jesus enters the physical Temple to heal those who wish to come to Him (vs. 14), a false practice is in full operation. The lame and blind are forbidden to enter the Temple, for no “imperfect” thing or person is allowed to desecrate the Temple by its presence. From the Lord Jesus’ perspective, the very ones who need to be admitted are being excluded, while business and profit take the rightful place of those in need.

Once Christ our God has disrupted the course of “business as usual,” the blind and lame readily make their way to Him (vs. 14). This message applies to us as well. We may enjoy the Lord’s presence in our earthly temples and in our icons, yet we must never forget that His true temple is situated in the heart.

Those of worthy heart – who know well their spiritual blindness and crippled state – will joyfully throng to the Lord, go into the temple of the heart, and seek the healing touch of Christ our God. Thus anywhere in the world men and women may worship the Lord by *coming* to Him (vs. 14) in spirit and in truth to be illumined, strengthened, and healed of sin and evil.

Finally, let us heed Jesus’ warning to the fig tree. When He finds a lush but fruitless tree, He curses it to wither away (vs. 19) and continues searching for those of true worship who will bear fruit from their hearts. This stark message is also full of hope: He gives life to those who seek Him and He withdraws life from us only if we turn away, investing in our own thriving businesses and thus failing to bear Him fruit.

The meditation of my heart shall be before Thee forever, O Lord, my helper and redeemer.
– Psalm 18:14

August 5 – Saturday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 15:32-39

God Is Compassionate: *Matthew 15:32-39, especially vs. 32:* “*I have compassion on the multitude. . . .*” Out of pure compassion, Christ our God concerns Himself with the hunger of thousands of men, women, and children (vs. 32). Such is the record of God’s true nature; His actions substantiate His words. By feeding the multitude, God the Son demonstrates His compassion for a crowd on an isolated mountainside, far from every source of food. These people have been with Him for three days seeking healing for the mute, maimed, blind, and lame (vs. 30). When their food supplies are exhausted (vs. 32), the Compassionate One reveals His provident nature: He sees men’s hunger, and He feeds them.

Three compelling truths emerge from this account. First, because He is compassionate, God intervenes in our human distress. Second, God’s compassion can never be measured, nor is it verifiable by scientific or statistical means. Lastly, by feeding more than 4,000 people, Christ our God gives us the faith to perceive compassion as the greatest aspect of His involvement in human affairs. This compassion leads Him to defeat sin, sickness, and death, the issues that eternally reign over our improvident existence.

The people come to the Lord Jesus on the mountain because He is compassionate. They lay their sick and injured loved ones at His feet, hoping He will restore and heal them (vs. 15:30). They are not disappointed. Through the act of healing, He establishes their trust in God’s compassion, for they see clear evidence of the hand of the God of Israel (vs. 31).

As a result, the crowd lingers in the wilderness to be near Jesus. In Him they find active and merciful help for their tangible needs. When their food runs out, they again discover how God manifests His compassion on their behalf, for the Lord Jesus feeds them. “Compassionate and merciful is the Lord, long-suffering and plenteous in mercy. The Lord is good to all, and His compassions are over all His works” (Ps 144:8-9).

Here on tiny planet Earth, which teems with billions of people, how can we say that the God of the universe really cares, especially when so many are hungry? This question does not arise explicitly in today’s passage. Rather, we find it woven subtly into the inquiry of the Lord’s disciples: “Where could we get enough bread in the wilderness to fill such a great multitude?” (Mt 15:33). On this dot of a planet, amidst the vast wilderness we call the universe, we either choose to face an impersonal whorl of matter devoid of caring, or we else meet Him who created us and continues to care for us, now and ever.

In the feeding of the 4,000, we grasp the awe expressed by the Prophet Isaiah: “He will feed His flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs with His arm; and He will comfort those with young. Who measured the water in His hand, and heaven with a span, and all the earth in a handful?” (Is 40:11-12). Our God is compassionate!

We find the declaration of God’s love stunningly embedded in this passage. God the Son appears as a man and feeds 4,000 people on a remote mountain. He comes among us as Jesus of Nazareth and continues to reside with us forever, for He is the One without whom “nothing was made that was made” (Jn 1:3). “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor 5:19). The Compassionate One is never indifferent to our needs!

Come, my soul, let us ascend the mountain yonder, whence cometh thy help. My help cometh from the Lord, who hath made heaven and earth. – From Psalm 120:1-2

August 6 – Transfiguration of our Lord, God, & Savior, Jesus Christ, Tone 4
Matthew 17:1-9

Preparation for The Light: Saint Matthew 17:1-9, especially vs. 2: “...He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.” By His Transfiguration, the Lord Jesus prepares His People for His Passion, the ineffable wonder of His Resurrection, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, apprehension of the Mystery of His Incarnation, and readiness for His glorious return to judge the living and the dead. The Transfiguration develops the faithful to meet the full Mystery of Christ, Truth beyond human comprehension and the unfathomable glory of God. By God’s grace it may evoke a health-giving fear of the Lord.

How can a mortal be ‘prepared’ for a Mystery that is ‘beyond and above’? God provides the Transfiguration. Christ stands radiantly, a promise of His glory that we shall one day behold. The Troparion of the Feast adds a caution: “When Thou wast transfigured on the mountain, O Christ our God, Thou didst reveal Thy glory to Thy Disciples *‘in as far as they could bear it.’*” That last phrase is an alert: the Lord’s glorified state, as the God-Man, was overwhelming for the three disciples. It would stagger any man and woman in heart and mind.

As we contemplate the icon of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the glistening, whiter-than-white figure of the Incarnate Lord dominates all else in the composition. Everything around Him is subdued, bowed in reverence. Observe the disciples, prostrate in holy fear. Jesus’ Transfiguration was momentous for those who already had “...left all and followed [Him]” (Lk. 18:28). We too shall gaze upon His glory; may that thought bring us down upon our faces, trembling before the radiant majesty of the Eternal Himself.

For months the disciples struggled to comprehend the Lord Jesus’ teaching, His acts and words presented with astonishing power and authority (Mt. 7:28,29), as well as His control of the natural elements: “Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?” (Mt. 8:27). They found Him unique (Mt. 9:8), “...healing every sickness and every disease among the people” (Mt. 9:35). Speculation was rampant: “Could this be the Son of David?” (Mt. 12:23). Yes, some even wildly attributed His power to evil demons (Mt. 12:24).

Shortly before the events on Mount Tabor and apart from the crowds, the Lord confirmed Peter’s intuition to all the disciples: He is, indeed “...the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16). But He added that “...He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day” (Mt. 16:21). This message confused them. Undoubtedly powerful groups in society were plotting “...against Him, how they might destroy Him” (Mt. 12:14). The right moment had come to help the disciples see His Divine nature, and so, in a flash from eternity, He briefly slipped aside the cloak of His humanity. Thus, the Transfiguration became one more step in the Disciples’ development as Apostles. In a dazzling moment, the gracious Lord provided a theophany of Himself to move three of His key disciples closer to the whole truth concerning Himself, their Master and Lord.

Read this account and prostrate your heart before the gleaming Incarnate God. Worship the Holy, Transfigured Christ our Savior. Prepare to see Him in His glory. Today, in a burst of uncreated Light, God illumines all who will go up on the mountain with His Son Jesus. The vision is brief but overwhelming for mortal comprehension. The Light of Tabor is enough to prepare us for the ‘disorientation’ that comes when we meet the arrest, crucifixion, and death of the Son of God in the flesh and see the power of sin. The Transfiguration is encouraging. It is a foretaste of the Resurrection and of the reigning Christ.

“Let Thine everlasting Light also enlighten us sinners, O Thou Bestower of Light.”

August 7 - Monday of the Tenth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 21:18-22

Belief in the God Who Expects: *Matthew 21:18-22, especially vs. 22:* “*And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.*” In the mystery of baptism we are asked to renounce Satan and to unite ourselves to Christ. When the priest asks, “Dost thou believe in Christ?” we respond, “I believe in Him as King and God.” After this, we declare the Nicene Creed, repeating the phrase, “I believe *in*. . . .” The Church makes certain that we are committed to the Lord and to His teachings.

The catechetical examination is truly intended to search our hearts. It tests our vows effectively by giving us an oath of allegiance. Note especially the final question, which follows the Creed: “Hast thou united thyself unto Christ?” After we answer, “I have,” we are given a command: “Bow down also before Him.”

As initiates of Christ, we expect to be put to the test. This test, however, is far less a matter of what we *think* about God than it is a matter of our commitment to Christ and His Church. The two acts are as different as the statements “I believe that Osama Bin Laden was a determined Muslim teacher” and “I believe in Osama Bin Laden.” One statement concerns objective fact, while the other endorses the policies of a terrorist.

This week’s readings aim to help us understand various aspects of true belief in the Lord Jesus, the Holy Trinity, and the Church. In cursing the barren fig tree (vs. 19), our Lord Jesus Christ reveals that expects us to bear fruit faithfully. He also affirms that some will not believe in Him, and thus will remain fruitless. Many people today express the belief that there is a God. However, Christians believe *in* Christ. Furthermore, we know that the Lord expects something of us: we must “bear fruit.”

According to Blessed Theophylact, “The fig tree means [that] . . . every man who gives himself over to the sweetness of the present life is likened to a fig tree, who has no spiritual fruit to give to Jesus who is hungry for such fruit, but only leaves, that is temporal appearances which fall away and are gone” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 179).

Of course, the converse is also true. We may give ourselves over daily to the sweetness of maturing fruit in honor of our Lord. Our God looks to us every day. Shall we say we believe there is a God, while serving only ourselves, or shall we believe *in* God and strive mightily to offer Him pleasing fruit?

Note our God and Savior’s words: “If you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree” (vs. 21) – you will do even greater things. Christ seeks our belief in Him and in His commandments. Like Adam, our forefather, we are preoccupied with the activities of this world. We give little thought to Christ and often succumb to worldly expectations. We resemble guests who behave as if there is no owner of the house and thus do as we please.

How often do we find ourselves acting religiously, saying “Lord, Lord” in public worship while our actions reveal that we treat God as a concept, rather than as the One who waits for us to serve, love, and obey Him. The Lord Jesus challenges us to take the risk of acting *for* Him! We are to act as He acted, glorifying our Father in Heaven with gracious words.

Today the Lord is challenging us to trust in Him, despite our doubts and fears. He understands that doubts come (Mk 9:24). If we move forward, trusting in His words and in His salvation, we can override doubts when they assail us and put our belief in Him into action. God seeks such risks from us on a daily basis, if we are to fulfill His desires. Lord have mercy!

