

**February 1st - Thursday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost**  
**Hebrews 10:35-11:7**

**Therefore: Hebrews 10:35-11:7, especially vs. 6:** “*But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*” Note how today’s passage begins with the word “therefore” (vs. 35), declaring that we have now reached the conclusion of Saint Paul’s line of thought presented in chapters 8-11 of Hebrews. This series of passages meditates on the ineffable, unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ our God on the Cross for our salvation – His gift to us as the incarnate God-man.

The apostle’s use of *therefore* is intended to prompt our response to God’s actions. The Lord God has extended His amazing favor to mankind. Have we heard the message of the angels at Bethlehem, and the word of the angel at the empty tomb? “*Therefore, do not cast away your confidence*” (vs. 35). Let us not be frivolous, but allow the apostle to guide us to “*receive the promise*” (vs. 36) as well as the “*great reward*” (vs. 35).

When Saint Paul directs us to receive this *great reward*, his first instruction is that we not draw back (vss. 38-39). In confidence, we refuse to retreat. Indeed, we will need “*endurance*” (vs. 36), for how else will we counter the weakness of our flesh and the covert actions of the enemy? The demons know our desire for immediate gratification, and they play upon these weaknesses to divert us from our goal.

Without endurance for “*a little while*” (vs. 37), we are at risk of “[drawing] back to perdition” (vs. 39). However, we take God at His word: eternal destruction will not be our lot. The Apostle Paul affirms that those who trust God do endure. Knowing that God is absolutely faithful, they do not draw back, and in this way they save their souls.

Therefore, we trust in God, the One in whom we may place all our confidence. “*He . . . is coming [and] will come and will not tarry*” (vs. 37).

Then, the Apostle Paul reviews for us what it means to “*live by faith*” (vs. 38). “*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for*” (vs. 11:1). It is the essence of our hope, even though it cannot be proven by means of our physical senses. If we touch, taste, see, hear, and smell what we hope for, we have information, but not faith.

Apostolic faith does not depend upon the senses, although we can find “*evidence of things not seen*” (vs. 1), of what is yet realized. We have trustworthy representatives of Christ who report that He whom we expect “*is coming . . . and will not tarry*” (vs. 37). Based on the evidence of these witnesses, we prepare for His coming. We keep alert.

In this earthly life we live on the basis of trust. We accept the fact that “*the worlds were framed by the Word of God*” (vs. 3), although we did not see creation occur. We perceive, rather, that the world is orderly, reliable, and consistent; we infer from things seen the “*unseen*” hand of God who made the world. The apostle’s assertion thus rings true: “*that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible*” (vs. 3). They were created by the invisible God out of nothing. God brought everything into being by His Word. He spoke, and it came to be.

God created all things and holds everything in existence. How else does Abel offer an acceptable sacrifice to God (vs. 4)? What of Enoch, “*taken away so that he did not see death*” (vs. 5)? He pleased God by his faith (vs. 5)! What God asks is not beyond our ability.

God is the *rewarder* of “*those who diligently seek Him*” (vs. 6). *Therefore* we embrace the the message of God’s creation and Christ’s victory in the flesh. We prepare now for the day of salvation – a salvation far greater than Noah received (vs. 7)!

*Grant me to know Thy love, and make me like unto Thee, O Lord, my God.* – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

## February 2nd - Meeting of the Lord in the Temple Hebrews 7:7-17

**The Ultimate Blessing: *Hebrews 7:7-17, especially vs. 7:*** “Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better.” The Lord Jesus carefully instructs His followers concerning the culmination of time, when we will reach the end of the ages and the Last Judgment. On that day, the faithful will hear these words: “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt 25:34). The Master’s righteous servants – who are to be considered “lesser,” since we attain perfection only through His grace – shall then obtain the ultimate blessing from Christ, who is “better” – indeed, the best.

On another occasion, when the Virgin Theotokos and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the Temple “to present Him to the Lord” (Lk 2:22), we see the *lesser* blessed by *better*. Simeon takes the Child in his arms and acknowledges that he beholds the incarnate salvation of the human race. “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation” (vss. 29-30).

Writing today’s epistle, the Apostle Paul affirms that God the Father has provided His ultimate blessing to His people “by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (Heb 1:2). The appearance of the Son of God transforms the Old Covenant into the new – and better – one.

Under the original covenant, the various offerings of God’s people were brought to the Temple to be blessed through pronouncements by the Levitical priests. As Solomon demonstrated at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chr 6:1-7,10), a variety of blessings, with thank-offerings to God, were offered that the Lord might continue His provision for the people’s earthly needs (vss. 29-30). Sin offerings were made, so that God might extend forgiveness (vss. 22-23), while holocaust offerings were presented so that God might bless the people with His presence (vss. 18-19).

These acts of worship under the Old Covenant were types to be forever replaced by the appearance of the ultimate High Priest, who gives us the ultimate blessing. Indeed, mankind continues to receive all good things from God without limit: food, clothing, shelter, everything we need.

Our God has called us forth out of every nation, instituting a new age for giving thanks in Christian temples all over the world. Our praise and thanksgiving for God’s earthly good things are embedded in the far greater offering to God from Christ, who becomes His own offering, presented once “in behalf of all, and for all” (from the anaphora).

We still need God’s forgiveness and healing, of course, since we are all sinners. To this end, our Great High Priest offers His Body and Blood through the Eucharist, in order that for “those who shall partake thereof they may be unto vigilance of soul, unto forgiveness of sins, unto the communion of [the] Holy Spirit, unto the fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven.”

The perfection sought through the sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood is now fulfilled in Christ our High Priest. He ever intercedes for us (Heb 7:25). Just as Simeon embraced the ultimate blessing when he held the Child in his arms, so we now say, “My eyes have seen Your salvation” (Lk 2:30).

May we one day hear God’s perfect blessing spoken by His Son, when He declares the ultimate blessing to His own (Heb 7:11)! May we receive Him now through the Eucharist with boldness toward God and not “unto condemnation,” remembering that “Christ is in our midst!”

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

**February 3rd - Saturday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost**  
**Ephesians 5:1-8**

**Walk in Love: *Ephesians 5:1-8, especially vs. 1:*** “*Therefore be imitators of God as dear children.*” In the original Greek, the word translated as imitators is *mimitei*, a cognate of the English word “mimic.” As Orthodox Christians, we are God’s beloved children. We are intended to imitate our Father, who formed us from the dust as living souls and blew His spirit of life into us (Gn 2:7). To mimic God is to control our inner life and to direct our bodies as He wills.

Hence, the Apostle Paul begs us to “walk in love, *like Christ*” (Eph 5:2). Not just any kind of love will do, only love “as Christ . . . loved” (vs. 2). The “walk in love” of our Lord Jesus Christ was truly the self-sacrifice of God, an outpouring on our behalf (vs. 2).

For this reason Saint Paul uses imagery from ancient Jewish worship in the Temple. The holocaust offerings, totally consumed, symbolize a complete surrender to God by the worshipers. Our Lord’s death on the Cross is the prototype of such sacrifices (see Phil 2:7-8).

Our Savior, pure Himself, stepped into the waters of the baptism of repentance and thereby assumed the sins of the world. He walked in the desert of temptation to defeat the devil, by whom we are so often snared.

By the Sea of Galilee He called the fishermen, the tax collectors, and sinners like us, loving all He met with His sacrificial love. Among the crowds, He healed, taught, and disputed day after day, until the time came for Him to go to Jerusalem and complete His sacrifice (Lk 13:33). Our Lord’s every step was a walk in love.

We live in a world that reduces love to mere physical satisfaction. Many people get their way by hook or by crook, never seeking to quiet the desires swirling inside them. The tide of the coarse, the crude, and the cruel encroaches on us all, pushing away the sacred and the pure.

And yet Saint Paul calls us saints (Eph 5:3), united to Christ. In the Lord we find the grace to love truly, to defeat temptation, to acquire pure motives by continence, to become worthy of His blessing. We are people of thanksgiving, for our Eucharist of praise (vs. 4) has “in remembrance . . . all those things which have come to pass for us” through the mercy of our gracious Savior, who still walks among us in love.

How shall we enjoy “any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (vs. 5)? It will not be through lust, nor impurity, nor coveting (vs. 5). Such impulses are signs of the materialistic personality. In cultures where idolatry is openly embraced, religion is usually coupled with immorality and debauchery. In the growth of Satanism and witchcraft in modern society are signs of a resurgence of corrupt religion, but let us not be deceived.

Around us are “empty words” (vs. 6) full of deceit uttered by politicians, advertisers, entertainers, broadcasters, even televangelists. But we are guarded by the mysteries of Christ, for “[we are] baptized. [We are] illumined. [We have] received anointment with holy chrism. [We are] sanctified [and] washed: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

The door has been opened wide for us to “be sheltered in the shelter of [God’s] wings” (Ps 60:4). Social decline afflicts every nation. However, the dread judgment seat of Christ is a certainty, when “the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (vs. 6).

Perhaps we are surrounded by nonbelievers who are unaware of their debasement. The Apostle Paul counsels us, “Do not be partakers with them” (vs. 7). It is never easy for us to walk “as children of light” (vs. 8). Perhaps we too “were once darkness” (vs. 8), as Saint Paul puts it. And yet it is not too late to “put off the old man” (vs. 4:22); for “now you are light in the Lord” (vs. 8). We have God’s grace to walk in love, as Christ’s own saints.

*Adorn me, teach and enlighten me. Show me to be a dwelling place of Thy Spirit.* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**February 4<sup>th</sup> - Thirtieth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Colossians 3:12-16**

**Put on Christ: Colossians 3:12-16, especially vss. 12-13:** “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another . . . even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.” On the great feasts, we replace the trisagion hymn “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal” with the baptismal antiphon: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). Writing to the Christians at Colossae, Saint Paul lists the virtues we are called upon to acquire as “the elect of God” (Col 3:12) – as those who have “put on” Christ.

It is one thing for us to receive an invitation to the heavenly banquet (Mt 22:2-10), but quite another for us to be properly attired in a wedding garment (vss. 11-12). Saint Paul lays out the design of this garment so that we may weave it, wear it, and prove ourselves worthy.

We already have before us the true model, clothed in every virtue: Christ our God. What He did, we “also must do” (Col 3:13). We are united to Him, and yet we spend our lives endeavoring to “put on Christ.” He reveals the form of the garment, but who does not require some major tailoring in his life – letting out a great deal there, taking in a little bit here?

Getting the right fit is what this life is about. If we are to put on Christ, we must lay the fabric of our souls on the cutting table, measure it against the divine pattern we have been given, and go to work snipping and sewing.

Note how every virtue in this passage, from tender mercies (vs. 12) to *love* (vs. 14), are intended to be translated into action. First, however, we must affirm them in our heart as qualities. This is why the Church Fathers insist we begin with purification of the heart. According to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, “For someone who desires spiritual rebirth, the first step toward the light is to curtail the passions, that is to say, to guard the heart; for it is impossible otherwise to curtail the passions” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 74).

Psalmody, of which Saint Paul speaks (vs. 16), can help warm our hearts. Attentiveness and prayer ward off “all distractive thoughts that encircle the heart” through “the invocation of the Lord Jesus Christ,” says Saint Symeon.

If we desire to show a modicum of compassion and *tender mercy* toward others, then we must use every appropriate means the Master makes available to us. We take risks, like the Good Samaritan, and strive to meet the most basic needs of those God places in our path.

*Kindness* is expressed naturally when we exercise the tenderness our Lord displayed when He met the widow of Nain. Following the funeral bier of her only son, “He had compassion on her” (Lk 7:13). Then He spoke to her, came to the coffin, and touched it.

*Humility*, says Saint John Chrysostom, “is the basis of all virtue. . . . [do] not [be] lowly toward one, and rude toward another; be lowly toward all men, be he friend or foe, be he great or small. This is lowliness” (“Homily 9 on Ephesians,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 13, p. 96). *Meekness*, according to Saint John Climacus, “is an immovable state of soul which remains unaffected, whether in evil report or in good report, in dishonor or in praise” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 8.3, p. 81).

