

July 1 - Tuesday of the Fourth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 11:16-20

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

July 2 - Wednesday of the Fourth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 11:20-26

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

July 3 - Thursday of the Fourth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 11:27-30

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

July 4 - Friday of the Fourth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 12:1-8

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

July 5 - Saturday of the Fourth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 8:14-23

Christ's Healing: Matthew 8:14-23, especially vs. 17: *"He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses."* Our God and Savior Jesus Christ not only restores and saves us, but also shoulders the burden of our infirmities. This passage from the Gospel of Matthew lifts our eyes to this vision of Christ's ministry. The Lord bids us to consider His compassion for every person who suffers in body, soul, and spirit; in His acts of healing, He indicates the full health He will restore to us when we are united to Him.

Let us note the three goals our Lord sets forth, indicating His intentions when He heals us. First, He intends that we serve Him (vss. 14-15). Second, He wishes us to be free of every shackle of demonic corruption (vs. 16). Finally, we are to obey Him without hesitation (vss. 18-23).

When the Lord arrives at the house of His chief disciple and sees Peter's mother-in-law "lying sick with a fever," He touches her and heals her (vss. 14-15). Bear in mind that this woman is so ill that she cannot rise from her bed to greet the important guest who comes into her home. Her healing, however, is instant and total. Her health does not gradually improve – rather, she is fully restored to the point that she not only arises but offers hospitality to this guest and all those who accompany Him.

"Having therefore touched her body, He not only quenched the fever, but also gave her back perfect health," notes Saint John Chrysostom, who calls it "a thing which no physician's art could have wrought. . . . For patients yet need much time to return to their former health" ("Homily 27 on the Gospel of Matthew," *NPNF* First Series, vol. 10, p. 185). The Lord heals us, as He does Peter's mother-in-law, so that we might serve Him, becoming like the angels who constantly minister to Him (Ps 102:18,19; Mt 4:11). Every healing that comes from God fulfills a purpose greater than our immediate health: God wills to restore us that we might fully embrace and serve Him.

That very evening, many suffering individuals are brought to Him "who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word" (vs. 8:16). Surely the principal reason that we hold back from serving God is because we are ruled by our passions! We respond instead to the dark powers, who cleverly pull us this way and that as if we were puppets. Satan, the nihilistic ruler of this age, the dark puppet-master, pulls our strings in order to promote his agenda of death.

Perhaps the passions the evil one manipulates are based in nationalism, greed, debauchery, alienation, or political ideologies that run contrary to the Gospel of life. Saint John the Evangelist warns us, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God" (1 Jn 4:1). Let us always remember that our gracious Lord sends the Holy Spirit to heal and restore us to faith, love, hope, obedience, and humility. He gives us freedom from every shackle of demonic corruption.

The Lord now gives the disciples "a command to depart to the other side" (Mt 8:18). A scribe, full of self-assertion, says, "I will follow You wherever You go" (vs. 19). Seeing his pride, the Lord corrects him, as He will later challenge the sons of Zebedee ("You do not know what you ask" – vs. 20:22).

A second man asks to bury his father, contrary to the divine command he has just received. "Jesus forbid him, not as commanding to think lightly of the honor due to our parents, but signifying that nothing ought to be to us more urgent than the things of heaven," explains Chrysostom. We find healing when the Lord puts an end to our self-will and confused priorities, so long as we obey Him without hesitation.

O Lord, send down Thy healing power, touch our bodies; quench our fevers, soothe our suffering, and banish every hidden ailment, O Thou Physician of our souls and bodies. – Mystery of Holy Unction

July 6 - Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 8:5-13

Implications of Christ's Healings: Matthew 8:5-13, especially vs. 10: *"Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"* The healings performed by the Lord Jesus reveal more than His divine tenderness; they point to God's purpose for us, His fallen children. As we learned from yesterday's reading, He wills for us to become His servants, free from the influence of demons and unquestioningly obedient. His healing always is conducted with those ends in mind, and He yearns for us to cooperate in the achievement of these goals.

The Lord testifies that the centurion described today's passage from Saint Matthew is spiritually advanced (vs. 10). In the course of the Gospels, we encounter many people who fail to understand the Kingdom of God as well as this Roman officer. Let us take note of the manner in which the centurion approaches the Lord, for it reveals that he has attained several virtues required of those who would "sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (vs. 11).

First, we observe that this man knows his own unworthiness before the Lord (vs. 8). He reveals profound insight into the scope of Christ's capacity to heal, as well as a grasp of the exalted nature of the Lord's divine person (vss. 8-9). He offers a worthy model for us to follow if we wish to grow in Christ, to free ourselves from the power of the demons and attain health in all aspects of our being.

Saint Matthew reports that the centurion comes "pleading" to the Lord Jesus (vs. 5). This word suggests a fervor beyond the scope of a simple request, for there is a plaintive quality in the man's address. And yet his request is coupled with modesty, for he does not tell Christ what to do, nor does he express expectations of Him. He simply communicates his own pain, basing his appeal on the suffering of his servant who is "lying at home, paralyzed, dreadfully tormented" (vs. 6).

The Lord clearly startles the centurion with His answer: "I will come and heal him" (vs. 7). He does not anticipate such a response, for as a devout Gentile he knows that his home is considered a defiled place, especially for this great and holy man whom he calls Lord (*Kyrie*) (vss. 6-8).

The Lord startles him further by his insistence on coming to visit this very home. To protect the Lord Jesus from ritual defilement, the centurion offers this alternative: "I am not worthy. . . . Only speak a word" (vs. 8). His reply brings to mind the prayer from the Bridegroom services of Holy Week ("I behold Thy Bridal Chamber. . . . but I have no wedding garment to worthily enter"). His words reveal a man who perceives his unworthiness before God – an unusual quality, to say the least, in a Roman officer.

Second, the centurion manifests a profound understanding of God's power over all the earth. He knows it is unnecessary for the Lord to visit his home: "Only speak a word, and my servant will be healed" (vs. 8). The centurion does not subscribe to the magical thinking we might expect from a pagan idol-worshiper. He appreciates that Christ is the *Pantocrator* – the ruler of all.

Third, the centurion reveals a sublime theology by recognizing the exalted nature of the Lord Jesus. The eyes of his heart pierce through the Lord's humanity to perceive His divinity. Whereas neither Mary nor Martha fully grasps His divinity when the Lord comes to raise Lazarus (Jn 11:21, 32), the centurion understands readily with neither doubt nor hesitation. As a man of authority himself, he is able to perceive the glorified eminence of the Lord, which leads him to unquestioning faith that Christ can heal by means of a spoken word alone.

Behold, my soul, beware, lest thou fallest into deep slumber and the door of the kingdom be closed against thee; but be thou wakeful, crying, Holy! Holy! Holy! art Thou, O Christ God. – Bridegroom Orthros

July 7 – Monday of the Fifth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 12:9-13

Jesus – Merciful or Threatening? Matthew 12:9-13, especially vs. 10: *“And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’ – that they might accuse Him.”* Over the next five days, our Gospel readings examine the time when serious opposition develops against Jesus even as the popularity of His ministry is growing. His identity has by now become the focus of intense public debate. Is He a wise, merciful teacher and healer, or is He a threat to everything that Jewish tradition and religion holds sacred?

Some of His contemporaries are already speculating that Jesus could be the Messiah (vs. 23). His own family is bewildered by the multitudes that surround Him (vss. 46-13:2). Clearly, He is a wonder-worker – although He also proclaims bluntly that God’s judgment will condemn the wisdom of the day (vss. 39-45). For His part, Jesus presents Himself as the sower – the One who spreads truth which will be rejected by some and bear fruit in others (vss. 13:3-9).

The Pharisees, with an estimated membership of 6,000, composed an influential segment of the population at the time. Most were laymen who studied under highly trained scribes, or teachers, of the Law of Moses, and stood in theological opposition to the Temple priesthood. The Pharisees were fanatically devoted to Scripture and its regulations, meticulously observing the rules of ritual cleanliness.

To support their rigorous way of life, these men lived in closed communities as the name Pharisee (“separate one”) suggests. They regarded themselves as the true Israel and took pride in being superior to the majority of Jews (cf. Lk 18:11-12).

Even before the conflict reported in the present passage, the Pharisees had already questioned the Lord Jesus’ lifestyle and teaching (Mt 9:10-13; 12:1-8). Still, according to His custom (Lk 4:16), “He went into their synagogue” – that is, the synagogue of the Pharisees (Mt 12:9) on the Sabbath, for on this day the Law commands worship and no work (Ex 20:8-10).

The Pharisees’ attitude is already hostile, for in their eyes Jesus condones the work of “reaping” on the Sabbath (Mt 12:1-8). In their zeal to keep the Law, the Pharisees identify thirty-nine acts that constitute forms of reaping, including binding, shearing, cutting, grinding, or plucking ears (vs. 1). Jesus not only approves of His disciples plucking and eating ears of grain on the Sabbath, but when challenged claims to be the “Lord . . . of the Sabbath” (vs. 8).

As He enters “their” synagogue, the Pharisees watch Him closely to see if He will violate the Sabbath in other ways. “And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked [Jesus], saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’” (vs. 10).

Would this “Lord . . . of the Sabbath” persist in His teachings concerning mercy (vs. 7) in order to justify doing as He pleases? No doubt the Pharisees’ aim is to accuse Him on legal grounds (vs. 10), for then they might incite the people to stone Him for violating the hallowed Sabbath day.

However, let us take note of the Lord’s response. He first confronts the Pharisees with their own practice of rescuing any farm animal which happens to fall “into a pit on the Sabbath” (vs. 11). Of course, they “lay hold of it and lift it out!” (vs. 11). In a further rebuttal, He applies His teaching to the needs of men. “Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (vs. 12).

Forthwith, Jesus heals the man with a withered hand (vs. 13). Not surprisingly, the Pharisees “went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him” (vs. 14). When God’s mercy toward all men is revealed, Christ becomes a threat to the legalists.

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

July 8 – Tuesday of the Fifth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 12:14-18, 22-30

Jesus – Son of David: Matthew 12:14-16, 22-30, especially vs. 23: “*And all the multitudes were amazed and said, ‘Could this be the Son of David?’*” Faced with the growing antagonism of the Pharisees, the Lord Jesus now withdraws while they plot “against Him, how they might destroy Him” (vs. 14). In His great compassion, He continues healing the “great multitudes [that] followed Him” (vs. 15). However, He warns the multitudes “not to make Him known” (vs. 16), not because He fears those conspiring to kill Him, but because He desires that all should discern His true nature as God’s chosen Servant (vs. 18). Our gentle, non-combative Savior (vss. 19-20) is concerned for everyone, that all might receive genuine righteousness (vss. 18, 21).