O Christ, who art more ready to hear than we are to pray, save me, draw my heart to Thee, and use me as Thou wilt, that I may believe in Thee and serve Thee.

August 8 - Tuesday of the Tenth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 21:23-27

Belief in Divine Authority: Matthew 21:23-27, especially vs. 24: *“I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things.”* The Gospel readings this week concern aspects of belief in the Lord Jesus. The present passage touches on His authority, a critical element of our belief in Christ and the very issue around which the encounter between our Lord and “the chief priests and the elders of the people” (vs. 23) takes place.

As the recognized religious and political authorities of their day, these men are offended when the Lord Jesus takes command of their domain. Behind their confrontation with Christ lies the assumption that this man Jesus is usurping their prerogative. If we examine this event closely, we discover that the opposite is true. The priests and elders have in fact usurped the authority of God, who stands in their presence and possesses every right to silence them (vs. 27).

Dr. Lewis Patsavos of the Holy Cross School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts, gets at the heart of the confrontation between the Lord Jesus and the Jerusalem authorities when he describes a mindset all too common in our contemporary Church. We modern believers may know that God is real, but He is real for us only at defined moments. Of such people, Dr. Patsavos observes, “In none of them is God steadily the dominant factor in life; in none of them does one live in a permanent awareness of God; in none of them is one permanently turned in the direction of God; in none of them is God at the center of life.”

Let us examine the confrontation between our Lord and the so-called authorities in today’s Gospel with the goal of assessing our own submission to God. First, consider the irony of the situation. The Temple authorities perceive a man encroaching on their power, which derives from their birthright as priests or clan elders with hereditary estates. As they see it, this Jesus boldly presumes to drive out merchants whose trade offers a convenience to Temple worshipers. Since these businesses possess official licenses to operate in the Temple, His actions upset legitimate, for-profit services (vs. 12).

The perpetrator of this affront, however, is not merely a man but God Incarnate, of whose Temple they are only the stewards. The authorities perceive an untrained carpenter, one not born to the tribe of Levi, daring to teach in the Temple. This misperception reveals the grave limitations of every claim to authority based on wealth, position, heredity, or training alone, rather than on truth.

Furthermore, the elders observe the Lord encouraging “the blind and the lame” (vs. 14) to enter the Temple to receive healing, despite that tradition forbids the disabled to enter. Christ, however, asserts a higher tradition: “Because of sin for a time I grieved him, and struck him, and turned away My face from him. . . . I saw his ways, and healed him” (Is 57:17-19).

How do these God-appointed authorities go wrong, nullifying the heritage that is theirs by birth and position? In what way are they misguided for asking Jesus, “By what authority are You doing these things?” (Mt 21:23)?

His answer, which comes in the form of a question, disclosed the true problem. “The baptism of John – where was it from? From heaven or from men?” (vs. 25). The Lord knows that they resisted the divine call issued through John the Baptizer, who urged men to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (vs. 3:2). Rather than confess their sins and be baptized by John in the Jordan, they continue to exclude God from control over their lives (vs. 3:7).

If we do not accept the call of God in our lives and refuse to submit to His authority, then whoever we are, whatever our position and heritage, we will nullify our claim to be numbered among Christ’s own. May God grant us all His gift of holy repentance!

We have sinned before Thee, O Lord. Forgive and accept us as Thou hast promised. – Saint Ephraim the Syrian

August 9 - Wednesday of the Tenth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 21:28-32

Belief in Obedience: *Matthew 21:28-32, especially vs. 31:* “Which of the two did the will of his father?” Believing in the Lord Jesus Christ surely means that we search Holy Tradition, as well as within ourselves, for how we may honor Him! Doing so manifests our belief in Him, for we strive to obey His commands, avoid sinful attitudes and behaviors, and labor diligently to please God. Obeying Christ, as He indicates in this parable, begins within our inner life.

The virtue of obedience is near to God’s heart, for Christ our God states, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (Jn 14:15). Like the father in the Parable of the Two Sons, God is tolerant of our struggle to reach agreement with Him. He waits patiently for us to obey Him. He longs for us to become like obedient children who relent and go to the vineyard (Mt 21:29) of our own free will.

Of course, the parable also reveals a condition opposite to obedience. One who is far from God makes a show of compliance but never follows through. We can act like agreeable, evasive children who give the right answers but do only what satisfies us. Let us pray earnestly that our Father will show us how to obey in “the way of righteousness” (vs. 32) and then act accordingly.

The essence of obedience, according to Christ our God, is expressed by three concepts we encounter in today’s lesson: to *relent*, to *believe*, and to *enter* (vss. 29, 32, 31). To obey means first and foremost that we repent – we change from the heart. Assent requires us to examine the direction of our life. Whom do we trust? What are we willing to do? The child of God listens with an open heart, reconsiders, changes his perceptions, and becomes convicted. Conviction, in turn, manifests itself in God-pleasing behavior. Obedience is a process of conversion.

The Apostle Paul cautions us to distinguish between “worldly sorrow” and “godly sorrow” (2 Cor 7:10). Mere weeping with no visible result does not constitute change. Only one son obeyed – the one who “did the will of his father” (Mt 21:31). The Lord waits for us to obey in the end, but we will never comply unless we relent, and then act.

The Lord’s comments about tax collectors and harlots are meant to sting our hearts, exposing our illusions and revealing to us the scope of genuine obedience. The Lord Jesus and His opponents understand that tax collectors and harlots, by definition, are far from God’s will. The behavior of those despised sinners is clearly condemned under God’s law. Yet the Lord equates them with the son who at first refused his father, then relented – the one who ultimately goes into the vineyard.

Let us read carefully! “I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you” (vs. 31). The Lord does not say that every tax collector and harlot will enter the kingdom, only that some are entering. These are the obedient sons who changed their ways, such as Matthew, Zacchaeus, and the sinful woman who washed His feet with tears (Lk 7:37-38). We must abandon the mistaken notion that repentance is for sinners, but not for us. Are we not all sinners?!

As our Lord Jesus teaches, obedience does not follow the aphorism which insists that “seeing is believing.” In fact, our Lord proposes the opposite: believing is seeing. When He observes that the tax collectors and harlots believed in John’s preaching (Mt 21:32), He refers to *visible* changes.

The same call is ours – we are to repent of disobedience. Even great sinners have changed into children of God. May we relent like them! Let us never allow a false belief in our own righteousness to insulate our hearts from His sting. Do we believe? Then let us act accordingly.

O Lord, open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of Thy Gospel teaching that we may enter a spiritual manner of living, thinking and doing what is well-pleasing unto Thee. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 10 - Thursday of the Tenth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 21:43-46

Belief in Bearing Fruit: *Saint Matthew 21: 43-46, especially vs. 43:* “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.” This passage – especially in the verse quoted above – raises a significant issue about belief in Christ: can we consider God to be truly reliable if He *takes away* from His people the blessings of His kingdom. After all, He makes a solemn promise to Abraham and his seed: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be your God and the God of your seed after you” (Gn 17:7).

Humanly speaking, we may be tempted to infer from the Lord’s declaration in Matthew 21:43 that God sometimes qualifies His promises. Is He capable of going back on His word, despite a covenant supposedly lasting forever? As Orthodox Christians, we understand that “the nation bearing the fruits” is a reference to the Church. And yet the question remains: is God faithful to His word?

We are not discussing some abstract theological problem with no bearing on our lives. Our eternal salvation is at stake! Does God renege on His offer of salvation for all peoples? This question is so important that traces of it are found scattered throughout the New Testament.

The Apostle Paul addresses the issue of divine faithfulness in his epistles to the Romans and the Galatians. In Galatians, quoting from Genesis 22:18, he provides a clear resolution of the question. “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ” (Gal 3:16). The promise to Abraham is fully and faithfully kept by our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Son who comes from the seed of Abraham.

Here is our confirmation that the Church, of which the Lord Jesus is the Head and progenitor, constitutes that other *nation* to whom the blessings of the kingdom are given by God. What is more, the Church is simultaneously the new nation that inherits God’s promises and the continuing Israel, who recognizes and answers the call of her Messiah and God.

History affirms that the Church possesses a living heritage – past *and* present – and experience of God. The Holy Spirit continually brings forth the fruits of God’s kingdom within the Church. Let the record speak for itself – out of the Church pours a harvest of *fruit* in every way befitting the kingdom of God.

The implications of this truth about the Church also apply to each of us. Participation in the life of the Church is a prerequisite for bearing fruit to Christ. Without the Church, there will be no *fruit pleasing to the Lord*. How, then, do we share in the life of the Church?

First and foremost, we participate in the Church when we come together in the Divine Liturgy. We gather as “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that [we] may proclaim the praises of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy” (1 Pt 2:9-10).

Many Christians today approach their faith from an individualistic perspective. They view the Church as a convenience store where they can stop by and pick up inspiration. The Lord Jesus rejects this heresy when He says, “Abide in Me, and I in you. . . . He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for without Me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:4-5).

Do we rely on what our Lord says? If we do, then let us remain connected to the True Vine as participants in His Body, the Holy Church!

Let us commend ourselves and each other and our whole life unto Christ our God. –Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 11 - Friday of the Tenth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 22:23-33

Reading Scripture: Matthew 22:23-33, especially vs. 29: “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God.’” When a delegation of Sadducees “came to Him” with a question (vs. 23), the discussion focuses on the nature of God’s revelation to His people as recorded in Holy Scripture (vss. 24, 29, 31-32). Our Lord not only instructs His inquirers as to the nature of resurrection, but He also reveals much about how we are to read Scripture.

We who consider ourselves disciples of the Lord Jesus do well to take note of these instructions. Even today, when an abundance of books and audio recordings are available through stores, libraries, and the electronic media, we are to come to Scripture as the Church teaches us: reverently and attentively, never treating the Bible as merely one book among many.

In the worship of the Church, Holy Scripture is richly bound and treated with ceremonial reverence. The Gospel Book is carried as an icon of the Lord Himself. Its texts are read and intoned with solemnity, and always expounded with honor in our prayers and hymns.

The present Gospel passage confirms the importance of coming to the Lord and His Church for instruction in the meaning of the Bible (vs. 23). As readers, we must avoid bringing our prior human conclusions to the texts in the manner of the Sadducees, who have already decided that “there is no resurrection” (vs. 23). We should strive to come humbly to the Lord Jesus for illumination. Our expectation, as we approach the sacred texts, is to be blessed as we seek what is “spoken . . . by God” (vs. 31).