To “put on Christ” means that we endure loss, insult, and wounds, and yet still forgive. Only then are we truly *longsuffering*. With each virtue, let us “put on love, which is the bond of perfection” (Col 3: 14). Such is the way of Christ, our Master and our model.

*I have put Thee on, O Christ our God; in Thy mercy make me a victor, even unto the end.*  
– Chrismation Prayer

**February 5th – Monday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost**  
**Hebrews 11:17-31**

**Promise and Faith: Hebrews 11:17-31, especially vss. 17-18:** “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called.’” The actions that lead Abraham toward the sacrifice of his son Isaac are neither blind nor irrational. Indeed, logical choice leads Abraham to pursue a deliberate plan to sacrifice his only son.

Although on the face of it the sacrifice of Isaac seems contradictory and irrational, the underlying cause of the patriarch’s actions is his absolute trust in God’s word. He fully accepts the trustworthiness of what God has promised him. This trust is possible because the patriarch is certain that God is able to keep His promises.

Today’s epistle reading highlights the essential connection between promise and faith. As illustrations, Saint Paul offers us a series of faith-based actions by various Old Testament saints who trusted God’s promises. Each of them anchored his faith on the reliability of God. Their examples are especially important for us Christians struggling to live by faith in the strange land of contemporary materialist and secular culture.

The apostle continues his discussion of what it means to act on faith in verse 20, jumping ahead to the time when Abraham’s son Isaac is himself an old man. When Isaac blesses his sons Jacob and Esau, he, like his father, cites a promise from God (see Gn 26:2-4; 27:1-40).

In the apostle’s next example, we see Jacob, now an old man, blessing his grandsons by Joseph (Heb 11:21). Again, there is reference to a promise from God (Gn 48:3, 15-16). And on Joseph’s deathbed (Heb 11:22) many ancient promises, including those involving Joseph’s brothers, are once again reviewed (Gn 50:22-26).

Saint Paul next reminds us of the birth of the great Moses. His parents refused to obey Pharaoh’s command of infanticide (Heb 11:23) because of a promise (Ex 2:1-10). Indeed, the book of Hebrews continually reminds us of God’s zeal and dedication toward releasing His enslaved people from bondage.

When Moses comes of age, he “by faith forsook Egypt” (vs. 27). (Note how, in verse 26, the Apostle Paul refers to Christ in His pre-incarnate divinity. A similar reference to Christ appears in First Corinthians 10:1-4.) Each verse of today’s passage continues the refrain “by faith.” Saint Paul makes sure that each verse also contains one or more of the Lord’s promises, upon which vital faith forever depends.

The apostle then reviews the first Passover (Heb 11:28), taking us to the shores of the Red Sea to witness Israel’s deliverance (vs. 29) and the destruction of Pharaoh’s army. These events became the basis for Passover feast celebrated by the Israelites (Ex 12:13-16, 26-28) and also the basis for the Evangelist John’s theme of the lamb (Jn 1:29, 36).

When the Lord says to Moses, “Tell the children of Israel to go forward” (Ex 14:15), this promise gives them the necessary faith to make the passage. Skipping over their years in the desert, the apostle again shows us promise evoking faith, in this instance before the fortifications of Jericho (Heb 11:30, Jos 6:2). Note that the “harlot Rahab did not perish” with the other citizens in the fortress because she helped the Israelite spies before the battle (Heb 11:31, Jos 6:20-21).

Saint Basil the Great says of God’s promises, “To him who believes, a promise is given by God: ‘I will give you hidden treasures, unseen ones’ (Is 45:3). When we have been deemed worthy of knowledge face to face, we shall see also the depths in the storehouses of God.”

*O Lord, remember Thy holy promises, and bring forth Thy people with joy.* – Based on Psalm 104

**February 6th – Tuesday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost**  
**Hebrews 12:25-26, 13:22-25**

**The Voice of the Lord:** *Hebrews 12:25-26, 13:22-25, especially vs. 12:25:* “See that you do not refuse Him who speaks.” The Prophet David composed this beautiful hymn lauding the voice of the Lord: “The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory hath thundered, the Lord is upon the many waters. The voice of the Lord in might, the voice of the Lord in majesty, the voice of the Lord who breaketh the cedars, yea, the Lord will break the cedars of Lebanon. And He will break them small like the calf of Lebanon, and His beloved is like a son of the unicorns. The voice of the Lord who divideth the flame of fire, the voice of the Lord who shaketh the wilderness, yea, the Lord shaketh the wilderness of Kaddis. The voice of the Lord gathereth the harts, and shall reveal the thickets of oak, and in His temple every man uttereth glory” (Ps 28:3-9).

In today’s epistle the words of the Apostle Paul, like those of the Psalmist David, help us to heed the voice of the Lord. Although the Lord’s voice breaks great trees and makes mountains *skip* (Ps 113:4), shaking and gathering animals into herds, this voice is never impersonal. It is neither a brute power nor inanimate energy, nor does it lack intelligence.

Rather, the voice of the Lord is meaningful and personal, coming from our God who conveys His intention, purpose, and result. Thus the Apostle Paul entreats us, “See that you do not refuse Him who speaks” (Heb. 12:25).

The voice of God is recorded by His people in Holy Scripture, by a community brought together by His voice. Scripture is our primary written witness of God’s words and accomplishments. Here we also discover what God is doing at this very moment and what He will bring about through time unto eternity.

At the center of all Scripture is the Word of God, for the voice of the Lord comes to us as God the Word. The Word achieves everything described in Psalm 103: He “stretchest out the heavens . . . maketh the clouds . . . laid the foundation of the earth . . . coveredst it with the deep . . . gave drink to every beast . . . causeth the grass to grow . . . giveth meat to all in due season.”

More important than these provisions are the people He brings forth – a host “innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore” (Heb 11:12). He covenants with us, calls us His people, and goes before us to do battle on our behalf. He bears us up in His arms “as a man carries his son” (Dt 1:31).

The Apostle Paul deplores the refusal of the early people of God to hear and obey the voice of the Lord, who raised up the Prophet Moses to lead them into a land of their own. At the boundary of that land, they “would not go up, but disobeyed the word of the Lord [their] God. And . . . murmured” (vss. 1:26-27).

Through the great Law-giver, God clearly told them by His Word – His own voice from the mountain – that He would give them the land. “Yet, in all this matter [they] did not believe the Lord [their] God” (vs. 1:32). Hence, Saint Paul says, “they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth” (Heb 12:25). They died in the wilderness, outside the promised land!

May we always heed the message God gives to us through “Him who speaks from heaven” (vs. 25): Jesus, the Incarnate voice of the Father, “His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (vs. 1:2). We have greater divine promises than did ancient Israel. Let us not refuse God, for we shall “not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven” (vs. 12:25).

*As Moses communed with God and, in an ineffable manner, received Thy voice in his ear, do Thou prepare us to worship Thee, O Word of the Father, and ever to hear and to obey Thee.*

– Verse from Cheesefare Sunday

**February 7th - Wednesday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost**  
**James 1:1-18**

**Coping with Trials: James 1:1-18, especially vs. 2:** *“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.”* The first-century brethren to whom the Apostle James is writing are in the midst of a test of their commitment to the Lord Jesus. As the apostle warns, such *perasmos* (“trials”) are often accompanied by personal suffering. Although these brethren do not face martyrdom, those he addresses must stand fast as “confessors” of the faith, to use the Church’s terminology.

The Apostle James is counseling us as well, for our own faith is being tested. On television and in the media, in classrooms at college and secondary school alike, we are bombarded with materialistic, godless messages. Scant allowance is made for spiritual truth, still less for the possibility of miracles, asceticism, chastity, traditional morality, or worship.

Indeed, spirituality in almost any form is treated as either nonexistent, unimportant, or worthy of ridicule. Let us wake up! Our faith is being repudiated, undermined, and brushed aside!

Patience is necessary if we are to endure this constant, unrelenting assault on the sacred. Saint James advises us to “let patience have its perfect work, that before God we may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (vs. 4).

Above all, we should never underestimate the worldly learning and persuasiveness of those who oppose the Orthodox faith. They ride the crest of a wave of popular acceptance. When we feel ourselves incapable of speaking the truth, or lacking sufficient wisdom, we “ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to [us]” (vs. 5).

We strengthen our faith by standing before the holy icons, reading Scripture, and absorbing the hymns and prayers of the Divine Liturgy. These reinforce our commitment to God, so that we do not become like one “who doubts,” nor “like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (vs. 6). We avoid adopting a worldly outlook that would make us “double minded” and “unstable” in our ways (vs. 8), for in such a case we will not “receive anything from the Lord” (vs. 7).

In the midst of our success-driven culture, we who lack riches and status look to Jesus Christ, who also was poor, and “glory in [our] exaltation” with Him before God the Father (vs. 9). If we are wealthy by worldly standards, then we remember how fleeting and uncertain riches can be. In the heat of the marketplace, our financial worth can wither like the grass and perish. We know that “the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits” (vs. 11).

Instead, let us labor for that which lasts for eternity. If we endure temptation and are approved of God, we “will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (vs. 12).

Above all, we do not blame God for our struggles. We understand that we may be drawn away – either by our “own desires” (vs. 14) or by whatever “gives birth to sin” (vs. 15) – and run the risk of falling into the full-blown sin that “brings forth death” (vs. 15). The worst outcome is to be captured by this world: its assumptions are deadly, no matter how plausible they sound.

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights” (vs. 17). With God we escape from the changing fads of this materialistic world, for in Him “there is no variation or shadow of turning” (vs. 17). Like a mother, He gave us birth that we might become “a kind of firstfruits of His creatures” (vs. 18) – an entirely new kind of humanity. Let us hold onto this gift from our Father and keep His name holy all our days.

*Show me to be a dwelling-place of Thy Spirit; and in no wise the dwelling-place of sin.*  
– Post-communion Prayer

**February 8th – Thursday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost**  
**James 1:19-27**

**Self-Deception: James 1:19-27, especially vs. 25:** “*But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.*” What standard should we use if we wish to measure ourselves honestly, to assess accurately who and what we are? Saint James teaches us to look “into the perfect law of liberty” (vs. 25) – by which he means the Lord Jesus, for only Christ embodies the perfect law of liberty for mankind.

By looking at Him and measuring ourselves in turn, we are enabled to see ourselves without distortion, inflation, or self-flattery. The Lord neither enlarges our moral and spiritual height nor diminishes it, nor does He pass over any desire of our hearts. In musical terms, we can liken Him to that pure note or pitch with which any slight tonal variation, sharp or flat, will immediately cause discord.

Christ our God is the reliable standard to use for authentic assessment of every person, no matter what our race or tongue. Being Himself pure and undistorted, He accurately reflects all our “filthiness and overflow of wickedness” (vs. 21), as well as our potential for “pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father” (vs. 27).

The Elder Joseph the Hesychast explains how the Lord mirrors every element of our lives so well: “Once someone has tasted wine, he can tell if they give him vinegar instead.” The Lord Jesus is the wine; to know Him is to know both the bad and the good within ourselves.

First, the Lord Jesus shows us how slow we are to hear (vs. 19). When asked why He speaks in parables, Jesus replies, “Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore, I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Mt 13:12-13).

Instead, He opens our ears that we may be *swift to hear*. “God renders judgment and will render it. He will come and save us. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall hear” (Is 35:4-5).

Foolish as we are, we are often swift to give way to wrath rather than offering a kind or healing word (Jas 1:19). Invariably, our wrath “does not produce the righteousness of God” (vs. 20). As Solomon wisely said, “A stone is heavy, and sand is cumbersome; but the wrath of a man without discernment is heavier than both” (Prv 27:3).

Thankfully, Jesus Christ our Savior turns us from wrath. When His disciples are ready to destroy a community of Samaritans who will not receive the Lord, Jesus rebukes them, saying, “The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them” (Lk 9:56).