During the first century, the people of God envisioned the Messiah as a descendant of David (vs. 23) who would conquer nations and “herd them with a rod of iron . . . shatter them like a potter’s vessels” (Ps 2:9). Few, if any, expected the Messiah to be a kind savior extending mercy to all people.

The Lord Jesus does not wish to be viewed as a powerful wonder-worker. His purpose is to address a far more serious problems of human existence: sin and death. Throughout His ministry He avoids appearing as a conquering king or military leader. He seeks rather to reveal the saving, healing aspects of His nature, preparing the faithful to gladly submit to Him as God once the apostles proclaim the good news of the Resurrection (Acts 2:40-41).

We believers humbly acknowledge Christ as our king and the ruler over a great dominion (Mt 12:25-28). But let us be cautious here, for when the Lord Jesus is asked directly, “Are You a king then?” He answers, “You say rightly that I am a king” (Jn 18:37). But what sort of a king is He?

As today’s Gospel makes clear, this *Son of David* is a monarch in the royal lineage of David, the ancient king and prophet. Jesus reigns, however, over a kingdom where healing takes place (Mt 12:22). This kingdom may *come upon* men (vs. 28) graciously, but it also binds and plunders “the strong man” (vs. 29).

We seldom consider healing a necessary quality in a ruler. Control, authority, command, the settling of disputes – these are the activities and attributes we expect from kings. However, Christ Jesus is the king of healing. He demonstrates before the multitudes that He has the power to restore sight and speech, for a blind mute “both spoke and saw” (vs. 22). Then and now, He brings “alleviation of every infirmity and every malady; for deliverance from ills of those who await salvation” that comes from Him (Service of Holy Unction).

And yet power and life which flows from the kingdom over which the Lord Jesus rules is not something entirely otherworldly. As He says, “If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has *come upon* you” (vs. 28). His dominion influences the lives of men and nations alike, opposing “the rulers of the darkness of this age” (Eph 6:12). He restores health, speech, and sight to us so that we may see life, pain, and death as they truly are.

The Son of David, ruler of the Kingdom of God, has personally entered this world, which is the *strong man’s house* (Mt 12:29). He has bound the strong man (see the icon of the Harrowing of Hell) and actively plunders his goods. He frees Satan’s slaves, rousing them from sleep, healing and lifting them from all sorts of tombs, and gathering them to Himself.

For with Thee is the fountain of life; in Thy light shall we see light. Let Thy mercy be upon us, O Lord, even as we have set our hope on Thee. – Small Doxology

July 9 - Wednesday of the Fifth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 12:38-45

Jesus – True Wisdom: Matthew 12:38-45, especially vs. 42: “*And indeed a greater than Solomon is here.*” The Apostle Paul distinguishes between two kinds of wisdom: “the wisdom of this world” and “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:20-21). He declares Christ to be the Wisdom of God (vs. 24), for those who are united to Him receive true wisdom, while those who resist Him are self-condemned (Jn 3:18). The spirit of these declarations informs today’s Gospel, which calls us to embrace the Lord Jesus as true wisdom – and warns that refusing Him leads to slavery, delusion, and condemnation (1 Cor 3:19; 4:5).

When the Pharisees ask the Lord Jesus to show them a sign, He calls them “an evil and adulterous generation” that demands miracles for proof (Mt 12:39). He knows that these men who presume to establish criteria for the “true” Christ are plotting His death, despite having seen Him heal a man’s withered hand (vss. 9-13) and restore a “demon-possessed, blind and mute” man (vs. 22). Their explanation is that Jesus draws upon satanic powers to heal (vs. 24).

Perhaps these “experts” in the Law of God should have asked themselves the same questions as masses: “Could this be the Son of David?” (vs. 23). The Pharisees’ failure to recognize the Christ is a warning to us not to base our lives on human reasoning. God gives wisdom to those who live not by “the spirit of the world, but [by] the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God” (1 Cor 2:12).

Those who follow the wisdom of this world will be judged and condemned, precisely because of their refusal to acknowledge their sin before Christ, who is the ultimate revelation of God’s wisdom for mankind (Mt 12:41-42). God’s message to Ninevites (“Yet three days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” – Jonah 3:4) sounds harsh next to the healing revelation of Christ our God. However, the men of Nineveh chose to embrace godly wisdom, for they repented.

Let us heed the Lord’s call to repent, as described by Saint Peter of Damascus: “God . . . has given to all men spiritual knowledge and every other good thing. For these good things we ought all of us always to give thanks to Him, especially those who have received from Him the power to renew their holy baptism through repentance, because without repentance no one can be saved” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 177-78). Repentance is the cornerstone of a truly wisdom-filled life.

The wisdom of this world sweeps aside the Wisdom of God as unnecessary and irrelevant. It foolishly prides itself that its house is neatly put in order (Mt 12:43-44), but for what purpose? To receive a host of demons (vs. 45)? This world will always disdain the wisdom of Christ and ignore His warnings. Men “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18), and as a result they become “futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts [become] darkened. Professing to be wise, they [become] fools” (vss. 21-22). Let us look carefully to our hearts and souls!

The Wisdom of God is Christ our Savior, who demonstrates truth to us in this world. He stands at the door and knocks (Rv 3:20). If we wish to heed His voice, we must sweep our hearts clean of worldly wisdom so that He – and not the demons – may come in and dine. When we rely upon worldly wisdom, we “are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked,” according to Him. “I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see” (vss. 17-18).

O Immortal King, receive the repentance of me, the sinner; incline Thine ear unto me. – Pre-communion Prayer of Saint Basil the Great

July 10 – Thursday of the Fifth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 12:46-13:3

Jesus – Kinsman or King? Matthew 12:46-13:3, especially vs. 50: “For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.” At first glance this passage from Saint Matthew seems to show the Lord Jesus speaking harshly to His mother, contradicting the loving pattern characteristic of His relationship with her. Some non-Orthodox scholars even infer that the God-man Jesus is rebuking the Theotokos during this encounter!

Careful study of the text, however, does not support such a conjecture. Nor does the passage suggest that He considers Himself too important to spend time with His earthly relatives. Such a characterization does not fit the Lord Jesus, the King of heaven, who divests Himself of glory to become a kinsman to us all. Saint Paul confirms that “Christ Jesus . . . being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:5-7).

To appreciate the essence of this exchange between the Theotokos and the Lord Jesus – her own Son after the flesh – let us consider the first chapter of Saint Luke’s Gospel. Specifically, in the account of the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38), we hear the Virgin respond to the Archangel Gabriel’s promise that she will conceive and bear a Son by the power of the Holy Spirit: “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (vs. 38).

The term in the original Greek – *rhema*, translated here as “word” – implies a command, declaration, or mandate. Thus the noun could very well be translated as will (“according to your will”). And who among the fallen race of Adam more perfectly obeys God’s will than the Virgin Mother of God? She rightly sings in the Magnificat that believers in all generations shall call her blessed (vs. 1:48). Her response to the Archangel reveals what Saint Nikolai of Zicha calls “the readiest obedience and the most perfect humility,” a soul transformed and exalted in theosis.

The Lord Jesus does not reject the Theotokos, who is the icon of humility. Rather, He presents His mother as a unique example of perfect obedience to the will of God. She is a model for all who desire to be members of His holy and heavenly family.

“Jesus, wishing to reveal a new concept of family answered: ‘Who is My mother, or My brothers?’” writes Father Dennis Michelis. “And adds: ‘Whoever does the will of God is My brother, and sister, and mother.’ His point is that, besides the hitherto well-known biological family, the one united by blood relationships, there also is a spiritual family whose members, though not related by blood, are kin so long as they do the will of God who is the heavenly Father of all mankind” (*The Virgin Mary*, p. 108).

What about the brothers who are mentioned in today’s lesson? On the one hand, the Lord’s gesture indicates that all His obedient disciples are His kinsmen (Mt 12:49). However, the Lord also had earthly kinsmen, including his step-brother James, who would become Christ’s heavenly kinsman. Although at the time of today’s account he was not yet a believer, he affirmed Christ after the risen Lord appeared to him (I Cor 15:7). The apostles made him the first bishop of Jerusalem in recognition of his obedience and sanctity (Acts 12:17; 21:17-18; Gal 1:18-19; 2:9). As hierarch, James presided over the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:13).

James was a pious man. The Jews called him “the Just” and the “camel-kneed,” because his knees were calloused from prayer. He suffered as a martyr for Christ when he was thrown down from the Temple and clubbed to death. Like the Theotokos, we count him as a kinsman of the King – for he is one who kept the word of God.

O Mother of our God, and Brother of the Lord, James, as you obediently received the Gospel, intercede with Christ our God to grant us the grace of obedience and the Great Mercy. – Festal Hymn for Saint James

July 11– Gospel, Miracle of the Martyr Euphemia the All Praised Saint Luke 7:36-50

Of Man and of God: Saint Luke 7:36-50, especially vs. 47: *“Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.”* Like the sinful woman (vs. 37), our sins are many; it is our condition and it nurtures the choices we make. We play God, reject others around us who sin, set the standards by which God judges others, and deny our own need for His forgiveness. After all, we do not commit ‘notorious’ sins, and we do good deeds. Here in Saint Luke’s Gospel four common sins are highlighted. We are a great deal like Jesus’ host, Simon. Join the Lord Jesus in examining these sins, and then, let us weep and love the Lord like the humbled woman.

Perhaps you are like me: you have often read this passage but missed Saint Luke’s note that Simon “...spoke to himself...” when he thought, “This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner” (vs. 39). He did not speak these thoughts audibly at the table, but he clearly voiced them to himself and to our Lord Who hears everyone’s ‘heart-speech.’ It has taken me some years to reach a partial awareness that God hears every last thing that goes through my mind. I say, ‘partial,’ because, if my awareness of being heard (not just accidentally overheard) by God were acute, I would be in tears like the sinful woman before Christ. For the most part, I blithely think horrible things, and occasionally, by God’s grace, snap to awareness and stop enjoying my hidden opinions.

Realizing this about myself, I have compassion for Simon. “I stand before the doors of Thy temple, and yet I refrain not from my terrible thoughts.” But among ‘my terrible thoughts’ are disparaging ideation about others gathered with me at the Divine Liturgy who also are approaching the Holy Chalice.