Above all, let us come as to the Master Himself in love, faith, and the hope that we may understand fully what we read. The Sadducees are correct in coming to the Lord Jesus; only their motive is wrong. The texts of the Gospels indeed embody the record of the Lord Jesus’ life and teaching. Out of all the Biblical literature, the Gospels receive the greatest honor, followed by the apostolic writings and then by the books of the Old Testament.

Our key to instructive reading is to approach the Bible as the ultimate divine revelation of the Lord Jesus, our King and God. He Himself opens our minds to understand what is written. We observe that the reading of the Gospel during the Divine Liturgy is preceded by this special prayer: “Illumine our hearts, O Master who loveth mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge and open our mind to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings.”

One of the most difficult requirements that the Lord makes in today’s passage is that we set aside any preconceived conclusions. Christ our Lord deals gently with the Sadducees who come to Him already believing that “there is no resurrection” (vs. 23). He hears them out and then takes great care to remain on common ground, expounding the resurrection based on what “Moses said” (vs. 24) and quoting from Mosaic texts they trust.

For example, He says, “But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’” (vss. 31-32, quoting Ex 3:6, 15). A right reading of Scripture requires an honest willingness on our part to set aside our pet prejudices and assumptions, so that we may be open to what Christ our God truly teaches.

The secret to receiving grace from the Holy Scriptures lies in humility. We expect God to correct us, leading us more deeply into the divine mind and steadily away from our limited human biases and our arrogant certainty. Scripture, we always remember, “was spoken to [us] by God” (vs. 31).

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: grant that we may read, digest, and embrace them as Thou hast taught us by our Savior Jesus Christ. – The Orthodox Missal

August 12 - Saturday of the Tenth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 17:24-18:4

In – but not of – the World: Matthew 17:24-18:4, especially vs. 26: “*Then the sons are free.*” Our world is not as it should be, for we live in a culture devoted to the bottom line. Often our society promotes love of things and the abuse of people rather than love of people and the use of things. We pour resources into aid for dependent children and education, yet we maintain a right to slaughter children *in utero* because we treat them as things. Our capacity to feed and house people has reached dazzling heights, yet much of the world’s population starves, exposed to the elements.

Every year our world shrinks, thanks to the powers of communication and transportation. At the same time it breaks down ever further into warring factions based on tribal, religious, and ethnic loyalties. In the name of keeping the world free, our government often assists repressive and dictatorial regimes. What is the matter? The world is standing on its head!

And yet the world is acting as it always has. Seven centuries before Christ, the Prophet Isaiah exclaimed, “The earth mourns and the inhabited earth is ruined; the lofty of the earth mourn. The earth acts lawlessly because of its inhabitants, for they transgressed the law and changed the ordinances, the everlasting covenant” (Is 24:4-5).

Fifty or sixty years after the Lord’s Resurrection, Saint John the Evangelist described the Roman Empire that condemned him to an island prison. “Babylon the great is . . . a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird! For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury” (Rv 18:2-3).

Despite technology’s promises, our world has changed little in heart and soul. As Orthodox Christians, what is our response to this upside-down world? God sends us out to proclaim the Good News of His compassion, “for God is Love” (1 Jn 4:8). We are committed to the truth that there is “neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all” (Col 3:11).

As His servants, we do not despair. “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God” (Jn 1:10-12).

With this simple *but*, Saint John brings us directly to the way in which we faithful are to live in the world: on heaven’s terms. We are children of God. Let us live God’s truth, never lending our hearts and souls to the priorities of the upside-down world. Let us stand up straight, for Christ our God intends us to “lift up [our] hands unto the holies” (Ps 133:3).

We observe our Lord and Savior paying His taxes, as He is required to do by the world (Mt 17:27). Let us imitate Him as we take our place in offices, shops, board rooms, and playgrounds, determined to remain obedient toward heaven. We are “fellow citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19)!

By asking Peter to pay the tax, our Lord teaches us “to fulfill all righteousness” (Mt 3:15). We are never to destroy the Law and the prophets, as our upside-down world does. We are to fulfill the ways of heaven on the earth (vs. 5:17). In Christ we are free to be *in* the world, but we need not be *of* the world.

We have seen the true light, we have received the heavenly Spirit; we have found the true faith, worshiping the undivided Trinity; for He hath saved us! – Post-communion Hymn

August 13 - Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 17:14-23

Growing as Disciples: Matthew 17:14-23, especially vss. 20-21: *“For assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed. . . . nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”* On a mountain in Galilee, perhaps on the very peak where He was transfigured, the newly risen Lord appears by appointment to the eleven disciples (Mt 28:7). On that mountain He issues the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (vss. 19-20).

Careful analysis reveals that the Lord gives His disciples, in essence, a single command. Although He mentions ancillary activities, He issues only one true imperative: they are to *make disciples*. The Lord’s command to His first disciples also applies to us as we continue in our own discipleship training.

Turning to the present reading, we focus on the underlying process of discipling. To encourage growth among the Lord’s disciples, the Apostle Matthew records the failures in faith which occur while the apostles are being trained. As members of Christ, through the prayers of the Church and by the grace of God, each of us is embarked on a similar effort to “please [the Lord] in every deed and word, and . . . be a child and heir of [His] heavenly kingdom.” In other words, we too are asked to grow as disciples.

We begin our relationship with Christ by faith (Eph 3:17) in the mysteries of baptism, chrismation, and communion. We soon learn that even the miniscule faith we have is a gift from Christ (Phil 1:29). Over time, we learn to place even greater trust in our Lord Jesus (Mk. 9:24). Like those first disciples, we must keep growing in faith.

In today’s Gospel we encounter an anxious father whose persistent faith enables him to overcome hesitation and approach the Lord Jesus, even though the Lord’s disciples have proven themselves inept. The man’s faith even prompts him to kneel and to beg (Mt 17:14).

In response, the Lord Jesus exclaims, “O faithless and perverse generation” (vs. 17). To whom is the Lord referring? Obviously, He is faulting His disciples as a *generation* of little faith. This fact becomes apparent later, when He addresses them privately, saying, “If you have faith as a mustard seed” (vs. 20). Our Lord is urging every disciple to deepen his trust in Him.

The Lord’s first step is to hold out a promise. Granted, His choice of an image – the moving of a mountain – seems extreme. He does this, however, to assure us that even if we possess a grain of faith “nothing will be impossible” (vs. 20).

Christ displays little interest in miracles; He is more concerned with the matter of our salvation. We come to Him to be healed of “all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking . . . with all malice,” so that we may “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave” us (Eph 4:31-32). This is what it means to be discipled: to go through an extended time of spiritual struggle. In order to attain spiritual healing, we must apply our faith at each step along the way as best we can.

For this reason, Christ our God directs us to prayer and fasting (Mt 17:21). Since faith is an essential gift, we need to draw close to the Lord – thus the necessity of prayer. By fasting we purify ourselves and discipline our bodies to help us gain stronger faith, as our Savior desires. If we persist, He will equip us with sufficient faith to fulfill His Great Commission, so that we may work in synergy with Him for the salvation of others.

Establish us in Thy sanctification, that we may ever mediate upon Thy righteousness. –
Post-communion Prayer

August 14 - Monday of the Eleventh Week after Pentecost
Matthew 23:13-22

Spoken Hypocrisy: Matthew 23:13-22, especially vs. 13: “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.” Aside from depraved violence and wanton destruction, what is more distasteful than hypocrisy? Over the next three days, we will examine the Lord Jesus’ pronouncements of woe against the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, who were His first-century opponents. Saint John the Forerunner calls these men a brood of vipers (vs. 3:7). They are the first to attack our Lord’s teachings (vss. 9:2-3, 34) and the first to urge that He be destroyed (vs. 12:14).

As we read through the seven woes, we observe that Christ spares no one. He calmly and dispassionately presents His case, using a negative structure which parallels the positive assurance of His blessings in the Beatitudes (vss. 5:3-12). Although it is evident that the Lord opposes all hypocrisy, He specifically forecasts woe for the scribes and Pharisees. His attack is such a biting exposé of their shortcoming that it helps explain why they later support His arrest and crucifixion.

With each declaration of tribulation, the Lord Jesus explains why woe will befall those He calls hypocrites. Hypocrites are self-contradicting and perversely blind to the kingdom of God. They twist words to avoid God’s commands. They affect righteousness as a means of self-indulgence. And yet they feign respect for the prophets and for the righteous among God’s people whom their predecessors martyred.

The Lord’s solemn proclamations challenge us to examine our hearts in order to locate every trace of hypocrisy, and then to seek His grace to purge this sin from us. Today’s passage, which highlights four of the Lord’s seven woes (vss. 23:13-16), forms a succinct commentary on all hypocrisy.

In the first woe, the Lord declares God’s judgment against the hypocrite who shuts “up the kingdom of heaven against men” (vs. 13). *Closing off the kingdom* happens when a person narrows his attention to observable performance, disregarding inner motivation and attitude. The highest value is applied to holy deeds and pious words. By his actions and words, the hypocrite satisfies himself that he has obtained approval from God. Even worse, he encourages others to adopt this approach, thereby preventing them from “entering the kingdom of Heaven” by neglecting the state of their hearts.

Religious pretense is exposed in the second woe. Hypocrites garner approval by a show of piety (vs. 14) and seek public attention through their righteous acts. They think God approves of them, but as Christ says, “they have their reward” (vs. 6:5) – i.e., they attract the notice of men. The third woe calls attention to the intense effort hypocrites make to draw others into the net of their charade (vs. 23:15). How tragic for those who are deceived by such efforts!

When the Lord states His fourth woe (vss. 16-19), He exposes the manner by which hypocrites manipulate religious language and vows to their advantage. They encourage others to bring “gold” (vs. 16) or “gifts” to God so long as those offering enrich them. They play word games which emphasize the value of material things while denigrating genuine spiritual practices. As a result, they consider the gift more important than the altar, the gold more important than the Temple.

Finally, in verses 20-22, the Lord Jesus points to the basis of every true religious vow and deed. Our goal should be to honor God, for it is He who receives men’s humble, unseen offerings upon His altar in heaven.