Jesus Himself implants His words in our heart and enables us to receive His gifts and spirit of meekness (Jas 1:21). He it was who “was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb [was] silent before his shearers” (Is 53:7). He reveals the beauty of a meek and quiet spirit in the face of violence. Christ Jesus exemplifies His beatitude “blessed are the meek,” for at the end of all things, He “shall inherit the earth” (Mt 5:5).

Jesus our Lord blesses us when we care for the widow and orphan (Jas 1:27) instead of exploiting or ignoring the poor and defenseless: “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Mt 25:40).

Let us follow Saint James’ teachings and look steadily “into the perfect law of liberty,” our Lord Jesus Christ, not as forgetful hearers but as doers of the work Christ gives to us (Jas 1:25). Only He can keep us unspotted from the world and undeceived in our hearts (vs. 26).

*Illumine our hearts, O Master who loveth mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge; and implant in us also the fear of Thy blessed commandments!* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom



**February 9th - Friday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost**  
**James 2:1-13**

**Partiality: James 2:1-13, especially vs. 1:** “*My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.*” The Apostle James is intensely concerned with the vice of partiality (see verses 1, 4, and 9). But what, exactly, is this partiality he warns against? The New Testament Greek word translated into English as partiality is formed from the word *lambano* – “to take in hand,” “receive,” or “recognize” – combined with the word *prosopon*, which means “person.”

According to Metropolitan John Zizioulas, in Greek culture *prosopon* came “to be identified . . . quickly with the mask, *prosopeion*, which was used in the theater.” So close was the association between the two words that they became synonyms. Thus, “in the ancient Hellenic world for someone to ‘be a person’ meant that he had something added to his being” (

*Prosopon* thus implies a person’s outward features or characteristics. The New Testament writers, including Saint James, were drawn to this word when expressing the vice of showing “favoritism with respect to distinguishing features or external appearance” – that is, *partiality*.

The use of this word by the epistle writer expresses the idea of giving special attention to, or favoring, someone more than another. Clearly, the emphasis in the original is on the outward features and characteristics that draw us to a person or group of people.

Drawing upon this understanding, let us turn to Saint James’ illustration of partiality. He identifies this practice, into which his readers obviously have fallen, as one of paying “attention to the one wearing the fine clothes” (vs. 3) as opposed to recognizing the “poor man in filthy clothes” (vs. 2).

When we look at partiality this way, we surely recognize the impulse to favoritism which is common to us all. As Christians, however, we face a stern apostolic warning against showing any type of partiality or favor. Saint James commands us to “show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” (tr of vs. 1 in RSV). We are to guard against the pervasive and sinful inclinations of our souls that prefer certain classes of persons over others.

When we meet a person of a certain ethnic background, we may be drawn instantly to like or dislike that person just because of these distinguishing features. In American culture, we have a strong bias in favor of youthful dress and youthfulness. We are suspicious of people who speak with certain accents.

Regardless of the fact that bias is repudiated and even sometimes made illegal, we are still partial. We divide up people into classes of those we like and those we do not. We do exactly what the Apostle cautions us to avoid, for “if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (vs. 9). It is not enough to mask our tastes and inclinations – we must be prepared to confess these sinful tendencies of our hearts to God.

Saint James suggests that the way out of the snare of this nearly universal sin can be found by fulfilling “the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (vs. 8). This rule he calls “the law of liberty” (vs. 12).

Yes, it is one thing when God commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves; it is another to actually do it. Saint James reminds us that “the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” to which we hold is our commitment to “the Lord of glory” (vs. 1). May we discover through His grace that “mercy triumphs over judgment” (vs. 13), for Christ yearns to free us to experience impartial love for everyone.

*O Lord Jesus, cleanse me from all inclination and showing of favor, so that I may treat all others as my brethren, hold the faith without partiality, and love others as myself.*

**February 10th - Saturday - February 10 – Saint Haralampos**  
**2 Timothy 2:1-10**

**Committing the Ministry: 2 Timothy 2:1-10, especially vs. 2:** *“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”* Following His baptism, the Lord Jesus trained a select group of men who would experience His ministry, Passion, and Resurrection (Lk 24:48). Later, He named them apostles, meaning “those sent.” These men were formally commissioned to labor as His ambassadors and serve as pastors over His flock, the authorized teachers of His Gospel (Mt 28:19-20).

Christ Jesus committed this ministry to His apostles so that others, in turn, might follow the Lord as the true Way. The process of committing one another to the faith continues to the present day without interruption. It has never been the sole possession of some elite inner society. Rather, it is the work of the whole community of the People of God – all of us whom are called “the faithful.”

At an ordination, the faithful see the candidate brought before the bishop as to Christ. The plea is made, “Command, holy Master.” The bishop prays to Christ our God, the Master of all, to fill this human vessel with grace, strength, and love through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

As the bishop vests the one who will minister within the Church, he declares: “He is worthy.” The faithful in turn assent, “He is worthy.” This commissioning of ordination is a communal work by the community, the Body of Christ. We commit “faithful men, who will be able to teach others” (vs. 2) what every member has within himself.

What does the Church require of our leaders, those selected to train others and hand on the life in Christ? Above all, leaders are to acquire the interior life needed to transmit the faith to others. Such an orientation comes only from Christ.

For this reason, the Apostle Paul tells Timothy, “You . . . be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (vs. 1). No one who teaches, leads, pastors, admonishes, or counsels is able to do so on the basis of natural skill. Nor can our leaders rely solely on a college or seminary education, or on some special courses they attended.

All such commitment occurs through “the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” Church leaders capable of investing the faith in others – bishops, priests, deacons, even church school teachers – must steep themselves in Christ’s life as it flows through the Church.

Saint Paul teaches that those selected to transmit the faith to others must be faithful to the ministry and Person of Christ our God (vs. 2). All of the faithful must embark upon the lifelong process of purification and illumination, by which we are renewed in Christ.

We strive to escape “the corruption that is in the world through lust” as well as to “be partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4) by means of theosis (deification). Of course, we do not expect perfection of our leaders. Rather, our leaders themselves are seeking completion in Christ. Evidence of this quest is the basis for our trust in them.

Every faithful leader commissioned by the Lord Jesus for ministry through His Church must develop an aptitude for conveying the faith. These leaders need to “be able to teach others also” (vs. 2).

Ultimately, however, a commitment to live the life in Christ is the true basis of the ministry required of the Church’s true leaders. To help another person commit to the Lord, we must know Him in our heart. As we seek to know Him, the Lord Jesus shapes us from the inside out. Let us make Him our life and our hope, as He desires to be for each one of us.

*Preserve, O Lord, in pureness of life and unswerving faith, all who are joined to Thee!*  
–Prayer of Ordination

**February 11th - Thirty-first Sunday after Pentecost (also, Sunday of the Canaanite Woman)  
1 Timothy 1:15-17**

**Chief of Sinners: 1 Timothy 1:15-17, especially vs. 15:** “*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.*” What exactly does Saint Paul mean by stating that he is *chief* among sinners? “How was he the first?” asks Saint Augustine. Clearly, the apostle wants to tell us “that I am worse than all of them. By first, he meant us to understand worst”

Does Saint Paul’s sweeping indictment apply to us as well? Perhaps we recall that the Church puts these very words on our lips during every Divine Liturgy. We declare them to “the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise” (vs. 17). Let us consider carefully the intention of this heartfelt prayer uttered just before holy communion: “I believe, O Lord, and I confess that Thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the living God, who didst come into the world to save sinners, of whom *I am chief.*”

Saint Paul appears to be measuring himself against other sinners, i.e., using the sins of others as the standard for evaluating himself. The apostle’s early life in Judaism justifies such an approach, for he actively made “havoc of the Church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison” (Acts 8:3). In his fury, he was even “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (vs. 9:1).

After he became a Christian, the Apostle Paul was compelled to confess that he had been the chief of all sinners. Indeed, he surely include himself in the list of “sinners . . . the unholy and profane” set forth in 1 Timothy 1:9-10!

No doubt, some of us may identify with Saint Paul’s self-evaluation. We may readily admit that we belong to the ranks of those who have lived “contrary to sound doctrine” (vs. 10). Others of us, however, may see his words as mere hyperbole – the kind of talk suitable for Church, but not really applicable to our own lives.

Let us take care, however, not to pass over Saint Paul’s statement too quickly. Saint Augustine understands our true condition! Reflecting upon the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus, he observes: “If a great doctor has come down from heaven, a great invalid must have been lying very sick throughout the whole wide world. This invalid is the whole human race.”

Let us find courage to conduct a thorough a self-examination! Perhaps measuring our behavior against that of others may become an excuse for us to ignore the term “chief of sinners.” After all, we see people in the world today heartlessly pursuing terrorist acts. Others embrace every form of sexual libertinism and defend the resulting need for the “convenience” of abortion. In business and finance, some people resort to gross deceptions and lies to improve their bottom line. Are we truly worse than these people?

Using examples of public misbehavior as the primary measure for evaluating our own sins is a serious mistake. Such an approach is not in accord with “sound doctrine” (vs. 10). “For man does not see as God sees,” the Lord cautions the Prophet Samuel, “for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord sees into the heart” (1 Kgs 16:7).

By the grace of God, we are asked to plumb the depths of our heart, without offering excuses or extenuating circumstances. We soon discover that “the heart is deep beyond all things, and it is the man. Even so, who can know him?” (Jer 17:5).

Without God’s grace, we can never know the true extent of our wickedness. We are far too adept at deceiving ourselves, and the weight of this knowledge would likely crush us.

And yet God leads us toward repentance – and life. Christ Jesus came into the world to save each and every one of us *chief* sinners, offering us His complete forgiveness. The Lord says, “When I say to the ungodly man, ‘You will surely die,’ and he turns from his sin, does judgment and righteousness . . . he will surely live” (Ezk 33:14-15).

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

**February 12th - Monday of the Thirty-second/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost**  
**James 2:14-26**

**Faith Works: James 2:14-26, especially vs. 17:** “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” We note how carefully this sentence from James’ epistle is constructed so as to emphasize the primacy of faith in our Christian life. We further observe how the Apostle James qualifies his remarks about faith by adding the phrase “by itself,” followed by the stipulation, “if it does not have works.” The Fathers of the Church are of one accord concerning both the primacy of faith and the need for robust faith to lead us to good works.

According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “Only the good deed done for Christ’s sake brings us the fruits of the Holy Spirit. All that is not done for Christ’s sake, even though it be good, brings neither reward in the future life, nor the grace of God in this life” (*Little Russian Philokalia, vol. 1: Saint Seraphim*, p. 86). Although Saint Seraphim does not directly refer to *faith*, we understand that no one does *good deeds* “for Christ’s sake” unless he has faith in Christ, trusting in the Lord’s authority over all his works.

Although we are baptized and chrismated, we sometimes receive holy communion as a matter of habit. Perhaps we were brought up to approach the chalice every Sunday. If such is the case we may lack faith in Christ, even though we consider ourselves to be good Orthodox Christian. A basic key, essential to the life in Christ, appears to be missing.

Saint Seraphim implies that trust in Christ is the true basis for all “good works.” Orthodox training, at any age, is meant to awaken our faith, so that we truly trust in Christ and do never act solely on the basis of accumulated habit.

Saint Seraphim further assures us that doing good works for the Lord provides us with grace now, in this present life, and also leads us toward eternal life in the age to come. Likewise, Saint James assumes that every good work must be done for Christ’s sake, although he does not specifically say so. The emphasis on Christ is clear when we read the whole of Saint James’ epistle, especially verses 5-8 in the first chapter.

Those of us who do good works for Christ because our parents taught us to do so are greatly blessed. However, if our parents assumed that we would do good for Christ’s sake, but never helped us understand the true reason for our works, we may simply continue our habits as adults without ever wondering why.

Both the Apostle James and Saint Seraphim confirm that doing good is our duty as Christians. Why does Saint Seraphim warn that the blessing is lost if those good deeds are done without faith in Christ? Our good works are blessed because of our faith; works done for other reasons lack the necessary foundation for this blessing from Christ.