It is what I think - ‘my terrible thoughts’ - that horrifies me. In lucid moments, I catch ‘the Pharisaical garments’ of my thoughts momentarily and see that I am just like Simon. Christ our God exposes me in my unspoken words. He reveals that I take over His role as God and decide, “This one is not worthy.” He ‘is a sinner,’ or ‘she is a sinner’ (vs. 39). What gall, what usurpation, what presumption! God forgive me. I do nice things; I help people; I give ten percent; and on and on. But in the presence of God, deep down, I think that He should not accept these others, but should naturally forgive and accept me - of course! The buried implication in my not-so-silent thoughts is that God has it wrong and should not accept them as He does me.

I admit, Simon and I are like those on narcotics - we are ‘on the nod,’ so to speak - we are uncritical before God of what we think, lulling ourselves with the good things that we do. But the Lord Jesus, my King and my God, calls both Simon and me to account. He urges us that “when [we] have done all those things which [we] are commanded, [we ought to] say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do’” (Lk. 17:10). He carefully goes over all of that by which we dull our consciences and shows us a genuine penitent - one who loves God for His forgiveness and kindness and who is being saved by her tears (Lk. 7:44-48). He gently reminds us of that which is of God and that which is of our sinful humanity.

Of us men, we can only say that although we have “...nothing with which to repay...” yet that which is of God is the gracious truth we know in Christ our Savior: He freely forgives both kinds of sinners (vs. 42). Simon and I are both humbled to realize that.

“Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother.”

July 12 - Saturday of the Fifth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 9:9-13

Commitment to Healing: Matthew 9:9-13, especially vs. 12: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” This saying of Jesus, along with the rest of today’s Gospel, reveals that life in Christ is a healing process. Our healing, however, begins only after we obey His commands (vs. 9). Saint Matthew offers a prime example of one who committed to be healed, for he quits his tax office and follows the itinerant Teacher when Jesus commands him to follow. When we reflect carefully on Saint Matthew’s response, we learn what our Savior asks of us concerning our commitment to Him and its relationship to healing.

First of all, to embrace healing demands courage. According to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, “to him who has truly begun to live . . . all that happens [is] for his help and to the glory of God” (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 3, p. 357). Saint Matthew’s commitment does not spring from a magic spell cast by the Lord, nor does he leave his work behind on a whim. He, like most of the future apostles, initially works while learning from and about the Lord Jesus. Then, when this introduction is complete, Christ calls the apostles to follow Him full time. Matthew is one of the called who obeys.

This disciple’s courage can best understood in the context of his life. He was a tax collector, pursuing an occupation regarded with venomous hatred by the people of first-century Palestine – and with good reason. When Galilee and Judea were annexed into the imperial Roman revenue system, the common people were forced to sell their traditional, communal lands in order to pay taxes. Literally pauperized by the tax collectors, God’s people were losing the Holy Land given to them by God.

The chief officer of this infamous financial system was the Roman procurator. His collectors were assigned quotas in each community and allowed to keep for themselves an unspecified percentage of what they collected. In this process they had the support of the Roman military. The tax collecting trade was so lucrative that its positions often were auctioned to the highest bidder, but the populace considered the tax collectors to be traitors and apostates.

Paradoxically, our commitment to the Lord Jesus in order to gain healing often begins with pain. To be widely hated, despised, and rejected, as Matthew undoubtedly was, is an isolating and dispiriting experience. However, Matthew’s rejection turns into a blessing when Christ meets him in his true spiritual state. His social status serves to ready him to turn fully to God.

Indeed, Saint Matthew’s commitment to follow Christ becomes a clear act of repentance. “Repentance is a contract with God for a second life. . . . the daughter of hope and the renunciation of despair” (Saint John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 5.1, p. 54). Whatever our reasons, as soon as we realize our inadequacy and commit ourselves to Christ, we commit to true healing – to the restoration of our humanity and to salvation.

The healing which follows from repentance comes through communion with God. “Jesus sat at table in the house . . . [and] behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him” (vs. 10). “The salvation of the soul is. . . chiefly communion and union with Christ” through our fellowship with Him (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 158). “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him” (Jn 6:56).

“For this reason, we . . . approach the table frequently, for we, from time to time, offend against God since we are human,” says Nicholas Cabasilas. “But such as seek to cancel the indictment stand in need of penitence, effort, and triumph over sin. Yet this they will not achieve without adding the only remedy against man’s sins. . . . Christ infuses Himself into us. . . . This ointment can do such great things to those who fall into it” (*The Life in Christ*, p. 121, 123).

July 13 - Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 8:28-9:1

Adversaries: Matthew 8:28-9:1, especially vs. 29: “What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?” The festal hymn of the Holy Cross beseeches the Lord Jesus to “save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance, granting victory to the faithful over their adversaries.” Who are those adversaries? They are created beings, primarily spiritual, but in part material (Mk 5:15; Lam 2:15-17). Saint Peter, who saw the Lord defeat many adversaries, declares their chief to be “the devil [who] walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pt 5:8).

We consider the legion of demons in today’s reading to be subordinates of the devil, but any nation, entity, or individual who struggles against God’s reign must also be counted among the vassals of the Prince of Darkness – enemies of the living God (Ex 23:22-24). To this company we add sin, sickness, and death, for these plagues also serve Satan and strike humanity as a whole.

However, the present passage also brings us good news concerning our adversaries in very form, whether sickness, enslavement, or vassalage. The Lord Jesus and His disciples meet two demon-possessed men “coming out of the tombs” (Mt 8:28). These tortured humans, although made in the image of God, are walking “in the midst of the shadow of death” (Ps 22:4). Enslaved by Satan, they are ravaged to the point that even their fellow pagans will not consent to dwell with them. Relegated to a living death amidst the tombs, they reside beyond all companionship, community, and love.

Make no mistake about God’s adversaries – as the Prophet David exclaims, they “draw nigh against me to eat my flesh, they that afflict me and are mine enemies” (Ps 26:2). Our enemies are champions at the game of death, whether it be social, moral, or physical. Consider the array of “unjust witnesses . . . risen up against” us (vs. 26:14). Historically, the ideologies of death have ravaged nations and led to genocide, death camps, mass starvation, interminable civil strife, poverty, and vicious wars. Likewise, when a cure for one disease is found through the healing arts, new and more sinister plagues emerge. Divorce, addiction, neurosis, violence, and suicide are rampant; death appears ubiquitous in our families and society.

And yet, as Saint Matthew reports, Christ has broken the reign of death, “trampling down death by death.” Without fear or hesitation, the Lord appears as the avowed enemy of every sickness, madness, and disease. No wonder the demons cry out, “What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God?” (Mt 8:29).

Our most bitter enemies, when confronted by God, *tremble* (Jas 2:19). As a result, we “sing to the Lord, for He is greatly glorified. Horse and rider [of death] He has thrown into the sea” (Ex 15:1). Even as Jesus casts demons out of two men made in His image, He also commands His adversaries to self-destruct. “Go,” He says, and they obey, driving the swine “violently down the steep place into the sea” to perish in the water (Mt 8:32).

The Prophet Solomon knows that “love is as strong as death” (SOS 8:6). Truly love prevails, for Christ is risen! Sadly, however, not everyone accepts His gospel of life. Too many prefer to yield to inevitable sickness rather than face Love unbounded in the form of the self-sacrificing and all-powerful God. We choose “managed care” over His unmanageable love.

A frightened city came to Jesus, the adversary of death, and “begged Him to depart from their region” (Mt 8:34). What will our own request be?

O Thou who rulest over souls and bodies, in whose hand is our breath, the consolation of the afflicted, ever save us from our passions and the death of our souls. – Saint John of Kronstadt

July 14 - Monday of the Sixth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 13:10-23

Mysteries of the Kingdom – Parables: Matthew 13:10-23, especially vss. 10-11: *“And the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Why do You speak to them in parables?’ He answered and said to them, ‘Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.’”* The New Testament writers use the word *mystery* to describe God’s universal plan of salvation. This plan is revealed in and through Jesus Christ, declared subsequently by His apostles, and effected within each person who heeds the life-giving word of God.

Anyone may share in the life in Christ through holy baptism and by living the sacramental life, meditating on Holy Scripture, following the doctrines of the Church, and practicing the ascetic disciplines. All of these pious acts serve to convey to us the one basic mystery of Christ “as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets” (Eph 3:5).

The parables of the Lord Jesus convey the essence of this mystery, for they have the power to reveal His life-changing truth so that we may see, hear, repent, and enter into the power of “Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and . . . [to] receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Not everyone wishes to receive Him, however. For this reason our Lord speaks paradoxically concerning certain men who, “seeing . . . do not see and hearing . . . do not hear, nor do they understand” (Mt 13:13).

There will always be those among us who fail to grasp the faith – or, more precisely, who are not grasped *by* the faith. For them, the mystery remains obscure or meaningless. Sadly, their number includes people who attend church regularly and yet live like men did before Christ came into the world. Some will “enter this holy house with faith, reverence, and fear of God,” and some will not.

The series of parables set forth in the Gospel of Matthew begins with the Sower (vss. 3-9). Here Christ identifies Himself as the One who sows seed among men and nations. In today’s sequel He interprets this parable for the faithful who, by God’s grace, have “been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (vs. 11). These listeners are blessed to *see* with their eyes and *hear* with their ears (vs. 16).

When the Lord Jesus sows, His life-bearing seed – the word of the kingdom – is proclaimed to all men. This word is sown with the intention of reaching men’s hearts (vs. 19). The condition of the heart is crucial, for the Lord states plainly that not every heart is ready to receive His seed – His truth. The word of the kingdom will grow only in the ready heart, signified by the “good ground” (vs. 23).

In some people, the sowing of the word creates a crisis. If our hearts remain closed, we fail to grasp Christ’s truth, for it can only be comprehended by the heart. If we merely trust in what appeals to us rationally or emotionally, Satan will suggest a host of contrary thoughts to occupy our minds. Although we may hear the words of the kingdom audibly, we will become confused and fail to understand them (vs. 19). In this way the evil one devours the seed before it ever germinates in our hearts.

At other times the connection between heart and mind is impaired. The heart responds to the seed and stirs the mind to assent (vs. 20). However, if the seed never reaches deep into the soil of the heart where lasting spiritual growth occurs, the words of the kingdom soon wither – especially when we face “tribulation or persecution” (vs. 21).

