

**March 1 – Saturday of Cheesefare Week (Expulsion from Paradise)  
Matthew 6:1-13**

**Fasting – The Pitfalls of Piety: Saint Matthew 6:1-13, especially vs. 1:** “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” The earliest manuscripts use the Greek word *dikaiosune* (piety) in verse one rather than *elemosune* or “charitable deeds,” which does not appear until the second verse. The more generic term *piety* actually provides a better introduction to chapter six because it encompasses the Lord’s teaching about three devout practices: charity (vss. 2-4), prayer (vss. 5-15), and fasting (vss. 16-18). As we pursue these pious actions, we must be vigilant against vainglory to ensure that our efforts are directed toward obtaining heavenly treasure (vss. 19-21).

Blessed Theophylact underscores the seriousness of the Lord’s warning against vainglory: “See what He says: ‘Take heed,’ as if speaking of some terrible, wild beast. Take heed that it not tear you limb from limb” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 56).

Let us be wary of the crouching beast of vainglory, always ready to spring and devour us! If we fall into the habit of measuring ourselves against others, such comparisons serve to prepare our souls to accept vainglory as something natural. The world, of course, urges us to take pride in our accomplishments without a moment’s thought for God. We never stop to consider who gave us every ability, strength, and capacity that we possess!

The serious Christian faces another danger. Out of devotion to the Lord, we seek to do well, give generously, pray fervently, and fast strictly. But as we practice righteousness, what happens to our humility? According to Saint John Chrysostom, “the most tyrannical passion of all, the rage and madness with respect to vainglory . . . springs up in them that do right” (*NPNF First Series*, p. 130). Vainglory is like a raging virus that mutates into the worst kind of self-congratulation. As soon as we are tempted to believe we have become humble, we are indeed worse than the Pharisee.

Our compassionate Lord knows it is difficult for us to practice piety while keeping our focus solely on Him. “Our heart often sleeps,” Saint John of Kronstadt explains. “The outer man prays, but not the inner one . . . we only flatter with our tongue” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. 40).

How do we sustain an awareness of God’s presence? The Lord Jesus offers us specific guidance in these verses. First, let our charitable giving be discreet and private (vss. 3-4). We must also pray in secret (vs. 6) and occupy our hearts with prayer constantly (vss. 7-8). Finally, the Lord gives us His own prayer (“Our Father”) as a sure guide and weapon against vainglory. This prayer sustains us as we lift our hearts to Him.

Whom do we seek to please, other than our Father in Heaven, with our offerings, prayers, and fasting? *Our Father*, Thou hast provided the perfect Offering for the sins of the whole world. Christ, the infallible intercessor, prays for us; He is the champion of fasting who defeated Satan through His own hunger. Accept our imperfect piety and make it perfect in Him.

Let us hallow Thy name in every thought and word, and in every one of our deeds. *Hallowed be Thy name* above every name that is named. Do we pursue acts of piety to further Thy Kingdom, or simply to increase our reputation? O Compassionate One, forgive our impiety and may *Thy Kingdom come* in us!

Thou hast asked us to give, to pray, to fast. May we do so only for Thee! We need *our daily bread*, but above all we need the Bread of Life. Receive our thanks, for all things come from Thee! *Forgive us our debts*, although we do not deserve it, for we are hopelessly in debt to Thee for all things. *Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory* unto the ages of ages!

*By the power of Thy love, grant us to hold fast to that which is good in Thy sight.* – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

**March 2 - Cheesefare Sunday (Expulsion from Paradise; Forgiveness Sunday)  
Matthew 6:14-21**

**Three Essentials of Fasting: Matthew 6: 14-21, especially vss. 17-18:** “But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place. . . .” In this passage the Lord outlines three conditions of true fasting: forgiveness (vss. 14-15), accountability (vss. 16-18), and readiness for combat with the enemy (vss. 19-21).

Two matters concerning *forgiveness* must be settled prior to commencing the Lenten Fast: our need to be forgiven and our need to forgive. The aim of the fast is to assist us in embracing the Lord’s “propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 Jn 2:2) which does cleanse “from all unrighteousness” (vs. 1:9). God calls us to repent and confess (Acts 3:19), for He forgives when we forgive. And “if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt 6:15).

This very evening, at Forgiveness Vespers, we have an opportunity to begin the Fast by cleaning the slate – seeking and offering forgiveness. If we do so, we shall profit from the days of the Great Fast with their self-examination, repentance, and confession.

As for *accountability*, we must remember that we are called to fast by our Master. He defines the Great Fast and how we carry it out. We must not to blur His goals and procedures. The Lenten fast is a secret between us and God. For this reason the Lord commands us to “anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting” (vss. 17-18).

If we exhibit penitence and contrition – if we “appear to men to be fasting” (vs. 16) – we fall into temptation from Satan. Displaying our asceticism realigns our motives in the direction of seeking the approval of our peers. Let us purify ourselves and labor where God *alone* sees, in the hidden areas of our heart.

“Do the Christian hypocrites . . . think that they . . . live hypocritically?” asks Saint John of Kronstadt. “They do not think so.” His words on prayer also apply to fasting: “They [fast] daily, perhaps at length; but . . . out of habit . . . not with their hearts, without heartfelt contrition, without a firm desire for amendment, and only in order to fulfill the established rule, and [they] ‘think’ they ‘do God service,’ whilst in fact they only incur the wrath of God” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. 39).

In this world, the Lord warns, “moth and rust destroy and . . . thieves break in and steal” (vs. 19). Moths lay eggs in woolen fabrics unless we guard against them. As the larvae hatch, they eat into the cloth and destroy the covering that protects us against the elements.

What does this mean for us spiritually? We must prepare to combat Satan and sin! When we allow sin’s larvae into our hearts and minds, they eat away the truth that shields us from lies and delusion. Only by confession and contrition do we attract the grace of God, which alone has the power to kill these deadly and voracious hatchlings of sin within ourselves.

Similarly, what functions like *rust* in our daily lives? Surely it is the corrosive power of secular life. The world carries our passions with self-serving lies, fads, and distortions. Secularism, unless sealed out with the chrism of the Holy Spirit, will corrode our devotion and our worship. When we fast, let us heed the Lord’s sure and gentle voice, for He alone assists us in countering the corrosive rust of the world.

Finally, the demons are the *thieves* who seek to break into our hearts by any means to steal our souls for Satan’s perverse kingdom. Beware when these enemies encourage us to “adjust” the terms of the fast or to shrug at Christ’s Mysteries! If we listen to them, we serve ourselves (and many devils) instead of God.

*Come and abide in us and cleanse us from every stain and save our souls, O good One.* –  
Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**March 3 – Clean Monday**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 1:1-20**

**Two Attitudes Toward Wisdom: Proverbs 1:1-20, especially vss. 5, 8-9:** “*For a wise man who hears these things will be wiser. . . . But the ungodly despise wisdom and instruction. Hear, my son, the instruction of your father, and do not reject the laws of your mother.*” We Orthodox Christians will immediately recognize that the “wisdom” set forth in the Book of Proverbs shares much in common with the *Philokalia* and other famous writings of the Church Fathers. Meditating on Proverbs during Great Lent encourages us to cultivate “the fear of God” (vs. 7) as a first step in gaining wisdom in Christ. The wisdom that we receive from the Book of Proverbs is not merely helpful advice. It highlights God-pleasing morals and ethics that form a major dimension of Christian life, understanding, and perception.

The opening line of Proverbs states the title of this collection of writings, followed by a prologue to its contents. Immediately we are presented with two contrasting orientations toward wisdom, aptly illustrated by the verses quoted above. When he is oriented to wisdom, the *wise man* gains discernment, astuteness, perception, understanding, and direction (vss. 2-8). However, the orientation of the *ungodly* leads one astray, for the secular mind neither knows nor considers God. If we do not “turn away our foot from their paths” (vs. 15) but instead choose “evil” (vs. 17), then we will suffer, for “they take away their own soul in ungodliness” (vs. 19).

The wisdom in Proverbs shows us how to conduct our life “before the Lord,” to whom each of us shall give account. We must bear in mind, of course, that these verses were compiled before the Lord’s incarnation. The writer of Proverbs does not yet “know” Christ as Wisdom incarnate. However, the Preincarnate Christ does speak to us through Proverbs, if we listen closely!

Whenever the word “God” appears in Proverbs, as in verse 7, we may read it as “the God-Man, Jesus Christ” – the Alpha and Omega, Holy Wisdom Himself. It is Christ who teaches us how to live rightly with others through the wise words of Proverbs. Christ is the very “Wisdom [who] sings in the streets . . . [and] moves boldly in the squares” (vs. 20). Let us be numbered among the “simple” so that we may receive “perception and understanding” (vs. 4). When we hear Proverbs as coming from Christ Himself, “a wise man who hears these things will be wiser, and the man of understanding will gain direction” (vs. 5).

When Proverbs prompts us to “hear . . . the instruction of your father, and . . . not reject the laws of your mother” (vs. 9), let us receive this admonition with all our mind, heart, and will. These words may recall the godly voices of grandparents and parents, to the extent that they raised us in the faith. They also remind us to heed the preaching, teaching, and counsel of our priests. Finally, let us read the words of the Church Fathers, who give us a two-thousand-year-old, life-giving stream of Holy Tradition that constantly renews the riches of Orthodoxy. Among these fathers we are blessed to count elders – gerondas, startzy, and abbas – who are speaking, writing, and praying for us even today.

May God grant us during the coming season of Lent the grace of attentive listening for our salvation! Our mother, the Church, serves us a lavish feast of words and worship. She does not confine, constrict, or inhibit us, but rather urges us to restrain ourselves from the evil passions and the insidious, worldly invitations of the *ungodly* (vss. 10-14).

*O Lord our God, nail our flesh to the fear of Thee, and mortify my earthly members that we may be illumined by the contemplation of Thee, O Holy, life-giving Wisdom.* – Great Compline prayer of Saint Basil the Great

**March 4 – Clean Tuesday**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 1:20-35**

**Lord, Have Mercy: Proverbs 1:20-35, especially vs. 35:** “*But he who obeys me shall dwell in hope, and shall be at rest without fear from every evil.*” During virtually every Orthodox church service the priest offers the Litany of Peace, which bids us to pray for an all-encompassing list of needs, situations, and groups of people. Our response to each of these requests is “Lord, have mercy,” a refrain that reminds us of our urgent need to cry out to God. The litany ends with the plea, “Help us; save us; have mercy on us; and keep us, O God, by Thy grace.”

In this light, let us observe the message conveyed by today’s passage from the Book of Proverbs. It warns against *arrogance* and the *ungodly* (vs. 23) – those “evil men [who] . . . hate wisdom and choose not the fear of the Lord” (vs. 31). These people do not “wish to follow [God’s] counsels, but despise [His] reproofs” (vs. 32). What befalls those who “hate wisdom,” rejecting the Lord’s counsel and despising divine correction (vss. 31-32)? Effectively, the wicked slay and bring ruin on themselves (vs. 33-34)!

Our reading reinforces the fact that the Wisdom of God is heard in the hymns the Church *sings*, as well in the passages of Holy Scripture we read (vs. 20). It is up to us to heed this wisdom, but there is nothing secret about Orthodox Christianity. We openly proclaim Christ, the Truth, as announced by His apostles, those “lords at the gates” of the City of God (vs. 21). Within the life of the Church, Christ our Truth is the same forever (Heb 13:8).

When we read that “Wisdom sings in the streets” (Prv 1:20), let us picture life’s winding avenues, those daily thoroughfares traveled by the people of every city in the world. The mention of “squares . . . high city walls and . . . the gates of a city” (vss. 20, 21) emphasizes the fact that our holy faith applies to every aspect of human activity. The Church openly asserts the message of the Gospel so that people everywhere may cry out to God, in the spirit of the Litany of Peace, “Lord, have mercy.”

In the Septuagint version we read, “So long a time as the simple hold fast to righteousness, they shall not be ashamed.” (vs. 22). By way of contrast the text holds up those without *discernment*, who desire “arrogance” and “become ungodly” (vs. 23). As one commentator notes, “Folly and carelessness of heart can laugh at the entreaties of Wisdom; [but] a day comes . . . when Wisdom shall laugh at . . . calamity and mock . . . bitter anguish” (Ironsides, *Notes on the Book of Proverbs*, p. 24).