Isn’t it enough to believe in Christ? Surely we receive God’s blessing simply by confessing our faith in Him in few words. No doubt, such expressions are a form of faith in the Lord. However, if we end with such a confession, our faith is still-born, according to Saint James.

Saint James warns that we risk becoming truncated Christians if we never undertake good deeds based on our confession of Christ. This is why he speaks of “faith by itself” and emphasizes that such faith “is dead” (vs. 17).

Mere basking in the Nicene Creed does not confer the fullness of God’s blessing. True Christians share in labor with Christ our God. The Lord speaks of how we are “yoked” to Him (Mt 11:29-30). Our faith in Christ leads us to put on His yoke and do His works, pulling with our Master and yoke-mate. Let us be blessed by doing good works in Christ (Eph 2:10)!

*O Christ our God, may I carry out every deed and word, in saving fear of Thee.* – Chrismation Prayer

**February 13th - Tuesday of the Thirty-Second/Thirty-Third Week after Pentecost**  
**James 3:1-10**

**Teaching Christ: James 3:1-10, especially vs. 1:** “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.” Saint James warns those drawn to a ministry of teaching to consider the work cautiously. First, he reminds us that teaching Christ is a high calling, for a teacher faces higher standards before the judgment seat of Christ (vs. 1). Since stumbling is a human characteristic “in many things” (vs. 2), while what is taught is perfect in all respects, we ought to be slow to teach until we attain a high level of self-control. Lastly, since teaching often involves speaking and “no man can tame the tongue” (vs. 8), there is good reason to approach an educational mission with caution.

As we begin our consideration of this passage, we recognize that there are different levels and kinds of teaching. What does it mean to serve at the very highest level of pedagogy – to teach about Christ? The idea that one might teach anyone about the Lord seems absurd, if we look at the task soberly.

However, the teaching of the faith remains an essential ministry within the Church (Eph 4:11), even if the endeavor borders on the preposterous. We must keep in mind that the Christian teacher is not asked to conduct an academic course about Christ in the abstract. Understanding the limitations of the human mind – his own as well as that of others – the true teacher of the faith does never seeks to convey a mere body of intellectual information.

The true Christian teacher necessarily speaks from the heart, from the inmost aspect of his being, which the Fathers call the *nous*. In the *nous*, all learning takes place through an immediate encounter with Christ, not through the abstract concepts of the rational mind.

Holy communion, for example, does not offer us mere thoughts about Christ Jesus; rather, we receive His all-pure Body and Blood. In like manner the faithful do not read the Bible simply to learn about the Lord, but rather to meet the God the Word in the words of Holy Scripture.

Christianity is never taught, only “caught.” Thus the true teacher must know Christ personally. According to Saint Peter of Damascus, every teacher ought to “pay attention to what the Savior teaches him and do all he can to escape from the enemies’ traps. . . . As Saint James the Brother of God rightly says, ‘All good giving and every perfect gift comes from above’ (Jas 1:17)” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 154).

Since “we all stumble in many things” (vs. 2), those of us who teach the faith need great self-control. The all-encompassing virtue of the soul “is self-control, by which I mean abstinence from all passions,” says Saint Peter of Damascus. “The person who possesses this virtue does not tolerate any thought or word, any movement of hand or foot or of any other member of the body, unless it is essential to the life of the body or to the soul’s salvation” (p. 219).

The Apostle James identifies one of the most difficult hurdles for self-control: management of the tongue. The speech of fallen men is “unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (vs. 8). True Christian teaching is shared through action, yet every teacher must speak as well. We must always remain aware that danger is near when we speak, for “out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing” (vs. 10).

Saint Paul calls the true teacher to become “an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tm 4:12). Here is a humbling standard for anyone called to be a Christian teacher. Apart from the grace of God, how can we hope to teach Christ?

*O Most-good Lord! Send down upon us the grace of Thy Holy Spirit, so that by attending to the teaching Thou dost give us, we may grow into the glory of Thee, our Creator, our most holy Truth, and our only Way.* – Prayers During the Day

**February 14th - Wednesday of the Thirty-second/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost  
James 3:11-4:6**

**Wisdom From Above: James 3:11-4:6, especially vs. 17:** “*But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.*” The Apostle James distinguishes “earthly, sensual, demonic” wisdom from the true “wisdom that is from above” (vss. 15, 17). Likewise, Saint Paul differentiates between “the wisdom of this world” and “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:20-21).

According to Saint James, we must conduct ourselves faithfully if we wish to enter into “the meekness of wisdom” from above (Jas 3:13). Note how the apostle speaks of this higher wisdom as a dwelling place where we may situate our hearts. He likens the wisdom of this world to another kind of a residence “where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there” (vs. 16). We are often tempted to stray into just such a place, and there we find ourselves living in bitterness and missing the joys of the true wisdom “from above.”

To help us enter into this “wisdom that is from above” (vs. 17), Saint James lists several key obediences: we are to draw near to God, cleanse our hands, purify our hearts, lament, mourn, and weep. In short, we are to “humble [ourselves] in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift [us] up” (vss. 4:10).

By speaking of wisdom as a location, the epistle writer strengthens his point that these two types of wisdom are contradictory – indeed, they are completely antithetical. A spring will only send forth one kind of water, never both *fresh* and *bitter* from the same opening (vs. 3:11). Trees bear the one fruit that their nature produces (vs. 12).

Thus, when we choose to live in envy, self-seeking, confusion, and other evils, we can expect only earthly, sensual, and demonic wisdom to prevail (vss. 15-16). But Saint James tells us that if we humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord and open our hearts to Him, we allow the Spirit to enter and provide the “wisdom from above” (vs. 17).

The first key for drawing near to God is prayer. “Prayer is one wing, faith the other, that lifts us heavenward,” writes Tito Colliander. “With only one wing no one can fly: prayer without faith is as meaningless as faith without prayer” (*Way of the Ascetics*, p. 56). The Prophet David affirms: “It is good for me to cleave unto God” (Ps 72:26). We are to cry out, like Saint Augustine: “Let me know Thee, Thou that knowest me. . . . O Thou strength of my soul, enter into it and prepare it for Thyself . . . without spot or wrinkle” (*Confessions* 10.1, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 1, p. 142).

The next key is moral purification: we must *cleanse our hands* (Jas 4:8). Saint John of Kronstadt advises us to “observe temperance and simplicity in food and drink; preserve chastity; do not foolishly squander the balsam of your life; do not seek after riches or luxury” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. 152).

First and foremost, the goal of this cleansing is to purify the heart. Even good thoughts during prayer open the way for the devil to slip in, which ultimately results in the adultery of our spirit. For this reason Saint James calls us “adulterers and adulteresses,” because our “friendship with the world is enmity with God” (vs. 4). We are to beg the Lord, “Help me to keep my thoughts on Thee, that I may hear Thee speaking in my heart.”

Finally, our cleansing is achieved by persistent repentance. This is why we “lament and mourn and weep” (vs. 9). “And if you fall again,” says Saint Peter of Damascus, “then rise again, without despairing at all of your salvation, no matter what happens. So long as you do not surrender yourself willingly to the enemy, your patient endurance . . . will suffice for your salvation” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 170).

*May the Lord keep your soul and body from every evil and from every adversity caused by the devil and from every imagination causing disturbance; may the Lord be your light, your protection, your way, your strength, the crown of your joy and eternal help.*

– Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*

**February 15th - Thursday of the Thirty-second Week/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost  
James 4:7-5:9**

**Ten Commandments for Disciples: James 4:7-5:9, especially vs. 17:** “Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.” Our life in Christ never conflicts with the Ten Commandments given by God to His people in ancient times (see Dt 5:7-21; Ex 20:1-17). At the same time, our life in Christ differs from existence under the Law of Moses, for the Lord requires us to do good not out of obedience alone, but from our hearts. In today’s verses, Saint James enumerates ten commandments for Christ’s disciples, showing us how the impetus “to do good” (vs. 4:17) flowers from a pure heart.

1. *Submit to God* (vs. 4:7): The Lord teaches us that “God is Spirit” (Jn 4:24). To submit to God requires surrendering the spiritual aspect of our being to Him, so that we may be united with God “in spirit and truth.” This spiritual aspect is called the heart, which must be the basis of all true discipleship.

2. *Resist the devil* (vs. 4:7): The mystery of baptism begins with an exorcism, which expels every spirit “which operateth through the prompting of the devil.” Such foul spirits must be driven from our hearts during this life, so that we continue to “renounce Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his service, and all his pride.”

3. *Draw near to God* (vs. 4:8): Having received baptism and chrismation, we strive to draw steadily nearer to God. Christ’s grace acts in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

4. *Cleanse your hands* (vs. 4:8): Our actions and words can sully our hands and corrupt our hearts. For this reason we must invest constant effort in ending all sinful activity.

5. *Purify your hearts* (vs. 4:8): The central concern of every Christian should be the condition of our heart. Our life’s work is to purify our hearts of every impure desire that invites improper actions.

6. *Let your laughter be turned to mourning* (vs. 4:9): Christ teaches, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4). Godly mourners grieve for their own sins, and for others caught by Satan’s lies. They turn naturally to repentance, which is essential to the life in Christ. Saint James commands us to “weep and howl” (Jas 5:1).

7. *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord* (vs. 4:10): Humility accords with our Lord’s command to open the pitiful condition of our hearts before Him. At the same time, we anoint our head, wash our face, and refuse the appearance of false piety.

8. *Do not speak evil of one another* (vs. 4:11): Having already warned us of the dangers of an unruly tongue (vss. 1:18; 3:1-12), Saint James instructs us specifically, “Do not grumble against one another” (vs. 5:9).

9. *Live humbly in the will of God*: We are to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that” (vs. 4:15). Our life in Christ is one of quiet, heartfelt acceptance of God’s providence and grace. We attribute everything that befalls us as coming from the Lord. Whether God is the cause or allows something to happen for our correction, we accept it as a blessing.

10. *Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand* (vs. 5:8). Saint James ends as he begins – by directing us to the condition of our hearts. We are to cultivate *patience* and thus be well-established in Christ: “Wait on the Lord, be thou manful, and let thy heart be strengthened, and wait on the Lord” (Ps 26:16).

*Turn Thy face away from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. – Psalm 50:9-10*

**February 16 - Friday of the Thirty-second/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost**  
**1 Peter 1:1-2, 10-12; 2:6-10**

**Searching the Scriptures: 1 Peter 1:1-2,10-12; 2:6-10, especially vs. 1:10:** *“Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you.”* Saint Theophan the Recluse offers two prescriptions for overcoming the disease of ignorance in the heart. “First and most necessary is prayer,” he says, “by which we must implore the Holy Spirit to pour His divine light into our hearts.”

Second, we must probe “deep for the knowledge of [truths], in order to see clearly which of them are good and which bad. We should judge them not as the world and the senses do, but as they are judged by . . . the Holy Spirit . . . the word of the divinely inspired Scriptures, or that of the holy fathers and teachers of the Church” (*Unseen Warfare*, p. 90).

If we read the Scriptures with the Church, if we search them, praying to the Spirit to bestow right judgment upon us through these divine texts, we will find healing. In these verses, Saint Peter reveals three ways that we heal the disease of ignorance by searching the Scriptures: the restoration of true perspective, the correction of ingratitude, and relief from forgetfulness.

Searching the Scriptures restores our right perspective on life. Secular humanism refers to a world devoid of God, or marginalizes God as an idea confined to people with a particular interest in religion. Scripture, by contrast, approaches God as *the* primary actor amidst all of human history. He alone offers salvation to all nations, and He alone makes sense of everything that bewilders us.

Note how widely these two views differ! Saint Peter, speaking to his fellow Christians, calls us *pilgrims* and *sojourners* (vs. 1:1, 2:11), for he accepts that we belong to a kingdom “not of this world” (Jn 18:36). He sees us as an elect people (1 Pt 1:2; 2:9) who are brought into existence by the actions and love of God (vs. 1:2). We are not merely a group of individuals who happen to come together for religious rituals. Ours is no chance gathering, but an integral part of a plan by which God addresses the sin, sickness, ignorance, and confusion in history.