Lastly, our hearts may become closed as a result of our preoccupation with “the cares of this world” or its riches. In such cases the life-giving seed is choked off and never grows in our hearts (vs. 22).

Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, O Lord, by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit. – Western Rite Service Book

July 15 - Tuesday of the Sixth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 13:24-30

Mysteries of the Kingdom, continued – Watching: Matthew 13:24-30, especially vs. 30: “*Let both grow up together until the harvest. . .*” Growth – in truth and in life – is the theme of Jesus’ Parable of the Tares. As we learn from the earlier Parable of the Sower (vss. 13: 3-8, 18-23), “sowing” describes God’s action on our behalf. Christ broadcasts the seed of His life-giving word so that it may be received by our hearts and souls (vs. 19). As the Lord now explains the Parable of the Tares, He encourages us to build upon our understanding of the Sower to interpret its meaning.

Let us begin with the differences between the two parables. In the Parable of the Tares, the soil in which the life-giving seed is sown is assumed. As He progresses from the Sower to the Tares, our Lord shifts our attention from soil types to the entire field. We are invited to survey the entire property of the Sower, i.e., the world, for “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof, the world, and all that dwell therein” (Ps 23:1).

According to the Fathers of the Church, the Parable of the Tares may be interpreted at a personal as well as a social level. “The field, then, is the world, or, each one’s soul,” asserts Blessed Theophylact. “The sower is Christ. The good seed is good people, or, good thoughts. The tares are heresies, or, evil thoughts” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 115).

According to Saint John Chrysostom, the enemy is the one who “sows again; as the heretics also do, who for no other cause than vainglory inject their proper venom” (“Homily 46 on Matthew,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 288). The enemy confronts the Sower, or owner of the land, much like the birds in the first parable who eat the seed before it germinates (Mt 13:4).

Here, however, our enemy sows evil thoughts in human beings, planting heresy in the Church and self-will in our souls and hearts. Satan is always working to displace the life-giving truth that Christ plants. He grows, instead, destructive theories that weaken the Church and encourages us to pursue immoral practices. History and ascetic experience bear out this truth.

Thus the primary spiritual truth of the kingdom that the Lord commends in this parable is watchfulness. We note that the servants observe (vss. 27-28), for they are good servants who seek to do the Master’s will. Watching protectively over the seed sown in the hearts of the faithful, they find tares, also known as dandelion. This weedy grass looks like wheat when it first sprouts, but when it matures it utterly lacks the qualities of grain.

To find such a “weed” in the Church – or in one’s heart and soul – is to encounter a grave untruth. The enemy’s lies distress and perplex God’s servants, for how can error and evil be allowed to appear in the life of the Church or the souls of the faithful? (vs. 27).

However, the servants’ watchfulness is mobilized *on behalf of the Lord*. The servants are ready to root out the wickedness they have discovered (vs. 28). The Master cautions them not to gather rashly, lest they *uproot the wheat* when pulling the tares (vs. 29).

Saint John Chrysostom finds two reasons why the Lord restrains them: “One, that the wheat be not hurt; another, that punishment will surely overtake them, if incurably diseased.” The Lord does “not therefore forbid our checking heretics, and stopping their mouths, and taking away their freedom of speech, and breaking up their assemblies” – however, He opposes “our killing and slaying them” (p. 288-89).

Heretics are to be identified, excommunicated or silenced by the Church, then left to God’s judgment. Similarly, we disciples must be ever watchful over our own hearts and souls, for the devil never ceases striving to plant evil suggestions in our hearts that lead us into sin.

I will stand on my watch and see what He shall say to me, and what I might answer. – From Habakkuk 2:1

July 16 - Wednesday of the Sixth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 13:31-36

Mysteries of the Kingdom, continued – Growth: Matthew 13:31-36, especially vs. 31-32: “*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. . . . When it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.*” The Lord Jesus illumines the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven with two parables, the Mustard Seed and the Leaven. His focus is on our spiritual maturation in relation to Himself – our development within the life of His Body, as appropriate to His heavenly kingdom.

The two parables emphasize the Lord’s role as the primary actor in our spiritual growth. As He “took and sowed” (vs. 31), so also He “took and hid” (vs. 33). What He sows is His *field*, while He mixes His leaven into His *meal*. These metaphors refer to us, His people. He prepares us for union with Him so that we may grow and, in turn, *leaven* the many around us.

At the service of baptism the priest serves as an active icon of the Lord Jesus. He lays his hand upon the candidate’s head to depict the work of God in adopting us: “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, and to take refuge under the shelter of Thy wings.”

The hand of the Lord Jesus covers every Christian. We acknowledge this fact in prayer: “Into Thy hands I will commit my spirit: Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth” (Ps 30:5). We were once in darkness, but Light came to us. When we strayed into waste places, the Shepherd came to bring us back to Himself, hiding us in His tabernacle “in the day of mine afflictions” (Ps 26:5). Coming down from His heavenly throne, He assumed our clay and sowed His life within us, so that we might grow and extend shelter to others (Mt 13:32).

We note an element of secretiveness in the Lord Jesus’ actions as He takes, sows, and hides. The seed disappears into the earth, but it must do so in order to germinate. The baker works the flour and adds the leaven, which permeates the meal imperceptibly, secretly, quietly, invisibly. Only after time do the effects of this hidden growth become visible. Plants sprout, unfold, enlarge; if the dough is kept warm and covered, it mysteriously rises. Likewise, spiritual growth often takes place unseen, slowly becoming manifest only after much prayer, asceticism, struggle, and patient watching on our part.

Of course, Christ’s seed and His leaven are not magical, but rather mystical. The Spirit of God works in human hearts and gives us growth. According to Saint John Chrysostom, we are not to “stop at the limit of the commandments, but . . . even go beyond them” with the help of the Spirit (“Homily 5 on First Thessalonians,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 13, p. 344).

Because a long period of “working” is required before growth becomes manifest, we must not lose heart if we do not obtain immediate results. After all, spiritual growth is not a matter of applying liquid to a dry cube which suddenly swells and doubles in size.

Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the potential of small beginnings, whether in ourselves or in the world. Chrysostom observes, “Yea, for His disciples were weakest of all, and least of all; but nevertheless, because of the great power that was in them, It [the Gospel] hath been unfolded in every part of the world” (“Homily 46 on the Gospel of Matthew,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 289). God does work in us despite our tiny faith, our instability and timidity!

Finally, let us consider the *field* and the *three measures of meal* (vss. 31, 33). Where does Christ plant and hide us? His field, ultimately, is the whole world, but our Lord puts us there with His people. With the Church sheltering us from evils, we become that leaven that transforms those around us. His Church is the measure of meal He kneads into dough to bring true life into the world.

July 17 - Thursday of the Sixth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 13:36-43

Mysteries of the Kingdom, continued – Accountability: Matthew 13:36-43, especially vs. 41, 43: *“The Son of Man will send out His angels . . . [to] gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness. . . . Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun. . . .”* The Orthodox funeral service delivers a message we ought to heed: “Let us hearken unto what the Almighty crieth: Woe unto those who seek to behold the terrible day of the Lord! For lo, it is darkness: for all things shall be tried with fire.”

The warning is plain: there will be a final accounting when “all things shall be tried by fire.” This same warning underlies the Lord Jesus’ explanation of the Parable of the Tares. In all three parables (vss. 3-43), the Lord encourages us to grow in Him. With each parable, as He explains its meaning, He adds a sober warning to encourage self-examination (vss. 13:9, 19-22, 30, 43).

In the present passage, Christ explains His parable by directing our gaze toward the destiny of all men, whether they be God’s friends or His enemies. In particular, He reveals what shall befall us if we refuse to grow but instead persist in opposing the Lord’s truth.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, as the “Son of Man,” is the Sower (vs. 37); His “field” is the world, which includes every epoch, culture, and nation in history (vs. 38). Now, as He continues, the Lord states explicitly that “the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one” (vs. 38).

By dividing humanity into *sons* of the kingdom and *sons* of the wicked one, He indicates that we are neither servants nor slaves. In this same vein, Saint Peter reminds the faithful that “you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pt 2:9).

Through the Church, God calls us to be “kings and priests to our God” and to “reign on the earth” (Rv 5:10). Thus, in the final accounting, the princely sons of God “will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43). They will be illumined with the uncreated light of God which will gleam from within – blinding and brilliant as at the Transfiguration of our Lord (Mk 9:3; Mt 17:2). Our Lord reveals this great destiny which awaits every single human being!

In His Parable of the Tares, the sons of the wicked one (Mt 13:38) are those who choose to become princes in Satan’s domain. In this present existence many evil men are numbered among “the rulers of the darkness of this age” (Eph 6:12) – men like Judas and Ananias (Acts 5:3) who exemplify true “lost souls.”

Indeed, in every generation we find those who love “the body, mortal life, sensual pleasure, and the material world” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 42-3). These include heretics who, in “ignorance and impudence . . . [are] storing up for [themselves] the element of eternal fire” (Sunday of the Holy Fathers). However, we must avoid declaring anyone to be a “son of the wicked one.” Surely inhumane and reprobate behavior, if not corrected through repentance, leads directly to perdition. Yet while the reprobate live among us we are to pray for them, imploring that they might offer the plea of the good thief at the Crucifixion, “Remember me when You come into Your Kingdom” (Lk 23:42).

Yes, we all must face a final accounting “before the fearful Judgment Seat of Christ.” God will assess every person, as the Parable of the Tares foretells. Christ calls us to repentance, for His eternal desire, manifested by His Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection, is that everyone receive the shining transformation of the righteous.

As I think of the hour of account, and the coming of the Lord, Lover of mankind, I tremble and cry with grief, O my just Ruler, alone most merciful, receive me repentant. – Orthros for Meatfare Sunday

July 18 - Friday of the Sixth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 13:44-54

Mysteries of the Kingdom, continued – Gaining the Prize: *Matthew 13:44-54, especially vs. 52:* “*Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven . . . brings out of his treasure things new and old.*” This passage from Saint Matthew continues the Lord Jesus’ series of parables, introducing us to further mysteries of the kingdom. Each of the four parables in these ten verses shows us the way to attain the kingdom of heaven. As a preface to the parables, our Lord encourages us to be attentive to His word so that we may obtain the blessings of the righteous and shine “forth as the sun in the kingdom” (vs. 43).