Lord, illumine the eyes of my heart unto faith unashamed, love unfeigned, and purity of life. –
Post-communion Prayer

August 15 - Dormition (the Falling Asleep) of the Theotokos, Tone 1
Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28

Distractions: *Saint Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28, especially vs. 40:* “...Martha was distracted with much serving...” The Evangelist Luke records that while the Lord Jesus was enjoying the hospitality of His friends Martha and Mary, Martha was busy serving her guests but became exasperated with Mary who was not helping her. Our Lord then taught about the pitfall of losing focus while serving - this from the Son of God Who exalts serving to His followers: “...whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all.” And He adds that “...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mk. 10:43-45). How easy it is to be “...distracted with much serving...” (Lk. 10:40), fall prey to the tyranny of the urgent, forget one’s purpose, and shift focus from the Lord to one’s self.

The fact is that Martha, in welcoming the Lord into her home, fulfilled the royal law of hospitality, a highly valuable spiritual practice, a praiseworthy act of piety among godly people the world over. The great Patriarch Abraham entertained the Lord God Himself in the theophany of the three Angels (Gn. 18:1-8). Biblically, extending welcome to travelers and strangers is an esteemed virtue (Ex. 2:20; Jdgs. 6:18). And the Lord Jesus honored hospitality by blessing those who offered Him the comfort of their homes (Mt. 9:10; Lk. 19:7; Jn. 2:2).

Martha’s problem was not serving, but being “...distracted by much serving...” (Lk. 10:40). A danger in all worthwhile activity is letting that which seems to be urgent crowd out the truly important focus of our life. The telephone, email, fax machines, and other means of rapid communication breach the walls of our homes with constant and sometimes imperious demands. Who does not know the reality of piles of unanswered mail, unread books, prayerless days, and sleepless nights - all because of allowing oneself to become a slave to the urgent?

Martha’s shift in priorities became evident by the manner in which she appealed to the Lord Jesus. She scolds: “Don’t You care?...tell her to help me!” (Lk. 10:40). The pressure of ‘the urgent’ transformed Martha’s service into self-service. Was she most concerned about the Lord and His teaching or her needs as a hostess? What motivated Martha? Was it the chance to be ‘a slave to all,’ or her own concerns with the tasks of providing hospitality single handedly? Saint Theophan the Recluse points out how easily we can succumb to pleasing ourselves: the self “...seeks its own comfort and pleasure in all its doing, even the most righteous and spiritual, and secretly and lustfully feeds on it as though it were food.”

Our gracious Savior and Lord corrects Martha, but He warns us as well. He indicates the best way in the situation. He calls attention to Mary’s choice of “...that good part, which will not be taken away from her” (Lk. 10:42). Notice in the Lord’s comment that Mary ‘chose’ to sit at His feet and to hear His word (Lk. 10:39,42). If we are too quick to heed the urgent, then we are apt to succumb to its insistent voice! Be watchful of little momentary demands that pester for attention. When we allow the urgent to tyrannize, we void our freedom in the Lord and give away the power He graciously bestows upon us to live for His glory.

Always, to choose the living word of the Lord is the ‘best part,’ because in so doing He remains the highest priority. He continues to be the center of life, and the One we do best always to serve - in every task at hand. Saint Theophan offers a suggestion: to keep peace in our hearts when affliction and urgency would disturb us, incline the will toward “God’s will itself, then wish it and do it, but only because God wishes it...only for His glory alone.”

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doing with Thy most gracious favor; that in all our works, begun, continued and ended in Thee, we may, by Thine aid, serve and glorify Thee alone.

August 16 - Wednesday of the Eleventh Week after Pentecost
Matthew 23:29-39

Hypocrisy and Responsibility: Matthew 23:29-39, especially vss. 29-30, 33: *“Woe to you . . . [who] say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’ . . . How can you escape the condemnation of hell?”* Saint John of Damascus describes Orthodox Christians as a people who “do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set, but we keep the Tradition, just as we received it” (*Second Apology Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, p. 60). Our commitment to a living continuity down the generations provides us with a source of strength in this world of flux.

Having affirmed this truth, let us recall that simply receiving, learning, and reciting the words of the historic faith does not mean we fully practice the faith of the martyrs, confessors, and saints. The Apostle Paul warns us that we may have “a form of godliness” but deny “its power” (2 Tim 3:5). God keep us from such hypocrisy!

In the present Gospel reading, the Lord Jesus declares woe against those who pridefully delude themselves that they are incapable of sin. We know that human freedom is a major dynamic in history and every person’s life. Hegel’s cynical belief that “peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it” is totally alien to Orthodoxy.

Our holy Orthodox faith teaches us that sin inhabits every member of the human race, from our father Adam to the cutest babe in arms. When we unite ourselves to Christ, we accept the uncomfortable truth that “if we had lived in the days of our fathers,” we might well have been “partakers with them in the blood of the prophets” (Mt 23:30). This frightening admission is necessary if we hope to gain spiritual health. It explains why we cry out, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me a sinner.”

When we make absolute, all-inclusive statements of the sort quoted in verse 30, we give proof of a serious spiritual disorder. Behind such remarks lie two related misapprehensions. First, we may believe that we are incapable of heinous acts, and thus deny the universal weakness in fallen human flesh. Second, we may think that we are righteous by virtue of our own spiritual powers, which is evidence of blatant self-righteousness.

The Lord kindly inquires of the scribes and Pharisees, “How can you escape the condemnation of hell?” (vs. 33). Let us take care that we never allow self-satisfied remarks to slip out of our mouths, such as “I would never do that,” “I wouldn’t think of it,” “I don’t ever act in that way.” As the Lord says, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (vs. 12:34). We shall be judged before God according to the “thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb 4:12). Measured by the thoughts of our hearts, we are definitely capable of anything and everything.

Whenever we make such prideful statements, we are in imminent danger before God. We have proven that we accept the delusion that we are free of responsibility for what takes place in this world, whether past, present, or future. If we dare to say, “I would never have condoned the death camps,” we deny our responsibility for the present holocaust of abortion.

When we discern such thoughts in ourselves, we have an opportunity to repent. Saint Paul, who knew the dark side of our nature, asks, “Who will deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:24-25).

From my secret sins cleanse me, and from those of others spare Thy servant, O Lord. –Based on Psalm 18:12

August 17 - Thursday of the Eleventh Week after Pentecost
Matthew 24:13-28

Enduring to the End: Matthew 24:13-28, especially vs. 25: “*See, I have told you beforehand.*” Since the ascension to heaven of our Lord Jesus Christ, tribulations have constantly assailed the Church. One such season of anguish occurred in AD 70, during the Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire. In the years prior to the revolt, Christians were arrested and threatened by the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:3; 5:18). In AD 36, the Archdeacon Stephen was stoned (vss. 6:8; 7:59), and many of the faithful fled the city (vs. 8:1). A major famine followed in AD 45 (vs. 11:28).

Records show that after the Twelve left Jerusalem, evangelizing and planting churches in other places. James, the brother of the Lord, remained as head of the Jerusalem Christians until his murder in AD 62. Gradually, persecution of the Church spread throughout the Roman Empire. In AD 65, at the instigation of Emperor Nero, Peter and Paul were executed with many other faithful Christians in Rome. It was within this context, a year later, that the Palestinian Jews revolted.

Our Lord and Savior sought to prepare the Church for these assaults and for the times of affliction which were coming. His remarks in this portion of Saint Matthew’s Gospel are intended to succor the early Church in Jerusalem, before and during the Jewish revolt. However, the Lord’s words have aided countless Christians facing tribulation over the centuries. His abiding purpose is to encourage us to endure “to the end” (Mt 24:13).

Let us examine four principles underlying His message which speak to Christians in every generation. First, Christ our God tells the disciples under attack, “when you see the ‘abomination of desolation’ . . . standing in the holy place . . . flee to the mountains” (vss. 15-16). Saint Matthew inserts this aside: “Whoever reads, let him understand” (vs. 15).

These verses refer to the defilement of the Jewish Temple by the Roman general, Titus. In AD 70 the Roman troops remorselessly subdued the defenders of the Temple. Titus himself strode into the Holy Place, which was forbidden to Gentiles, shocking the sensibilities of the Jews.

What principle should we draw from our Lord’s warning? We should never hesitate to flee, or to take other prudent precautions, when the forces of evil are aroused.

Second, there is no special virtue in making useless gestures against the concerted, overwhelming storms of history. Our martyrologies reveal that the saints often withdrew during times of repression, as in the case of the Hieromartyr Polycarp.

The life of this blessed bishop also demonstrates the correct course of action when we are pressed to deny the faith: we are to accept even death, as he did. Discipleship can be costly. Here is the third point: while the Lord Jesus assures the faithful that it is prudent to withdraw from danger at appropriate times (vss. 16-22), we always should be ready to stand up for God’s truth when facing either inescapable affliction (vs. 13) or immoral compromise (vss. 19-20). Under such conditions, our first response should be to redouble our prayers before heaven’s throne (vs. 20).

The Lord Jesus’ other remarks in this passage reveal a fourth principle – we should be especially alert to the risk of deception during tribulations. We may hear Christians foolishly say, “This is the tribulation attendant upon Christ’s return.” But what does our Lord say? “Do not believe it” (vss. 23, 26)! He guides us away from such delusions by forbidding us to second-guess His return. These events will be obvious when they occur (vss. 27-28).

O Lord, grant us the light of Thy truth in affliction as may be most expedient for us. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 18 - Friday of the Eleventh Week after Pentecost
Matthew 24:27-33, 42-51

Be Ready! Matthew 24:27-33, 42-51, especially vss. 30-31: “Then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds. . . .” Look closely at this passage and consider what *then* refers to in this prophecy of the Lord Jesus. Is it not His return to judge the whole world? If so, we do well to pay attention now to our Lord, God, and Savior, Jesus Christ, for when He walked among us, He said that we need not tremble when He returns.

We may dismiss all concerns about how and when the Lord will come again. Here is the central point which Christ our God teaches: we are to apply ourselves right now, today, to that which we need to be and do. We must strive to be ready within ourselves, heart and soul.

In the message that Christ offers in this passage, He first speaks of His certain return (vss. 27-31). Next, He directs us to watch (vss. 32-33, 43-44), so that we will be ready to receive His blessing, rather than His condemnation (vss. 45-51).

Our first action is to accept the Lord Jesus’ return as a given. We need not worry about predicting the exact sequence of events. In any case, His return will be unmistakably apparent, like a world-wide flash of lightning illumining everything (vs. 27). No one will miss His appearing. He likens it to the experience of seeing birds of prey gathered to feed: there must be a carcass (vs. 28).