Christians are not the first people to whom God disclosed His plan to restore all things. The Old Testament prophets received many foresights. As Saint Peter says, they “inquired and searched carefully” into the plan of God (vs. 1:10). Further, by “the Spirit of Christ who was in them,” they were able to foretell “the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (vs. 1:11) His triumph over death.

We know that the revelations to the prophets are fulfilled (vs. 1:12 and 1 Cor 10:11)! Consider the great privilege we have received as Christians, for we are the first to know the whole truth. The generations before us did not receive the blessing of knowing Jesus Christ; they only glimpsed, through the ancient prophecies, the truths now known to us in detail.

The honor we have received humbles our mind and fills our heart with gratitude, for God has made us into His people. We have good reason to “stand aright” and offer “a sacrifice of praise,” in the words of the Divine Liturgy. Scripture heals ingratitude!

Finally, as Saint Peter says: we are “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people,” for we have been called “out of darkness into His marvelous light” (vs. 2:9). Saint Peter reminds us how ancient Israel, once called to be the people of God, was “cast away” (Rom 11:15), while we, “who once were not a people . . . are now the people of God” (1 Pt 2:10).

Let us read the Scriptures to be healed of our forgetfulness. We remember that we “have obtained mercy” (vs. 2:10). We come to Holy Scripture for perspective, and discover mercy!

*Illumine our hearts, O Master, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge.*

– Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom



**February 17th - Saturday of the Thirty-second/ Thirty-Third Week after Pentecost**  
**1 Thessalonians 5:14-23**

**Complete Sanctification: 1 Thessalonians 5:14-23, especially vs. 23:** “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Reading through today’s passage, we discover how greatly the Apostle Paul desires our complete sanctification in Christ. Although he is exhorting the faithful of first-century Thessalonica, his words extend to us as well, for the apostle’s love embraces us from the eternity of heaven!

What exactly does Saint Paul desire when he prays, “May the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely” (vs. 23)? He wants us to know that God yearns for us to be *whole* and holy. When we are purified in heart, mind, body, and will, we are restored to the divine image the Lord implanted in us at creation.

A wise man does not exhort people to exert themselves beyond their capabilities, and the apostle speaks wisely in these verses. Let us consider his admonition to “rejoice always” (vs. 16). Perhaps Saint John Chrysostom appears extreme when he challenges us to rejoice even when evil is done to us, expressing joy and thanking God for “him that has done [us] evil.”

Anticipating our discomfort with this advice, he asks, “And how, you say, is this possible? It is possible, if we will” (*NPN Fathers First Series*, vol. 13, p. 367). In Christ we receive the grace to return good for evil, if we so choose (vs. 15). We may differ from the world’s ways and be sanctified entirely, if we are willing to cooperate with God’s wisdom. In Christ we can *rejoice always*, even when we face the worst.

The Church Fathers also discuss at length Saint Paul’s charge to “pray without ceasing” (vs. 17). Saint Augustine insists that we must not reject this advice as something far beyond our abilities. Does Saint Paul ask us “to be . . . bending the knee and prostrating the body and lifting up our hands . . . ‘without ceasing’”? Surely not, says Saint Augustine, for “if that is what ‘without ceasing’ means, then I do not believe it is possible.

“[But] there is another kind of inward prayer without ceasing,” he continues. “For it is your heart’s desire that is your prayer. If your desire continues uninterrupted, your prayer continues also” (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament vol. 9, p. 98).

Here, Saint Augustine refers to the inner truth expressed by the well-known Jesus Prayer. The goal of this inner prayer is to cleanse away everything that hinders us from fulfilling God’s will, and thereby allowing us to pray without ceasing.

If with the Holy Spirit’s help we reach the point where we can “in everything give thanks” (vs. 18), then we shall indeed fulfill “the will of God in Christ Jesus” (vs. 18). In Christ we receive the potential to peel away all darkness and sin inside us, until we no longer “quench the Spirit” (vs. 19).

Let us never despise the labors of our pastors as they preach and teach (vs. 20). Do not disdain the Holy Tradition they convey to us. We do well to heed the apostle’s advice: “Test all things; hold fast what is good” (vs. 21).

We engage in the work of complete sanctification that Saint Paul encourages if we “abstain from every form of evil” (vs. 22). We put aside hateful attitudes, vile thoughts, cruel speech, and – God forbid – immoral actions and activities. Then, when the Master asks us to give an account of our lives, we shall “be preserved blameless” (vs. 23) before Him, having come much closer to being completely sanctified.

*O God, be a defender of my soul, for I walk in the midst of many snares. Rescue me therefrom and save me, O good One, since Thou art the lover of mankind. – Great Compline*

**February 18th - Sunday of Zacchaeus**  
**1 Timothy 4:9-15**

**Godliness Profits Eternally: 1 Timothy 4:9-15, introduced by verse 4:8:** “*For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.*” The opening verse of today’s epistle reading hinges upon the preceding verse, quoted above. Indeed, verse 8 contains the “faithful saying . . . worthy of all acceptance” of which Saint Paul speaks. The apostle acknowledges the value in *bodily exercise* (an activity highly esteemed today), but more greatly exalts *godliness* for its immeasurable worth in terms of both temporal and eternal life.

Saint Paul set godliness before the younger Timothy, his traveling companion and representative, holding up this trait as the prime reason for their mutual labor and for the *reproach* they are suffering (vs. 10). Although we are separated from Saints Paul and Timothy by two thousand years, we should not be quick to dismiss godliness, a quality highly regarded by these apostles. Certainly, we will not do so if we “trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe” (vs. 10).

The Apostle Paul commands us to be godly in thinking, speaking, and acting. Other people may discount us for superficial reasons such as age, education, or gender. We may not be ordained, nor have faced the circumstances of someone else’s struggle. But if we live a godly life, our actions speak volumes to everyone.

Our lives, not merely our words, command authority and instruct (vs. 11). We pray that others will find in this manner of living what “is profitable for all things” (vs. 8), more than they do in the lifestyles of depraved, selfish, and arrogant men.

Godliness may go out of style from time to time, but never with God. When we proceed authentically, we are godly in heart, mind, and action. We encourages other “believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (vs. 12).

This virtue which Saint Paul commends so highly involves love, under the best and the worst of circumstances, and especially *agape*, the highest possible love, divinely inspired. Godliness always trusts God; godliness holds to the highest standard of moral purity. Godliness is “peaceable” and “reverent” (vs. 2:2), does “good works” (vs. 2:10), and is content with life’s basic necessities of food and clothing (vs. 6:8).

Christ reveals the depths of godly living, so that the apostles may understand and commend godliness themselves. We in turn learn how to attain godliness of heart and soul in many ways: by reading Scripture and the Church Fathers, listening to our pastors, hearing the doctrines of the Church expressed in our liturgical texts, and studying the dogmas set forth by the Ecumenical Councils.

To help us embrace godliness, we first receive grace through “the laying on of the hands of the eldership” (vs. 4:14) at our baptism and chrismation. The Holy Spirit has already illumined our minds for godliness through the sacraments, and Saint Paul exhorts us never to “neglect the gift that is in [us]” (vs. 14).

Godliness grows within, becoming manifest as we “meditate on these things” and “give [ourselves] entirely to them” (vs. 15). There is no magic path for attaining this way of life. We have to labor for Christ’s sake, but the Holy Spirit aids us to grow into “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). Let us be encouraged and make “[our] progress . . . evident to all” (1 Tm 4:15).

*Implant in my heart an increase of Thy love . . . whereby Thou didst sojourn in the world.*  
– Saint Isaac the Syrian

**February 19th - Monday of the Fourth Week before Lent**  
**1 Peter 2:21-3:9**

**Christ-like Suffering: 1 Peter 2:21-3:9, especially vs. 21:** *“For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps. . . .”* In this passage the Apostle Peter admonishes us to follow the Lord’s example in suffering. He recalls the Lord’s Passion (vss. 22-24), reminds us that Christ is watching over our souls (vs. 25), counsels wives (vss. 3:1-6) and husbands (vs. 7), and advises the community of the faithful (vss. 8-9).

While the subjects covered by Saint Peter range widely, a careful reading discloses their deeper unity under the mandate to suffer like Christ. Very simply, our Lord Jesus expects every member of His Body to live by a norm that runs contrary to the assumptions of the world (Mt 16:24). We are to bear whatever trials God permits to come our way, without complaint. Above all, we maintain our integrity in Christ: we give no offense, we are innocent and patient in suffering, we mistreat no one, and accept wrongs against ourselves cheerfully.

Three of the apostle’s exhortations stand out. First, we are to remain firmly committed to the Lord Jesus, even in suffering; we must never deservedly earn afflictions by committing sin; and finally, we never return evil for evil but bless everyone, come what may.

Saint Peter reviews our Lord’s Passion – the supreme model for Christian life – in verses 22-24. Here, the apostle applies the Suffering Servant prophecy (Is 53:4-12) to Christ. However, let us remember that Saint Peter is not speaking theoretically, but rather from experience: the events he describes changed his life (Mk 14:46-72). Initially, Peter resisted the Lord Jesus’ declaration that He must suffer (vss. 8:31-32), yet later he embraced Christ’s sufferings for his salvation.

In declaring that our Lord “committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (vs. 23), Saint Peter reveals how we are to behave when we unfairly suffer. The Passion was endured by Him “who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth . . . [but] bore our sins . . . that we . . . might live for righteousness” (vss. 22-24). Christ maintained integrity, purity, and innocence; He never wronged others.

The Apostle Peter underscores our Lord’s example by noting that when He “was reviled [He] did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten” (vs. 23). Christ our Savior faced many provocations to return evil for evil; instead, the Master blessed. Saint Peter witnesses to this example, for which he later gave his own life, and summons us to follow.

Even as the topic shifts to marriage, Saint Peter’s three challenges to us persist. He counsels “wives [to] be submissive to [their] own husbands” (vs. 3:1), imitating the holy women of old who “trusted in God . . . being submissive to their own husbands” (vs. 5).

The calling of the Christian woman – even one whose husband does “not obey the word” (vs. 1) – is to pursue a pure and holy life. She is not to feign servility, but rather win her husband to Christ by living chastely, reverently, gently, and quietly (vss. 1-4). Her aim is to be free of sin, like Christ. The Christian wife will, in all circumstances, “do good, [but be] not afraid” (vs. 6). Never retaliating, she is always blessing.

The apostle likewise counsels husbands – and all of us who constitute the Church, as “heirs together of the grace of life” (vs. 7) – to be of one mind with Christ (see Phil 2:5). May we who are united to Christ Jesus submit to Him and be like Him: compassionate, tenderhearted, and courteous, never “returning evil for evil” (vss. 8-9)!

*O Lord, enable us, with spotless conscience, to suffer with Thee that we may be found worthy to be drawn up on high with Thee to the Jerusalem above in the kingdom of heaven.*

– Orthros verse for Holy Monday

**February 20th - Tuesday of the Fourth Week before Lent**  
**1 Peter 3:10-22**

**What Great Lengths! 1 Peter 3:10-22, especially vs. 18:** *“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit . . . .”* God exerts great effort to restore us to Himself. As the Gospel proclaims, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (Jn 3:16). When we look freely into this mystery, we discover God’s unswerving love for mankind. His incalculable efforts touch heaven and earth, things visible and invisible, angels and men, minds and hearts, that from the faintest flickering of hopes Christ “might bring us to God” (1 Pt 3:18).

According to the Apostle Paul, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). God’s perfect love goes to unimaginable lengths for our sake. Our minds and hearts cannot possibly comprehend God’s grace, initiative, and sacrifice, for “He . . . did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all” (vs. 8:32).

In today’s reading, the Apostle Peter takes us on a whirlwind tour of the expanses of God’s love. At the center is an unimaginable wonder: Christ our God embraces suffering for us. He, the only sinless One, dies for the unjust. “Taking the form of a bondservant” (Phil 2:7), He is “put to death in the flesh” (1 Pt 3:18).