In each parable, Christ describes the process through which we must pass if we are to acquire the kingdom. Further, He explains what sort of persons obtain this reward and the nature of what they hope to gain. The first two parables – the Treasure in the Field (vs. 44) and the Pearl of Great Price (vss. 45-46) – focus on the process of acquiring the true mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven.

In the first parable an unnamed person, whom we recognize as God, has placed a treasure in a field. Likewise, in the second parable, a pearl has been harvested – again by an unnamed person – and may now be purchased. The Lord Jesus states these prior actions unobtrusively, as givens. They merely set the stage for the *finding* of the treasure.

We observe that the man in the first parable hastens to buy the field, while in the second a merchant hurries (vss. 44-45) to sell his stock in order to buy a single pearl. However, the Lord never implies that these two found the treasure due to any special zeal or merit on their part. They happen upon something priceless and instantly recognize the value of the discovery. Of course, neither discovery is fortuitous; each serves as an example of God’s grace-filled provision embedded in the Gospel.

We learn next to nothing about the man who finds the treasure, for the Lord’s description of him is generic (vs. 44). The merchant, however, is no mere peddler; he is a wholesaler who knows the value of gems of various sorts (vs. 45). Both men, however understand what they must do to secure their findings. Likewise, God’s ultimate treasure – the life in Christ – is available to people from all walks of life, including laypeople as well as those pursuing the “angelic way” of monasticism.

The first man hides the treasure, leaving it buried in the field while he seeks to buy the land. The merchant goes to market to sell all the pearls in his possession, leaving the most valuable pearl exactly where he first found it. To gain the kingdom requires our total investment in the great prize.

The Parable of the Dragnet (vs. 47) describes a giant fishing seine supported at the top by floats and anchored at the bottom. Because such nets cover up to a half mile of water, a large group of men is needed to secure one and then haul in the catch. The Church is the dragnet, spreading out over the face of earth to gather up those who, like the men in the first two parables, earnestly desire Christ.

When the net is hauled to the shore, there is a sorting of good and bad fish. Here the Lord returns to the Last Judgment themes suggested by the Parable of the Tares (vss. 13:40-43). Those who pick carefully through what they have collected during this life (vss. 48-49) preserve the good but throw away the bad. Likewise, the angels will cast the wicked “into the furnace of fire” (vs. 50).

What do these finders discover that is so precious? While some treasure derives from God’s revelation prior to the Incarnation of Christ, many things we gain are new (vs. 52), for the Gospel of our Lord bears to us the very good news!

O Lord, finding the mystery of Thy dispensation, may I invest all and worship Thee. – Verse for the Exaltation of the Cross

July 19 - Saturday of the Sixth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 9:18-26

Faith and Wellness: Matthew 9:18-26, especially vs. 22: *“But Jesus turned around, and when He saw her He said, ‘Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well.’ And the woman was made well from that hour.”* The pronouncement that “faith has made you well” also carries the implication of salvation (for example, see Lk 7:50). The Lord Jesus connects faith with health while declaring that faith is essential to eternal salvation. We who are all too familiar with sickness and death find here an opportunity to explore the relationship between faith and wellness.

When our Lord sends out the disciples and commands them to preach the kingdom of heaven, He pays special attention to healing: “Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons” (Mt. 10:8). God knows how sick we are in body, soul, and spirit. It is primarily for this reason that He joins Himself to our race irrevocably for our salvation.

Whence comes the ubiquity of sickness? When Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit in paradise, the result is death. Spiritual separation from God is followed, in due time, by physical death (Gn 3:8-14,17-20). Spiritual death causes Adam, Eve, and their descendants to become subject to physical death (1 Cor. 15:22). As a result disease, pain, and suffering are now part of the human condition. Because of man’s fall from paradise, we all become ill and our bodies eventually die.

Christ comes to reverse the effects of sin: “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10). This *life* He offers includes health. Indeed, healing physical ailments plays a prominent part of Christ’s ministry. His ability to heal reveals His absolute power over our health.

In addition, the Lord directs His powers against the source of our sickness – against sin and death in every form, spiritual as well as physical. His primary aim is to unite us to God, overcoming our deep estrangement from Him and making us truly and eternally well!

When Jesus raises Lazarus, He calls forth a man four days dead to demonstrate His power over death. Another miracle takes place after Lazarus comes out of the tomb: many people “believed in Jesus” (Jn 11:45; 12:11). Through His power to raise the dead, He awakens faith and gives credence to His words: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (vs. 5:24).

When Jesus goes up to Jerusalem, He voluntarily embraces death in order to “trample down death by death.” Life, true life, does not die! Neither shall we, believing in Jesus, perish eternally! Believing in the Lord Jesus is thus the key to a healthy life, in the godly sense of the word. It is one thing to believe that Jesus in fact raised Lazarus from the tomb. However, it is a far greater thing to believe *in* this Jesus who raises Lazarus – the Jesus who defeats death by death and gives eternal life.

Faced with the prospect of death, do we trust Him to do the same for us? Saint Paul declares that “whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). To believe in Jesus Christ enables us to act against our own doubt, inaction, and sin. The woman in today’s Gospel believes in the Lord, and acts. Her faith results in her healing (Mt 9:22). The ruler believes in the Lord and acts accordingly. His faith leads to his daughter receiving life (vs. 25). Are we willing to be well? Do we elect to overcome the sickness that leads death?

Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of life, Thou Son of the living God. – John 6:68-9

July 20 - Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 9:1-8

Faith and Wellness, continued: Matthew 9:1-8, especially vs. 2: “When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.’” In the present passage, the faith of a paralyzed man and his friends leads to the invalid’s forgiveness. Certain scribes who overhear Christ’s remark are outraged, asking “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mk 2:7)). In their eyes, any man who would presume on God’s prerogative of forgiving sins commits blasphemy. And so, to reveal His power, the Lord also heals the man’s paralysis.

We understand that believing in the Lord Jesus Christ is a matter of trusting Him despite our doubts. Believing in Him overcomes the inaction and sin within us: this is the kind of faith that heals. Furthermore, we humans are at the same time physical, psychological, and spiritual beings. As a result, our healing often involves all three aspects of our nature.

From the Lord Jesus’ healing of the paralytic, we learn that the spirit is the most significant dimension of our nature. Within the heart our relationship with God either flourishes or withers. For this reason, our Lord Jesus’ first act is to forgive the paralytic’s sins.

This spiritual healing now lays the foundation for ending the man’s physical paralysis. The paralytic’s “physical therapy” not only flows from his spiritual restoration to God, but also reveals who it is that forgives him. The relationship between healing and salvation is very close.

The present passage from Saint Matthew declares that wellness is union with God, truly a form of holy communion. “In Him we have redemption . . . the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph 1:7), and from His grace healing also comes.

As Christians we seek genuine faith and whatever healing may come with it. To reach this goal we must grow in trust, struggle against our passions, purify our hearts, attain virtue, and strain toward blessed union with God. The deification of man is identical to what is called the “likeness of God” in Genesis 1:26. Although God created us in His image and likeness, our sin corrupts and debases us so that we have lost our likeness Him (Rom 1:23, 28). Our primary need is to be restored to God and to His likeness.

The Lord Jesus comes to all men as a *physician* (Mt 9:12-13). Analyzing the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), Saint John Chrysostom likens the Church to the inn – a place of healing where our bishops and priests serve as healers in the footsteps of the Lord and His apostles. Properly understood, the Church is a healing community. When we enter this community we are taking up the long, hard struggle toward restoration and deification. Orthodoxy rejects any so-called faith in Christ that does not require us to labor with the Lord through the Holy Spirit in the healing process.

In Saint Matthew’s account, the paralytic and his helpers clearly know the man is sick. Armed with this knowledge, they do not remain inactive. Aware of his need for healing, they take action and come to Christ. They express their faith visibly by approaching the Lord (Mt 9:2).

A true believer always knows that he needs the Physician. Within the Church, the Body of Christ, we find the spiritual fathers, prayers, icons, and worship all directing our souls toward ultimate health in Christ.

Lastly, we note that healing follows the observance of Christ’s commandments. The Lord Jesus declares that “if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (vs. 19:17). Ascetic self-discipline is our direct means for gaining the strength to obey His commandments. Thus, according to Saint Thalassios, “Obedience to the commandments is resurrection of the dead” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 309).

Lord, heal me, for I am Thy servant; teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God!

July 21 - Monday of the Seventh Week after Pentecost
Matthew 13:54-58

Wisdom: Matthew 13:54-58, especially vs. 54: “Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works?” Of course, the Nazarenes who ask this question have known Jesus from His childhood. These neighbors suspect that He only imitates the knowledge of the learned scribes, for they know that He has never studied Scripture but worked in Joseph’s carpentry shop. Instead of respecting His wisdom and receiving enlightenment from Him, they are offended by His presumption (vs. 57) and remain spiritually blind.

Nevertheless, their question deserves a reply in order to reveal the truth and refute all disclaimers (vss. 55-56). First of all, we consider the Lord Jesus to be Wisdom Incarnate. During the Divine Liturgy, at the Small Entrance, the priest or deacon stops before the Holy Doors, elevates the Gospel book, and exclaims, “Wisdom! Let us attend!”

We understand the Gospel book to be an icon of our Lord Himself, Holy Wisdom. Like all icons, the Gospel book serves as a vehicle of Christ’s presence among the faithful. As the book is carried through the Holy Doors the faithful respond, “O come let us worship and fall down before Christ. Save us, O Son of God, who art risen from the dead, who sing unto Thee: Alleluia!”

In the icon of Christ typically located to the right of the Holy Doors, the Lord appears as true Wisdom, for He is shown teaching the faithful. He blesses with His right hand while holding the open Gospel book with His left. He offers Himself to us, along with all that He teaches, as the essence of divine Wisdom.

May God save us from the casual familiarity displayed by the people of Nazareth, who mistake Jesus and His life-saving words for mere human phenomena. We should never listen casually to the prayers and Scripture passages as they are read in church. We are to seek out Christ and heed the Wisdom who speaks to us directly, lest familiarity deaden our spirits.

By resisting inattention and routine, we avoid falling into the error of those in Nazareth who “saw in shadows and perceived not that gloom which obscured the Law and hid from them Him that had made by His Word both Sabbath and light” (Orthros verse). As we consider the actions and objects reverently set before us during the liturgy, we are to attend as Saint Paul instructs us: “Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light” (Eph 5:14).