When our Lord comes again, the entire universe will be transformed. No one is going to miss it (vs. 29); everyone will be sorted into groups (vss. 30-31). Our Lord describes the magnitude of His second coming for one reason – so that we will keep watching within ourselves.

Inner watchfulness is a primary element of our life in Christ, and far more important than following outward events. Our Lord makes this abundantly clear when He says that His second advent will be apparent to all. Our foremost need, then, is to keep watch over ourselves all the time.

In the mini-parable of the householder watching for the thief, Christ emphasizes alertness (vs. 43), for thieves do not announce when they are coming. “The Son of Man,” according to the Lord Jesus, “is coming at an hour you do not expect” (vs. 44).

The Holy Spirit will help us keep our hearts safe from impure thoughts. “Examine yourself daily in the sight of God, brother, and discover which of the passions is in your heart. Cast it out, and so escape His judgment,” says Isaiah the Solitary (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 202). Interior watchfulness is the key to purification.

Note how Christ’s words lead step by step toward the urgent task of preparation. We are to develop inner watchfulness over our interior life so that we may sing with the Psalmist David, “Ready is my heart, O God, ready is my heart” (Ps 56:10). How does a person reach this sort of inward readiness so that he can speak to God in such a fashion?

Christ our God answers with an example of opposites: a faithful and wise servant (vss. 45-47) and an evil servant (vss. 48-51). Let us carefully observe these two servants and their attitudes and behaviors. Faithful and wise behavior is feeding one’s fellow servants. In other words, we are to carry out the tasks that the Master has assigned us in His household, the Church (vs. 45), whose “members should have the same care for one another” (1 Cor 12:25).

Of course, the evil servant in us wants to indulge in anger, gluttony, and drunkenness (vs. 49). Remember, we never despair when we fall into sin, but repent. The Holy Spirit will renew even the most sinful among us and help us make ready, if we will.

Make radiant the garment of my soul, O Giver of Light, and save me! – Hymn of Bridegroom Orthros

August 19 - Saturday of the Eleventh Week after Pentecost
Matthew 19:3-12

Willingness: Matthew 19:3-12, especially vss. 11-12: “*But He said to them, ‘All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given. . . . He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.’*” In these two verses from today’s Gospel, the Lord Jesus focuses on choosing a life of celibacy. Saint John Chrysostom, commenting on this choice, says, “And if it is of free choice, one may say, how doth He say, at the beginning, ‘All men do not receive it, but they to whom it is given?’ That thou mightest learn that the conflict is great, not that thou shouldst suspect any compulsory allotments. For it is given to those, even to the willing” (“Homily on the Gospel of Matthew,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 384).

Saint John Chrysostom’s words lead us to the first – and truly difficult – area of our life in Christ. How do we become someone who constantly “imitates Christ in thought, word and deed, as far as is possible for human beings, believing rightly and blamelessly in the Holy Trinity” (John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 1.4, p. 4)? For God does want us to be neither slaves nor robots, but rather sons who choose the Lord’s will over their own in all matters because they love their Father.

Yet here is precisely where the *conflict is great*. What gives our inner conflicts their power over us? We have many desires that create endless turmoil inside us, even as many things pressing upon us from the outside confuse us. How easy it is to speak of doing the will of the Lord, but how difficult in practice to live a life that is truly natural and sinless!

When we are baptized, the Church prays that Christ will “keep us ever warriors invincible in every attack of those who assail us; and make us all victors even unto the end.” Having chosen to bow our heads to the Lord, we still yearn to do His will. So where, then, do we find the means to defeat temptations, snares, and turmoil?

An all-important phrase from verse 12 speaks of making a choice “for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.” We make such a choice “not through pondering but through action. . . . We never reach a goal by just sitting in comfort and waiting. . . . Let the Prodigal Son be our example. ‘He arose and came’ (Lk 15:20)” (Colliander, *Way of the Ascetics*).

God in His grace does not compel us to choose rightly. Instead, He works with us in synergy, cooperatively. Saint John Chrysostom’s “compulsion to choose” is an oxymoron. The glory of God’s grace cuts the tap root of every compulsion that we have hitherto accepted as “natural.” In the Christian life we receive grace to work with the Lord to extinguish our compulsions. Let us arise and go to our Father! We are free in Him to do so.

In His great love, our Father rejects the notion that we should be “like one of your hired servants” (Lk 15:19). What then shall we say to our Father? There is a better plea we can offer in the face of temptations and turmoil – one that effectively defeats every trace of the compulsions that once were our masters.

Let us first look within and name the compulsion that claims to be in control. We face honestly the part of us that enjoys being compelled. We admit that we are accomplices in the conspiracy to defeat ourselves. And we pray to the Lord for His forgiveness, asking Him to at least make us “willing to be willing,” as the 12-Step programs for recovering addicts suggest.

Today’s passage can be applied to many other choices beside celibacy – for example, whether to marry or divorce, to be chaste or impure, to cheat or be honest, to forgive, reject, accept humiliation, and so on. Perhaps our weak will has little desire to “work the works of God” (Jn 6:28)? Let us then cry out to “Him whom He sent” (vs. 6:29)!

Master, I am struggling even to be willing; make Thou me willing to be willing; be Thou the strength of my resolve; save me lest I perish and lose Thee for ever, O my only Hope.

August 20 - Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 18:23-35

From the Heart: Matthew 18:23-35, especially vs. 35: “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.” When we were children, our parents sometimes intervened in our squabbles with playmates. “Tell Johnny you are sorry,” came the command. Gritting our teeth, we said, “Sorry,” hating the very word. We were not sorry! We resented being forced to reconcile with a playmate-become-enemy whose behavior was absolutely wrong in our eyes. Our mouths said, “Sorry,” but no forgiveness came forth from our hearts.

Now, as adults, we read Christ’s parable describing our relationship with Him and our fellow human beings. The point of the story is quite clear. We hear our true parent’s voice saying, “Forgive, and say you are sorry.”

Of course we rejoice when we receive the Lord Jesus’ forgiveness in the mystery of confession. We hear the priest say, “[May] God who forgave David through Nathan the prophet, Peter weeping bitterly for his denial, and the sinful woman in tears at His feet, forgive you through me a sinner both in this age and in the age to come and set you uncondemned before His dread judgment seat. And, now, having no further care for the sins you have confessed, depart in peace.”

However, let us listen carefully to everything our Lord has to say. As we are forgiven, so must we forgive – not with lip service, but *from the heart*. According to Saint John of Kronstadt, “God does not tolerate the slightest impurity in [us], and both the peace and God Himself leave [us] immediately after the admittance of any impure thought into [our] heart” (*My Life in Christ*, p. 301).

Every time we nurse a lingering grudge, or grit our teeth and smile, or bow to propriety rather than to the Lord Jesus, we destroy our inner purity. We forgo the forgiveness we have received and stand condemned before Christ’s dread judgment seat. Such impurity of heart requires our immediate and urgent care, because it signals that our peace is gone!

In today’s parable the compassionate King and God is ready not merely to delay retribution for our heinous sins but to release us entirely, forgiving us our debts (vs. 27) when we cry out to Him for our sins. The anger of God, on the other hand, is directed against unforgiveness on our part (vs. 34). Truly, we create the barrier between God and our own forgiveness when we hesitate to forgive from the heart.

A demon appeared to Abba Isaac of Thebes and announced, “You are mine . . . because three Sundays running you have received holy communion whilst being at daggers-drawn with your neighbor. . . . Are you not harboring a grudge against him because of a plate of lentils? I am the one who is in charge of grudges and, from now on, you are mine” (Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow*, p. 133).

This Desert Father, who had long cultivated wisdom from God, immediately left his cell and went to the brother in question. He prostrated himself before him in order to become reconciled with him. Abba Isaac knew that prostrations before one another free us of unforgiveness. And what was the grudge about? A bowl of lentils!

We take up a radical way of living when we follow Christ – one natural to our spirit, yet contrary to our pride. Let us remember the words that Christ, who tells this parable, spoke on the Cross: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do” (Lk 23:34). Surely He had grounds for a grudge; surely He might have warned His enemies that they were under judgment. But no, He shows us how to keep far from eternal danger – we are to forgive from the heart.

O Lord Jesus Christ, cleanse us from all wiles and wickedness and lead us into the kingdom of Thy love, that we may be heirs with all the saints in Thine unfathomable mystery. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

August 21 - Monday of the Twelfth Week after Pentecost

Mark 1:9-15

The Heavens Open: Mark 1:9-15, especially vss. 10-11: “*And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. Then a voice came from heaven, ‘You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’*” At times during the Divine Liturgy the royal doors on the iconostasis are closed, which prevents the congregation from gazing upon the Lord’s throne, i.e., the holy table. Then, at the time of holy communion, the doors open before the faithful. The priest or deacon, as an icon of Christ our God, comes forth with the invitation, “With fear of God and faith and love, draw near.”

The closing off of the altar reminds us of our fallen condition, for it plainly demonstrates our separation from God as a result of sin. We know that God is in heaven and simultaneously with us here on earth, yet our approach to Him is blocked, guarded by cherubim (Gn 3:24). Our Lord God and Creator is within us and yet beyond us. We are bound to this mortal life, to the particulars of time and place.

And yet the doors do open and Life comes forth to meet us. According to Father Alexander Schmemmann, the Divine Liturgy is the opening of the heavens, “the sacrament of the kingdom, the Church’s ascent to the ‘table of the Lord, in His kingdom’” (*The Eucharist*, p. 37). We draw near and share in this sacrament because our true heritage in Christ is the eternal, timeless presence of the Holy One.

How did everlasting, heavenly life become available to us? Saint Hippolytus, in his discourse on Theophany, says, “The region above was inaccessible. We might descend to the lower parts, but not ascend to the upper. So it happened not only that the Lord was being baptized – He was also making new the old creation. He was bringing the alienated under the scepter of adoption. For straightway ‘the heavens were opened to Him.’ A reconciliation took place between the visible and the invisible” (*ACCS New Testament*, vol. II, p. 11).

The present passage from Saint Mark speaks of this heavenly reconciliation in three ways. It begins by stating that the heavens were opened, and then describes the Holy Spirit’s descent upon our Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, we hear the declaration of God the Father.

When God the Word became man, He fully assumed our humanity from the flesh of His virgin mother. He brought heaven to us in His own Person, uniting the Godhead to earth and mankind. This ineffable salvation established an irreversible union of the eternal God with mortal man.