While in the tomb, Christ preached in Hades to the spirits bound in the prison of death (vs. 19). He gives us baptism, the antitype of salvation, to remove the filth that keeps our consciences apart from God (vs. 21). And once He is raised from the dead, He “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God” (vs. 22) to make intercession for us (Rom 8:34).

How can it be that God, who is beyond all change, who created all that exists, who is not bound by what He has created, suffered “once for sins” (1 Pt 3:18)? According to Saint John of Kronstadt, God is “a Spirit, an incomplex Being . . . not composed of a series or of a multitude of thoughts, or of a multitude of words or creations, but . . . wholly, in one incomplex thought, God.”

Such a mystery staggers the mind. At Great and Holy Thursday orthros, the Church contemplates this poignant miracle: “Today, He is suspended on a Tree who suspended the earth above the waters. He who wore a false purple robe covered the heavens with clouds. He was smitten who in the Jordan, delivered Adam.”

He suffers for us by taking on our mortal flesh, joining His changeless Person to our changeable humanity in the Virgin’s womb. Love chooses to bring us to Himself by offering “the just for the unjust” (vs. 18). Indeed, this is going to great lengths!

Having died, our deathless Lord entered the precincts of Hades. “Now Thou hast revealed Thy hidden things as God and Man to those who are in Hades also, who shouted, saying, ‘There is none holy save Thee, O Lord.’” We tremble at His death, for the “element of life was seen to be dead in a manner transcending the mind” (Holy Saturday orthros).

Finally, so that we might share in the mystery of His Death and Resurrection, our Lord Jesus Christ gave us baptism to wash us clean of our sins, and seal of the Spirit to seal us in the heavenly places with Him. “For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3).

Let us take note that He also gives us a task for this life: we are to mortify “[our] members which are on the earth” (Col 3:5) while He aids us in our feeble efforts. Being at the right hand of the Father, He eternally intercedes for us (Heb 7:25). Yes, surely Christ our Savior goes to great lengths to “bring us to God” (1 Pt 3:18)!

*Glory to Thee, O Christ our God and our hope, glory to Thee!*  
– Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**February 21st - Wednesday of the Fourth Week before Lent**  
**1 Peter 4:1-11**

**Suffering in the Flesh: 1 Peter 4:1-11, especially vs. 1-2:** “He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.” Earlier in this same epistle, Saint Peter declares that Christ suffered death “in the flesh” purposely, in order “to bring us to God” (vs. 3:18). Now, when he tells us to “arm [ourselves] also with the same mind” (vs. 4:1), he is urging us to embrace an intention similar to the Lord’s.

We should not read the expression “suffered in the flesh” as applicable only to martyrs and confessors, for a vital truth would then be lost. Suffering is common to everyone and takes many forms: persecution, injury, disease, financial reverses, rejection. While Saint Peter’s primary concern throughout his first epistle is with physical persecution, he is well aware that *suffering in the flesh* extends beyond the afflictions imposed on those who died for Christ.

This suffering may also come to one who has indulged in sinful living, but now withdraws for Christ’s sake and ceases to “run . . . in the same flood of dissipation” (vs. 4). As we would expect, the Apostle advises us against living “in the flesh for the lusts of men” (vs. 2). We should avoid “lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries” (vs. 3), determined to avoid all such indulgence.

But social isolation may follow when we choose to stop living “in . . . dissipation” (vs. 4). According to *The Orthodox Study Bible*, Saint Peter is talking about the vices then prevalent in Asia Minor, “where excessive drinking, along with unspeakable practices, took place in connection with the worship of various deities.” Let us bear in mind that these vices are well known today, even though they are no longer part of the worship of any deities!

As a fledgling disciple, Saint Peter learned the captivating power of a sinful mind. Christ tells us that “from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man” (Mk 7:21-23).

Among the Fathers of the Church, Saint John Climacus commends the pain of struggling for chastity and purity, especially since we have a vital hope of *ceasing from sin* (1 Pt 4:1-2). “Purity means that we put on the angelic nature. Purity is the longed-for house of Christ and the earthly heaven of the heart. Purity is a supernatural denial of nature. . . . He is pure . . . [who] expels fleshly love with divine love, and . . . has extinguished the fire of passion by the fire of heaven” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 15.1-3, 7, p. 104).

Keep in mind that Saint John does not limit the virtue of chastity to sexual purity, but rather asserts that “chastity is the name which is common to all the virtues.” In our struggle to gain purity, God helps us take certain steps that are necessarily accompanied by pain. We observe our passions, repent sincerely, and confess thoroughly; we undertake fasting, abandon self-reliance, and strive for unceasing prayer.

“Let no one thoroughly trained in purity attribute its attainment to himself, for it is impossible for anyone to conquer his own nature,” Saint John cautions. “When nature is defeated, it should be recognized that this is due to the presence of Him who is above nature.” Indeed, we never endure such sufferings apart from God, but rather in the presence of His love.

*I am caught in the depths of sins. O Savior, draw me out of passion, and save me!*

– Orthros for Sunday of the Prodigal Son

**February 22nd - Thursday of the Fourth Week before Lent**  
**1 Peter 4:12-5:5**

**Clothed with Humility: 1 Peter 4:12-5:5, especially vs. 5:** “Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’” The Apostle Peter bids us to clothe ourselves in humility, a virtue manifested through gentle actions and graceful words. He likens humility to a spiritual garment which we put on as our visible apparel. Indeed, humility is visible lowliness: it arises from a meek heart and makes no outward show of piety.

According to Saint John Climacus, “It is one thing to be humble, another to strive for humility, and another to praise the humble. . . . The first belongs to the perfect, the second to the truly obedient, and the third to all the faithful” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 25.19, p. 153).

If we are to take our place among the faithful, as our holy father among the saints suggests, we may come to recognize the seven marks of this “nameless grace in the soul . . . known only to those who have learned it by experience [as a] gift from God.” As the Lord says, “Learn from Me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29).

What does humility entail? First, we may anticipate every “kind of ascetic hardship, together with prayer that springs from an afflicted heart and is accompanied by many tears” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 29). To be truly humble means afflicting ourselves and shedding tears, for we discover how profoundly we are captive to sin. The humble “sow with tears [but] shall reap with rejoicing. . . . They wept as they cast their seeds. But in their coming shall they come with rejoicing, bearing their sheaves” (Ps 125:6-8). The harvest of humility is a merciful heart granted by the Lord, who richly rewards all who labor in His fields.

Second, we must know ourselves. We receive fear of the Lord as a grace, for God Himself teaches us how feeble we are. He helps us remember that “we are dust. . . . [and our] days are as the grass,” for when the “wind is passed over it, then it shall be gone, and no longer will it know the place thereof” (Ps 102:12-14).

Third, humility requires us to avoid wickedness. “Where humility is combined with the remembrance of God,” observes Saint Philotheos, “there is the place of God, the heaven of the heart in which, because of God’s presence, no demonic army dares to make a stand” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 17).

Fourth, if we are truly humble, we are thankful for our deliverance from past sins. We gladly endure trials inflicted on us, “accepting them as . . . [our] due on account of . . . former offenses” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 185). The humble offer their trials to God for correction of sins.

Fifth, the humble soul is filled with compassion, kindness, and mercy. We are to extend the same love to everyone, as our Heavenly Father does (see Mt 5:45). Saint John Climacus describes the “holy team” of humility and love: while “the one [humility] exalts, and the other [love], supporting the exalted ones, never fails” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 25.37, p. p. 156).

Sixth, the humble esteem others as greater than themselves. “The higher a man ascends in humility, the lower he appears in his own eyes. . . . The humble man does not wish to be compared even with the most lowly and is grieved when . . . given first place” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 38).

Lastly, humility bears indignity, humiliations, and the most despised conditions, for “God rejoices when He sees us running to meet dishonor, so as to crush, strike, and destroy our vain self-esteem” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 25.45, p. 157).

*Out of the night my spirit awaketh at dawn unto Thee, O God. Teach me Thy righteousness; enlighten the eyes of my understanding lest at any time I sleep unto death in sins. – Orthros verse*

**February 23rd - Friday of the Fourth Week before Lent**  
**2 Peter 1:1-10**

**The Life in Christ: 2 Peter 1:1-10, especially vs. 3:** “Divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue. . . .” The familiar phrase “the life in Christ” comes from the writings of Saint Nicholas Cabasilas and Saint John of Kronstadt. Saint John’s teaching concerning the life in Christ are eminently practical, for “its constant theme is that man is engaged in a spiritual warfare, which it is his business to win” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. xxvii). Cabasilas likewise encourages us to work with God’s grace, that we may hope to gain our salvation.

In today’s epistle, Saint Peter employs seven images to describe the life in Christ: precious faith; knowledge of God the Holy Trinity; a call; participation in the divine nature; escape from the corruption of the world; cleansing from old sins; and election by our Savior.

When our faith in God is weak or under assault, we would do well to recall the apostle’s clear declaration that faith does not come to us primarily through our own efforts, but rather as a gift from God (vs. 1). Our attraction to the Lord Jesus and His teachings, the Church, the Holy Scriptures, and the saints awakens in us when the Holy Spirit moves in our hearts and souls.

No clenching of our fists is needed to deepen our convictions, nor do we require mighty efforts to still our inner doubts, nor a diligent ascetical regimen. None of these efforts, alone, will give us *precious faith* (vs. 1) unless God acts. Faith, like life itself and the air we breathe, is God’s gift. By all means, let us ask for that precious gift!

The life in Christ is a relationship. We tend to think we know other people through physical association, but much we know of others is gained through our mind and heart. We know God primarily through the heart, via our spirit, for “God is Spirit” (Jn 4:24).

The Lord provides a rich array of tangible means for knowing Him: access to His temples, true writings concerning Him, holy communion, icons, and fellowship with other members of His Body, especially those who are well-acquainted with Him. Through these media we find “grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God” (2 Pt 1:2).

Our attraction to the Lord Jesus comes through the Holy Spirit, who echoes Christ’s *call* (vs. 3): “Come to Me. . . . Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me . . . and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:28-29). The life in Christ begins with a beckoning from the Holy Trinity, which elicits our own heart’s answer.

The moment we begin to share life with Christ, we participate in God’s *divine nature* (2 Pt 1:4). He rubs off on us, so to speak, infusing Himself into us and changing us as we heed Him.

Being joined to the Lord Jesus defends us against “the corruption that is in the world through lust” (vs. 4). Christ opposes the hatred, lies, and thievery that swirl around us! These evils are forever active in this world, but when we embrace the life in Christ we partake of another realm, being “more than conquerors through Him” who loves us (Rom 8:37).

The beauty of the life in Christ is being “cleansed from [our] old sins” (2 Pt 1:9). More and more the taint of this world diminishes, healed by our choice to live in and with Christ our God. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9).

The life in Christ is our free choice, but it becomes possible because our *call and election* comes from Him (2 Pt 1:10). “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (Jn 15:16). How shall we answer?

*May I ever remember Thy grace and henceforth live not unto myself, but unto Thee, our Master and Benefactor, O Bread of life, Fountain of holiness, and Giver of good things.*

– Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**February 24th – Saturday - First & Second Discoveries of the Head of the Forerunner  
2 Corinthians 4:6-15**

**The Great Miracle: 2 Corinthians 4:6-15, especially vs.6:** “...God...has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” How should we understand this statement? The Apostle is speaking of illumination, the action of God associated with the enlightenment the Lord gives in Baptism: to be “...freed from slavery to sin and the devil and...united with God.” Experience and the Holy Fathers agree, however, that our spiritual light can become darkened after receiving the Christian Mystery. As Saint John of Sinai points out, “All demons try to darken our mind, and then they suggest what they like.” We certainly experience such darkening, and let us heartily agree that the impure spirits are effective!

Gregory Palamas points out that he who “...recognizes his heart’s impurity, and is not filled with pride because of the partial degree of purity he has attained, but uses it as an aid...will see more clearly the impurity of the other powers of his soul and will progress in humility, his inward grief will grow, and he will find suitable ways of healing each of his soul’s powers.”

Thus, the great miracle of illumination, with its attendant freedom from slavery to evil, is useful for moving toward full enlightenment and theosis. God does not quit the field of the contest for our souls, nor do the demons readily give up; yet we need not succumb to the sin of despair, nor lose the hope of salvation nor of gaining full “...knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (vs. 6). Let us choose the exceedingly great miracle of illumination!

The personal ‘knowledge’ of Christ that God imparts in the Baptismal Mystery is meant to dominate our hearts and souls as it does Saint Paul and the Forerunner John. They knew Christ actively, having been acquainted with Him. They flowered and bore fruit because His Divine light filled them. Likewise, when we meet Jesus Christ face to face, in our hearts, we discern His glory as God and Savior, even if imperfectly. We can experience the miracle of illumination.

Having an active, ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ strengthens us for all aspects of life. That is a great miracle! Think how few know God’s glory in the person of Jesus Christ! Muslims do not; Buddhists do not; secularists do not, so many, too many, do not. Blessed is the man who shall “...bring forth...fruit in its season...” (Ps. 1:3).

Saint Paul outlines the miracle of knowing Jesus Christ: even when we are ‘hard pressed’ on every side, we need not be ‘crushed’ nor ‘perplexed.’ We can avoid being ‘in despair, and even be “...persecuted, but not forsaken...” (2 Cor. 4:8,9)! How? We possess Christ, the available miracle within us! John the Forerunner was arrested and jailed to silence him from telling the truth; yet, when he was ‘struck down’ and beheaded, he still was “...not destroyed...” (vs. 9).

The heart of the miracle of illumination lies between each of us and Christ our King and God, for He died, yet rose triumphing over death. Therefore, if we will work at preserving unity with the living and Life-Giving Christ, more and more we will be “...carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (vs. 10). . Of course, the choice is ours: will we prize union with Christ so highly that we will even surrender our will and desires “...to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (vs. 11)?

Archimandrite Sophrony urges us to remember, “...our nature can be recast only in the fire of repentance. Only tearful prayer will destroy the roots of passion in us. Only invocation of the Name of Jesus can cleanse, regenerate and hallow our nature.” “Abide in Me...” (Jn. 15:4). And how can we abide? This is what blessed Sophrony answers:

*“O Lord Jesus Christ, Who only art without sin, have mercy upon me, a sinner.”*



**February 25th – Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee (First Sunday of Triodion)  
2 Timothy 3:10-15**

**Let Us Be Apostolic: 2 Timothy 3:10-15, especially vss. 10-11:** “*But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions. . .*” During the Divine Liturgy, after the oblation of bread and wine is offered to our Lord and His peace is extended to all, we confess the symbol of faith: the Nicene Creed. We affirm therein our belief in “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”

In today’s epistle, Saint Paul calls upon us to stand up for our apostolic birthright in three specific ways. First, we embrace the apostles’ message from the heart; second, we are to adopt a manner of living worthy of the apostles’ standard; and finally, we must be willing to pay the price for being faithful to the apostles’ truth.

Saint Paul states that we practice the faith of the apostles when we “have carefully followed my doctrine [and] manner of life” (vs. 10). Let us never suppose that we are apostolic witnesses merely because we speak about the faith reasonably well. What Saint Paul means by *following* involves our manner of living – a consistent day-in, day-out application of the convictions we learn from the apostles. Let us speak apostolic words, but even more so strive to live their form of life. If we behave consistently as Orthodox Christians, then our manner of living will correlate directly with that of the apostles.

Of course, we do not set out to mimic the way the apostles lived. Instead, we begin by praying for the intercession of those great servants of the Lord. The Church Fathers are adamant that true theology flows from true prayer. Doctrine and manner of life are not assimilated by our rational faculties alone. God gives these gifts to us when we follow His path, seeking deep healing for our hearts and souls and the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.

To be apostolic is to have the same life purpose and trust in God as the apostles. According to Saint Paul, the truly apostolic person trusts in the same Holy Spirit who guided the apostles in their day-to-day lives. The life-giving Spirit leads us to embrace the apostles’ goals as our own. Furthermore, with the Spirit of God guiding us, we also accept their doctrine and manner of life wholeheartedly. We walk their path naturally, for we trust Christ our God without reservation, as they did.

Let us turn all our decisions and actions over to Christ! Saint Peter once asked, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Jn 6:68-69). The apostles refused to listen to anyone who pressed them to follow another purpose: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

Third, being apostolic means to be willing to embrace the cost of sustaining our faith. If we are to follow the apostles’ doctrine and manner of life, then we follow Christ, whatever may come. Yes, we pray that we hold fast to the apostles’ faith, embrace their manner of living, and freely accept whatever price this world may extract from us for doing so.

In this vein, let us consider the Greek New Testament word *martyrion*. Prior to the Christian era, this word merely referred to a “witness.” Within a single century, however, it came to mean “one who pays the price of death for Christ.”

We “united ourselves unto Christ” at baptism, and we live by what we have seen and heard of Him in the life of His apostolic Church – Christ’s own radiant Body. Be willing to love, persevere, and to suffer for Him as He wills. Glory to Jesus Christ!

*O Holy Apostle Paul, plead that we preserve thy good confession to our last breath.*

– Vespers for the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

**February 26th – Monday of the Third Week before Lent**  
**2 Peter 1:20-2:9**

**The Struggle for Orthodoxy – False Teachers: 2 Peter 1:20-2:9, especially vs. 2:1:** *“There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.”* In this epistle, the Apostle Peter raises grave concerns about “false teachers” (vs. 2:1), including “those who walk according to the flesh” (vs. 10), the “slaves of corruption” (vs. 19), “scoffers” (vs. 3:3), and “unstable people [who] twist . . . the Scriptures” (vs. 3:16).

By God’s providence, however, these deviant teachers who aggressively promote false ideas actually play a role in illuminating our Orthodox faith. The painful thorns of wrong doctrines moved the Fathers of the Church to articulate and uphold correct teachings, by God’s grace. As a result, Orthodox Christianity remains robust today after centuries of struggle against falsehood. The Church upholds the integrity of “the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of . . . the apostles of the Lord and Savior” (vs. 3:2).

We must always be attentive to this ongoing struggle against sin and error, since “God did not spare the angels who sinned” (vs. 2:4). Rather, He “reserve[s] the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment” (vs. 9).

In matters of heresy our salvation is indeed at stake, for the common human denominator of sin infests every false teaching and fills the heretics with deadly pride. The two-thousand-year history of heresy reveals that arrogant faith in our own ideas invariably draws us away from the very “grace and truth” that our Lord “declared” (Jn 1:17-18).

According to the Apostle Peter, any “private interpretation” of Scripture has roots in the “will of man” (2 Pt 1:20-21). Such interpretations underlie every heretical teaching. For example, the early fourth-century priest Arius, an earnest pastor and skillful preacher, refused to accept his bishop’s counsel about the errors of his teaching. Instead, he persisted in explaining the nature of the Lord Jesus in his own clever way, declaring Christ Jesus to be a special creature, but not fully God.

“Now when Arius and his fellows made these assertions and shamelessly avowed them,” writes the Patriarch Alexander, “we being assembled with the bishops of Egypt and Libya, nearly a hundred in number, anathematized both them and their followers” (*ANF*, vol. 6, p. 297). Arius remained unbending. The famous First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea was forced to convene in AD 325 to repudiate his false teachings.

Let us take careful note of how history both affirms the case against Arius and illustrates the Apostle Peter’s point. Without fail, the crux of heresy is the denial of the nature and essence of the Lord Jesus (vs. 2:1). Saint Athanasios, observing the spread of the Arian heresy, notes that “the Fathers . . . were forced to express more distinctly the sense of the words ‘from God.’ As a result, they wrote ‘from the essence of God . . . that all others might be acknowledged as creatures and the Word alone as from the Father’” (*NPNF*, vol. 4, p. 162).

If we examine the proceedings of the local synods of bishops prior to the First Ecumenical Council (and that of subsequent councils), we discover that Arianism’s advance was fueled by prerogative, status, and political advantage as much as by the marginal appeal of the heresy itself. Saint Peter’s point is thus affirmed: “By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words” (vs. 2:3). Greed for power and position follow naturally in the footsteps of arrogant self-will and pride. Let us be attentive to these pitfalls!

*Thou, O Christ, art our God of exceeding praise, who didst establish our holy Fathers as luminous stars upon earth, and through them didst guide us unto the true faith.*

– Sunday of the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council

**February 27th – Tuesday of the Third Week before Lent**  
**2 Peter 2:9-22**

**The Struggle for Orthodoxy, continued – Heresy’s Allure: 2 Peter 2:9-22, especially vs. 18:** “*For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error.*” Earlier in his epistle, Saint Peter teaches us that heresy originates from the sins of pride and greed for power and position. False teachers are always charmed by their own ideas about truth. Worse, because they willfully attract others to adopt their ideas, they become further deluded by the admiration of their followers.

While such men may think they are free, they are in fact “slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage” (vs. 19). Such is the tragic state of those who embrace heresy, “for it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them” (vs. 21).

Having spoken about the sinful desires that motivate heretics, the Apostle Peter identifies the factors that attract others to follow heretics and their ideas. Based on his insights, let us consider the steps we ought to follow if we wish to keep our Orthodox faith pure. None of us is free from sin, nor have we entirely “escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (vs. 20). We pray God that we may remain alert, never becoming “entangled in them and overcome” (vs. 20)!

Saint Peter first speaks of people who “walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness” (vs. 10), who “count it pleasure to carouse in the daytime” (vs. 13), and who have “eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin” (vs. 14). Such people are captivated “through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness” (vs. 18). We see a clear association between erroneous theology and corrupt living, with its constant indulgence of the appetites.

One popular heresy of the early centuries was Gnosticism. Many leaders of this false variant of Christianity encouraged their believers to indulge in whatever pleasures they desired, so long as they were initiated into the secret *gnosis* (knowledge) of the “real” Christianity which they invented. These deluded teachers lived debased and immoral lives while hypocritically speaking the language of piety.

Such teachings are still prevalent today, with their adherents suggesting a host of rationalizations for lewd, perverse, and indulgent behaviors plainly condemned by Holy Scripture. Such a permissive approach attracts the unwary by demanding neither purity nor ascetic struggle. True faith teaches otherwise, for the Fathers assert that “the keeping of God’s commandments generates dispassion. The soul’s dispassion preserves spiritual knowledge” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 314).

In addition to blatant self-indulgence, heresy appeals to our self-will by promising freedom from authority (see vs. 10). If we choose to ignore direction from rightful authority, then we remove the spiritual and moral safety net of the Church from our lives. Instead of questioning authority, as the bumper sticker suggests, let us affirm and seek godly protection and shelter from wise pastoral leadership. Only then will we be able to follow in the footsteps of the Church Fathers.

Finally, Saint Peter addresses those “who have actually escaped from those living in error” (vs. 18). He refers here to neophytes who fail to grasp the basics of the faith, never struggling to “put off . . . the old man . . . and . . . put on the new man” (Eph 4:22). Such people are forever vulnerable to being drawn into heresy. Let us commit ourselves to knowing our faith and laboring to be transformed into the Lord Jesus’ likeness.

*Adorn me, O Christ, as the abode of Thy Spirit only, and in nowise the abode of sin.*  
Post-communion Prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator

**February 28th - Wednesday of the Third Week before Lent**  
**2 Peter 3:1-18**

**The Struggle for Orthodoxy, continued – Prepare for Judgment: 2 Peter 3:1-18, especially vs. 11-12:** *“Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God. . . ?”* In today’s portion of Saint Peter’s second epistle, he focuses on the terrible day of the Lord’s judgment, which “will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (vs. 10).

Divine judgment is surely coming, when the *ungodly* who promote false religion will face a solemn “day of judgment and perdition” (vs. 7). How should we, as members of Christ’s flock, prepare to give an account of our lives?