When the Lord Jesus says, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house” (Mt 13:57), His words serve as a warning to us. The very temples in which we gather on the Lord’s Day represent that land dedicated to God, “His own country.” Our communities likewise constitute the *household* of God (Eph 2:19). Let us be attentive to this place and to our responsibilities!

In many cultures wisdom is considered the highest expression of human experience, character, and counsel. Such secular wisdom often includes man’s highest ideals, including truth, justice, and other concepts undergirding our notions of an orderly universe. However, the icons, hymnography, and Scriptures of the Orthodox Church reveal that wisdom is God Incarnate who appears to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

We who are in covenant with Him should strive become icons of His Wisdom, to the best of our ability. We live in a society which considers intellectual knowledge to be the highest form of wisdom. Let us avoid becoming trapped, like the contemporary savants, into treating Christ’s wisdom as mere bits of history or information. True Wisdom is neither a theory nor a concept, for Jesus Christ is the Wisdom of God.

O Christ our God, Wisdom manifest, enable us to serve Thee worthily and wisely. – Hymn for the Feast of Theophany

July 22 - Tuesday of the Seventh Week after Pentecost
Matthew 14:1-13

Solitude: Matthew 14:1-13, especially vs. 13: “When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. . . .” In these verses Saint Matthew records the grisly execution of Saint John the Forerunner and the devotion of the disciples who bury his body. Afterwards, these men report to the Lord Jesus all that has happened. One part of our Lord’s response to this tragic news is to retreat into solitude, to a lonely place.

In all four Gospels we find the Lord Jesus often leaving behind the crowds that follow Him in order to spend time by Himself. He seeks solitude to be with His Father. If the Lord, who is both man and God, needs to withdraw from the world to find intimacy with the Father, how much more do we, as fallen human beings, need to follow His example!

The life of Saint Antony, founder of desert monasticism, exemplifies the blessings of solitude. Around the age of eighteen, he heard these word of Christ: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Mt 19:21). Saint Antony knew at once that these words applied to him. He began living as a poor laborer at the edge of his village and, in time, withdrew deeper into the desert to dwell in total solitude.

Over the course of twenty years the great desert hermit underwent painful spiritual and physical trials. The superficial shell of his ego began to crack as God revealed the abyss of his sinfulness. Saint Antony surrendered unconditionally to the Lord Jesus Christ and only after decades of solitude did he re-established contact with people. Everyone who met him recognized in him a man entirely whole in mind, body and soul. Soon, hundreds flocked to him for healing and direction, and monastic life flourished in Egypt.

Christ continually calls us to “follow Me!” Saint Anthony’s life reveals that an aspect of this *following* is to seek out times of solitude. We must deliberately cast ourselves into the holy furnace with God alone. There, we are melted down by the Lord Jesus’ transforming presence and recast according to His will and likeness, for He burns away our every impurity.

How do we find true solitude in the mad rush of our godless society? Where do we find spiritual room to pursue a discipline of blessed solitude? The modern contemplative Thomas Merton reminds us that the Christians of Saint Antony’s day faced a very similar situation. “Society . . . was regarded . . . as a shipwreck from which each single individual man had to swim for his life. . . . These were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster!” (*Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 475).

Plainly, not everyone is called to pursue monasticism. Most of us are deeply engaged with family and society. Still, we must struggle for salvation and repentance regardless of the lifestyle we choose. If we are to gain the full riches of a life in Christ, we must also seek out times and places of solitude.

Those of us living in the world must develop our own little deserts – places where we can withdraw each day into the renewing and healing presence of God. We begin by finding a spiritual father – usually our parish priest – with whom we can bare our inmost thoughts. Saint John Climacus describes the spiritual father as a shepherd who “is able to seek out and set aright his lost, rational sheep by means of guilelessness, zeal, and prayer” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, p. 231).

Having secured a guide, we must deliberately set apart a time each and every day to be with God – and with Him alone. Without solitude, we find no renewal of life!

O Thou, who from a dry rock gavest flowing streams to satisfy Thy people, help us to glorify Thee, that we may drink of those living waters that come from Thine all-provident hand. – Great Book of Needs

July 23 - Wednesday of the Seventh Week after Pentecost
Matthew 14:35-15:11

The Inner Kingdom of the Heart: Matthew 14:35-15:11, especially vs. 15:8: “*These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.*” A group of “scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem” (vs. 15:1) approach the Lord Jesus and criticize Him for allowing His disciples to “transgress the tradition of the elders” (vs. 2). Our Lord points out that the Pharisees are using this very tradition to exploit their own parents (vss. 3-6). To indict these first-century religious leaders for their heartless formalism, He quotes a divine judgment from the prophesy of Isaiah (vss. 8-9, Is 29:13).

We know that the scribes and Pharisees were highly respected in the first century for the impeccable manner in which they maintained tradition. However, the Lord reveals that their hearts were devoid of love toward God and men – they manipulated only the externals of piety and devotion. Any excessive focus on form alone will disrupt our communion with God and our ability to love others as Christ commands.

In the Orthodox Church we preserve a rich and well-developed tradition that we uphold with fierce dedication. It follows then that we should listen closely to Christ’s indictment of those who neglect the state of their heart and instead exploit the minutiae of tradition. Clearly, God wants us to uphold His commandments (Jn 14:15). His chief desire, however, is that we do so with hearts filled with love for Him and for others, as He commands: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Mt 22:37).

Let us consider for a moment what enables the heart to draw near to God. Saint Peter reminds us that the grace of God takes root within the heart (“until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” – 2 Pt 1:19). We meet God within the heart, and yet of course He “is greater than our heart” (1 Jn 3:20) which controls our thoughts, emotions, and choices.

Our Lord declares that when the heart is pure, we shall see God (Mt. 5:8). Being created by and for God, it is only in Him that our lives acquire lasting joy and meaning. As Saint Augustine says, “Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee” (*Confessions* Book 1, p. 11).

True Christian life begins and ends with the inner life which our hearts direct. We perform the externals of life rightly when our hearts love God first, foremost, and above all. If our hearts are not filled with the living God, then our meticulous keeping of the “letter” – fulfilling the commandments and dictates of tradition – will never save but rather condemn us.

How then do we address the state of our hearts? According to Saint Theoliptos of Philadelphia, the answer is to “suspend . . . your gossip with the outer world and fight against the thoughts within until you find the abode of pure prayer and Christ’s dwelling place” (*Philokalia* vol. 5, p. 180). We are to strive to make our hearts Christ’s *dwelling place*, wherein grows the seed of grace that God gave us at holy baptism.

The central work of the Christian life is to enter the heart through prayer, so that God’s grace will give us the treasure He has buried there. God gives us fortunes! As we strive to remain in His presence through prayer, His gifts become more available to us, transforming everything we do. By laboring at prayer, we uncover His riches.

As we persist, aided by the Holy Spirit, we discover that the divine treasure is God. According to Archimandrite Sophrony, the moment we find God, the great Treasure, “love and cognition merge into a single act” (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 162). By directing our efforts toward meeting our Lord in the heart, we have hope for right action: “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (Jn 14:15).

And the sayings of my mouth shall be unto Thy good pleasure, and the meditation of my heart shall be before Thee, for ever, O Lord, my helper and redeemer. – Psalm 18:14

July 24 – Thursday of the Seventh Week after Pentecost
Matthew 15:12-21

The Inner Kingdom of the Heart, continued: Matthew 15:12-21, especially vs. 18: “*But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man.*” In the verses preceding this passage (Mt 14:35-15:11), Christ reveals that our efforts to do good depend upon our submitting to Him from the heart. He alone can give us the power to do what is just and pleasing to God. In the present verses the Lord expands on this truth, reminding us that our words and deeds – what comes out of us – reveal what truly lies within our hearts (vs. 19).

The Lord astutely diagnoses *evil thoughts* as the source of the defilement in the hearts of the scribes and Pharisees. Even if we do not constantly struggle against “murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (vs. 19), all of us have evil thoughts! We are all defiled before God. Do we then give up and surrender to sin? “Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?” asks Saint Paul. We join him in affirming, “Certainly not!” (Rom 6:1-2).

We must earnestly address the impurity in our heart, that secret defilement which spawns both evil thoughts and actions. The impure heart is the greatest barrier between ourselves and God, for it separates us from Him who alone is able to restore in us the power to do good. Let us examine our part in destroying this barrier raised up by our sin.

The Lord Jesus’ teaching in verses 18-19 follows God’s word in Deuteronomy 15:9: “Beware lest there be a hidden thought in your heart, a transgression of the law.” We must exert effort in prayer, seeking to find the seed God implanted in us at baptism so it can illumine our evil thinking. As Saint John Climacus advises, “Let all of us who have suffered an unexpected and inglorious fall, listen, *watch and act*” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 5.2, p. 55).

The term “watchfulness” denotes unceasing vigilance within the heart. True prayer cannot be attained without watchfulness, just as vigilance cannot be conceived without inner prayer. As Saint Hesychios says, “Watchfulness is a spiritual method which, if sedulously practiced over a long period, completely frees us with God’s help from the impassioned thoughts, impassioned words, and evil actions. It leads, in so far as this is possible, to a sure knowledge of the inapprehensible God, and helps us to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 162).

Our Lord exhorts us to be watchful: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Lk 21:36). The Apostle Paul admonished his protégé, Timothy, with these words: “But you be watchful in all things” (2 Tim 4:5). Saint Peter also speaks urgently of watchfulness: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pt 5:8).

Above all, Holy Scripture teaches us that the heart is a temple of God (1 Cor 6:19). What does the Lord do in the ancient Temple? He lashes the money-changers with a whip, overturns the merchants’ tables of commerce, and drives them out to restore the sanctity of God’s house. Likewise, as we watch over the interior temple of our heart, we ask God in prayer to cleanse it. “Let us make an effort not only to wrestle with the demons but also to wage war with them. Some throw them sometimes, and are sometimes thrown; but others continuously hound the foe” (*Ladder* 26.139, p. 183).

Thou art my God, and I will confess Thee; Thou art my God, and I will exalt Thee. I will give thanks unto Thee, for Thou hast heard me and Thou art become my salvation. – Psalm 117:28-29

July 25 - Friday of the Seventh Week after Pentecost
Matthew 15:29-31

Restoring the Image: Matthew 15:29-31, especially vs. 31: *“So the multitude marveled when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed made whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing, and they glorified the God of Israel.”* God reveals that we are created in His image (Gn 1:26) and graciously shows us how our human nature corresponds to His. His actions help us understand how to exercise dominion over other creatures (vss. 26-28) by means of speech (vss. 3, 26), by forming and modifying His creation (vs. 28), by valuing the world around us (vss. 4, 21, 31) and by making decisions (vss. 3, 14, 26, et al.). How wondrous it is to be made in God’s image!