First and foremost, the ungodly are defined as those who lack *discernment* (vs. 23). Saint Peter of Damascus defines this virtue as knowing “when the time is ripe, what means to employ, the inner state of the questioner, what level he has reached, his strength, his degree of spiritual knowledge and his intention, as well as God’s purpose and the meaning of each verse of Holy Scripture” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 242-3). If we wish to avoid God’s rebuke and remain guileless before Him, we must cleave to righteousness, attain mindfulness, and practice discernment. We need to pray unceasingly, “Lord, have mercy!”

Wisdom declares, “I shall bring forth upon you the utterance of my breath, and I shall teach you my word” (vs. 24). Christ our God warns that if we are tempted to scorn His counsel, we risk becoming ungodly and “subject to reproofs” (vs. 23). How willingly He calls us! He speaks to us “at length” (vs. 25), for “close examination shall destroy the ungodly. But he who obeys me shall dwell in hope, and shall be at rest without fear from every evil” (vss. 34-35).

*Thy coming will be great and fearful, O Lord, when Thou wilt come in righteous judgment. Do not condemn me, though I stand condemned, but spare me as the compassionate God, through the acceptable prayers of Thy holy apostles and all the saints.* – Divine Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts

**March 5 - Clean Wednesday**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 2:1-22**

**Wisdom: Food for the Soul: Proverbs 2:1-22, especially vss. 10-11:** *“If wisdom comes into your mind, and the perception in your soul seems to be good, then good counsel will guard you, and holy thinking will keep you.”* The Book of Proverbs encourages the people of God to seek wisdom – the divine knowledge that offers “truth for living.” But this wisdom is much more than just information, useful knowledge, or helpful tips for living. Wisdom is a godly orientation; it is to work with the Lord under His guidance (vss. 6-7).

We read to nurture the soul, and Proverbs are the food that sustains our life in Christ. God says, “Receive the words of my commandment and hide them within yourself” (vs. 1). The image of hiding indicates that gaining wisdom is first and foremost an inner process. We are to hear in our spirit, integrating the words into heart and soul. Then wisdom will appear in the form of action. Wisdom when acquired takes the form of life-giving habits, and godly habits in turn form the “smooth paths of righteousness” that allow us to “dwell in the land” where our good God chooses to place us (vss. 20, 22).

The opening quotation from verses 10 and 11 invites us to consider wisdom’s impact on all aspects of the soul: the rational powers (vss. 3-5), the will (vss. 6-9), and the emotions (vss. 10-12). Verses 13-22 add cautions from God, warnings against the temptations to “forsake the paths of uprightness” (vs. 13) in favor of darkness, evil, and perversion.

Of course, the acquisition of wisdom is always conditional, for God makes wisdom available only when two major “ifs” apply to us: “if [we] call upon wisdom, and search for her as treasure” (vss. 3, 4). God reveals wisdom but we must undertake the work. He inspired certain chosen vessels to understand His ways, and these unknown scholars recorded what they learned in the Book of Proverbs. These writers handed down this collection of food for the soul as an aid to subsequent generations of His people, including us.

Now it is our turn to search for wisdom and seek what God has revealed, saying, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, teach me Thy statutes” (Ps 118:12). Our task is to *seek* for wisdom and *search* for God’s truths (vs. 4). We must work to discern what wisdom is saying and then apply it. Take heart, for the “if” clauses are followed by God’s promise that we will then “understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God” (vs. 5). Let us feed our hearts and “eat the fat” (Neh 8:10).

Wisdom above all is a gift from God (Prv 2:6). Since God has revealed that it is He who provides the gift, let us cry out for wisdom and search for Him who will “guard the way of those who reverence Him” (vs. 8). We will then be able to base our decisions on God’s gift of wisdom and act with persevering effort. If we choose to be *upright* (vs. 7), then God will enlighten our darkened wills and enable us to act with grace consistently. He is with us in this project! Let us keep in mind the Lord Jesus’ promise: “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me. . . . For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Mt 11:30).

If we seek out wisdom, God will keep, rescue, and guard us (Prv 2:10-12). Not only will our minds and wills be healed by His wisdom, but we will know joy as well, for it is the Lord Who dispenses the grace of purification and dispassion. As Saint Diadochos assures us, “When the arrows [of the devil] reach the external part of the heart, they are destroyed there because the grace of Christ is within” (Vlachos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*, p. 102). Let us be grateful and seek to acquire wisdom as the inner treasure of our hearts, that we may be guarded by “the whole armor of God” (Eph 6:13).

*But be subject unto God, O my soul, for from Him is my patient endurance. For He is my God, my savior and my helper, and I shall not be moved from hence.* – Psalm 61:5-6

**March 6 – Clean Thursday**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 3:1-20**

**The Wisdom and Power of God: Proverbs 3:1-20, especially vs. 5:** “Trust in God with all your heart, and do not exalt your own wisdom.” Proverbs tells us that wisdom gives us right thinking (vss. 2:3-5), directs our decision making (vss. 2:6-9), and stabilizes our emotional life (vss. 2:10-12). All of this occurs because wisdom works deep in the human heart, for wisdom “is security for those who lean upon her as upon the Lord” (vs. 3:20).

The Holy Fathers emphasize the heart as the key to gaining the ineffable and “unsearchable riches of Christ,” a wealth that God the Father wills to give us in Christ (Eph 3:8, 2:7). When Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos says, “God is revealed in the heart and it is there that man comes to know Him,” he is pointing to the central work that takes place within us (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 121).

What is the heart? In biblical and patristic usage, the term “heart” does not correspond to the emotions. Rather, it is synonymous with the “spirit” of a person, and closely related to what the Fathers call the *nous*. These three terms – heart, spirit, and *nous* – may be defined as the essence of the soul, the place within each person where God reveals Himself (Mt 5:8). Most certainly, the heart is where God chooses to illumine the faithful (2 Cor 4:6).

Saint Maximos the Confessor treats heart and *nous* as equivalents when he exhorts us to “strive to cleanse the intellect [*nous*] (which the Lord calls the ‘heart’) from hatred and dissipation. For these defile the intellect, and do not allow it to see Christ, who dwells in it by the grace of holy baptism” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 109).

The role of the heart and *nous* with respect to wisdom is clarified in the account of Christ’s appearance to two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “They said to one another, ‘Did not our *heart* burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?’” (Lk 24:32). He then appears to the eleven and opens “their understanding [*nous*], that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (vs. 24:45). Christ, the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24) illumines us to comprehend the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 13:11).

In Proverbs, we find wisdom’s promises to those who let their hearts “keep my words” (Prv 3:1). “Life and peace” become ours (vs. 2). We “find grace” before the Lord and are able to “provide good things before the Lord and men” (vss. 3-4). Who guarantees such gifts? The answer here, obviously, is Wisdom.

Let us hasten to add, as the wise Fathers of the Church have demonstrated, that to be illumined by “Wisdom” is to be enlightened by Christ. So far as we are concerned, the light shining in Proverbs’ wisdom is the same Light that comes to us through the wise fishermen who received the Holy Spirit. The ancient Proverbs of the Old Testament are consistent with all that the Church Fathers have taught down through the ages. These writings contain the counsel of the Lord Jesus, who is Holy Wisdom.

Thus, we accept the command to “Trust in God with all your heart” (vs. 5) as an injunction from Jesus Christ. Before His Incarnation, Wisdom assumed the feminine gender according to the grammatical conventions of ancient Greek and Hebrew. Once Christ is revealed to the world as the Wisdom of God, however, we understand Him to be the very source of the light that shines into our hearts!

“Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, and a mortal who sees discernment” (vs. 13). Christ our Wisdom “is more valuable than precious stones, and nothing evil will withstand” Him (vs. 15). Our Savior is the “tree of life for all who cleave to” Him (vs. 20).

*O Image of Him who is, O Thou Son, Word, and Wisdom of the Most High, and His arm and right hand and strength, Thee do we praise with the Father and the Spirit.* – Canon of the Feast of the Transfiguration

**March 7 - Clean Friday**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 3:21-36**

**Godly Counsel: Proverbs 3:21-36, especially vs. 23:** “*My son, do not be careless, but keep my counsel and thinking.*” The counsels we find in the Book of Proverbs are ever in harmony with the teachings of Christ, His apostles, and the Church Fathers who follow after them. May we never overlook the understanding and insight found in this venerable book! Let us cleave to its wisdom so that “[our] souls may live, and grace may be [an adornment] around [our] neck” (vs. 23).

Proverbs does not offer us random bits of take-it-or-leave-it advice – rather, it presents us with an urgent directive for attaining both healing and security (vs. 25-27). The teachings in Proverbs will enrich our present existence and shape our eternal destiny as well. Each exhortation is laden with benefits if we will hear and build upon its truth, for these writings indicate how to follow God’s will in all our relationships.

We note, first of all, that “God by wisdom founded the earth and prepared the heavens” through careful planning (vs. 21). God the Word still sustains heaven and earth – the same Lord who came in the flesh “to purify the world from the error of the adversary” (Vespers of Theophany). The incarnate Wisdom of God sets and maintains the conditions of human existence. He bestows health and blessing on our endeavors (vs. 24), allowing or us to “walk confidently in peace in all [our] ways” without stumbling (vs. 26). Christ invites all to come to Him, promising rest to those “who labor and are heavy laden” (Mt 11:28). God promises these same benefits to us in Proverbs: “For if you sit down, you will be without fear, and if you lie down, your sleep will be pleasant” (Prv 3:27).

When we act and speak according to Christ’s will, obeying His word, a further declaration of Proverbs applies to our lives: “For the Lord will be over all your ways, and He will plant your feet firmly, that you may not be shaken” (vs. 29). Let us remember, however, that God’s promise to shelter “all our ways” comes with this basic condition: such protection is futile if we fail to glorify God and offer Him praise and thanksgiving (Rom 1:21).

The wise teacher who gathered and recorded the Book of Proverbs provides us with guidance for how to glorify God in all our relationships with others. First, we must assist the *needy* as we are able (Prv 3:30-31), as Christ teaches in the Gospel (Mt 25:35-36). We must refuse to *devise evil things* against friends and neighbors who live near us and trust us (Prv 3:32). Regardless of our feelings, we are to follow the Lord Jesus’ instructions: “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you, and persecute you” (Mt 5:44).

Both the Gospels (Mt 5:25) and Proverbs (Prv 3:33) advise us to avoid quarrels. In dealing with those who do or speak evil, let us be quick to turn away. Such people may accuse us of being “too good” because we obey the Lord. However, we neither covet the success of evil men nor “seek their ways” (vs. 34), for “the curse of God is in the houses of the ungodly” (vs. 36). Such men will “be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thes 2:12). Let us never be counted among those bent on wrongdoing, for they ultimately perish. Instead, let us study and apply the Lord’s counsels for life!

If we strive to approach every choice and every relationship in light of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12), we shall realize the blessing conveyed by these well-known words from Proverbs: “The Lord opposes the arrogant, but He gives grace to the humble” (Prv 3:37; 1 Pt 5:5).

*Rescue me from mine enemies, O Lord; unto Thee have I fled for refuge. Teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God. Thy good Spirit shall lead me in the land of uprightness; for Thy Name’s sake, O Lord, shalt Thou quicken me.* – Psalm 142:11-12).

**March 8 - Saturday of the First Week of Great Lent**  
**Mark 2:23-3:5**

**Orthodoxy as Fulfillment: Mark 2:23-3:5, especially vs. 2:28:** “Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.” Our Orthodox faith embodies a concern for right doctrine, right living, and right worship. Strict adherence to authentic tradition would thus seem to be a hallmark of orthodoxy. However, we discover a twist in today’s reading, which describes two conflicts between the Lord and the most Orthodox of Jews – the Pharisees. In both encounters, it is Christ who seems to be bending the rules.

Is it possible that the Lord Jesus is somehow less orthodox than His opponents? After all, He is the Lawgiver who establishes this commandment: “Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your works, but the seventh day is the Sabbath to the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work” (Dt 5:12-14).

Further, Christ makes this assertion: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. . . . Whosoever therefore breaks one of these least commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:17, 19).

What is happening here? What is the Lord teaching us about true orthodoxy? The key is found in the phrase *to fulfill*, which we have just quoted from Matthew 5:17. The Lord seeks *to fulfill* the Law, neither breaking it nor doing away with it. As we examine the present Gospel, let us consider how orthodoxy functions as fulfillment rather than Pharisaical strictness.

The conflicts at hand involve the Sabbath, the seventh day on which God “rested . . . from all the works He made” in creating the world (Gn 2:2). However, God not only “rested” on the seventh day – He also “blessed the seventh day and sanctified it” (vs. 2:3). To what purpose?

The Lord Jesus answers this question for us when He explains that God blessed and sanctified the Sabbath *for man* (Mk 2:27). The seventh day is a divine gift to mankind, a day of rest from labor and for giving thanks to the Lord.

The Pharisees, desiring to be fully orthodox in their Judaism, tried to spell out in concrete terms what constituted “work” on the Sabbath. They considered any action that could be assigned to any one of 39 categories to be a violation of the Sabbath. “Rest” was thus transformed from a gift from God into a man-made system of regulations, to be obeyed *as if they came from God*. The notion of *fulfillment* became lost in the welter of details.

Because the Pharisees considered reaping to be a category of work, they condemned the picking and eating of grain by the disciples (vss. 23-24). The Lord, however, gives an example of a violation of the Law (vss. 25-26) in order to crack the hard shell of their legalism. He thus restores the Sabbath to its real purpose as a day of rest *for man*.

Since people require food to live, the disciples are not violating the Sabbath rest: they are fulfilling their bodies’ need for food. To clarify the nature of true orthodoxy, Christ further states that He alone defines work and determines the intentions of the Sabbath Law, for “the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath” (vs. 28).

The second conflict (vss. 3:1-5) provides a further opportunity for the Lord to reveal how fulfillment constitutes true orthodoxy. When a man needs healing, His loving Creator helps him. He offers him restoration on the day of rest that He has given to all men. “Stretch out your hand” (vs. 3:5), He says, for “the Sabbath was made for man” (vs. 2:27).

*With my prayer I cry unto Thee, O Lord; it is time for Thy good pleasure. O God, in the multitude of Thy mercy hearken unto me, in the truth of Thy salvation.* – Psalm 68:16-17



**March 9 - First Sunday of Lent (Sunday of Orthodoxy)**  
**John 1:43-51**

**Seeing and Knowing: *John 1:43-51, especially vs. 46:*** “Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’” Philip invites Nathanael, a neighbor from his home town, to “come and see” Jesus. This invitation is one of nine occasions when the verb “to see” appears in the present passage. It is instructive to note how this recurring word changes meaning as the passage develops. At first the word “see” refers to sight through our physical eyes, but later on “seeing” indicates “knowing.”

The change begins with Philip’s offer to Nathanael. His invitation might be paraphrased thus: “Come, observe, learn, and get to ‘know’ this Man for yourself.” As the account progresses, “seeing” steadily acquires the deeper connotation of knowledge. Furthermore, the kind of “knowing” implied by the verb “to see” becomes increasingly profound. Saint John the Evangelist reveals that if we “see” Jesus, we will cross the threshold into a saving knowledge – a personal meeting that goes far beyond the mundane acquisition of information.

After Philip’s invitation, the next appearance of the verb “to see” is in verse 47, where it is used twice. The first instance states a simple fact: “Jesus *saw* Nathanael coming toward Him.” He immediately says, “Behold,” a verbal command equivalent to “Look!” By this command the Lord discloses that He already “knows” the character of Nathanael. Endowed with the capacity to “see” men’s hearts, the Lord knows Nathaniel to be guileless and free of deceit.

Nathanael does not miss the point of this “behold.” Impressed by the knowledge of this teacher who “sees” into his soul, he asks, “How do You know me?” (vs. 48). Let us never forget that the Lord sees clearly into every heart and mind! He selects men whom He “sees” to serve as His apostles, and He sees and knows our own deepest values.

Jesus replies to Nathanael, “When you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (vs. 48). This statement linking “seeing” with “knowing” is an example of what the Church Fathers call *diorasis*, the ability to see into obscure circumstances, to know facts or events inaccessible to others.

Such clairvoyance is a gift sometimes given to the Church’s saints. For example, a peasant once came to Saint Seraphim of Sarov in despair because his horse had been stolen. “I do not know how I shall feed my family,” he lamented. The saint replied, “Wrap yourself in silence and hasten to the village. . . . When you come to it, turn off the road to the right and pass along the backyards of four houses. There you will see a small wicket gate. Go in, untie your horse from the log and lead it out without a word” (Moore, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov*, p. 371-2).

Everything, of course, happened exactly in the manner described by the wonderworking saint. This kind of “knowledge” comes from the Holy Spirit and is limited to those deemed worthy of such “sight,” who have purified their hearts through deep asceticism (spiritual exercise).

The final kind of “sight as knowledge” is mentioned by the Lord in His final statement from today’s passage: “Hereafter, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (vs. 51). The Lord Jesus refers here to sight as pure revelation. When God discloses Himself to those who trust in Him and commit their lives to Him, they see.

At one level the Lord’s statement alludes to our ability to discern that He is the Way – the ladder leading from this life to the heavenly realm. The Lord reveals this truth to the hearts of the faithful so that we will venture to follow Him without hesitation or restraint, turning to Him as God and King in our daily lives and in every decision we make. At another level He is alluding to the age to come, when the faithful shall *see* Him no longer “in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor 13:12).

*Illumine us, O Lord, by the light of understanding and piety, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that we may behold Thee, O King of all, in Thy royal beauty.* – Baptismal prayer

**March 10 - Monday of the Second Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 3:37-4:21**

**Acquiring Wisdom: Proverbs 3:34-4:22, especially vss. 4:1-2:** “Hear, my children, the instruction of your father, and pay attention, that you might know his thinking; for I offer a good gift to you; do not forsake my law.” The Book of Proverbs is like a spring welling up and pouring into the river of Holy Wisdom. It flows into our lives via the channels of living relationships between elder and disciple from one generation to the next. As one of the wise elders who wrote Proverbs says, “For I was a son, and I was obedient to my father, and beloved in the presence of my mother, who taught me, saying, ‘Let our word become firmly planted in your heart; guard our commandments; do not forget them; neither disregard the word of my mouth, nor forsake it, and it shall cleave to you; love it, and it will keep you’” (vss. 4:3-6).

In order to drink from this life-giving stream of water, we must develop the habits conducive to acquiring wisdom. We begin by humbling ourselves, for “the Lord opposes the arrogant, but He gives grace to the humble” (vs. 3:37). Humility is learned from godly teachers, elders, fathers, and mothers, insofar as we heed them. Tito Colliander suggests that teachers of humility “meet us at every step in our daily life, if only we recognize their voices. Your wife wants you to take your raincoat with you: do as she wishes, to practice obedience. . . . Wordlessly the infant asks for care and companionship: do as it wishes as far as you can” (*Way of the Ascetics*, p. 44).

Let us further seek humility by confessing that we are sinners, sick and “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). Here is the gateway to humility. Recognizing our infirmity, we understand that therapy is required under the guidance of professionals who are adept in spiritual healing. Saint John Climacus describes the true spiritual healer as a “physician . . . who suffers from no carnal or spiritual malady” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, p. 231). Within the Church we find pastors who are “rescued by God” and able to “save those led on toward death” (p. 242). Before such healers we humbly confess our sins.

Proverbs next directs us to “pay attention” (vs. 4:1). Let us listen closely to our priests and teachers, who will help us to hear the voice of the Physician (Mk 2:17). Likewise, we are to heed the Scriptures and Church Fathers who us offer godly counsel and instruction. Let us be grateful for the truth we receive from these wise teachers, regarding it as a “good gift” (Prv 4:2) for benefit of heart and soul rather than as a confining stricture that stunts our freedom.

Another habit we must cultivate is *obedience* (vs. 3). Why go to a physician if we do not plan to take the medicine he prescribes and follow his directions? Saint Peter of Damascus says, “Blessed are they who are completely devoted to God, either through obedience to someone experienced in the practice of the virtues and living an ordered life in stillness, or else through themselves living in stillness . . . scrupulously obedient to God’s will, and seeking the advice of experienced men” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 103-4).

As we acquire truth, we find it necessary to set a perimeter around whatever light and wisdom we attain. When the wise elder speaks of “the word of my mouth” (vs. 5) and advises us to “secure it” (vs. 7), he is using the military term for digging a fortified perimeter. May God guide us in building life-defending disciplines, so that we set a guard over His wisdom in our hearts!

Lastly, may we love and honor the *word* (vss. 4, 6) of Christ, the Wisdom of God. He will keep us and make our ways “shine like a light . . . until full daylight” comes (vs. 18).

*O Wisdom of the Father, who didst manifest Thyself a great helper to the oppressed, and who enlightens those in darkness, have mercy upon me and keep me, O God, by Thy grace. – Kneeling Prayers and Litany of Pentecost*

**March 11 - Tuesday of the Second Week of Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 5:1-15**

**Life, Death, and the Mystery of Marriage: Proverbs 5:1-15, especially vs. 5-6:** “For feet lacking discernment lead those using her down into Hades with death; her footsteps are not planted, for she does not travel the ways of life; and her paths are slippery and not easy to discern.” Here *paths* (vs. 6) refers to “ways of life” that we may choose wisely or foolishly, only to find ourselves stumbling. Thank God for ways with sound footing that secure true life for us!

As we consider the two ways of life that these verses reveal, let us heed the warning of Proverbs and guard against the slippery paths that lead down to death. We know that there exists a godly path that assures life, love, and blessings, while there is another way “more bitter than gall” (vs. 4).

The Orthodox Church views marriage as one of the holy mysteries, which allows us to discern reason for the radically different outcomes of the two paths, promiscuity and fidelity. Adultery and fornication are choices that end in “hades with death” (vs. 5). Marriage, by contrast, can be a path of life that leads the man and the woman to union with God.

Father John Meyendorff calls holy wedlock “a mystery of the Kingdom of God introducing man into eternal joy and eternal love” (*Marriage*, p. 22). When a marriage is consecrated in the Church, within “the mystery of Christ” (Eph 3:4), men and women are united by God’s hand and directed to the path of eternal life. Thus the path of Christian marriage differs both in nature and direction from that of couples married outside the Church, and even more so from the way of those who indulge in sensual pleasures outside of holy matrimony.

The godly husband and wife choose to walk together on the living Way (Jn 14:6). They avoid the uncertain footing of what “feels good,” refusing to pursue the illusory fulfillment of every passing desire and feeling. Such couples seek to realize an eternal bond of love in Christ, exceeding what Father Alexander Elchaninov calls “the normal rules of human relationship . . . to enter a region of the miraculous, the superhuman” (*Diary of a Russian Priest*, p. 46).

The present passage from Proverbs encourages us to avoid of what is *base*, “for honey drips from the lips of a prostitute [who] for a season is pleasing to your taste” (vs. 5:3). Our English translation of *base* fails to capture the evil and wickedness implied in the original Greek. These are strong words that confront the modern neo-pagan obsession with sensuality. The era during which Proverbs was penned clearly has parallels with our own indulgent age.

The truth is that the lure of carnal pleasure has been a persistent temptation through all history; for abnormal, fleshly, lustful impulses arise in our fallen nature, as do noble, good, and God-given inclinations. “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin, leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?” (Rom. 6:16). The Apostle and the wise elder set life and death before us with both promises and threats that are greater than mere respectability or disease.

If we separate ourselves from God, then we die, but if we choose to be the Lord’s servants, then we have “fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life” (Rom. 6:22). Why should we learn the bitterness of momentary pleasures the hard way so that we are compelled to take the words of the remorseful man on our lips? “How I hated instruction and turned my heart away from reproofs” (Pr. 5:12). “choose life, that both you and your seed may live”(Dt. 30:19)!

*I behold the sea of life surging high with the tempest of temptations, and I cry aloud to Thee: lead Thou my life forth from corruption, O Most Merciful One!* – The Funeral Service, Ode 6

**March 12 - Wednesday of the Second Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 5:15-6:3**

**Maintaining Boundaries: Proverbs 5:15-6:3, especially vss. 22-23:** “Each man is bound by the chains of his own sins. Such a man dies with the uninstructed and is cast forth from the abundance of his own substance; and he is destroyed by lack of discernment.” In these verses we find wisdom concerning marriage and our responsibility for the debts of others. The two matters may at first appear unrelated, but they share a common pattern: the requirement to guard faithfully the truth that illumines us in Christ. We must actively protect what truly is valuable, setting clear limits on relationships and activities, especially those outside the home, and maintaining vigilance over our marriages, households, and financial obligations.

Let us determine to remain alert at all times for anything that might weaken or destroy our home and family life. We must not squander what is valuable through carelessness. Proverbs uses water as a metaphor here (vss. 15-18), for this resource is essential to life – and especially so in the semi-arid climate of the Holy Land. Yesterday’s warning to guard against base women (vss. 5:1-14) connects to the present reading; thus “do not let the waters from your fountain be spilled” (vs. 16) is a warning against bestowing favors outside the rightful marriage bed. Illicit pleasures, however sweet and pleasing they might appear at first, threaten our person, marriage, and home (vs. 20).

Chapter 6 warns against waste stemming from any action that places family assets at risk, such as co-signing the loan of another (vss. 1-3). Such generosity seem natural when it involves adult children, brothers, sisters, parents, or close friends. Indeed, Proverbs does not advise against generosity or oppose gifts to those in need. The underlying principle is this: if we lack sufficient resources to make an outright gift, then we should make no guarantees on behalf of another. Such acts can be likened to adultery, for when we assume financial risks for others we place the welfare of our own family at risk, and abuse the trust of those dependent on us.

Vigilance is required at all times over the boundaries between our relationships with strangers and our intimate, private relationships within the family. This issue arises most obviously in male-female relationships: “Do not be intimate with a strange woman” (vs. 20). The Patriarch Joseph, when he was invited to be intimate with Potiphar’s wife, fled the scene to preserve his purity (Gn 39:7-21). Holy Scripture provides us with a true spiritual perspective: God sees every action of every person, including the intents of our hearts (Prv 5:21; Gn 39:9).

This same perspective appears in the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ (Mt 5:28). If we prayerfully watch, test, and weigh all outside relationships, we will find that God prompts us in a timely manner to put on the brakes. That is, we are to interrupt any trend or behavior that jeopardizes what He has given us to protect and keep secure. Especially when you know that you may be putting your family’s financial security at risk, “do not give sleep to your eyes” (Prv 6:6) until you are delivered out of such a snare.

Lastly, God requires that we actively nurture the persons and resources of our households, for we are responsible for them before Him. In all our relationships let us be pure and chaste, protecting “the wife of [our] youth” (vs. 5:18). In managing material resources, let us balance acts of charity against family needs in order to stabilize the financial well-being of the home (vss. 6:4-6).

*Grant me Thy grace, O Lord, to be diligent and faithful and to avoid all evil company and influence, and to resist all temptation, that I may lead a godly life, blameless and peaceful.* –General prayer of intercession

**March 13 - Thursday of the Second Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 6:3-24**

**Dominant Sins: Proverbs 6:3-24, especially vs. 17, 20:** “A man who is without discernment and is lawless does not walk in good ways. . . . For he rejoices in everything the Lord hates, and he shall be broken because of his soul’s uncleanness. . . .” Today Proverbs provides a summary of life-dominating sins that “the Lord hates” (vs. 20). We encounter a veritable catalogue of personal defects and entrenched moral failings. This direct focus on sin stands in clear opposition to modern attitudes that excuse, explain, or seek to “understand” the wrongdoer.

The Book of Proverbs is forthright, for it asserts that sin starts with a lack of *discernment* (vs. 17). Indeed, sin often conceals itself behind a quick retort, a slip of the tongue, and a tendency toward harsh, shrewd, or defensive answers. Unexamined and unchecked, such evasions and “slips” may develop into perverse habits that subjugate the better aspects of our nature and deform our souls, little by little.

If we permit these weeds to grow in our souls, then we eventually become like those who cause “trouble in a city” (vs. 18). The Bible tends to classify sinners according to the passions that come to dominate them. Saint Paul states, “Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9-10).

Having been warned against assuming “the debt of [a] friend” (Prv 6:1), we now turn to the vice of laziness: “Compare yourself with the ant, O sluggard, and be zealous when you see his ways” (vs. 7). In some cases there are underlying medical and physiological conditions that give the appearance of sloth, but the wisdom of Scripture certainly applies to the majority.

Looking down on other people – a trait referred to here as “a haughty eye” (vs. 21) – is another snare of the devil, especially if we use it to increase our sense of self worth. We avoid such thoughts by remembering that “all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Furthermore, the Lord hates “an unrighteous tongue” (Prv 6:21). The Apostle James warns that “the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. . . . It defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell” (Jam 3:6).

Many “nice” people today are complicit in a legal agreement to “shed righteous blood” (Prv 6:21), since every day more than 3,200 abortions occur in our nation. In corporate offices, in halls of government, and in countless homes there is many “a heart that devises evil thoughts; and feet that hasten to do evil” (vs. 22).

God is calling to us to listen! To have “pure and undefiled religion before God . . . is . . . to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (Jam 1:27). We must look deep within our souls and identify every trace of those attitudes, thoughts, fantasies, and rationalizations that may become the seeds of a deep-set perversity. Just as God hates habitual liars, He hates the conventional dishonesties that we employ so as to feel comfortable in society, so that we can be seen as “nice” people.

The Biblical outlook understands repentance as a universal need. After Saint Paul provides his catalog of sinners, he continues: “And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11).

*Grant unto me, I beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy helping grace, that I may obediently walk in Thy holy commandments, and lead a sober, righteous and godly life, ever remembering Thy mercies and the blessings Thou hast bestowed upon me.* – Prayer of Thanksgiving After Deliverance From Trouble

**March 14 - Friday of the Second Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 6:24-40**

**Guarding Purity: Proverbs 6:24-40, especially vs. 24:** “My son, guard the laws of your father, and do not depart from the rules of your mother.” The first nine chapters of Proverbs are attributed to Solomon, who writes extensively on the sins of the flesh. This fact is not surprising, since the record shows that this wise king knew personal defeat at the hands of the demon of lust (3 Kgs 11:1-7). Today’s verses dwell in particular on fleshly desires, or what Saint John Climacus calls “our merciless foe, the teacher of fornication” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 15:33, p. 109).

Saint John Chrysostom describes how lust possessed Solomon, adding “there was never man wiser than he, and all other virtue did he attain; still, however, he was seized so violently by this passion, that even in his vitals he received the wound” (*Homily 23 on 2 Corinthians*, NPNF vol. 12, p. 389). May we heed the warning that “the adulterer through his lack of discernment obtains the destruction of his soul; he bears both pain and dishonor, and his disgrace will not be wiped away forever” (Pr. 6:37-38). Solomon offers credible witness because of his personal experience (3 Kgs 11). Let us learn from him and guard our own purity!

First, we consider how the commandment to protect our virtue helps us maintain purity. The “commandment of law is a lamp and a light” (Prv 6:28) in a time of darkness. Promiscuity is commonplace in our society today. For many, adultery and fornication are considered perfectly acceptable and not even regarded as wrong, much less as sin. The sin of lust has overtaken us to the point that the chaste are regarded as strange and out of step.

We are blessed that the light of the Lord reveals a higher wisdom to us. The Lord guides toward the “way of life” (vs. 28) and turns us away from the path “down into Hades with death” (vs. 5:5). Saint John Climacus especially pities those poor souls who “even though impotent . . . yearn for the stench” of promiscuity (*Ladder* 15:10, p. 105). At those times when we are tempted to stray – or when we may find ourselves willing to veer, but lacking the opportunity to do so – the commandments provide reproof.

How loving is the Lord’s reproach and His correction, when all is darkness on every side! We understand that God’s commandments are given to us in order to bless us. Our conscience prompts us to “guard the laws of your father, and . . . not depart from the rules of your mother” (vs. 6:24). We are to “fasten” these rules “to [our] soul continually” (vs. 6:25).

According to Saint John Climacus, “Not he who has kept his clay undefiled is pure, but he who has completely subjected his members to his soul.” In the end, victory comes by the grace of the Holy Spirit. “For unless the Lord destroys the house of the flesh and builds the house of the soul, the person who wants to destroy it watches and fasts in vain” (*Ladder* 15:25, p. 105-6).

We benefit each time we apply one of God’s commandments to our lives. Even “as you sleep, let it guard you, that when you arise, it may speak to you” (vs. 27). Surely wisdom is to be found by embracing the commandment to purity. “Do not let the desire of beauty conquer you; neither be caught by her eyes, nor captivated by her eyelids” (vs. 30). By exercising self-restraint and listening to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, we cultivate the habit of turning away from lust as soon as we hear the whistle of the “referee,” for God is our helper.

*Let my mouth be filled with Thy praise, O Lord, and establish me in Thy sanctification, that all the day long I may meditate upon Thy righteousness. Alleluia!* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**March 15 - Saturday of the Second Week of Great Lent**  
**Mark 1:35-44**

**Learning Prayer: Saint Mark 1:35-44, especially vs. 35:** “Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.” The incarnate Lord reveals Himself as a consummate man of prayer. Not only does Christ pray continually during His ministry on earth, but even now, as the Apostle Paul teaches, He “lives to make intercession” for us (Heb 7:25). Christ our Lord hears our prayers and offers them to the Father. As a fellow human being, He prayed – and in His reign as God and Lord He prays continuously, now and forever.

Can there be anything about prayer that He does not understand completely? What greater teacher can we turn to for instruction in this art? Metropolitan Philaret asks Christ to “direct our wills, teach us to pray, pray Thou Thyself in us.” Being baptized into Christ, we “have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). We are assured that He is ever ready pray with us and for us from within our spirits.

In the present passage, the Lord Jesus sets forth three practices undergirding every prayer. We must maintain an intimate relationship with Him, fight off demonic interference, and cleanse our hearts so that they serve as pure vessels of prayer.

Prayer is struggle, a reality that Simon Peter understands well, for He knows that finding Christ is urgent (Mk 1:36)! Many people in the world today fail to grasp what drives them to search for truth, light, happiness, love, and meaning. Peter, however, understands: “Everyone is looking for You” (vs. 37). The Lord intends for us to seek Him, to “grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:27-28).

Indeed, we are blessed when we find Him, for in Him is true faith! Like Christ’s first disciples, we too must realize that we have become separated from Him. Only then we will search and be reunited (Mk 1:36-37). We risk losing the Lord when we fall asleep spiritually (Mk 14:37). However, the Lord knows our weaknesses, for He tells his disciples: “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (vs. 14:38).

When they find the Lord, He leads his followers “throughout all Galilee . . . casting out demons” (vs. 1:39). The Lord leads us through many places in this life, if we are willing, teaching us to pray, casting out any demons He may find. Those demons attack us mercilessly, especially during prayer. We all have heard their voices, asking, “What madness is this? What are you doing? He is not within you! You are deceived. It’s time to deal with *real* life!”

To counter such voices, we cry out with Saint John of Kronstadt: “O my strength, Jesus, Son of God! O Light of my mind! The peace, the joy of my heart – glory to Thee! Glory to Thee, Deliverer from my invisible enemies, that fight against my mind and my heart, slaying me in the very source of my life, in my most sensitive part!” (*My Life in Christ*, p. 17). When we ask it, Christ our God casts our adversaries out (vs. 39)!

If the Lord Jesus dwells in us, how do the demons distract and tempt us so readily? We must confess the sinfulness of our hearts and minds, for we are as diseased as the leper (vs. 40). We seek repentance, which is “critical awareness and a sure watch over oneself. . . . reconciliation with the Lord. . . . [and] purification” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 5.1, p. 54).

Let us learn from the leper who comes to Christ, “imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, ‘If You are willing, You can make me clean’” (vs. 40). If we ask Him to heal our leprous hearts and souls, He is faithful to do so (1 Jn 1:9).

*O Master, who art merciful, grant unto us who pray, Thy rich mercies and compassions.* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**March 16 - Second Sunday of Great Lent (Sunday of Saint Gregory Palamas)  
Mark 2:1-12**

**A Revelation Through Healing: Mark 2:1-12, especially vss. 10-11:** “*But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins*’ – He said to the paralytic, *‘I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’*” When the Lord Jesus comes to Capernaum, “immediately many gathered together” (vs. 2). Despite the press of the crowd, the friends of a paralyzed man bring him to Jesus (vs. 3-4). Our Lord responds to the faith of the friends, then speaks to the paralytic about his primary problem: his need for forgiveness (vs. 5).

Jesus is quite aware of the the scribes “reasoning in their hearts” (vs. 6). These theologians believe that a man called Jesus is blaspheming by forgiving sins (vs. 7). How ironic, for they are quite correct in their view that the authority to forgive is vested in God alone.

To help them, the Lord Jesus addresses their spiritual resistance by declaring that “the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins” (vs. 10). According to Blessed Theophylact, “by healing the body, the Lord makes credible and certain the healing of the soul as well, confirming the invisible by means of the visible” (*Explanation of the Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 25). In other words, healing occurs in a believing community gathered around the Lord. Thus the friends’ faith is as important as the paralytic’s.

The scene in Capernaum is in fact a foreshadowing of the Church. Christ the Lord is in *the house* (vs. 1). When people learn that He is there, they gather; He preaches to them (vs. 2). According to Father Alexander Schmemmann, the very first action of the liturgy is the gathering of the faithful, which he calls the “sacrament of the assembly.” “When I say that I am going to church, it means I am going into the assembly of the faithful in order, together with them, to constitute the Church, in order to be what I became on the day of my baptism – a member, in the fullest, absolute meaning of the term, of the Body of Christ” (*The Eucharist*, p. 23).

The full expression of the Church’s gifts, including every sort of spiritual and physical healing, is most likely to come within the context of the Church gathered around her Lord. The Church is the assembly of the faithful, the locus where we anticipate Christ, “who is gracious unto all thine iniquities, who healest all thine infirmities, who redeemeth thy life from corruption, who crowneth thee with mercy and compassion” (Ps 102:3-4).

Note that the paralytic remains passive – and not merely because of his physical need to be carried (Mk 2:3). The man never says a word. He does nothing until he is directed to “arise, take up your bed and go to your house” (vs. 11). Then he acts, but still without a word. It is not so much the suffering man’s faith to which the Lord responds, but rather the faith of those who brought him (vs. 5). Healing requires the faith of the Church even more than individuals alone. We see how infants depend, through their godparents, on the faith of the Church. The sacrament of holy unction requires the reading of seven gospels by seven priests, for the number seven expresses the need for the wholeness of the Church gathered to her Lord.

All healing, whether physical or spiritual, finds its source in Christ. The scribes get the point right, but their reasoning is wrong (vs. 7). The Lord agrees with their assertion, then simultaneously assumes the authority to heal. “But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins,” He commands the paralytic to rise and walk (vs. 10). The Lord reveals his adversaries’ innermost thoughts and heals the man’s body, yet the scribes still cling to their delusion. Sadly, they cannot allow themselves to receive their Savior.

*O Master, Lord our God, raise us up from our sickness through the mercy of Thy goodness, that we who share in Thine inexpressible love toward mankind may sing Thy praises.* – Service of Holy Unction



**March 17 - Monday of the Third Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 8:1-21**

**Wisdom Incarnate: Proverbs 8:1-21, especially vss. 8-9:** “All the words of my mouth are with righteousness; there is nothing in them crooked or twisted. All things are evident to those who understand and true to those who find knowledge.” The core message of the Book of Proverbs centers on wisdom, which is ultimately found in our Lord Jesus Christ. As Wisdom incarnate, He comes as true *discernment* (vs. 1), *astuteness* of heart (vs. 5), and God’s spoken Word of *truth* (vs. 7).

“By revelation” the Apostle Paul is able to “understand . . . the mystery of Christ” through the working of the Spirit (Eph 3:3-5). We understand that the Wisdom in today’s passage – and throughout Holy Scripture – is the very Person of Christ our God. Let us seek the risen Lord through these verses and in all of Proverbs; let us hear Him calling us to Himself as Savior and Lord. May we find confirmation of our union with Him and of His presence in us, that we may say: “Counsel and safety are mine; discernment is mine, and strength is mine” (vs. 14).

We may well ask how the portrait of Wisdom in Proverbs corresponds to the Lord we know. Look at Wisdom’s declaration: “I speak sacred things . . . things that are true” (vs. 6). The Lord Jesus says, “Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I go not away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you” (Jn 16:7). The Spirit of Christ reveals Christ to us!

If we read this passage of Proverbs as the word of the Lord, we realize that He alludes to His Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. These profound, solemn events yield grace far beyond our hopes and imaginings. Wisdom says, I “speak . . . things that are true” (Prv 8:6). The lips of Christ our God are error-free. Wisdom says: “All the words of my mouth are with righteousness” (vs. 8). The Lord Jesus “hate[s] the perverted ways of evil men” (vs. 13), for when Christ is angry He speaks against evil’s corruption. He attacks the buying and selling in the Temple, for example, calling it the conversion of the holy place of worship into “a den of thieves” (Mk 11:17).

The portrait of Wisdom drawn by the Book of Proverbs discloses One who enlightens our hearts and minds, especially when we prefer His instruction to silver and “choose [His] perception rather than pure gold” (Prv 8:10). Let us make the distinguishing mark of our lives the striving to hear Christ’s word and maintain our union with Him. When the Lord asks the Twelve, “Do you also want to go away?” Simon Peter answers, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:67-8).

Truly, Christ teaches us to be “simple ones” (Prv 8:5) who “walk in the ways of righteousness, and [are] conversant with the paths of judgment” (vs. 20). Let us be like the fishermen Peter and John; they lack formal learning and yet they venture to say to the theologians, “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).

Christ our Wisdom gives us good *counsel*, security, prudence, and *strength* as the fruits of godly labor (Prv 8:14). His counsel makes us rich in divine things (Rv 3:18) while He keeps our hearts and minds secure in the peace of God (Phil 4:7). Prudence and strength (Eph 1:8, 6:10) come from Him. He raises up good leaders who *reign* justly (Prv 8:15). Emperors such as Constantine, Vladimir, Nemanja of Serbia, and Mirian of Georgia transformed their nations into Christian realms; their influence on behalf of truth and justice continues to this day.

*Glory to Thee who hast shown us the light. Blessed art Thou, O Lord: teach me Thy statutes. O Continue Thy mercy to them that know Thee, Holy God, Holy Mighty!* – From the Doxology

**March 18 - Tuesday of the Third Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 8:32-35**

**Resisting Wisdom: Proverbs 8:32-35, especially vs. 32:** “Now therefore, my son, hear me: Blessed is the man who shall hearken to me and the man who shall guard my ways.” Who is speaking in these verses? Who offers us blessing, if we hearken to Him and keep His ways? The Church Fathers confirm that it is the Lord Jesus, God’s Incarnate Wisdom, who addresses us as sons and daughters.

Despite this offer of good and godly counsel, many of us stiffen our resistance at any suggestion that we should change our behavior. Even an informed and friendly caution causes some of us to quit listening altogether. However, we would do well to be attentive to the Lord! He is appealing to us, offering us blessing and a place at His feast, if we will simply receive His invitation (vs. 32). Remember, too, that every true apostle, prophet, father, and elder conveys to us the voice of Wisdom Himself.

Those who are receptive to Christ’s message have, in a sense, “tuned in.” Others, however, have “tuned out” Christ. Christ not only bids us to hear Him, but also asks us to “hearken” – that is, to stay tuned in to Him (vs. 32). *Hearkening* is what a loving mother does when her child cries. Despite the clangor and distraction of life, she hears and moves. Mothers are always on ready alert, poised to respond to the child’s voice. Christ our God prompts us to grow in our capacity to *hearken* like a mother.

The Lord Jesus declares that everyone will be blessed who hearkens to Him and keeps His word. These people will receive the greatest of blessings since they are listening for Him in every situation. The opposite also is true: those who will not abide by the teachings of Christ’s Church have tuned Him out already within their hearts. They resist the voice of the Master, no matter what “wavelength” may be carrying His message. They repudiate any inclination to be attentive. They see no reason to follow the ways of the Lord, or keep “watch at the doors of [His] entryways” (vs. 33).

What leads to the inner decision to ignore Wisdom’s call? Since the *issues* that Wisdom raises “are the issues of life” (vs. 34), it really depends on how we define life. The Lord Jesus says, “I am . . . the life” (Jn 14:6). If we exclude Christ from our consideration of any aspect of our lives, then we are operating on an entirely different ground from that of the Lord. Life’s *issues* might then seem to encompass nothing more than health, wealth, status, ideology, or the boastful worldviews of the clever and conniving. However, when we move away from the Master who is life, we actually “love death” (vs. 35).

The first eight chapters of Proverbs identify a particular state of the heart that is rightly termed life-giving: the fear of the Lord. Many who resist God’s wisdom do so earnestly. They lack fear of the Lord and reverence for Him; they spurn obedience to His Commandments and avoid any spiritual commitment to truth, light, and life.

The wisdom authors describe such people as choosing to “act ungodly toward their own souls” (vs. 35). Saint Paul describes them as “men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith” (2 Tm 3:8); Saint Stephen calls them “stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears” (Acts 7:51).

All of us have chosen to act against what is right and to resist the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Our personal failures begin in the heart. Still, even in this life, Wisdom’s feast is spread out for all who will listen. Christ invites us, the repentant sinners, to “take eat, this is My Body which is given for you.”

*May I receive a portion of Thy holy things and have Thee abiding in me.* – Pre-communion Prayer of Saint Basil the Great

**March 19 - Wednesday of the Third Week of Great Lent  
Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 9:12-18**

**Human Wisdom vs. the True Faith: Proverbs 9:12-18, especially vs. 12:** “My son, if you become wise in yourself, you shall also be wise toward your neighbor; but if you prove to be evil, you alone will go through troubles.” The Book of Proverbs, written in traditional Hebrew style, instructs by means of contrasting images: “be wise” versus “be evil” (vs. 12), straying from one’s “farming” into “a waterless desert” (vs. 15). As we begin to explore these contrasts, bear in mind that only a few phrases from today’s passage appear in the common English translations based on the Masoretic text. What a blessing it is to receive these teachings from the Septuagint text of our Orthodox Old Testament!

We are struck by how accurately these verses address our situation in this third millennium in Christ. During the twentieth century a host of ideologies hurled men and machines into a demonic blitz of banners and bloodshed, much as our Lord cautions in these verses. Saint Nikolai of Zicha echoes the alert, warning that the “atheists want to shatter the vigil light of your soul. The heretics want to fill your vigil light with water in place of oil. The fainthearted believers grant you the freedom to maintain your vigil light as you wish, but they do not wish to see it lit. Those are the three wicked winds which have attacked your soul in these times. May the Almighty bless you, that you may be blessed and strong” (*Struggle for Faith*, p. 7).

The Lord of history permits mad, self-assured men to thrust violence and trauma into our lives, based on futile schemes devised by those who “support [themselves] with lies” (vs. 13). Fascism, communism, and jihadist Islam all disclose the presence of evil on a global scale. We see what happens when peoples and nations turn aside to pursue a warped vision – they follow “a woman . . . without discernment and overbold; [who] has no sense of shame” (vs. 16).

We see economic and political systems engaging in titanic struggles to prove their superiority. In truth, however, none has ever solved poverty, hatred, and starvation, nor relieved chaos. In the end, human solutions only worsen our lives. Man-made systems may dole out food and superficial necessities, but they leave people empty and “without discernment” (vs. 16).

Now a new millennium has brought mankind “through a waterless desert, a land assigned to drought . . . [where man] gathers barrenness with his hands” (vs. 15). Pray that the word of God teaches us a better way to live! God gives the nations “over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting” (Rom 1:28). Throughout history, God has affirmed the words written by Archimandrite Justin Popovich: “The Lord Jesus is the Truth and the Way. If one deviates from divine-human methodology, he inevitably also deviates from divine-human ideology, and deviates from the God-man Christ” (*Struggle for Faith*, p. 134).

Let us not despair, however. During the last century Orthodox Christianity emerged as a global presence on every continent, even as much of the Christian world was collapsing into humanism or worse. Many of our modern substitutes for Christianity indeed confirm what the Prophet Jeremiah taught centuries ago: “Cursed is the man who puts his hope in man . . . and withdraws in his heart from the Lord” (Jer 17:1).

Popovich continues, “After the rationalistic enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the myopic positivism of the nineteenth century, nothing remained for European humanism but to collapse” (p. 139). The true faith, bearing the message of the undivided Trinity, continues to present the God-man – the One who is eternally new. Let us run with all speed from the woman “who has no sense of shame” and come humbly to Him who calls us! Let us embrace the feet of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, cleansing our souls that He may manifest Himself in every aspect of our lives.

*O Lord, may I complete the remaining time of my life in peace and repentance!* – Litany of Supplication, Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**March 20 – Thursday of the Third Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 10:1-22**

**To Walk Confidently: Proverbs 10:1-22, especially vs. 10:** “*He who walks in sincerity walks confidently, but he who perverts his ways will be known.*” At every Orthros and Vespers service, we are reminded by Psalm 142:10 to consider “the way wherein I should walk.” This recurring verse prompts us to examine our manner of living from the inside out, to scrutinize how we walk through life. In Proverbs Christ our Wisdom shows us how to *walk confidently* (vs. 10), for as He says, “I am the way” (Jn 14:6). How personal and gracious we find His offer to us!

Life is a “walk” because it does not stand still; we are borne along in time. God is mainly concerned with *how* we walk along this temporal journey. By His grace, we hope to walk “in sincerity” before Him; we struggle to live with integrity. That is the Lord’s point. In order to walk with integrity, we must focus on Christ within us, who unifies our life at home, at work, at church, and in all our associations. Truly, an integrated person is at one with himself because of his relationship with Christ our God.

Those who walk with integrity before God fulfill the admonition of Saint Euphrosyne, mother of Saint Clement of Ancyra: “Do me honor, my son, and stand for Christ as a man and confess Him with strength and steadfastness” (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 1, p. 94). People of godly integration walk through everything in life – even pain, defeat, rejection, loss, and death – with an equanimity received from above.

The second half of verse 10 parallels the first part, but negatively. Literally, it means that if we pervert our way it will become known, evident, apparent. We do not need much contact with someone to discern whether or not he has godly integrity. Our inner life, our relation to self and God, inevitably manifests itself to others. This applies both to those who walk in the way of Christ and to those who turn away from Him.

As we review the entire selection of verses, we see how godly integration affects every facet of daily life and activity. For example, when a child becomes an adult and walks with godly integrity, the parents are glad. The same cannot be said of God-fearing parents who watch a children turn aside from the truth (vs. 1). Deep pain grieves the heart of any parent who sees his or her children stray.

Nor does it matter how much wealth, status, or influence we garner, if our own heart is not set on God. These earthly *treasures* will not provide us with satisfaction (vs. 2). The righteous man, by laboring to keep his relationship with God central, delivers his soul from spiritual death and joyfully accepts whatever God allows to come into his life.

In human affairs God is the unseen and foremost actor, feeding those who love Him and overthrowing the schemes of those who do not (vss. 6-7). A person of real integrity labors, prospers, and takes instruction well (vs. 8-9). He tends to rise to positions of responsibility and to “enrich others” who benefit from his industry (vs. 4).

Personal relationships are blessed for those who possess integrity (vss. 10-12). The upright are direct and without deceit: they enhance others as peacemakers and their speech is straightforward (vss. 13-21). May God enable us to love Him and our neighbor with all our mind, our soul, and our strength (see Dt 6:5). Pray to God to forgive us our sins when we turn away from Him, restoring to us the grace to walk in sincerity and confidence before Him, doing His will in all things.

*Lord, I have fled unto Thee: teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God. For with Thee is the fountain of life: in Thy light shall I see light. O continue Thy mercy unto me.* – Great Doxology

**March 21 - Friday of the Third Week of Great Lent  
Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 10:32-11:10**

**Our Inner Life: Proverbs 10:32-11:10, especially vs. 10:33:** “*The lips of the righteous man distill grace, but the mouth of the ungodly is perverse.*” The Book of Proverbs presents a series of poetic pairings that contrast types of people and behaviors: the righteous vs. the ungodly, humility vs. arrogance, blamelessness vs. wrongdoing, discernment vs. lack of perception. We are led by these parallels to consider the state of our own hearts and souls – the hidden, inner life of every person.

The Lord Jesus says, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things” (Mt 12:34-35). The Apostle James deepens the issue further with a bitter truth we know only too well: “The tongue. . . is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing” (Jas 3:8-11).

Saint James is correct in his assessment of our tendency to bless God one moment and curse our neighbor the next. One moment I am weeping over evil or lifting up my voice in devotion to the Lord, while the next I find myself snarling contemptuously at others. “I know mine iniquity, and my sin is ever before me” (Ps 50:3). Who will deliver us from the insidious enemy within? What will satisfy our yearning to be “seen . . . righteous before [God] in this generation” (Gn 7:1)?

On the surface of things, it appears that we simply need to make up our minds to act righteously – to speak only good things. If we monitor our speech and actions and choose always to bless, we will surely *distill grace* and wisdom from our hearts. This does not seem so very difficult, and yet we find it impossible to do!

Although there may be some benefits to this direct and rational approach, our longstanding habits seize control despite our best intentions. Today’s reading recounts the tragic outcome: “The tongue . . . utterly destroys” (Prv 10:32) and “the ungodly perishes” (vs. 11:6). Deceit is an abomination before God (vs. 1), and *lawless men* are destroyed (vs. 5). Indeed, we cannot escape the consequences that follow from our wicked acts and words.

Another impediment stands in the way of our direct attempts at goodness: we may be diligent, scrupulous, and righteous for a time, but then we turn into hypocrites. Actually, two problems emerge when we resolutely determine always to do right. First, we tend to rely upon our own will, leaving God no part in our efforts except to reward us when we do or say good things (Lk 18:11). Second, we may seek to mask our deep, hidden reservoir of sin, pride, and meanness beneath a righteous façade. Alas, the parable of the Publican and the Pharisees exposes us with its blazing light (Lk 18:10-14)!

Should we then despair? By no means! Saint Nikolai of Zicha writes that “when divine love came to the heart of man, with it came everything . . . wisdom and power, and purity and compassion and righteousness and bravery and endurance and clairvoyance and tranquility and joy and every goodness.” God’s love causes mouths to distill grace and lips to meditate on wisdom. Saint Nikolai’s text continues, “The entire history of the Church confirms this. By the illuminations of the love of Christ, bumpkins have developed wisdom, cowards become martyrs, rakes saints, misers benefactors, kings and rich men slaves of Christ, wolves lambs, and lambs lions” (*Kassiana*, p. 61-2).

Let us take hope, for every good deeds and act of righteousness grows out of the Lord’s love and not our own. We are baptized into Christ so that His forgiveness, love, and grace may continuously move us toward repentance and purity.

*O good One, shut not against me the wings of Thy love for mankind, but open them and receive me as the prodigal son, and save me.* – Vespers for the Second Sunday of Lent

**March 22 – Saturday of the Third Week of Great Lent**  
**Mark 2:14-17**

**Entry Level Requirements: Mark 2:14-17, especially vs. 15:** “Now it happened, as He was dining in Levi’s house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him.” Tomorrow we reach the midpoint of Lent, when we bow down before the life-giving Cross which looms above the struggles of the Great Fast. Before the Lord lays down the one essential requirement for all who wish to follow Him (see Mk 8:34-9:1, which is tomorrow’s Gospel), He asks if we have met His prerequisites. The Lord’s entry-level requirement is that we be called by Him, follow Him and, as sinners, be truly willing to struggle in repentance.

First, we note that becoming Christ’s disciple does not originate with us. Levi is at work when Jesus calls him. We are always free to answer yes or no, but Christ initiates. The Lord even calls the infants, for the baptismal prayers refer to the call of *every* candidate. When the priest lays his hand upon the one about to be baptized, he says, “In Thy name, O Lord God of truth, and in the name of Thine Only-begotten Son, and of Thy Holy Spirit, I lay my hand upon Thy servant, who hath been found worthy to flee unto Thy holy name.”

Still acting in the name of the Lord Jesus, the priest declares that he upon whom he lays his hand has “been found worthy.” The Church deems us worthy of baptism, for “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:14). Only the Church has the mind of Christ, who is head of the Body, and is activated by the Holy Spirit (vs. 16). As baptized children mature in the Church, they in time will hear Christ’s voice *calling* them (Jn 10:4).

Following Christ is another entry level requirement for every Christian. We may say that we are Christians, but this label does not make us followers of Christ. We must respond to Jesus, just as Levi does. We have to act, to do something more than speaking pious words. As Shakespeare says, “‘Tis a kind of good deed to say well: and yet words are no deeds.” Our Lord proclaims, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21). Disciples are those who act when the Lord Jesus calls (Jn 14:15).

In today’s reading, the Lord says to Levi, “Follow me” (Mk 2:14). We know for certain that Levi obeys, for Saint Mark adds, “So he arose and followed Him” (vs. 14). What is more, Levi continued to follow Him, for he wrote first Gospel using his other name of Matthew. He proves himself a loyal servant, for “by true servants of God we mean all those who tirelessly and unremittingly do and have done His will” (John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 1.1, p. 3). Persistent action is necessary!

Finally, repentance is a given. God loves sinners, for He drew His disciples from their ranks. In the last verse of today’s reading, He says, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (vs. 17). There is room for all of us at the table!

Christ our God forgives our every failure and sin, from fraud, intimidation, lack of trust, slothfulness, hopelessness, and jealousy to adultery, theft, and murder – every sort of trespass. But although He loves sinners and forgives them, He calls us specifically to embrace a life of repentance. Only godly sorrow produces the diligence to clear ourselves (2 Cor 7:11). “The falls that occur after our call are hard to bear [but] certainly we do not return by the way we went astray, but by another shorter route”: repentance (*Ladder* 5.39, p. 65).

*O Christ our God, grant us the gift of true repentance that we may follow Thee worthily.*

**March 23 – Third Sunday of Great Lent (Sunday of the Adoration of the Cross)  
Mark 8:34-9:1**

**Essential for All Disciples: Mark. 8:34-9:1, especially vs. 34:** “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” God reveals that He is searching for those who will freely obey Him, admit their sins, and struggle for purity. To enlarge our vision of what is essential in this struggle, the Lord Jesus foretells His Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection (vs. 31). He encourages every disciple to take up the cross and follow His way, in spite of whatever suffering may ensue (vs. 34).

Let us first consider self-denial. The serious Christian undertakes such practices as fasting, vigil, prayer, and almsgiving with a specific end in mind. According to Saint Paul, we deny ourselves that we “may gain Christ and be found in Him” (Phil 3:8-9). Standing in the way of this undertaking is our self-will – the rebellious soul that wants its own way. Our inner self can be likened to a raging, 2,500-pound bull – no one is prepared to control such a self.

Still, we endeavor to throw down this rebellious self a thousand times over “for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus [our] Lord” (Phil 3:8). And God, in His mercy, has revealed to us a superior opportunity to master our rebellious self in order to gain Christ’s will as our own. According to Elder Joseph the Hesychast, “if you endure the daily ascesis, every time you coerce your soul to bear a cold word, a derision, a reproach, you become a confessor. Every time you have patience, you receive a crown, and it is considered by God to be a daily martyrdom for you” (*Monastic Wisdom*, p. 162)

Closely related to self-denial is *taking up one’s cross*. This cross is not the Lord’s Cross, but my particular cross – the one with my name on the placard. My cross is to embrace with the love of the Lord Jesus *all* who surround me in life, especially those who wave red the flags that provoke the fighting bull inside me. God brings into our lives people who aggravate us, irritate us, and inflame our passions, giving us opportunities for suffering love. We do not need go to far places in order to seek out suffering, for He allows it to come to us in our daily circumstances: our residence, financial agreements, social and professional relationships, and parish life.

The Lord Jesus shapes our cross in order to develop commitment in those He loves, so that we will die to our desires and exhibit only His will through our words and deeds. Nothing is forced on us, but the Lord reminds us what is at stake: “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mk 8:35). Salvation lies in our persistent efforts to tame the raging bull.

How can we know if we really are denying self and taking up our cross? The Lord indicates the way: we simply follow Him, doing what He says without shame (vs. 38). In every circumstance, choice, and challenge, He leads us in His direction. Every decision constitutes a “yes” or a “no” to Christ, no matter how small or inconsequential it may seem.

When Christ says, “If any man will come after Me,” He neither forces nor compels us. Rather, according to Saint John Chrysostom, He makes each one of us “lord of his own choice. For to good things do I call you, not to things evil or burdensome; not to punishment and vengeance, that I should have to compel. . . . Although it be in My power, as Son of God, to hinder you from having any trial at all of those hardships, yet such is not My will for your sake, that you may yourself contribute something, and be more approved” (“Homily 55 on Matthew,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 339).

*To Thee, O Savior of the world, do we travel early, praising Thee, having found safety in Thy Cross, through which Thou didst renew mankind and led us to the never-setting light.* – Verse for the Adoration of the Cross

**March 24 – Monday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 11:19-12:6**

**Doing Business: Proverbs 11:19-12:6, especially vs. 27:** “*He who trusts in riches, this man will fall, but he who helps the righteous, this man will rise.*” The manner in which we conduct business discloses not only our attitude toward material things, but also the state of our hearts and souls. Forensic technicians can distinguish between two individuals by carefully noting the patterns of loops, whorls, and composites in the lineation of their fingertips. Similarly, we may observe how people conduct their work and identify telltale patterns that disclose their deepest values and convictions.

Six verses in this reading speak of workplace interactions, including both our own and those of others. The remaining proverbs, although we might deem them to be more general, may be applied to business or work transactions as well. Each proverb in this passage affirms integrity and honesty. Since many people have been swindled through unscrupulous dealings, a major focus of the law concerns contracts: what constitutes a deal, how parties become obligated, and what is and is not fraud.

Without question there are people who persistently take advantage of others in their business dealings. Over time we learn to avoid those whom we deem to be unscrupulous operators (see the *lawless man*, vs. 12:2). This proverb affirms that those who sell and buy fairly are apt to be more successful in business. They earn the trust and respect of the public, even at a cost to themselves in some cases, and thus their businesses gain public approval. People want to do business with those who deal honestly. Furthermore, the Lord stresses the importance of telling the truth in business (vs. 11:19).

Wisdom warns us to be on the alert for those who do not conduct business for the benefit of others, but rather are driven by their passions to exploit, to appear more knowledgeable than they really are, or to make a sale no matter what (vs. 25). Employers and supervisors also should heed the warning of this proverb, for any superior who deals roughly or inconsiderately with subordinates finds that he will “inherit the wind” (vs. 28) instead of enjoying the pleasure of a job well done (vs. 29). Let us realize that God is party to every business transaction and holds the participants accountable, buyer and seller alike (vs. 19).

Two proverbs concern our basic attitudes toward material things (vss. 25, 27). We learn to trust those who give an extra measure when they supply us with goods or perform a service. The mechanic gains our confidence when he fixes our car or appliance and then says, “If you have any trouble with this, bring it back to me.” This holds true especially when he indeed makes it right when something does go wrong.

It is not always obvious to us where the fault lies when things go awry. May we at least be generous toward those we serve, and toward those who serve us. Even when resources are scarce, it is better to absorb some loss in order to remain openhearted and fair. God’s declaration of *blessing* falls upon those who share their surplus, but His curse is on those who do not care about the conditions or needs of others (vs. 25).

The fundamental orientation that assures success at work and in business is summarized in verse 19. Our Lord, the Master Employer asks of us: “Where do you actually place your trust in life: in material gain, profit, and success? Or, as I have shown you, do you set purity of heart above every task that I entrust to your hands?” He wants us to be honest and industrious, and to extend His care beyond those whom we serve on an immediate basis.

*O Lord, may I ever be diligent and faithful, avoid evil company and influence, resist all temptation and advantage, and labor always for Thee on behalf of those whom I serve.* – General Intercession



**March 25 – Annunciation of the Theotokos**  
**Luke 1:24-38**

**Mystical Conception: Luke 1:24-38, especially vs. 34:** “Then Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I do not know a man?’” God the Word, Lord of the Universe, joins Himself eternally to mankind through the Incarnation. He acts in concert with the Theotokos, for He enters her womb with her consent. He uses the elements of the natural procreative process and at the same time overshadows both nature and history to become a man (vs. 35).

We understand that what occurs in the case of Mary is revealed as God’s desire for all who would receive Him. In the mysteries of baptism and chrismation, we receive the Holy Spirit. He empowers us to discard, if we will, whatever is fallen in us, so that we may grow in God’s grace and the adoption that He provides. According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, “By this power, Christ is always born mysteriously and willingly, becoming incarnate through those who are saved. He causes the soul which begets Him to be a virgin-mother.”

Thus the Annunciation becomes the model for what God wills to achieve in every one of us. The Annunciation is from God, for us: “Return to Me, and you shall be saved. . . . For I am God, and there is no other” (Is 45:22).

The Evangelist Luke enumerates the specifics of the time, place, social status, and lineage of the Virgin (Lk 1:26-27). Like the Theotokos, we too live in a certain town, at a specific address which the Postal Service calls a “point of delivery,” embossed on our letters as a barcode. We are alive on a specific date in a specific century, bound to what is called “now.” God’s saving acts in Christ are universal, yet salvation is bestowed upon us one by one, so that each of us may cry, “Thou art my God” (Ps 117:28).

Notice the Archangel Gabriel’s words to the Theotokos: “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you” (Lk 1:28). To have God involved in the specifics of our lives is cause for great rejoicing. How glorious to know that our souls and our ordinary human psyches contain the potential to have Christ conceived within us, fully formed in every aspect of our being (Gal 4:19)! While we may yet be far from the fulfillment of this potential, we know that He prays that He may be in us and we in Him (Jn 17:23).

We learn that Mary “was troubled at [Gabriel’s] saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was” (Lk 1:29). We find it unsettling to have God acting in our lives. He disrupts our logic, pushes our assumptions, stretches us and calls for us to change - to accept Him, repent, and respond. Appropriately, then, the archangel preserves the Virgin from agitation by saying: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God” (vs. 30).

Our own decision to embrace this mystical conception is never made in a state of fear. Rather, we receive the great lovingkindness of God Himself. As Christians we have found favor with God. His love has been manifested that we might live in Him (1 Jn 4:9).

The Angel Gabriel answers the Virgin’s perplexity (and ours) by explaining, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you” (Lk 1:35). It is beyond mortal understanding that God wishes to be mystically conceived within us. However, since the Son of God became the Son of Man, the possibility of such a conception has been realized countless times in specific persons. God does what He wills, “for with God nothing will be impossible” (vs. 37).

Last of all, we note that this mystical conception requires our assent. God does not force, for love is born from freedom’s womb. May we say, “Thy will be done,” joining our assent to that of the Theotokos: “Let it be to me according to your word” (vs. 38).

*From day to day, proclaim the salvation of our God, as we sing to Thee, Alleluia.*

**March 26 - Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 12:24-31**

**Integrity and Speech: Proverbs 12:24-31, especially vs. 24:** “*Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but he who shows faithfulness is acceptable to Him.*” When the Lord warns against lying, He is encouraging us to show understanding, perception, and conciliation through the choice of pure words in our communication. To attain such integrity of speech requires restraint infused with a full measure of God’s grace. Godly restraint in speech, or in any other aspect of living, begins deep within the hearts and souls of the faithful in Christ.

“Nothing is more unsettling than talkativeness and more pernicious than an unbridled tongue, disruptive as it is of the soul’s proper state,” according to Saint Philotheos of Sinai. For chatter within “destroys what we build each day and scatters what we have laboriously gathered together.” And hence, the saint adds, “The tongue has to be restrained, checked by force and muzzled . . . to serve only what is needful.” As the first checkpoint, there must be “deliberate silencing of [our] tongue, even though the intellect [*nous*] itself may not yet be still” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 17).

How do we begin to gain such restraint in speech? We must pray to the Lord for help, and plead with Him to make us wise rulers that govern well from “a throne of perception” (vs. 25). For this very reason the Apostle Paul bids us to seek the mind of Christ within us (Phil 2:5). As we seek to control ourselves, God will neither abandon us nor thwart our efforts to control our words – rather, He will help us.

When the Lord Jesus assists us, a “feedback effect” occurs: we listen with greater attentiveness as the Holy Spirit reveals the mind of Christ, allowing us to take firmer hold on the “rudder” of our speech (Jas 3:4). We seek to follow the example of Abba Philimon of Sketis, whose monastic brethren reported that “he would never listen to idle talk. If someone inadvertently said something which was of no benefit to the soul, he did not respond at all” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 352).

When Abba Philimon was asked about the way to noetic purity, he said, “He who renounces the world, ranging himself with Christ and devoting himself to stillness, loves God; he guards the divine image in himself and enriches his likeness to God, receiving from Him the help of the Spirit and becoming an abode of God and not of the demons” (p. 354). Such is the road we must take in order to *prevail easily* and escape from *captivity* (Prv 12:26).

As a “fearful word troubles the heart of a righteous man, but a good message makes him glad” (vs. 27), so likewise we need to give attention to our hearing. According to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, “When a man detaches his mind from the earth and opens it to God with the desire of pleasing Him, then God reveals His will to him in various ways. Saint Peter Damascene writes: ‘If a man has a wholehearted desire to please God, to him will God show His will through his thoughts, or through some other person or through Holy Scripture.’ Such a man will be careful and will await the promptings of God, both inward and outward” (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 2, p. 39). It matters so much where we decide to turn our attention!

If our first line of self-defense is the heart, then we will guard both our speech and personal integrity at the same time. We must be able to recognize every evil that “pursues sinners,” leads the ungodly astray, and foils “the deceitful man” (vs. 29, 30). Saint John of Kronstadt reminds us that our speech is one measure by which God will judge our integrity: “An answer and a punishment awaits you for every idle word, and not only for scandalous, shameful ones. It is because that with our Lord, the All-creating Word, there is not, and cannot be, any idle words. . . . Therefore, be most watchful not to speak idly, unmeaningly, either in prayer or in conversation” (*My Life in Christ*, p. 378-9). As Proverbs teaches, “In the ways of righteousness there is life, but the ways of remembering wrongs are unto death” (vs. 31).

*Set, O Lord, a watch before my mouth, and a door of enclosure round about my lips.* – Psalm 140:3

**March 27 – Thursday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 13:22-14:6**

**Comparisons: Proverbs 13:22-14:6, especially vs. 23:** “*Evil things shall pursue sinners, but good things will overtake the righteous.*” The saying “comparisons are odious” dates from the fourteenth or fifteenth century. Had they known of this aphorism, the authors of Holy Scripture would have hotly contested its truth, for their teaching favors the use of comparisons. The very word that we translate from the Hebrew as “proverb” (*mashal*) means “comparison.” Comparisons may seem odious to us when they illumine things we find uncomfortable or unpleasant. Yet few will argue that sinners are anything but odious – especially when compared to the righteous – or dispute the fact that “those without discernment” contrast poorly with the wise.

Let us consider three comparisons in the present selection from Proverbs: the *righteous* against the *ungodly* (vs. 27); a *wise* woman in contrast to those *without discernment* (vs. 14:1); and he who walks *uprightly* compared to one who is *crooked* in his ways (vs. 2). These comparisons reveal several distinctions implicit in God’s commandments, guiding us to the Lord’s foundation as the sure basis for establishing our lives (Mt 7:24-27).

We begin with the distinction between the righteous or godly and the ungodly (vs. 21, 27), a comparison that touches upon the core truth about human life that permeates Holy Scripture, liturgical texts, and the Church Fathers. Unlike our contemporary situational ethics, the Church’s tradition places all human activity in the context of the absolute holiness, purity, and righteousness of God. Divine wisdom exposes the limitation of human knowledge: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1 Cor 1:20).

With God, values are never relative: right is right and sin is wrong. God judges rightly and mercifully, quickly forgiving the penitent. As Saint Paul declares, God renders “eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness – indignation and wrath” (Rom 2:7-8).

God is the source of all righteousness, law, justice, goodness, wisdom, faithfulness, and prudence. Those who persistently choose to act against His commandments and wisdom are the unrighteous. Those who struggle to live in accordance with His revealed way – even though they fail to accomplish God’s law perfectly – are deemed the righteous.

The godly or “good man” who seeks to live according to God’s ways is properly compared to the *ungodly* (Prv 13:24). These antithetical terms are based on the Hebrew *seb*, meaning “to step away from” or “shrink back,” like Moses before the burning bush (Ex 3:6), or as Saint Peter before the Lord (Lk 5:8). *Godly* connotes awe and reverence for the Lord. The person who lives in this way is counted among the wise rather than those *without discernment* (vs. Prv 13:22).

The godly father chastens his son to teach him respect for the ways of the Lord. A godly father does not indulge his children, but rather expresses hatred toward the misdeeds of his offspring. He does not accept willfulness and thereby avoids falling under God’s judgment himself (vss. 24-25). His approach is loving: he can only be said to “hate his son” if he spares him “correction” (vs. 26). He hopes to pass his legacy on to his descendants so that they will inherit the truth of God and “live in wealth many years” (vs. 13:25).

Likewise, the godly avoids evil men and prefers “discerning” company (vs. 14:6). He *guards* his speech to oppose the demon of pride within himself (vs. 3) and does not indulge in lies of convenience in order to be successful (vs. 5).

*O Christ, establish me in Thy fear that I may in no wise be the dwelling-place of sin.* – Post-communion Prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator

**March 28 - Friday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 14:15-26**

**Self-Restraint: Proverbs 14:15-26, especially vs. 16:** “A wise man fears and turns away from evil, but a man without discernment persuades himself to mingle with a lawless man.” One of the Desert Fathers presents the story of an old man who wanted a small fig. When he held the fig up in front of his eyes, “he repented, reproaching himself for even having had this wish” (*Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, p. 5).

During Lent in particular, the struggle for self-restraint lies before us. But if we would grow in restraint, we must first frankly admit that we have weaknesses concerning those objects that are attractive to us. Many of us lack restraint once we put our hands on the fig; others must avoid the very room where the figs are stored. We truly progress in self-control by heeding the Fathers’ wisdom and never permitting even the *thought* of the fig to linger in our mind.

Saint Peter of Damascus describes self-restraint in this way: “Like a good shepherd it folds the sheep – the divine thoughts – and through refraining from what is harmful it slays licentiousness as if it were a mad dog. It expels stupidity as though it were a fierce wolf, and prevents it from devouring the sheep one by one; but it constantly keeps an eye on such stupidity and reveals it to the intelligence [*nous*], so that it cannot lie hidden in the moonless dark and infiltrate among our thoughts” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 257).

Proverbs warns that “a man without discernment persuades himself to mingle with a lawless man” (vs. 16). Let us learn instead from Christ, who seeks to save us eternally by many means. As one “meek and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29), He encourages us to be “astute [and] take hold of perception” (Prv 14:18). Then we are able to “turn away from evil” (vs. 16) and embrace a humble, life-giving fear of the Lord, thereby acquiring the riches of self-restraint exemplified by the Desert Fathers.

How do we grow in fear of the Lord and learn to manage our strong desires and passions? Saint John Chrysostom says, “If we only consider that God is everywhere present, hears all things, sees all things, not only whatsoever is done and said, but also all that is in the heart, and in the depth of the soul, for He is ‘quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart’ (Heb 4:12) – if we so dispose ourselves, we will not do or say or imagine anything that is evil” (*Homily 8 on Philippians*, NPNF First Series, vol. 13, p. 219). Let us make this truth our own!

Fear of the Lord begins with prayer. In true prayer a man thinks: “I have grieved Christ, I have been away from divine grace.” May our hearts be deeply wounded by this grief, for “when the heart is wounded from the spirit of repentance” then it is possible to “remember Jesus all day and night” (Vlachos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*, p. 56).

Let us take another look at the phrase “the astute will take hold of perception” (Prv 14:18). In Holy Scripture, *perception* conveys the idea of moral judgment and discernment. Seeing, we must act as well as pray. When God commands and enlightens, we seize upon divine wisdom to inform our actions. As a result, we “come to repentance” and “turn away from evil” (vss. 15-16). We are to reflect on what the Lord reveals and to bear “many things” (vs. 17), devising “mercy and truth” (vs. 22). Walking the path of self-restraint requires us to cooperate with God who promises blessing, for “to everyone who is careful there is an abundance” (vs. 24).

By God’s grace we can restrain ourselves from evil as we develop sustained, constant prayer. Through prayer we are led to greater union with God and receive astuteness as a *crown* from Him (vs. 25).

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

**March 29 – Saturday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent**  
**Mark 7:31-37**

**The Spiritual Senses: Mark 7:31-37, especially vs. 34:** “Then, looking up to heaven, He sighed, and said to him, ‘Ephphatha,’ that is, ‘Be opened.’” In this passage Saint Mark describes a man who can neither hear nor speak. However, when Christ utters the divine command, the man hears him and, as a result, “he spoke plainly” (vs. 35). Indeed, after his healing he joins those present in loudly proclaiming, “He has done all things well” (vs. 37).

We see how voice of the Incarnate Lord of Creation overturns the order of nature, under which the man had lived closed off, unable to hear. This account presents us with a crucial question: Will we allow Christ Jesus our Lord to open our senses and our lives?

Let us first consider the senses. We humans have, in fact, two sets of sensory organs. We possess organs of sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing for receiving impressions from the physical world. The Fathers of the Church show us in their teachings that we also have spiritual organs – the receptive capacities of the heart. In these verses, Saint Mark reminds us that these human *senses of the heart* are darkened, bound, or numbed in most people, including those with impaired physical sight or hearing.

However, when we experience the “supernatural birth” of baptism, God commands these inner faculties to “be opened.” During the baptismal mystery, when we take “refuge under the shelter of [God’s] wings,” the priest asks the Lord to awaken our inner senses: “Open the eyes of [the] soul.” He also prays for the awakening of our spiritual ears “unto the hearing of faith.” The Mystery of Christ opens the spiritual capacities of the faithful so that we can receive Truth.

If we consider other sacraments such as confession and holy communion, we understand that here, too, we are coming to Christ for the healing of our spiritual senses. We ask Him to unify our all our senses so that both sets of eyes and ears – spiritual and physical – may work in unison. In words of the post-communion prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator, we beg the Lord to put His hand upon us and “enlighten as one [our] five senses.”

Who has not encountered those terrible seasons when the senses of the heart are closed to God? The Prophet David speaks of this inner silence and darkness: “And now, what is my patient endurance? Is it not the Lord? Yea, my hope is from Thee. From all mine iniquities deliver me; Thou hast made me a reproach to the foolish. I was dumb and opened not my mouth, for Thou hast made me. Take away from me Thy scourges” (Ps 38:10-13).

Are the spiritual senses removed from us at such times? No, they remain present, for God is still present. When they fail, it is because of the cloaking of sin. Sin renders us spiritually blind, dumb, and speechless.

It appears that the man whom the Lord heals in this instance was at one time able to speak and hear normally, for the evangelist never indicates that he was born in this condition. How and when did the closing down of his physical senses occur? It might be the result of demonic power, his own sins, the sins of others, or even an accident. Whatever the cause, he was reduced to total silence.

Let us note, however, that the Lord touches more than his physical organs of speech and hearing – He speaks to the man’s spiritual ears. As a result, the unfortunate one hears his Creator (Mk 7:35). The Lord truly *enlightens as one his five senses*. Immediately the man declares with *both* his tongues, “He has done all things well” (vs. 37).

*Lo, my lips I shall not restrain; Lord, Thou knowest it. Thy righteousness have I not hid in my heart. . . . nor Thy truth from the great assemblage. But Thou, O Lord, remove not Thy compassions far from me; let Thy mercy and Thy truth continually help me.* – Psalm 39:12-15

**March 30 - Fourth Sunday of Great Lent (Sunday of Saint John Climacus)  
Mark 9:17-31**

**Basic Weapons: Mark 9:17-31, especially vss. 28-29:** *“His disciples asked Him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ So He said to them, ‘This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.’”* This passage does not simply provide another account of a healing by the Lord Jesus; it constitutes an “action report” from the battlefield of spiritual warfare. A father and his son are overwhelmed by the enemy (vss. 17, 18). The disciples’ skirmish with the unclean spirit, but cannot dislodge it (vs. 18). Finally, the Lord enters and defeats the foe (vss. 19-27).

After the victory, the Commander instructs His trainees as to why certain weapons are crucial in spiritual combat (vss. 28-29). In the concluding verse, the Lord Jesus announces the approach of His great and final battle and His subsequent victory (vs. 31). This Gospel is directed to all of us who are engaged in constant spiritual skirmishes and battles.

It is helpful to begin our approach to these verses with a passage from Ephesians in which the Apostle Paul discusses the basic rules of engagement with the enemy. First and foremost, our strength comes from the Lord (Eph 6:10). We must use the armor He provides (vss. 11, 13) when we are confronted by the wiles and power of our foe (vss. 14-16). In addition, the apostle describes the weapons required to win the spiritual struggle: Holy Scripture, prayer, the holy mysteries, and watchfulness (vss. 10, 17-18). Although Saint Paul does not mention fasting, the Lord reminds us of that weapon in today’s passage.

Addressing the relationship between fasting and prayer, Blessed Theophylact says: “Both are necessary. Good sense dictates that . . . one . . . must not only fast, but also pray; and he must not only pray, but also fast, for true prayer is rendered when it is yoked to fasting” (*Explanation of the Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 77).

Saint John Chrysostom explains the connection: “He that fasts is light, and winged, and prays with wakefulness, and quenches his wicked lusts, and propitiates God, and humbles his soul when lifted up” (“Homily 57 on Matthew,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 356).

Let us thoughtfully review each of the five essential weapons of spiritual warfare. Holy Scripture – the life-giving words of God – is a must for discerning truth and the will of the Lord in the midst of the myriad attacks we endure. As the core of Orthodox tradition, Scripture provides us with the light to cut through the smokescreen of lies from the enemy.

Prayer is our second essential weapon and draws directly from Holy Scripture. In fact, we should become adept at using the language of Scripture to form our words of prayer. The Divine Liturgy, which is soaked in Scripture, demonstrates the method we follow.

The holy mysteries are the third weapon for disciples in combat. According to the pre-communion prayer of Saint Basil the Great, they move us to “boldness . . . increase of virtue . . . [and] keeping of [God’s] commandments.” The sacrament of communion shapes and molds our lives, making us resilient in Christ.

Fasting, in the manner prescribed by the Church, sharpens our spiritual awareness of what is happening around and within us. Let us carefully observe the days, seasons, and times of fasting, always following the directions of regular Orthodox practice as our guide.

Finally, watchfulness is the hallmark of Christ’s warrior at all times and in all circumstances. We are especially blessed to have the Jesus Prayer to aid us in the struggle against “the evil imagination, wicked deeds, and work of the devil” that seek to oppose us.

*O Lord of mercies, enlighten the eyes of our understanding by Thy Holy Scriptures, enable us by Thy Spirit to pray as we ought to pray, strengthen our wretched souls and bodies through Thy Holy Gifts, help us to subject our flesh by abstinence and blameless fasting, and awaken us to cultivate watchfulness zealously that we may be victors unto the end.*

**March 31 - Monday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 14:28-15:4**

**Snare or Fountain: Proverbs 14:28-15:4, especially vs. 28:** “*The command of the Lord is a fountain of life, for it causes one to turn from the snare of death.*” The verses in the present reading cover a wide assortment of topics: population and national security (vs. 29); patience and humility (vs. 1); responsibility for the poor (vs. 32); morality in national life (vs. 35); the treasure of wise civil servants (vs. 36); and the judgment of God on human activity (vs. 3). We may find it instructive to apply verse 28 to each of the proverbs in the reading, first asking ourselves which commandment it represents. How might this commandment then become a “fountain of life” to keep us from the “snare of death”?

God’s decree to the human race to “multiply; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gn 1:28) is the basis for the proverb in verse 29. Historically, growing populations have been engines for extending the domination of one nation over another. We observe this phenomenon in the case of ancient Egypt and the great Mesopotamian empires of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. More recently China, Germany, Japan, Russia, and the United States have become power brokers, often invading and dominating neighboring states. Conversely, small nations have had to learn to live with larger, more powerful neighbors. Population may not be the sole determining factor in history, but it has played an important role.

The apostolic command in Ephesians 4:31 (“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you”) is closely related to the truth expressed in Proverbs 14:30: “A long suffering man is strong in discernment, but the fainthearted man is strongly without discernment.” A hot temper tends to provoke others. We can literally perish if we are impatient with some people! May we control our tempers wisely and avoid the snare of death by making humble, peaceful answers. Such answers help in *turning away anger* and wrath (vs. 15:1).

When the proverb says, “A man with a gentle spirit is a healer of the heart” (vs. 14:31), we hear echoes of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Mt 5:5). Being gentle with others extends a spirit of reconciliation, healing, and life. When we are harsh, we have a tendency to corrupt and destroy trust and friendship.

The Book of Proverbs also warns against ignoring the needs of the unfortunate (compare Prv 14:32 and Dt 15:9-11). The Lord’s encounter with Zacchaeus demonstrates that Jesus can transform us into a “fountain of life” by turning us away from the snare of greed: “Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold” (Lk 19:8).

Compare God’s command in Deuteronomy 28:1-2 (and His warning in 28:15) with what He teaches in Proverbs 14:34: “There is wisdom in the good heart of a man, but wisdom is unknown in the heart of those without discernment.” Christ scorns success if we act wickedly in order to achieve it, but when we act righteously we are acceptable to Him. God condemns the wicked: “But as for these, in vain have they sought after my soul; they shall go into the nethermost parts of the earth. . . . But . . . everyone shall be praised that sweareth by Him” (Ps 62:9,10).

Christ our Wisdom reveals that there is no perfect justice in this world: true justice comes only with His kingdom (Lk 13:25-30). “A wise servant is acceptable to a king, and by his own versatility he removes dishonor” (Prv 14:36). Let us turn to Christ for wisdom!

*O Master, may Thy holy mysteries be for healing of soul and body, unto love unfeigned, fulfilling of wisdom, the keeping of Thy commandments, and growth in Thy grace.* – Post-communion Prayer