Two thousand years have passed since the apostle wrote this epistle, but the Day of Judgment has not yet arrived. We sense its approach, however, for “the Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (vs. 9).

If we do not wish to perish with the “scoffers . . . walking according to their own lusts” (vs. 3), let us heed Saint Peter’s counsel. Our desire, like his, is to meet the Lord “in peace, without spot and blameless” (vs. 14).

First, then, let us struggle to be “mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandments of . . . the apostles of the Lord and Savior” (vs. 2). All of Scripture attests to the coming of Divine Judgment, teaching that “the heavens and the earth while now preserved by the same word [of God] are reserved for fire” (vs. 7).

God reveals Himself as patient, compassionate, and merciful, yet we also know that He is righteous and just. For example, when God establishes His covenant with Abraham, He warns him of what will happen: “Know for certain that your seed will be strangers in a land not their own” (Gn 15:13). Indeed, Abraham’s family went into Egypt and was enslaved by the Pharaohs.

Yet God fulfilled His prophecy, for after serving the Egyptians for four hundred years, the people were freed. God keeps His word! The Lord allowed Israel to taste slavery in Egypt, but He also looked after His people. Thus they flourished in Egypt, despite their servitude.

In revealing these events to Abraham, the Lord offers words we should consider in our hearts: “Then, in the fourth generation they [Abraham’s descendants] shall return here, for the sin of the Amorites is not yet filled up” (Gn 15:16). God puts His people through times of trial in order to free us from sin, for His judgment is sure.

Indeed, God tolerates iniquity only for a time. His judgment eventually comes to nations and individuals alike. Let us be wise and prepare our hearts now, so that we may face the Lord in hope. May He stir up our hearts “by way of reminder” (2 Pt 3:1), so that we may keep the apostle’s teachings reverently.

In particular, let us never indulge in idle questioning. Speculation only opens the door to evil and leads us into moral and spiritual confusion. Only the Lord Jesus conversed successfully with Satan, since He alone is sinless. Now, “all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (vs. 4).

Finally, let us strive to live pure and godly lives, even if it requires painful struggle at times. Christ has promised to help us and save us. May we grow “in holy conduct and godliness” (vs. 11) as we prepare ourselves ever more fully for the coming Day of Judgment.

*Grant me repentance and a good defense before Thy dread Judgment Seat, O Christ.*  
– Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

## February 29th - Thursday of the Third Week Before Lent

### 1 John 1:8-2:6

**Sin: 1 John 1:8-2:6, especially vss. 8-9:** *“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* Today begins a series of six readings from the first epistle of Saint John. This letter introduces us to the apostle’s unique teaching style, which earned him the exalted title of “theologian.” As we prepare to explore his key truths concerning lust, the devil, love, spirit, and faith, Saint John first asks us to consider sin, the dark side of our fallen human state.

By establishing the pervasive presence of sin within the human personality, Saint John affirms the same truth proclaimed by the Apostle Paul: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Saint John encourages us to look deeply into the deadly wound that sin wreaks in our hearts and souls, so that we may avoid the serious error of “say[ing] that we have no sin.” If we “deceive ourselves . . . [then] the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8).

In the next five verses, the apostle emphasizes that *all* have sinned, including the faithful – we who have entered into the Body of Christ, the Church – along with worldly people. We, too, are among the sinners: self-deceived, unrighteous, devoid of truth, yet blessed by God’s love, faithfulness, and righteousness.

Because of sin’s universality, the apostle urges us to *confess our sins*, assuring us that God will “forgive us our sins” and “cleanse us” (vs. 9). Although his words underscore the vast chasm between God and mankind, he also declares the Lord’s solution: “We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (vss. 2:1-2).

These basic truths concerning sin provide the groundwork for us to avoid and overcome the burden of the sin within us. Sin, being self-deception (vs. 1:8), is the greatest of tragedies: “Know this: their heart is ashes; they go astray, and no one can deliver his soul. See, you will not say, ‘There is a lie in my right hand’” (Is 44:20). As a result of sin, we often fail to separate lies from truth. Our hearts are darkened and we become “futile in [our] thoughts” (Rom 1:21).

The snare of sin deprives us of truth (1 Jn 1:8), for God’s “word is not in us” (vs. 10). God is Truth (Jn 14:6), but sin deceives, corrupts, and throws us into unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9, 2:1). Hence, we are “detestable and unclean” (Job 15:14-16).

Saint John’s good news is that sin can be overcome (1 Jn 2:1). We need not submit to sin, for the apostle teaches that we practice truth by receiving Christ into ourselves and confessing our sin (vss. 1:8-9). God can and does cleanse “us from all unrighteousness” (vs. 9).

Confession, then, is more than owning up to some sordid facts. It diminishes our affront while admitting the Word of God into the depths of our being (vss. 1:9-10). Whenever we honestly confess our sins, “Jesus Christ the righteous” advocates for us with the Father (vs. 2:1). He presents Himself as our *propitiation*, for He died that we might live (vs. 2:2).

The apostle longs for us to receive Christ and activate this forgiveness of our sins (vs. 2:2). The Lord Jesus alone is capable of overcoming sin for us. Accepting Christ as Lord is the essential first step toward victory. Let us seek Him, know Him, and keep His commandments (vs. 3). Then “the love of God can be perfected” (vs. 5) in us and we can begin “to walk just as He walked” (vs. 6).

*O Lord, grant me the gift of repentance, forgiveness of sins, deliverance and pardon.*

– Prayer after the Sacrament of Confession

**March 1st - Friday of the Third Week before Lent**  
**1 John 2:7-17**

**Lust: 1 John 2:7-17, especially vs. 17:** “*And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.*” Yesterday we focused on sin, the first of six key truths drawn from Saint John’s first epistle. Today the focus is on lust (in Greek, *epithymia*). In our sexually over-charged society, we most often associate lust with inordinate sexual craving.

However, our epistle writer uses *lust* in the broader sense of any strong “desire for, inclination toward, or passionate attachment.” Just the word “desire” has both negative and positive connotations in English, depending on the context, so does the term “lust” among New Testament authors writing in Greek (see Mt 13:17; Lk 15:16; Phil 1:23). However, we most commonly find *epithymia* used negatively in Scripture, as exemplified by our opening quote (1 Jn 2:17).

As Orthodox Christians, we usually consider “lusts” to be the equivalent of the passions. Saint Gregory of Sinai, along with other Church Fathers, does not consider the passions to be evil. God, he writes, “did not make [the soul] have rage and animal lust; He endowed the soul only with appetitive power and with the courage to be lovingly attracted,” i.e., to have healthy, natural desire (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 108).

Desire is transformed into lust when we exclude God from the picture. Without God, the natural powers of our soul become corrupt. Abba Sisoës, one of the Desert Fathers, stresses along with Saint James that “each man is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire” (Jas 1:14).

With Saint John the Evangelist, the problem with desire is not something inherent in the order of creation. Rather, the difficulty arises from our enslavement to the things of this world and to our physical being (1 Jn 2:15-16). God made the world, forming our very flesh and our eyes, yet sin turns even our natural desires into lust.

What is Saint John’s solution to desire run amok? What we do when lust separates us from God? First, we must seek God’s grace to resist hatred, craving, and lust. We are renewed and supported by a power greater than lust and the unruly passions, “because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining” (vs. 8). This new condition is God’s gift to us in Christ, if we only embrace Him.

Second, Saint John gives us “an old commandment” from the Lord – a commandment that existed from the *beginning* of time (vs. 7). We are to love one another and “abide in the light” so that there will be “no cause for stumbling” (vs. 10).

This spiritual condition in Christ is described using several images. Our *sins are forgiven* for His name’s sake (vs. 12). We *know Him* who is from the beginning (vss. 13-14, Jn 1:1). We “have overcome the wicked one” in Christ (1 Jn 2:13). We are strong because “the word of God abides” in us (vs. 14). We strive to care for those whom God introduces into our lives with a passionless love.

Since God’s word is at work in us, the beloved apostle counsels us to resist the wicked one who is already defeated by the Lord Jesus. We become vulnerable only if we allow Satan to entice us into shifting our love from God to His creation: “Do not love the world or the things in the world” (vs. 15).

When we love created things, our love for God diminishes and “the love of the Father is not in” us (vs. 15). Without the life blood of God’s love, our hearts wither. Then “all that is in the world” (vs. 17) and our lust for the flesh takes over. We lust after the things we see, rather than directing our desire toward our unseen Father (vs. 16). In Christ, however, we may overcome lust and abide forever (vs. 17)!

*To Thee I come, O Christ, blinded in my soul’s eyes, crying unto Thee in repentance, “Thou art the Light; let me abide in Thee that I not stumble but overcome the wicked one.”*

– Sunday of the Blind Man

**March 2nd - Saturday of the Third Week before Lent**  
**2 Timothy 3:1-9**

**Godliness vs. Self-Love: 2 Timothy 3:1-9, especially vss. 2, 5:** “For men will be lovers of themselves. . . . having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away.” Although the epistle readings for today and tomorrow are drawn from Saint Paul’s writings, they share the concern with sin and lust found in Saint John’s first epistle. For example, Saint Paul warns us that men of the “last days” (vs. 1) “will be lovers of themselves” (vs. 2). Such people may appear religious, but they lack the depth of true conviction and practice (vs. 5). Weighed down under sins and lusts (vs. 6), these men stifle the “knowledge of the truth” (vs. 7) and confuse the immature and gullible.

If we merely dally with holy truth, we obscure true piety and godliness. Armed with apostolic wisdom, however, we can resist error and the false piety it spawns often in the form of counterfeit religion (vs. 8). First, we must examine and cleanse our own lives of ungodliness, so that the Holy Spirit will illumine us and guard us.

Saint Paul identifies several characteristics that distinguish true and false godliness. We encounter pious souls who love God, but we also meet *seemingly* devout persons who are “lovers of themselves” (vs. 2).

According to Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, “So often when we say ‘I love you,’ we say it with a large ‘I’ and a small ‘you.’ We use love as a conjunction instead of it being a verb implying action.” In loving God we encounter this same gulf between outward form and true substance, unless we can arrive at “that time when there is a longing in the heart for God Himself, not for His gifts, but God Himself” (*Beginning to Pray*, p. xvi, xviii).

Self-love and love for God are at polar opposites on the spectrum. Since few of us are entirely free of self-love, we must ask ourselves: “Toward which of these loves am I moving?” We may also be tempted to wonder about others, speculating as to which kind of love is manifested in their lives – in which direction are they moving?”

However, we are easily deceived. Many nice people are also very self-serving; they have the outer form of godliness, but choke its roots before they can sink deeply into the heart. There is no objective tests for identifying empty piety. Whenever we assess ourselves and others, we do so from hearts that are not reliable testing instruments. This is why Christ warns us against judging (Mt 7:1).

But what about those who seem to be maturing in the Holy Spirit? And what about us? “Who are you to judge another’s servant?” chides Saint Paul. “To his own master he stands or falls” (Rom 14:4). Speaking of himself, he says, “In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord” (1 Cor 4:3-4).

Next, Saint Paul says that false godliness denies us the power inherent in true godliness (2 Tim 3:5). He mentions multiple causes for this denial, including ignorance (vs. 7); misplaced love of self, money, or adulation (vs. 2); love of one’s own ideas or pleasures (vs. 3); disobedience, ingratitude, and pride (vs. 2); lack of self-control and loyalty (vss. 3-4). Let us pray that God will cleanse us until we overflow with love, thankfulness, and praise, always ready to give account of the faith within us.

Lastly, the Apostle Paul speaks of resisting the truth (vs. 8) – another sure sign of false piety. True godliness submits to the Lord, to godly authority and wise teachers; we follow Truth, no matter the price. Living in a headstrong age of relativity, we must ground ourselves in the basics of our faith if we wish to recognize every compromise with truth, every subtle form of resistance to the Gospel and its call to a genuine, holy life.

*Spirit of Truth, guide and save me from all false choices for Thy Holy Name’s sake.*