Tragically, as the verses from today’s Gospel passage reveal, sin has corrupted the gifts of God; it cripples, blinds, and diminishes us in body, soul, and spirit. The great multitudes who come to lay their sufferings before the Lord (Mt 15:30) present a tragic portrait of humankind. Still, we receive a clear statement concerning God’s will for us in these verses, for their central message is that our God’s abiding purpose is to restore His image in everyone.

God has appointed us stewards over His creation, yet because of sin we do not exercise our stewardship as the Lord intends. Until we are healed, it is impossible for us to *subdue* without tyrannizing, crushing, or deforming the creatures with whom we share this earth. In the Hebrew account of creation, the principal meaning of subdue is “to form or to shape” (Gn 1:28). However, more often than not we damage, distort, and pollute when we apply our God-given capacities, for “professing to be wise,” our thinking is “futile” (Rom 1:22).

The mention of blindness (Mt 15:30) reminds us how much we need Christ our God to restore our sight, if we wish to heal the damage and waste we create around us. First must come the renewal of our spiritual vision according to the divine image in us. Can we hope for this?

According to Saint Peter of Damascus, “God irradiates knowledge to all and at the same time He gives us faith as an eye through which we can perceive it. If we choose to grasp this knowledge firmly by means of faith, we can keep ourselves mindful of it by putting it into practice, and God then gives us greater ardor, knowledge and power. For our pursuit of natural knowledge kindles our ardor and this ardor increases our capacity to put the knowledge into practice” (*Philokalia* v. 3, p. 78).

In addition to being blind, we must also admit that we are mute. We distort God’s gift of speech whenever we use words to lie, cheat, and deceive, proving that we are slaves of the wicked spirit of darkness. How well the Lord describes us when He says, “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He . . . does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar” (Jn 8:44).

Let us seek the Lord Jesus, ascending the mountain of healing along with the multitudes. We must go to the place where Christ our God is seated and repent before Him. May our tears flow humbly as we seek the restoration of our speech (Mt 15:29-31)!

The Church Fathers teach that God has planted in us a capacity for His “pure words, silver that is fired, tried in the earth, brought to sevenfold purity” (Ps 11:6). Although today our communication is confounded, so that we do “not understand one another’s speech” (Gn 11:7), yet the Gospel declares that God will answer if we but cry out to Him: “O Lord, Thou shalt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Thy praise” (Ps 50:15).

O Thou who hast power to release men from their sins, forgive and release me that I might obtain Thy cooling solace and be found without impurity or stain before Thee. – Saint Ephraim the Syrian

July 26 – Saturday of the Seventh Week after Pentecost
Matthew 10:37-11:1

Commitment to the Lord: *Matthew 10:37-11:1, especially vs. 40:* “*He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.*” Chapter 10 of the Gospel of Matthew records the process by which the Lord Jesus commissions His future apostles for ministry and empowers them for ministry (vss. 1-5). The Lord offers the disciples six sets of instructions, warnings, and encouragements (vss. 6-36). He then exhorts the disciples to weigh their commitment to Him carefully (vss. 37-39). Lastly, He foretells their meetings with others who will welcome them with love and hospitality (vss. 40-42).

Throughout the chapter Christ stresses the need for unqualified commitment to Him, even when difficult personal choices are involved. In the present passage, He clarifies the specific nature of this commitment, explaining that love for Him must take precedence over our love for all others who are dear to us.

Here He includes even family loyalties and affections, for our love for Him must come before our love for parents and children (vs. 37). Christ’s command is not intended to create competition between Himself and our families, but rather to establish priorities among our commitments and loyalties. When we “commend ourselves and each other, and all our life” to Him, we are granting Him first place. If our family members are committed to Christ, then torn loyalties should never be a problem. We are all to strive to place Christ first, as Master of all.

Today, many of us face daily choices between love for parents or children and the keeping of our commitment to the Lord Jesus and His Church. Who comes first? Will we let family ties pull us away from attending liturgy, from making the moral choices that He expects, from the prayer and good works that sustain our vital relationship with Him? We must be careful not to skirt around the issue by saying that such difficult choices are limited to the clergy. Every baptized member of the Church is under obligation to make Christ his Lord and Master.

The true measure of our Christian commitment comes when we must face choices that carry the potential for pain, whether it be physical, emotional, spiritual, or financial in nature. Let us consider how our Lord Jesus approaches His Passion. The Gospel narratives reveal that He deliberately embraces death. He freely decides to die on the Cross, as evidenced by the drops of blood He sweats in Gethsemane (Lk 22:44). He accepts the humiliating attacks unleashed upon Him by the officials and by the general populace.

If we are determined to face suffering while remaining faithful to Him, we will discover that worthy discipleship bears a cost. However, we are called to eternal blessings! We aspire to hear Christ’s words, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Mt 25:21), rather than settling for the ephemeral approval of friends and family. “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (vs. 10:39).

We do well to listen to Christ our Lord and to the good news He offers those who commit themselves to Him. If we place Him first, “take up our cross,” and follow after Him, His blessings are assured. Nor will every blessing He names be reserved for the future age; the faithful servant likely will experience some reward in this life. There will always be brethren in Christ who *receive* us and support us in holding onto the Lord above all else (vs. 40).

Consider Blessed Basil, the fool-for-Christ, who lived in tatters and yet led many Russians to repentance. Even the nobles gladly received his reprimands. In the end, the grateful people of Moscow named the now-famous cathedral of Saint Basil for him – truly “a righteous man’s reward” (vs. 41).

O Lord, may we find grace in Thy sight, and may our sacrifices be acceptable unto Thee! – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

July 27 – Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 9:27-35

Unwavering Mercy: Matthew 9:27-35, especially vs. 35: *“Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people.”* Reacting to the Lord Jesus’ generous acts of healing, the Pharisees say, “He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons” (vs. 34). The Lord neither disputes this claim nor slows the pace of His ministry in Galilee. Rather, He fulfills Isaiah’s words: “The deaf shall hear the words of the book, and the eyes of those in darkness and in a fog shall see. The poor also shall rejoice exceedingly because of the Lord, and the hopeless among men shall be filled with gladness” (Is 29:18-19).

Reading Saint Matthew’s report, we are struck by the ceaseless care that the Lord Jesus offers to wounded humanity. This essential truth – the truth of God’s mercy – can be easily overlooked amidst the many details of the Gospel. Mercy is priceless! We are to hold it close to our hearts, letting it soothe our minds and reassure us in the midst of this troubled life. Our Lord sympathized with the troubles that befell men while He was on earth, and He persists in His concern for us even now. We must not permit the woes of this life to turn us away from Him, for His mercy is unwavering.

The two blind men in this passage are neither paralyzed nor deaf, nor are they tongue-tied. They follow the Lord Jesus and cry out to Him. They come to Him (Mt 9:27-28), and He offers them enduring mercy. He does not at first attempt to correct the flattery that may lodge in their appeal to Him as Messiah (“Son of David” – vs. 27). Rather, He draws out their faith in Him by asking, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?”

What is He able to do? To heal their blindness, of course. As soon as they declare that, indeed, they do believe that He can cure them of their blindness, He touches them – and it is accomplished (vss. 29-30).

The Lord Jesus’ stern command, “See that no one knows it” (vs. 30), directs them away from their false ideas of messiahship. He comes as Savior to heal mankind’s deepest wounds – to reveal that God’s kingdom is one of mercy and restoration above all else. He brushes aside political power and social reform in favor of restoring our trust in God for mercy and life.

Having regained their sight, the two men become irrepressible messengers, spreading “the news about Him in all that country” (vs. 31). They know firsthand, from their own healing, the unwavering mercy of God.

The man who is “mute and demon-possessed” (vs. 32) stands in complete contrast to the blind men. He neither follows nor cries out, for he is mute. He comes only because others lead him; they present him to the Lord Jesus. Christ our God, without a word, heals him by casting out the demon has taken away his speech (vs. 33) – a marvel, indeed, of the pure unwavering mercy of God.

The most wounded of all those whom the Lord Jesus encounters in Galilee are the Pharisees. Their minds are warped, for they fail to see the hand of God in the merciful healings visibly performed “in their synagogues” (vs. 35). Incredibly, they call the Lord’s power over demons satanic! How can one logically conclude that Christ Jesus draws His power from Satan (vs. 34)?

Later on, the Lord will seek to correct them (vss. 12:24-29). Here, He appeals to their hard hearts with more good news of the kingdom. By “healing every sickness and every disease among the people” (vs. 9:35), He allows His actions to declare the unwavering mercy of God – all with the goal of softening the Pharisees’ hearts.

Illumine our hearts, O Master who loveth mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings. – Orthros Prayer

July 28 – Monday of the Eighth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 16:1-6

The Sign of the Kingdom: Matthew 16:1-6, especially vs. 4: *“A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.”* A rising ocean tide steadily advances along the dry sand of the beach. Inexorably, the waves wash further and further ashore until high tide is reached. In today’s verses, we observe the advancing tide of social opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ that will eventually reach high tide with His Passion.

Early in His ministry, a group of scribes and Pharisees come to the Lord Jesus and ask Him for a sign (vs. 12:38). Now, a new and larger wave of opponents comes. The scribes and Pharisees are joined by the Sadducees, who are rulers from the Temple. These groups, traditionally hostile to each other, are united in their resistance to Christ.

Together, these interrogators challenge Him, demanding a sign “from heaven” (vs. 16:1). The specific request for a sign *from heaven* represents a demand for wonder-working even greater than the demonstration they had requested earlier.

Both groups asking for a sign from Christ receive the same answer: there is but one sign for all, “the sign of the prophet Jonah” (vs. 4). Earlier, the Lord explains His reference to Jonah (vss. 12:39-40); but on this occasion He focuses on the lack of spiritual depth in anyone who demands signs before he will believe (vss. 16:2-4). He warns even His disciples against lame spiritual requests for miracles in order to believe (vss. 5-11).

Ironically, these encounters with sign-seekers occur in the midst of overt evidence of the presence of the kingdom of God, for Christ is healing the sick and feeding the hungry (vss. 15:29-38). Tragically, the Lord’s interrogators unable to “discern the signs of the times” (vs. 16:3) nor do they perceive the spiritual realm He is introducing. The kingdom is disclosed to all, but these opponents, having rejected the obvious, are promised only “the sign of Jonah” – Christ’s departure.