As man, the Lord Jesus rises from the waters of Jordan, having taken our sins upon Himself. He “saw the heavens parting” (vs. 10) and opening to us. For “as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus. . . . have been united together in the likeness . . . of His resurrection” (Rom. 6:3, 5). When we are baptized, we are united to Christ. Now the heavens open so that we may *draw near*.

We experience divine life through the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. In the mystery of chrismation we are sealed in the Spirit. As fire and life, the Spirit comes to quicken our spirits. As the New Adam, Christ Jesus rose from the waters of the Jordan. Likewise each of us, united to Him, is made alive (1 Cor 15:22).

Just as the voice of the Father witnesses to His Son at His baptism, so He extends the privilege of sonship to us, so that we may call Him by that name. We “received the Spirit of adoption by whom we may cry out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Rom 8:15).

When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan, knowledge of the Trinity was made manifest. And the voice of the Father bore witness to Thee, calling Thee His beloved Son; and the Spirit in the likeness of a dove confirmed the truth of His word. – Festal Hymn of Theophany

August 22 - Tuesday of the Twelfth Week after Pentecost

Mark 1:16-22

Essentials for Ministry – Training: Mark 1:16-22, especially vs. 17: *“Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”* The Evangelist Mark concisely summarizes the Lord Jesus’ early ministry with these words: “Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God” (Mk 1:14). Subsequently, he records the conditions essential to all who minister in Christ. First, we must be trained and equipped to fish for men. Second, we learn to guard against the dark powers that oppose the Church. Third, we embrace the Lord Jesus’ vision of restoring human beings to their full potential. Finally, we accept asceticism as necessary for every disciple who wishes to develop a life pleasing to God.

Peter, Andrew, James, and John are well acquainted with Jesus by the time He enlists them as disciples. They have allied themselves to the Lord Jesus as inquirers and supporters (Jn 1:35-42) while continuing to pursue their accustomed activities as fishermen. Meanwhile, the Lord ministers alone, proclaiming the advent of the kingdom of God and calling upon all to repent and believe in the good news (Mk 1:14-15).

During this period, the inquiring fishermen have many opportunities to hear the Lord Jesus teach and see Him heal (Lk 4:14-15, 31). When He calls them to become disciples, they learn how to form His Church by sharing in its actual development. Today’s reading describes their enlistment as trainees, a word that accurately conveys the meaning of “disciples.” Leaving their careers as fishermen, they eventually serve as apostles who fish for men.

How long the four fishermen mingle with the crowds as hearers and observers of the Lord Jesus is never specified. Christ clearly allows sufficient time to pass for each to develop a bond with Him. When the Lord finally calls the four, they drop their employment, income, and familiar lifestyle to follow Him (Mk 1:19-20).

The necessity for a personal connection with the Lord Jesus still pertains to all who take part in Christ’s ministry. Before we give up the pursuits of this life, we must first acquire Christ as our great personal treasure, prizing the Lord above all else. Love for the Lord is a precondition for ministry because His service is unlike any other pursuit in this life. The life in Christ entails the choice to set aside all earthly cares in order to go as we are sent, leading as Christ requires (vs. 4:19).

The four clearly recognize Jesus’ personal uniqueness and the immeasurable importance of His work, for they respond to the Lord’s call “immediately” (vs. 1:18, 20). They have sorted out their values; they understand that He asks for total commitment. In the end, His brief invitation is sufficient to start them on the path.

Anyone who is considering ordained ministry, lay leadership, or active participation in the Church must give the Lord first place in his heart. To become disciples, we must be certain of the urgency of the work to which the Lord calls us.

Finally, take note of the reaction when the four start traveling full-time as Christ’s companions. “And they were astonished at His teaching . . . as one having authority” (vs. 22). Whenever we take part in the life of the Church, we come to expect the unexpected!

Manifest in all who shall take up ministry in Thy Church, O Lord, a true and abiding love for Thee and an unquestioning readiness to obey and follow Thee as Thou leadest.

August 23 - Wednesday of the Twelfth Week after Pentecost
Mark 1:23-28

Essentials for Ministry – Confronting the Enemy: *Mark 1:23-28, especially vs. 27:* “For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.” Satan, the father of lies, instigator of hatred and source of sinful temptations, is a deadly enemy to be met with caution. We are fallible creatures whose lives are measured by a brief tally of years. Do we think we can stand up to him, when he has waged war against our race for centuries? We would be foolish to think so! We are puny before Lucifer and mere fodder for his minions, for this archangel-turned-archfiend possesses vast powers.

Let us never become disheartened, however, for we have an almighty defender who is greater than Satan (Rv 19:11-15). Christ our Lord and God is the Creator of the angelic beings. He is before them, outside of time and creation. He is infinitely more powerful than any angel, evil or good. This message, conveyed by our present reading from Saint Mark’s Gospel, answers those who, seeing demons defeated in a synagogue, ask, “What is this?” (Mk 1:27).

The Lord Jesus reveals in a single stroke the impotence of the spiritual forces ranged against us. He demonstrates that ministry in His name means seizing authority over unclean spirits and wresting men from their control (vs. 27). By the power of His life-giving Spirit, Christ’s ministry continues in the Church unabated. Let us now examine the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy the Lord opposes.

Satan has blinded our modern world using our love of material things. He has convinced the so-called “great minds” of this age of the non-existence of the spiritual world, including himself. The only thing left to contemporary man is serving our bodily pleasures and delights. As a result, our impoverished culture heedlessly promotes the deadly lies of self-indulgence and rational skepticism.

As Orthodox Christians, we are freed from such lies by our spiritual knowledge and illumination in Christ. How blessed we are to be members of the Church, enjoying her spacious view of reality based on the Lord, “by whom all things were made . . . visible and invisible” (Nicene Creed).

Because they can neither measure nor identify spiritual beings, many of our contemporaries fall prey to the demons who always stand behind the gods we fashion with our own hands. Behold the sad condition of modern secular life, forever subject to possession, wicked manipulation, and depravity! So many people are willing to sacrifice “their sons and their daughters unto demons” (Ps 105:35) and to “drink . . . the cup of demons” (1 Cor 10:21).

In this Gospel passage, our Lord Jesus enters a synagogue and preaches the truth. Immediately He is accosted by demons who inhabit one of the people of God. The Lord understands that He is engaged in combat with dark spiritual powers. Knowing that He has ultimate power over them, He orders the spirits to depart and be silent.

It is urgent that we see the ministry of Christ our God through His eyes. Our Lord is making a strategic counter-attack on the ruler of this age. This same Satan seeks to kill Christ at birth (Mt 2:16), tempts Him before His ministry begins (vss. 4:1-10), and enters into Judas in one final attempt to destroy Him (Lk 22:3) – all to no avail.

Just as Satan’s efforts were defeated then, Christ continues His warfare of liberation now against the spiritual enemies of mankind. Let us exult, for “you are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4).

Open, O Lord, the eyes of our understanding to Thy Gospel teachings; remove from us our former delusion, crush down Satan under our feet, and give us victory over our enemies. –Prayers derived from the Divine Liturgy and Service of Baptism

August 24 - Thursday of the Twelfth Week after Pentecost
Mark 1:29-35

Essentials for Ministry – Healing: Mark 1:29-35, especially vs. 34: “Then He healed many who were sick with various diseases. . . .” The opening verses of Saint Mark’s Gospel focus on the early period of Christ’s ministry in Galilee – a ministry that He continues through the Church to the present day. The three events Saint Mark describes occur over a sixteen-hour period beginning on a Sabbath afternoon. They continue in the evening, after the Sabbath has ended, and conclude before daylight on the first day of the week (vss. 29, 32, 35). These time markers call our attention to the relationship of what takes place to our Christian “first day of the week” as well as to the Jewish Sabbath.

Earlier, when Christ our Lord first exorcizes a man on the Sabbath (vss. 1:21-26), He sets a notable precedent for His ministry: He will place human needs ahead of pious practice. His readiness to do so offends the Pharisees, whose strict interpretation of God’s commandments defines the casting out of demons as “working” on the day of rest (Mk 3:1-6; Ex 20:10-11). Clearly the Lord sees the matter differently, for as the Sabbath continues He performs yet another healing (Mk 1:29-31).

Finally, in the evening, when it is now “the first day of the week” (vs. 16:9), He administers still more exorcisms and healings. These actions reveal the primacy of the first day, foreshadowing it as the eighth day of eternity in the kingdom of God.

For the faithful, these events from the Lord’s early ministry also serve to identify healing as a core activity of God’s people. The Church is tasked with bringing the sick before the Lord; we serve as His eyes, voice, and hands for healings, exorcism, and the keeping of vigils on behalf of the infirm. The Divine Liturgy, for example, refers to healing and restoration in the Litany of Peace, as we pray “for the sick and the suffering, for captives and their salvation. . . . For Thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God.”

We observe how the people of Galilee bring “all who were sick and those who were demon-possessed” to Christ (vs. 32). Through the offering of the bread of oblation, we bring the names of our family members, especially the sick, to be remembered before the throne of God. As the Holy Gifts are prepared during the prothesis, the sick are again remembered in prayer.

Many parishes maintain prayer lists of those acutely or chronically ill, including both Church members and non-members. God blesses the devout who faithfully intercede for the sick and who inform their pastors of sickness among family members and acquaintances. The Church’s ministry also involves lay visitors calling on the sick and homebound. Blessed are those parishes that hold vigils and pray before the All-compassionate One for their beloved sick!

Note, in particular, how the Evangelist describes the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law. The Lord Jesus “came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and immediately the fever left her” (vs. 31). We are created with spiritual, psychological, and physical dimensions, and sin ravages all three. The Lord Jesus affirms the importance of physical means for ministering to those who are ill, no matter the type of illness. Hence, in this instance, He extends His hand physically to raise up Simon’s mother-in-law.

The Church likewise employs physical means to administer the Lord’s healing. Our priests lay their hands upon those who are ill. They administer holy communion so that the ill may be united to Christ. In the mystery of holy unction, blessed oil is applied. God honors our ministry in the form of holy water, crosses, relics of the saints, icons, and loving kisses.

O Lord, by Thy word alone Thou didst cure the kinswoman of Peter of her fever. Do Thou also relieve Thy sick servants, sending upon them Thy mercy and granting them health.

August 25 - Feast of the Apostles Bartholomew and Titus
Matthew 5:14-19

Light of the World: Saint Matthew 5:14-19, especially vs. 16: *“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”* At the beginning of chapter five of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the Evangelist sets the scene for what is known as ‘The Sermon on the Mount.’ “And seeing the multitudes, [Jesus] went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened his mouth and taught them” (Mt. 5:1,2). Among the Lord’s teachings in ‘The Sermon’ are the six verses that make up the Gospel for the Feast of two of His Apostles, Bartholomew and Titus. However, we must not apply Jesus’ words only to the two Apostles. Since we are Christians, we ought never to take any portion of ‘The Sermon’ and excuse ourselves from what the Lord is saying; for we are not mere spectators. Christ our God is speaking to us in these words - be attentive!

The Lord tells us, “You are the light of the world” (vs. 14). He states this as an honest fact. Still, what sort of condition is it with which He confronts us? The answer is that, as His disciples, we have a status, a circumstance under which we exist as a result of being united to the Master. This state is not a theory nor an ideal, but a description of our actual situation in life. We are the light of the world. You are the light of the world. I am the light of the world. Like it or not, when we stand at the door of our life and we face our neighbors, friends, family, acquaintances, passers-by, enemies, and associates, we are Christ’s light to them.

We may be surprised at being cast in this role, but when we ‘bowed down before Him’ at our Baptism, our status as the light of the world became ours along with our surrender to Christ our King and our God. Measure the scope of these circumstances with the words of Saint John Chrysostom: “‘Of the world’ again; not of one nation nor of twenty states, but of the whole inhabited earth. And ‘a light’ to the mind, far better than this sunbeam...to teach thee how great is the gain of these strict precepts and the profit of that grave discipline: how it binds, and permits not to become dissolute; and causes clear sight, leading men on to virtue.”

There is no ‘ducking’ or avoiding this status. Christ makes it perfectly clear: “A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden” (vs. 14). As He is light, so are we, through being united to Him: “Jesus spoke to them again, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life’” (Jn. 8:12). The role is not altogether overwhelming. We united ourselves to Him, and He gave us a measure of the Light that He is. We did more when we bowed down to Him at Baptism, we became residents of His household. As such, our life should contribute “...light to all who are in the house” (Mt. 5:15). His light is not a private possession, but a light to be shared with all in His household and all who around us in the world.

Thus our Lord and Master tells us, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (vs. 16). Pluck up some determination! You are the light of the world in Christ. Let your light shine, but let it shine in a definite manner. A night-light helps me find my way around in the dark; it’s a private light for me. Instead, let us decide to cast the light of Christ toward others so that they may benefit as well. Hit the main switch, turn on the flood of Christ’s light that’s in you for all in the house. It will not run up your utility bill! God covers the cost of this illumination. All of Christ’s light that you share likely will help others avoid missteps, keep a loved one from stumbling, help a friend glorify God.

O Lord Jesus Christ our God, I have been illumined so as to praise Thee, the Brightness of the Father. Govern my life, Thou that dost illumine all creation, and make me know the way wherein I should walk. Overshadow my deeds with the Spirit of Thy fear and of Thy radiance.

August 26 - Saturday of the Twelfth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 20:29-34

Inner Sight: Matthew 20:29-34, especially vs. 32-33: “So Jesus stood still and called them, and said, ‘What do you want Me to do for you?’ They said to Him, ‘Lord, that our eyes may be opened.’” The two blind men “heard that Jesus was passing by” (vs. 30). They seize upon this rare opportunity and cry out to Him. What is more, they cry out persistently. They know their best opportunity to regain their sight depends upon the possibility that Jesus might come their way. In their dark captivity, they have heard of His presence. However, because they lack the freedom of movement that sighted persons possess, they have been side-lined by life – left sitting until this blessed day and hour. Perhaps what they have heard about Jesus is true, and can become true for them as well!

Once He passed near us; He stopped to ask what we desired and then illumined us. “When did this happen?” we may ask. At our baptism, the priest blesses God “who sheddest forth upon them that were in darkness the light of salvation, through the manifestation of Thine only-begotten Son and our God . . . who hast . . . been graciously pleased to regenerate Thy servant that hath . . . received illumination by water and the Spirit.”

Among the host of divine gifts that our compassionate Lord showers upon us at baptism is holy illumination. Christ is lavish, gracious, and kind, flooding our souls with light. In other words, He restores our inner sight.

What sort of illumination do we receive from God? According to Saint Diadochos of Photiki, “Divine grace confers on us two gifts through the baptism of regeneration, one being infinitely superior to the other. The first gift is given to us at once, when grace renews us in the actual waters of baptism and cleanses all the lineament of our soul, that is, the image of God in us, by washing away every stain of sin” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 288).

God the Creator embosses the soul of every man that comes into the world with His image (Jn 1:9). However, sin stains the divine likeness to the point that many people barely grasp what it means to be human. In the bath of baptism, this grime is washed away to reveal the truth about our souls and the soul of every living person.

If we do not appreciate this wonder at the time of our baptism, or in the course of our life in the Church, what a tragedy! This awe-inspiring reality cannot be fully described in words. Over time, our consciousness of being created in God’s image inevitably darkens, leaving us in the same condition as the two blind men along the Jericho road. We neither think about nor remember our initial illumination. We are effectively blind in spirit.

However, let us return to the statement quoted above: “Divine grace confers on us *two* gifts through . . . baptism.” What of the other, the greater illumination? Saint Diadochos goes on to speak of our “likeness” to God, which is meant to be etched onto the divine image within us. “When the nous begins to perceive the Holy Spirit with full consciousness, we should realize that grace is beginning to paint the divine likeness over the divine image in us. Our power of perception shows us that we are being formed into the divine likeness; but the perfecting of this likeness we shall know only by the light of grace.”

If this refashioning is possible through the grace of God, it requires our cooperation. The blind men teach us the first step in this cooperation, for when “their eyes received sight . . . they followed Him” (vs. 34). Receiving inner sight, like the miracle of physical healing, requires God’s grace to open our inner eyes (vs. 33). Then we must take the next step and follow Him.

O Master, ever graciously illumine our hearts with the light of Thy countenance. – Service of Chrismation

August 27 - Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 19:16-26

Follow Me: Matthew 19:16-26, especially vs. 21: “Jesus said to him, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’” When we talk things out, it often brings things to light. This truth is certainly reinforced by the conversations in the present passage. The first dialogue takes place between Christ our God and the rich young man (vss. 16-22), the second between the Lord and the disciples (vss. 23-25). Both shine light into the profound depths of what Christ means when He says, “Follow Me.”

As Orthodox Christians, we have signed on to follow Him, so to speak, but even so the cost of discipleship can confront us in unexpected ways. For the inquirer seeking eternal life (vs. 22), the cost turns him away from following Christ. It even dismays those already following Him (vs. 25). What of us? We would do well to consider carefully what is entailed in the appeal to follow the Lord.

There are two variants of the first conversation found in the manuscripts of Saint Matthew’s Gospel that bear on the proposition to “come, follow Me” (vs. 21). In the opening verse of some ancient texts, the inquirer asks, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (RSV). In other ancient texts widely used by the Church Fathers, the inquirer asks, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” (vs. 17).

In the RSV, the Lord responds with a more general question, “Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good.” However, in the second set of texts, our Lord speaks directly of Himself: “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God” (vs. 17). In both cases Christ emphasizes the same point: the appellation “good” should be reserved for God alone. The Lord knows, of course, that His inquirer has failed to perceive Him as the Savior, the Incarnate God.

The Lord then offers a proposition: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (vs. 21). Discipleship has a cost, and its demand falls differently upon each person who comes to Jesus Christ.

For the particular inquirer in this passage, our Lord sets the cost at a threshold the man believes he cannot attain (vs. 22). Nor is it wealth alone that poses an obstacle to genuine discipleship – for example, the Lord challenges the Samaritan woman’s promiscuous lifestyle (Jn 4:18). However, she, unlike the inquirer here, responds to the appeal and becomes a disciple (vss. 4:29-39).

So much turns upon how we perceive the One who says, “Follow Me.” The Lord Jesus is never harsh, for He loves every one of us. Saint Mark brings this out in his account of our Savior’s meeting with the rich young man: “Jesus looking at him, loved him” (Mk 10:21). Even so, the man cannot see beyond the cost to himself, although Christ understands the obstacle lodged in the man’s heart. As Saint Jerome observes, “Many abandon their wealth but do not follow the Savior” (*ACCS New Testament*, vol. 1b, p. 101).

This is why our Lord hastens to reassure the astonished disciples, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (vs. 26). Many of the disciples left behind their trades (vss. 4:19-20) and profitable businesses (vs. 9:9). He asks us, likewise, to risk letting go of whatever holds us back.

Establish me wholly in Thy fear. Adorn me, teach and enlighten me, O good One. – Post-communion Prayer

August 28 - Monday of the Thirteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 3:6-12

Christ Unrecognized: Mark 3:6-12, especially vss. 11-12: “*And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out, saying, ‘You are the Son of God.’ But He sternly warned them that they should not make Him known.*” In the early days of the Lord Jesus’ ministry, people developed varied opinions about Him. Their reactions ranged from intense devotion to hateful scheming. After the passage of twenty centuries, we may observe that the range of responses has altered little. We the faithful honor Him as God, the “same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb 13:8), while many darkened hearts ignore or reject Him.

The Pharisees and Herodians want to “destroy Him” (Mk 3:6), but the multitudes, “when they heard how many things He was doing. . . pressed about Him to touch Him” and to be healed of their afflictions (vss. 8, 10). Those possessed by unclean spirits fall prostrate before Him, while the demons call Him “Son of God” (vs. 11). He forbids the demons to “make Him known” (vs. 12).

If the Pharisees and Herodians had concluded that Christ was God Incarnate, the Creator and Judge of all, they would not have plotted His destruction. Crowds of people flocked to Him and had their sicknesses healed, yet the demons alone knew Him for who He is.

Scholars of first-century Palestine estimate that the sect of the Pharisees had some six thousand members during the reign of Herod. Most were laymen and played no part in the Temple priesthood – in fact, they opposed the priests.

The Pharisees supported themselves as merchants, craftsmen, and farmers. Most lacked formal education, but they made up for it by fiercely studying and keeping the Law. They lived in closed communities, as their name suggests: *Pharisee* means “the separate ones.”

Because of their disciplined compliance with the details of the Law, the Pharisees considered themselves the true Israel. They were contemptuous, even hostile, to the masses of people whom they perceived as ignorant and neglectful of the Law. Assuming they were the true defenders of the Law of Moses, they trusted “in themselves that they were righteous” and despised others (Lk 18:9).

Why would the Pharisees lower themselves to become allies of the retainers of the court of Herod, men whom they despised for their “Edomite,” pagan ways? Two centuries before Christ, these Idumeans were forced under the control of a short-lived Jewish kingdom. During that era, the various Herods served as their titular governors. Herod the Great, as a loyal vassal of the Romans, invariably supported the policies of the Empire. He even educated his children in Rome.

The Herodians were nominal converts to Judaism, but solely for political reasons. To please the people, Herod rebuilt the aging Temple. Yet, in their hearts, the Herods were basically like the pagan Romans, as their mode of living reveals.

In today’s Gospel, both the Pharisees and the Herodians lack the humility, purity of heart, and godly discernment to see anything of value in Jesus of Nazareth. The Pharisees fear that He will undermine their religious prestige; the Herodians see Him as a political threat, possibly stirring rebellion against King Herod and Roman authority.

When Christ says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8), He excludes those who disdain Him as a mere peasant. Only the people, eking out an existence in deep poverty and aching for relief from a host of afflictions, sense divine power in the Lord Jesus. And yet even they recognize Him as no more than a God-inspired prophet – or perhaps as the Messiah (vss. 8:28-29). How ironic that the dark powers – the unclean spirits – are the first to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God!

Remove far, O Lord, our delusion, and fill us with faith, hope, and love from Thee. – Prayer for the Reception of Catechumens

August 29 - The Beheading of the Forerunner, John the Baptist
Mark 6:14-30

An Icon of the Passion: Saint Mark 6:14-30, especially vs. 16: *“But when Herod heard, he said, ‘This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead!’”* The lives of Saint John the Forerunner and our Lord Jesus Christ are woven together from birth to death and in eternity. Both came into the world, and the world did not know them nor did it receive them (Jn. 1:10,11). From the beginning, before Christ our Savior announced His Passion, Saint John called Him “The Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29), a title fraught with overtones that place Christ’s sacrificial Passion and death before our eyes.

Likewise, compare the icon of the Forerunner with the Gospel reading for today. The icon, usually located on the Iconostasis to the right of the icon of the Lord in Orthodox churches. In both the icon and in the present passage, the message joins the martyrdom of the Prophet and the Passion of our Lord. Saint John’s witness to the Lord earned him the title of Forerunner (Jn. 1:7), but his icon shows, and these verses from Saint Mark reminds us, that Saint John also was a martyric Forerunner, pointing forward in his death to the great, saving Passion of Christ.

Whether we read Saint Mark’s narrative of the ‘passion’ of the Forerunner, or we stand before the icon of Saint John and read the iconographer’s revelation, the elements of the Lord Jesus’ saving Passion are unmistakably present: profound holiness, bold purity, and a clear call to repentance. Death, martyrdom, and human rebellion against the Law of God are also vividly present, as are life, salvation, and the Great Mercy. The impotence of earthly kings and the saving economy of God that delivers from iniquity are likewise proclaimed.

In the icon, the Prophet has wings. These define Saint John as a holy message-bearer. As he said, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord” (Jn. 1:23). He announces the coming of the Incarnate God. The wings further reveal a monastic who lived as a terrestrial angel and a celestial man. Through this vision, we see why Herod was afraid of John. One should be in dread of a messenger of the Lord. God sent angels and other messengers to reveal to earthly eyes His dread holiness, He Whom “...no man can see My face and live” (Ex. 33:20). The conical rocks of the landscape in the Forerunner’s icon tell of detachment from the world, of a man of the desert who remained unspotted by the world.

Reading Saint Mark’s account and the iconographers’ message helps us look into death, down to its roots in human sin; we behold the Passion that God the Word took upon Himself. In the icon, Saint John holds a cross. His severed head, eyes closed, lies on the platter before our gaze; yet the Prophet looks toward the figure of the Lord Jesus in the corner of the icon. The whole drama of the coming Great Passion is written in inescapable imagery. Similarly, without seeing the Prophet as the Forerunner of the Crucified Bridegroom, one might misread and fail to comprehend Saint Mark’s description of Saint John’s arrest, of the godless folly of the King Herod, of the calculated use of Salome by her mother Herodias, of the inevitable execution, and of the reverent burial by John’s disciples. Look and read deeply.

The icon, as well as the written Gospels, proclaim the triumph of God over sin and death. The figure of Saint John is alive, with angelic, messenger wings, looking toward Christ. He is one raised from the dead by his Lord and Savior. Saint John’s head lies at his feet on a charger. Look again and behold the proclamation of the crucified Lord Who has defeated death!

The earthly angel was offered as a prize for an immoral dance. And the tongue constantly speaking of God is sent to preach Christ to those who are in hades. Ah! By Thy surpassing providence, Christ our God, save our souls, for Thou alone art compassionate.

August 30 - Wednesday of the Thirteenth Week after Pentecost

Mark 3:20-27

The Ongoing War: Mark 3:20-27, especially vs. 27: *“No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house.”* According to Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, the Church Fathers “portray the spiritual life and the course of Christian history in images of the constant struggle between the evil force of Satan and his demonic cohorts and the goodness of God and those energized by His living force, the martyrs, saints, and angels” (*Orthodoxy and Psychology*, p. 37).

Such is the view of everyone described in today’s gospel: first of all Jesus, then the multitude pressing upon Him (vs. 20), “His own people” who consider Him to be “out of His mind” (vs. 21), and the officials who conclude that “by the ruler of the demons He casts out demons” (vs. 22). This spiritual battle between good and evil dominates the shared worldview of that age. Although there are sharp disagreements about who stands on which side, all agree that they are in the midst of an ongoing spiritual war.

Every serious Orthodox Christian tastes the bitterness of this struggle, for in our present era we are reading the latest chapter in a story that recurs throughout history. As Christians, we affirm that deliverance is ours “through the Incarnation of . . . Christ . . . from the bondage of the enemy.” Our recovery from bondage begins when we renounce “Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his service, and all his pride” (Service of baptism).

Let us read this passage from Saint Mark within the context of our baptism into Christ, for God our Savior entered the “strong man’s house,” bound him, and plundered “his goods” (vs. 27). Our Lord has never ceased His attack on the enemy, nor His work of setting us free.

Ironically, the materialist culture in which we live does not even consider whether or not Christ actually “casts out demons” (vs. 22). People around us are plunged into spiritual combat, but they often place the blame for this turmoil on terrorists, rogue nations, or greedy players in the world. Such mistaken views of history ensure our defeat in the conflicts which fill our daily lives. Why? Because we overlook the evil forces that instigate these battles.

Materialism rules out any possibility that spiritual struggle undergirds today’s conflicts. If we view life and history only superficially, we can never address the dark powers and evil rulers of this world who constantly warp our contemporary life. We are doomed to go on shadow-boxing, remaining victims rather than victors.

Imagine the response we would receive if we were to advise a politician, local official – or even a next-door neighbor – on society’s problems based on the worldview that our Lord Jesus Christ reveals in the present passage. Even the majority of professed Christians are ensnared by the pervasive materialist view of life. They would surely think, “He is out of His mind” (vs. 21). Some might demonize us as being in league with “Beelzebub” (vs. 22), i.e., one of the bad guys whom they blame for creating problems and making them victims.

Nevertheless, we rejoice. Although we disobeyed “the true God, who had created” us, were “led astray by the guile of the serpent” and banished “into this world,” God speaks “unto us through [His] Son.” He has “released us from the delusion of idols and brought us into a knowledge . . . of the true God and Father” and “unto the resurrection from the dead,” making a way for us to be victors in the ongoing spiritual war (Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great).

Arise, O God, judge the earth; for Thou shalt have an inheritance among the nations! – Great and Holy Saturday

August 31 - Thursday of the Thirteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 3:28-35

Jesus Christ as Judge: Mark 3:28-35, especially vss. 29, 35: “*He who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation. . . . Whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother.*” In today’s passage we encounter Saint Mark’s first mention of divine judgment. Up to this point, the evangelist has presented the Lord Jesus primarily as the Savior of mankind, casting out demons and healing every form of bodily and spiritual sickness. The people are still forming conclusions about Him: some follow Him and learn from Him, while others repudiate Him because of their darkened reasoning. On the basis of their own spiritual disorder, men dare to judge God.

At this point in the text, in order to correct these misperceptions, the Lord Jesus addresses them concerning *their* ultimate judgment. There will be eternal condemnation as well as familial affection and warmth in the kingdom of God. He who will judge the living and the dead continues to pursue salvation for all men, even as He reveals that our present actions have eternal consequences.

In verse 28, the Lord discloses the full scope of God’s forgiveness, revealing a salvation expansive and inclusive beyond our human imagination. Our repentance is assumed, even though the Lord does not mention it, for He desires that all should hasten to the mercy of God (Ps 33:9-10). No sin remains beyond the pale of God’s forgiveness, not even blasphemy against God Himself. No one is unforgivable. We rejoice as the Lord shatters the black despair of the most wretched sinner!

God does not remove the consequences of our wrongs, but He assures us of His forgiveness. The good thief dies on the cross, but enters Paradise because He cried out to Christ to remember him. In the same vein, the Church Fathers teach us that we must not despair of receiving forgiveness from God. “Even if you are not what you should be, you should not despair. It is bad enough that you have sinned; why in addition do you wrong God by regarding Him in your ignorance as powerless,” says Saint Peter of Damascus. “He will receive your repentance” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 160).

The Lord Jesus, having stated that God’s salvation is boundless, reveals that God honors human freedom even in those who disdain His mercy (vs. 29). It is our choice. The Lord does not say that anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit *will never have* forgiveness, for such a statement would contradict what He just said (vs. 28). He says “he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit *never has* forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation” (vs. 29).

The Lord here declares salvation impossible for one who steadfastly maintains that the work of the Holy Spirit is evil or satanic. Sin and evil are not of the Lord, but they may come to reside in us and dominate us.

Can we repent of blasphemy? Of course! Sadly, we bring eternal condemnation upon ourselves. The Lord’s wording in verse 29 is a carefully chosen response to the scribes’ claim that His exorcisms are the work of unclean spirits, rather than from God (vs. 22).

The Lord’s concluding comments about His extended family (vss. 31-35) underscore the part we play in our own salvation. We reveal ourselves to be true members of His family by cooperating with divine salvation and striving to do “the will of God” (vs. 35). The Lord’s grace enables us to do His will, as the example of the Theotokos illustrates. When we do God’s will, we have a basis for calling upon him as “our Father.”

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