Our Lord further foreshadows this greatest sign by walking away from them (vs. 4). Departure from our midst is God’s most dread sign and warning. When we turn from Him, God effectively withdraws from us, although in reality He remains everywhere present.

How is the sign of Jonah a departure for those who oppose God? We faithful in Christ know His departure is followed by the Resurrection. But for the disdainful and resistant, the sign of Jonah is a true departure. After the Lord’s opponents crucify Him and see Him buried, they behold Him no more.

Still, the kingdom of God comes! He comes to the humble, the meek, the repentant, and the sorrowful. Having once come in the flesh, meek and lowly, the Lord mightily tramples down death by death. Then, after “three days and three nights in the heart of earth” (vs. 12:40), He arises and appears to His faithful. The sign of Jonah is at once God’s departure from the faithless and His greatest miracle – resurrection and eternal life!

The sign of Jonah is sufficient for everyone. Yet too often we turn away from the Lord Jesus and oppose Him who loves us! Sadly, the more active His kingdom, the more unreceptive the worldly become. How often the Lord calls out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (vs. 11:15)! Our kind and merciful Lord seeks to awaken every interrogator. However, in the end He departs from those who would set their own criteria, as a warning of the great “departure” (Lk 9:31).

Which will we choose, withdrawal or restoration? As Saint John of Kronstadt advises, “Do not let there be any deceit or duplicity or coldness in your soul. Strive to have His Spirit, for ‘if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His’” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. 28).

Cast me not utterly away, and forsake me not, O God my Savior! – Psalm 26:11

July 29 – Tuesday of the Eighth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 16:6-12

Growing in Christ: Matthew 16:6-12, especially vs. 12: “Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Saint John Climacus encourages us to acknowledge our sins, weaknesses, and passions to the Savior if we wish to grow as His disciples. We must “have the courage to offer our infirmity and natural weakness to Christ with unhesitating faith, and confess it to Him; and we shall be certain to obtain His help, even beyond our worth, if only we continually plunge to the depth of humility” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 1.8, p. 6).

Honest confession of our sins and failures, when made with a modicum of humility, is the single proven path for receiving Christ’s renewing grace and correction. This is what Gospel reveals concerning the first disciples. It is a life-giving truth for us, too, showing us how we may understand, change, and grow in faith and humility in Him.

The present portion of Saint Matthew’s Gospel is the Lord Jesus’ reply to our prayer: “Teach me Thy statutes . . . make me to understand Thy statutes . . . enlighten me with Thy statutes.” Christ responds to this plea by addressing our lack of faith, mindfulness, and good spiritual practice. He corrects us by setting aside our obsession with material concerns and speaking to our deep, underlying problem: our lack of trust in Him (vs. 8). He recalls us to our right minds as members and partakers of Him (vss. 9-10). He provides Himself as the Truth we must embrace if the Holy Spirit is to illumine our hearts (vss. 11-12).

If we are to receive the benefit of our Lord Jesus’ blessed correction, we must approach His teachings as more than mere reminders – rather, He sets forth the steps for returning to Him, the true Source of life. We need to place the Master and His teaching before us constantly, for we do not grow in Christ by acquiring information, but by humbly developing a relationship with Him. Because we are beginners in this process, He guides us through repeated failures, showing us through reflection and practice how to draw closer to Him.

The disciples, for example, mistake the Lord Jesus’ remark about “the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees” (vs. 6) because they are preoccupied with material things such as the bread for a journey (vs. 7). In the original Greek, the Lord literally calls them, “O you little-faiths” (vs. 8).

Here we encounter an insight into our own ongoing limitations as disciples. We are constantly worried about the lack of this or that thing, a state which plainly reveals how little we trust the Lord. The plunge into humility of which Saint John speaks requires that we admit ourselves to be “little-faiths” – those who do not fully trust Christ with our lives.

The Lord’s antidote for lack of faith is remembrance, for He says to the disciples, “Remember the five loaves” (vs. 9). The word Christ uses for *remember* refers not simply to memory, but to a life lived intimately in Him. We are to be *in touch* with Him as He feeds the thousands, gives sight to the blind, heals the lame, and raises the dead. The Gospels are not pleasant stories meant to delight us, but opportunities for reshaping our hearts and minds in every circumstance of this present, limited life.

When the Lord returns to the original topic – the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (vss. 6, 11) - He does not fully explain His point. Instead, He gives the disciples sufficient grist to reach His meaning, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and to correct their lack of spiritual orientation.

If we, too, hesitate to rely on Him, we will not find life in and through Him. It is no idle matter to pray, “Illumine our hearts, O Master.” This prayer is life-blood for us if we wish to grow as His disciples by embracing the Lord Jesus and His correction.

Glorify us in recompense by Thy Divine power, and forsake us not who hope in Thee. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

July 30 - Wednesday of the Eighth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 16:20-24

The Full Gospel: Matthew 16:20-24, especially vs. 23: *“You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”* Since we are weak, we are often tempted to adopt what Saint Paul calls “a different gospel” (Gal 1:6), despite our illumination in the Christian mystery. We must keep in mind, however, that there “is not another [gospel], but there are some who . . . want to pervert the gospel of Christ” (vs. 7).

In the present passage from Saint Matthew, the Lord Jesus reveals three ways we sometimes skew His Gospel in order to make it more palatable to our earthly, human sensibilities. We may be tempted to minimize the supernatural, to modify the identity and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, and/or to gloss over the centrality of His suffering, death, and Resurrection.

The disciple Peter, who later becomes chief of the apostles (Mt 16:18), has an intense, emotional reaction to the Lord Jesus’ announcement that “He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed” (vs. 21). Horrified at this prospect, Peter rebukes the Teacher for allowing this (vs. 22). His resistance to Christ’s prophecy is so strong that he misses the stunning conclusion of the message (“and be raised the third day” – vs. 21). The full Gospel includes the Resurrection!

Like the Pharisees and Sadducees, Peter and the other disciples do not fully comprehend that the sign of Jonah (vs. 12:39) has two dimensions. They understand only the horrifying prospect of “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (vs. 40) and overlook the Resurrection that is to follow. Jesus has told them, and yet they miss it.

Then the Lord warns them of the “leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (vss. 16:6, 11), for these religious leaders demand signs if they are to believe in Him. In the end the disciples witness the greatest of all signs, but first they must live through Christ’s Passion. Only afterward does the risen Lord stand in their midst.

Let us not be over-dependent on miracles, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, for the full gospel is ours by faith in Christ. As He says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29). Above all, let us not miss out on the true gospel by having an inadequate or limited understanding of the Person and ministry of Christ our God. Rather, let us affirm that He is fully God and fully Man in every respect, except that He is free sin – free of the tragic lot of our race.

This present passage shows the disciples slowly moving toward a complete understanding of the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ. They reject many popular views of Him, including that He is John the Baptist or Elijah, who are forerunners of the Christ, or that He might be “Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Mt 16:14). Peter even declares, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (vs. 16).

The Lord carefully modulates His revelation, beginning with the caution to “tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ” (vs. 20). Since Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” the full Gospel will necessarily include His death and Resurrection. Immediately, then, He tells the disciples about His Passion and how He will be raised on the *third day* (vss. 20, 21).

When Peter resists Jesus’ prediction of suffering and death, the Lord rebukes him sharply so that His disciples will fully understand the Gospel. We acknowledge the foolishness of the Lord’s message: “Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called . . . the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:21-25). Only the whole Gospel saves, and this despite our logic and wisdom.

The Bridegroom of the Church was fastened with nails, pierced with a spear. Thy sufferings we adore, O Christ. Make us to behold Thy glorious Resurrection! – Orthros of Great and Holy Friday

July 31 – Thursday of the Eighth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 16:24-28

Self Denial: Matthew 16:24-28, especially vs. 24: “Then said Jesus unto His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself. . . .’” Saint Paul poses this crucial challenge to all Christians: “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey?” (Rom 6:16). The assumption underlying the apostle’s assertion is that we are all slaves to someone, or to something. The reality is that we cannot serve Christ so long as we are ruled by anything else in this life. To be Christ’s slaves, we must wage a continuous resistance.

“But God be thanked,” Saint Paul continues, “that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. . . . For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness” (Rom 6:17-19).

If we are to remain faithful to Christ without being drawn back into sin, we face an unending battle of self-denial. Who can help us win this struggle but Christ? He says, “I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (Jn 6:38). The Lord Jesus does not ask anything of us that He did not also do as a man. He knows the battle, and thus in Him we have an invincible champion. Since “those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24), we may choose to depend the Lord’s grace for our battle, for He “will crush Satan under [our] feet” (Rom 16:20).

If we do not deny ourselves, we merely persist in self-indulgence. We must accept the Lord’s declaration that “whoever desires to save his life will lose it” (Mt 16:25). There is no profit to be gained by caving in to the self! Even if we gain the *whole world*, we forfeit our very life and give up Christ (vs. 26).

The Son of Man will come and “reward each according to his works” (vs. 27). If we live only for pleasure and satisfaction, we surely dread this element of the Gospel message. According to Saint John Chrysostom, “Fear is necessary merely in order that we may master the indolence natural to us. Where there is so fierce a war and such great hindrances, how can we by any possibility be saved without fear?” (“Homily 8 on Philippians,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 13, p. 219).

Saint Silouan achieved union with Christ while remaining aware of the continuous raging of the fires of hell around him. Do we think that the apostles, prophets, and our Lord Himself took the fear of God lightly? “Who is the man that feareth the Lord?” asks the Prophet David. “He will set him a law in the way which He hath chosen. His soul shall dwell among good things, and his seed shall inherit the earth. The Lord is the strength of them that fear Him” (Ps 24:12-14).

Saint John Chrysostom identifies godly fear as an element essential of spiritual growth. “And how may this fear be produced? 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 the depth of the soul, for He is quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart (see Heb. 4:12).

“Whenever you eat, consider that God is present, for He is present; whenever you are preparing to sleep, or giving way to passion, if you are robbing another, or indulging in luxury, or whatever you are about, you will never fall into laughter, never be inflamed with rage. ‘Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice in Him with trembling’ (Ps 2:11).”

O my Creator, establish me wholly in Thy fear. Ever shelter me, guard and keep me from every soul-corrupting deed and word. Show me a dwelling place of Thy Spirit only. – Post-communion Prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator