

October 1 – Wednesday of the Nineteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 5:33-39

Christ the Bridegroom: Luke 5:33-39, especially vs. 34: “*And He said to them, ‘Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them?’*” During the Divine Liturgy, the priest holds the veiled chalice before the assembly and invites the faithful to partake of holy communion, saying, “With fear of God, and faith and love, draw near.” Likewise, the Apostle Paul encourages us to draw near to the Lord: “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16). Both of these invitations to draw near to the throne of grace are illumined by today’s Gospel passage.

Let us begin by recalling that we are directed to abstain from food before receiving communion, starting at midnight for a morning liturgy and from noon onward in the case of a vespereal service. Such fasting awakens our reverence for the holy mysteries. Likewise, the Lord instructs us about the proper time for fasting, connecting our abstinence with His absence: “The bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast in those days” (vs. 35). Note that He does not simply say, “I will be taken away;” but that the Bridegroom will be taken away.

By referring to Himself as the Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus connects our pre-communion fast with the eternal, heavenly wedding feast. He reminds us of His relationship to us, the Church, as His blessed bride. We may tend to associate this imagery with the hymns of Bridegroom Orthros during Holy Week. However, we must also understand that the imagery of the wedding feast and the Bridegroom applies each time we receive communion.

We fast before gathering with the Church to prepare ourselves for feasting with our Lord. We refrain from eating His earthly good things so as to incline our hearts toward what Father Alexander Schmemmann called the “sacrament of assembly” (*The Eucharist*, p. 11-26). For when two or three faithfully gather in His name, the Bridegroom draws near, as He has promised. His presence transforms the liturgy into a divine and mystical marriage supper, for Christ is in our midst.

When we hear the invitation to draw near “with fear of God, and faith and love,” we participate in a marriage with Christ our Bridegroom. Here faith and love are as natural as when those united in holy wedlock come into each other’s presence in blessed marriage, partaking, to some degree, of the love between Christ and His Bride (Eph 5:22-33).

In this Gospel Christ our God announces the eternal marriage covenant between the Bridegroom and His Bride. What a marriage! Through our repentance and the Lord’s grace, our past infidelity is overcome. We have reason to hope that He will not declare, as He did to ancient Israel through the Prophet Hosea, “She is not My wife, and I am not her Husband” (Hos 2:2).

Today, during the era of the Church, the new Israel, God offers us a new and mystical marriage. “‘Then it shall come to pass in that day,’ says the Lord, ‘that she shall call Me “My Husband”’” (Hos 2:16).

“I will betroth you to Myself forever; yes, I will betroth you to Myself in righteousness and in justice, and in mercy and compassions. I will betroth you to Myself in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord” (Hos 2: 19-20).

Indeed, let us prepare ourselves with fasting before the Divine Liturgy. In this way we will feast with joy and thanksgiving at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rv 19:9).

I have sinned, O my Savior; despise me not like the barren fig tree. But since Thou art compassionate, have mercy upon me, who cry in fear, lest I remain outside the chamber. – Bridegroom Orthros of Great and Holy Tuesday

October 2 - Thursday of the Nineteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 6:12-19

The Infallible Guide: Luke 6:12-19, especially vs. 17: *“And [Jesus] came down with them and stood on a level place with a crowd of His disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases.”* The Gospel of Luke provides us with rich insights into the ministry and teachings of Christ our God. He is revealed as the one infallible Guide for all the faithful, regardless of the era in which we live. The last part of Luke 6 includes several key examples of this ageless and enduring direction.

Today’s reading portrays Christ keeping vigil through a night of prayer, as He prepares for the momentous task of selecting the inner core of His disciples: the twelve who will become His holy and God-bearing apostles. These men will serve as the leaders who initially spread the message of the Church across the world. Saint Luke describes Jesus’ preparation very simply: He “went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God” (vs. 12).

Reading further, we discover that the Lord took his band of disciples with Him for this vigil (vs. 17). He thus shows prayer and vigil to be a necessary foundation for the process of selecting Church leaders. Let us pray for our bishops, that they in turn may fervently pray prior to ordaining and appointing our pastors.

The Lord Jesus, of course, had infallible knowledge of those whom He designated as apostles, and good and right reasons for choosing each disciple. We may safely assert that, through the Holy Spirit, He guided the evangelists to record the details of this process for the subsequent instruction of the future Church.

Of our Lord Jesus’ selection process, Blessed Theophylact says: “In everything He did, the Lord teaches us to do likewise. . . . After prayer He chose the disciples, teaching us that when we intend to ordain someone for spiritual ministry, we should first pray before choosing the candidate and be guided by God, beseeching Him to reveal to us the one suited for this task” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, p. 66). Prayer and vigil are necessary in every aspect of ministry, above all in selecting the Church’s leaders.

The Gospels make it clear that the Lord Jesus spent considerable time considering which men He would name as His apostles (Jn 1:29-51; Lk 5:1-11). Likewise, the Apostle Paul cautions Timothy: “Do not lay hands on anyone hastily” (1 Tim 5:22). Allowing some time to pass permits those who are not ready to turn back (Jn 6:66).

Our Lord also guides some away from ministries for which they are not suited (Lk 8:38-39). Each position of leadership in the Church is unique. For this reason our bishops need time to discern the will of our Lord and God when they select men for ordination and assignment.

The choice of just and right men was crucial in the case of the apostles, for their role was historically unrepeatable. The Church has been served by many priests and bishops, but there was only one set of apostles.

We likewise note the care with which the nascent Church finds a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:12-26). The apostles follow our Lord’s example of prayer before selecting Matthias (vss. 14, 24). They follow the infallible path set by the Lord! May the Church’s leaders ever seek the will of God in assigning and assuming leadership positions, and may we also conform ourselves to Him.

Save Thy people, O Lord, from false choices, guiding them by the light of the Holy Spirit, so that the Church may prosper in her ministry unto the fulfillment of Thy kingdom.

October 3 – Friday of the Nineteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 6:17-23

God Is Best Obeyed: Luke 6:17-23, especially vss. 17, 20: *“And [Jesus] came down with them and stood on a level place with a crowd of His disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases. . . . Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples and said, ‘Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’”*

Today, the media places political candidates before the public eye as never before in history. Every detail of a candidate’s personal life, friendships, associations – even matters of dress and personal appearance – are exposed to the intense light of public scrutiny. As a result, every word or statement has the potential to make or break a candidate’s campaign.

When the Lord Jesus addresses His disciples openly before a multitude assembled in Roman Palestine, He reminds us that the faithful of every age are subject to public review. As disciples, we are constantly on display before the world as examples of our holy faith. This is the meaning of our Lord’s statement: “You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:14-16). We bear an awesome responsibility.

The secular world around us watches to see whether we will live up to the teachings of the Lord. Often, people delight in seeing us contradict what we profess. Worse, our shortcomings allow others to discount Christianity as a serious way of life. Therefore, as we review the Lord Jesus’ teaching, we should take careful note of what He expects and assess how well we are obeying the Lord.

Who are the “poor” whom the Lord addresses in Saint Luke’s version of the first Beatitude (Lk 6:20)? We encounter two possible interpretations if we contrast his version with Saint Matthew’s. Is He speaking to the economically disadvantaged, or to the “poor in spirit” (Mt 5:3)?

Among those who first heard our Lord speak these words were Palestinian villagers who were losing their hereditary lands and income under the Roman Empire’s system of taxation. Families found themselves sinking deeper into poverty and suffering. Our Lord knew that the hearts of many of these poor remained faithful to God. Christ’s words have encouraged the destitute in many places and times since they were first spoken.

However, the Lord Jesus also addresses everyone who affirms total dependence on God. Even if we are not impoverished, we still are called to depend on Him alone. In either case the question remains: How evident to the world is our dependence on God?”

Our first concern is not the status of our cash flow, but the flow of our relationship with the Lord. We need to ask ourselves how diligently we seek His will and the grace to carry it out. Do we treat “all that comes to [us] with peace of soul and with the firm conviction that [God’s] will governs all” (Prayer for the Beginning of the Day), affirming that life is a gift from God?

The word “hunger” (Lk 6:21) has the same double meaning. Are we among those who hunger to do the will of God, to be righteous in His sight and walk in His ways? What do we read and say? What do we spend our time hearing and discussing?

According to Saint John Climacus, “Repentance goes shopping for humility . . . is ever distrustful of bodily comfort . . . is critical awareness and sure watch over oneself” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 5.1, p. 54). Deep mourning, coupled with confession, is the Orthodox way of life. May God grant us spiritual grief, the fruits of repentance, and humble obedience as a witness to our secular neighbors.

Unto the healing of body and soul, unto the hearing of faith, Thy hands have made and fashioned me: Grant, O Lord, that I may ever walk in the way of Thy commandments. – Baptismal prayer

October 4 - Saturday of the Nineteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 5:17-26

The God Who Is Forgiving: Luke 5:17-26, especially vs. 24: “*‘But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins’— He said to the man who was paralyzed, ‘I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’*” Christ calls us to obey Him, and thus glorify God (Mt 5:14,16). Let us not procrastinate in following His word, but rather struggle to heed Him, for the world watches us to see if and how we obey. The dread day is coming when everyone must account to God for his words and deeds (Lk 13:25-27), a day when all shall be “tried with fire” (1 Cor 3:13). Were it not for God’s forgiveness, which today’s reading reveals in its full beauty, our sins would cause us to despair.

In today’s Gospel the Lord reveals that we, like the paralytic, may go home “glorifying God” (Lk 5:25). Of course, He calls us to recognize the reality of our sins and see them as paralyzing evidence of the universal human sickness which resides in the depths of our being. And yet He also discloses what we can do about the deadly malady that infects us.

A paralyzed man is brought to the Lord Jesus, carried on a litter by his friends, so that He might heal him. Our attention is first directed to the man’s need for physical healing and to the efforts of the friends, who climb up on the roof, tear off some tiles, affix ropes to his litter, and lower the poor man down to Jesus’ feet.

Take careful note of our Lord’s first words: “Man, your sins are forgiven you” (vs. 20). Great effort has been made to help this man reach a teacher famed for healing. Strangely, the Healer speaks of forgiving sins without mentioning the paralysis!

What is the implication of the Lord addressing sin before everything else? As our chief Physician, Christ our God addresses the core of the human problem. He bypasses the external symptoms (in this case, physical immobility), for He desires us to see that our primary need is to be cured of sin: to be forgiven, for God to put our sins away from us and cover them.

The Church reinforces our Savior’s point. Our sins are symptoms of the foremost human sickness, the universal malady running through our race and manifesting itself in many ways. We are all paralyzed before God and in desperate need of His forgiveness. But when we enter the Church by means of baptism, God illumines us to recognize that we are sick with sin, urgently in need of cure through forgiveness.

Let us turn to the efforts exerted by the paralytic’s friends. Their actions constitute solid evidence of faith. These men are determined to bring their friend before the Lord Jesus. They apply the gifts God gives to all of us: hearts to love, minds to think, and strength to act. Sin is opposed to faith. Sin gives up. Sin is inaction, bitterness, and death. Faith, however, acts.

We learn from these energetic men that Christ is present now, and ready to heal us (vs. 17). “Rich men have turned poor and gone hungry; but they that seek the Lord shall not be deprived of any good thing” (Ps 33:10).

We must acknowledge that the Pharisees, though they oppose the Lord, are technically correct. Only God can forgive sins. The Lord does not deny the Pharisees’ assertion. Rather, He seizes the occasion to reveal that He is “God with us.” His hyper-religious critics, with the eyes of their hearts darkened, do not see God Incarnate standing before them. Hence the Pharisees are offended by a mere man – or so they think – usurping God’s authority.

Sins are wrongful acts and thoughts that oppose God’s will. Indeed, our sins are aimed against God Himself (Ps 50:4). Yet He still says, “Although your sins are . . . like crimson, I shall make them white like snow” (Is 1:18). Let us repent and discover the glory of God!

Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. – Psalm 50:2

October 5 - Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 6:31-36

Beyond Fairness: Luke 6:31-36, especially vs. 35: *“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil.”* The Lord Jesus begins this reading with a saying (“And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise” – vs. 31) based on the famous Mosaic dictum, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord” (Lv. 19:18).

Dubbed the Golden Rule, this wisdom appears in ancient traditions worldwide. Many of the world’s great teachers have urged us to deal with our fellow man equitably and honestly when it comes to the exchange of goods, courtesies, and services. The rule usually takes a negative form, as in the deuterocanonical book of Tobit: “What you yourself hate, do not to anyone” (Tb 4:15).

If we act in this manner, however, we merely reflect the natural condition of mankind, as Saint Cyril of Alexandria observes: “God writes upon our hearts the knowledge of His will; ‘for in those days,’ saith the Lord, ‘I will surely give My laws into their mind, and will write them on their heart’ - Jer 31:33” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 137).

When the Lord teaches us the Golden Rule, does He apply this same natural standard, urging us to treat others as we would have them treat us? Is fairness His measure? Clearly not! Even sinners, according to Christ our God, operate on the basis of what is fair in their relations among themselves (Lk 6:32-34). As His examples show, it is normal to be kind, courteous, generous, and loving in the ebb and flow of relationships where mutuality prevails. When fairness is our norm, we are inclined to offer those who love us love in return.

We are all familiar with classical statue of Justice (a blindfolded woman holding a set of balanced scales) which expresses the Golden Rule. This standard is accepted and praised by the world. However, if we live by the Golden Rule in the manner the Lord intends, we are required to go far beyond mutual impartiality.

Our Lord reveals His higher standard to us in the icon of His Passion called “Extreme Humility.” We are to love even our enemies, to “do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return” (vs. 35). We are to be like the Most High God, who is “kind to the unthankful and evil” (vs. 35).

How different from the world’s norm is the Lord’s way of applying the Golden Rule! In social encounters where love, gentleness, kindness, and thoughtfulness are mocked, we are to love others beyond the standard of reciprocity (vs. 32). We are to *do good* even when the majority do not return favors (vs. 33), and *lend* when we have no reasonable assurance of repayment (vs. 34).

This is the way of the saints, who, by God’s grace, do more. Indeed, we are to embody from the heart the standard of extreme humility. We reject the invitation to practice the Golden Rule on worldly terms, along with the cynical advice to “do to others before they do to you.”

Our Lord places the lofty standards of heaven before us, insisting we rise above our self-serving nature. Only by the grace of God can we stretch toward this height! As the pure light of Christ exposes the dark recesses of our lives, we are troubled – but we admire His way. Let us seek grace to live it! Our Lord gives us grace to go beyond fairness, pointing to the boundless mercy, love, and goodness of God the Father: “Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful” (vs. 36).

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

October 6 – Monday of the Twentieth Week after Pentecost
Luke 6:24-30

The Challenge to Christians: Luke 6:24-30, especially vs. 27: “*But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.*” Blessed Theophylact, who prayed over this passage, heard the Lord Jesus’ call to “lowliness, humility, self-effacement, and self-reproach.” He urges us to love our enemies and warns that woe “awaits those who are rich and prosperous now,” and who show no consider to others around them (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, p. 67).

The majority of us enjoy goods, satisfactions, and pleasures unknown to the rest of the world. Yes, there are those we call wealthy, which gives us the feeling that we are not truly rich. But honestly, by the standard of most people on earth we are quite rich, well fed, and comfortable. How often do those facts lure us into accepting the devil’s counsel to disdain our enemies!

“Is it the case that every one who is rich and possesses abundant wealth is determinately cut off from the expectation of God’s grace . . . entirely shut out from the hope of the saints?” asks Saint Cyril of Alexandria. He answers emphatically, “Not so, we say, but rather on the contrary, that the rich man might have shown mercy on Lazarus [Lk 16:19-31] and so have been made partaker of his consolation” (Homily 29, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 135.)

What about the goods that God has placed in our hands? Grave and eternal danger may overtake us in our material well-being, even though our riches may be limited and our pleasures constrained. May God reveal our true spiritual condition to us! The material things we possess can either help us grow toward the grace of God or turn us away from the true life in Christ.

We can learn to appreciate the difference between the miserly and the generous. We know a gulf exists between those who wantonly indulge themselves and those who seek the betterment of their neighbors. Advertisers continually encourage us to eat, drink, and be merry because we “deserve” it. How merciful, moderate, and sober are we in reality?

Our hearts seldom remain neutral when possessing this world’s goods. We must urgently heed what the Lord says in this passage. Here He gives us tangible measures for self-examination, once again holding up His icon of Extreme Humility.

How do we love our enemies? The Lord Jesus calls us to choose do them good, and good alone (vs. 27). That is how He treats His enemies. He gives them honest answers (see vss. 22:67-69). He refuses to be baited (vss. 20:20-26) but speaks the truth to all, honoring God in every matter (vss. 27-38). He remains silent before hatred, forgiving insults and injuries (vs. 23:34). Let us pray, “Lord, help us to be as generous to our enemies as Thou art!”

Are we able to bless those who curse or spitefully use us? Our Lord begs us, while we have breath, to return every curse, slur, tongue-lashings and hateful remark with *polite firmness* (vss. 22:47-53). Always He returns good for evil (vss. 50-51).

How do we react when we are assaulted physically or psychologically? How do we respond in our heart to being robbed or cheated? When Saint Myron of Crete discovered thieves stealing from his threshing-floor, he helped them fill their sacks, lift them onto their backs, and escape (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 3, p. 169). Help us to surrender our “rights” to Thee, O Lord!

By choosing to seek and apply God’s grace, we may learn how to handle the good things of this life in the way of the Lord. “Our business as Christians consists not in increasing the number of our good deeds,” says Saint Seraphim of Savor, “but in deriving from them the utmost profit, that is in acquiring the most abundant gifts of the Holy Spirit” (Moore, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov*, p. 179).

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. – Lord’s Prayer

October 7 – Tuesday of the Twentieth Week after Pentecost
Luke 6:37-45

Producing Goodness: Luke 6:37-45, especially vs. 45: *“A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good: and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”* The Lord Jesus sets his teachings in these nine verses between a pair of bookends. In verse 36, immediately prior, He admonishes us to “be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.” He ends by declaring, “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good” (vs. 45).

How do we produce good fruit such as mercy? As the Lord says, we must have abundance of good treasure in our heart (vs. 45). But how do we acquire a profusion of “good treasure”? Very simply, this treasure accrues to our heart when we submit ourselves to God: “Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful” (vs. 36).

Between these bookends, the Lord Jesus describes four specific actions, two negative and two positive (vss. 37-38). He then addresses the truly difficult struggle of changing the heart from evil to good so as to keep the commandments, which will bring forth good (vss. 39-44).

His four actions follow a reflexive pattern: the one who obeys shall receive the same in return from God our Father. If we do not judge, we shall not be judged by God. If we do not condemn, God will not condemn us. If we forgive, our Father will forgive us. If we give generously, our Father will lavish goodness upon us. Let us pay attention to the Lord’s pattern!

As for being judgmental and condemning, Saint Cyril of Alexandria calls the passion of busying ourselves with the affairs of others “very unmanageable . . . [and] the commencement and begetter of pride” (Homily 29, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 137). This terrible illness begins when we forget our personal frailties and the abundant mercy of our Father in Heaven.

When we turn our attention outward, toward the actions and behavior of others, then we evade what lies in our own heart. The Church Fathers label such evasion as presumption. According to Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, “One who presumes himself to be without passions will never be cleansed from the passions.”

Here is the heart of our Lord’s teaching which is to be found in Saint Luke’s Gospel: the way to change our hearts from evil to good. The great Healer of the passions prescribes turning inward, toward the condition of our own heart. There we find the source of our disorder, and no longer presume to lead the blind while we are blind and falling into the ditch (vs. 39).

The Lord Jesus commands, “First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly” (vs. 42). Our foremost need is repentance, which is the primary cure for the presumption that we are without passions, the remedy for spiritual blindness.

God, our gracious Father, sent His Son to call us to repentance. It is the precondition for seeing and hearing the Gospel (Mk 1:15). The Lord Jesus states forthrightly, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Lk 13:3). According to Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, “Repentance . . . has been commanded . . . by God Himself [and] . . . is essentially and logically necessary for the heart.”

What holds us back from repentance? The obstacle lies in our presumption that we do not need to repent. Submit to the Lord Jesus, listen to Him, heed His admonitions, and we shall not fall into the mad belief that we know better than He does.

“A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher” (vs. 6:40). Let us root our lives in His, “for a good tree does not bear bad fruit” (vs. 43). From Christ alone can we draw true life.

O Lord, be ever in me to the increase of virtue, and the keeping of Thy commandments. – Pre-communion Prayer of Saint Basil the Great

October 8 - Wednesday of the Twentieth Week after Pentecost
Luke 6:46-7:1

Submit to Survive: Luke 6:46-7:1, especially vss. 47-48: *“Whoever comes to Me, and hears My sayings and does them, I will show you whom he is like: He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock.”* In the Lord Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:17-49), He commands all who come to Him (vs. 47) to love their enemies, do good to those who hate them (vs. 27), bless those who curse them, and pray for those who abuse them (vs. 28).

Next, He even more stringently requires the disciple to endure physical assaults against person and property (vs. 29), give and lend freely (vs. 30), be merciful to all (vs. 36), refrain from judging or condemning, and forgive others (vs. 37). His expectations of us are huge!

Christ’s demands reveal the true nature of discipleship as an uncompromising commitment to godliness. I, for one, confess that I have evaded the pure, holy, and godly life that Christ our God outlines in His lengthy sermon. I avoid being told how to behave, evading the struggle that a godly life requires and, sadly, refusing Jesus Christ as the bedrock of my life. I believe that these failures apply to a great many of us.

Is the Lord then speaking casually? Surely not, for He presses us to examine our hearts and minds, asking “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” (vs. 46). The demon of this age insidiously promotes us to assert ourselves. We find this satanic message at school, on the job, and in the media. Springing from the evil spirit of individualism, liberation, self-reliance, and self-expression, it urges us to declare the right to choose in every facet of our lives. Tragically, such glamorous falsehoods confuse, deceive, and actually enlist many of us among the faithful.

The ideology of individualism first encourages us to question all authority. Then, when this insidious, radical independence becomes fixed in our personality, it creates an inner resistance to submitting to anyone who would direct our behavior and decisions. When such an ideology is accepted by Christians, it corrodes our willingness to obey the tough, saving commandments of God. We start to question the very idea of lordship, and our duty to obey Christ is unthinkingly ignored.

Independence partners with laziness to further impede our salvation, for the commands of the Lord are not easily fulfilled. What Christ asks – to love those who abuse or hate us, to “turn the other cheek” (vs. 29) – requires our deliberate, focused effort in situation after situation. Likewise, generosity with our material wealth for the relief of others may cost us the pleasures of comfort and self-indulgence (vss. 24-25).

To be an obedient disciple and servant of Christ requires us to dig deep and struggle hard (vs. 48). Otherwise, we are like the son who said, “Yes, sir,” but then did not go out into the field to labor (Mt 21:30).

Let us carefully consider our reasons for refusing our Lord and giving lip service to Him. The so-called “self-reliant Christian” refuses to trust Christ the Rock (1 Cor 10:4), but the Lord Jesus counters this error when He says, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6).

Addressing the parable in Luke 6:48, Blessed Theophylact reminds us why we must be anchored in Christ: “When the flood of persecution or temptation arises, the tempter, whether demon or man, will beat against [the heart truly united to Christ] like a stream, and will not be able to shake it” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, p. 79). Christ our God alone is our eternal and sure survival.

O Lord, grant me, I beseech Thee, Thy divine helping grace, and endow me with patience and strength to endure tribulations and grow in submission to Thy will. – Based on a Theophany hymn

October 9 – Thursday of the Twentieth Week after Pentecost
Luke 7:17-30

Becoming a Forerunner: Luke 7:17-30, especially vs. 20: “*John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’*” The Orthodox Church calls Saint John, who baptized Jesus, by the title Forerunner, for we recognize John’s crucial role in preparing men and women for the coming of Christ. Today’s Gospel reveals three means by which Saint John carries out this mission. He centers his life on Christ, he directs others to Christ, and he encourages people to discover for themselves whether or not Jesus is the Christ, or Messiah.

Through these actions Saint John models for us, the faithful, how we may serve the Lord. as forerunners. Laboring by God’s grace, we may play a role in preparing nonbelievers, inquirers, and catechumens to “remove far from them their former delusion” and become filled “with the faith, hope and love” that come to us from God in Christ.

First and foremost, the Forerunner defines his entire life solely in terms of his relationship to the Lord Jesus. Even as a babe in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, he leaped for joy at the voice of the Theotokos who, at that moment, was carrying the Incarnate Christ (vs. 1:41). Later, during his ministry of baptism for repentance in the waters of the Jordan River, John is asked, “Who are you? He confessed, ‘I am not the Christ. . . . I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord’” (Jn 1:19-20, 23).

The Forerunner seeks to prepare people for the One who will come after him and baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk 3:16). However, when the Lord Jesus actually comes to be baptized at Saint John’s hands, the Forerunner “tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by You.’” He only agrees to our Lord’s request in order “to fulfill all righteousness” (Mt 3:14-15), acting respectfully so as not to be seen as greater than Christ (Jn 3:30).

Now, in this passage from Luke, we see the Forerunner persisting in his Christ-centered life. When his disciples express concern about the Lord Jesus’ ministry, Saint John sends two of them to the Lord so that they might witness that Jesus is the Christ (Lk 7:17-19).

The Forerunner encourages these men to ask Jesus, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?” (vs. 20). Saint John does not resort to persuasion to convince his disciples, but rather tells them to search out the truth for themselves, based on Jesus’ own actions and words (vs. 19).

We, too, should encourage others to investigate Christ Jesus for themselves. We need not sell Christ to the world as if He were a commodity. Faithful forerunners understand that knowing the Lord Jesus and His teaching firsthand is more powerful than any human testimony, so they plant questions and invite exploration.

Finally, the Forerunner encourages men to observe our Lord carefully to determine if He is indeed the One (vs. 20). The Lord amply demonstrates the truth about Himself (vs. 21). Many people come into our churches; some eventually join themselves to Christ because they discover that He is present here. If we get ourselves out of the way, we allow the Lord to heal others’ blindness and enliven their lame, feeble lives and languishing spirits (vs. 22).

Let us become true forerunners! We start by developing Saint John’s habit of referring every aspect of our life Christ (vs. 19) who dwells in us (Jn 6:56). May our hearts leap for joy at the presence of the Lord (Ps 94:2). May nothing in our lives divert any seeker from Christ our God, but rather lead all to encounter Him.

Shine through us, O Light of all, that all men everywhere may see Thee and give glory, praise, and worship to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. – Prayer for Catechumens

October 10 - Friday of the Twentieth Week after Pentecost
Luke 7:31-35

Wisdom's Children – Vindication: Luke 7:31-35, especially vs. 35: *“But wisdom is justified by all her children.”* The Lord Jesus' assertion at the end of this reading provides a window into a series of Gospel selections that start today and continue through Tuesday of the twenty-first week after Pentecost. Two preliminary issues need to be explored at the outset: first, who is wisdom, and second, who are the children of wisdom?

The Orthodox Church identifies wisdom with the Lord Jesus Himself. The famous church of Hagia Sophia – “Holy Wisdom” – in Constantinople was built as the first among temples honoring Christ our God. According to Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, the Lord Jesus “holds His royal dignity, and shares the Father's seat, being God and Wisdom and Power, as hath been said; reigning together with the Father, and creating all things for the Father, yet lacking nothing in the dignity of godhead, and knowing Him that hath begotten Him, even as He is known of Him that hath begotten” (“Fourth Catechetical Lecture,” *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 7, p. 21).

The Apostle Paul expresses the truth that Christ Jesus is “the power of God, and the wisdom of God” in 1 Corinthians 1:24. The conviction that Christ is Holy Wisdom clarifies our reading of Scripture, especially the Old Testament. It is the pre-incarnate Christ, the Wisdom of God, who illumines by the power of the Holy Spirit those preparing the garments of the High Priest Aaron (Ex 28:3). Holy Wisdom likewise fills King Solomon with such understanding that he is fearsome to his subjects (3 Kgs 3:27). The Prophet David understands that Wisdom enables the tongue of the righteous to “speak of judgment” (Ps 36:31). As the creative Wisdom of God, Christ made the heavens and the earth (Ps 135:5-6).

The fourth-century controversy over Christ's essence stemmed, in part, from Arius' interpretation of Proverbs 8, in which Wisdom says, “The Lord created me in the beginning of His ways for His works” (vs. 23). Arius insisted that the passage indicates Christ to be a creature of God, albeit supreme among God's creatures. He used this reading of Proverbs to attack the divinity of Christ: “He established me in the beginning before time, before He made the earth. . . . He begot me” (Prv 8:23, 25).

Finally, at the Ecumenical Council called by Constantine in AD 325, the Church proclaimed in the Nicene Creed that Christ is “of one essence with the Father.” Arianism was repudiated after years of struggle. Since that time the Orthodox Church has omitted verses 22-31 of Proverbs 8 from the cycle of readings during Great Lent. Rightly understood, however, the passage provides an excellent description of Christ as God the Word, “by whom all things were made.”

Another question remains: who are wisdom's children? According to Blessed Theophylact, these children are all “those who have accepted the words of both John and Jesus” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, p. 79). This is what the Lord Jesus teaches when “He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, ‘Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother’” (Mk 3:34-35).

We understand that the children of Wisdom refers to that great cloud of witnesses, including the Theotokos, the saints, and every member of the Church (Heb 12:1), who did and are now doing the will of God. The uncreated light of eternal Wisdom shines through them, so that “by their fruits you will know them” (Mt 7:20). Let us stand among His children like a good tree and bear good fruit (see Mt 7:17).

Verily, O Savior, Thou art Wisdom and Truth and hath appeared and lighted those who lie in darkness and the shadow of death; for Thou hast revealed Light unapproachable. – Verse for the Feast of Theophany

October 11 - Saturday of the Twentieth Week after Pentecost
Luke 5:27-32

Wisdom's Children, continued – Tax Collectors and Sinners: *Luke 5:27-32, especially vs. 32*: “*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.*” Wisdom’s children, we have seen, are those who strive to keep the words of the Lord Jesus (Mk 3:34-35). Since the Lord is wise, the obedient disciple is joined to a “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1), which includes everyone who knows and loves the Savior, manifesting the depth of the riches of His wisdom (see Rom 11:33).

Levi, also called Matthew, was such a man, for when the Lord calls him away from his lucrative and rapacious tax-collecting business, he obeys. “He left all, rose up, and followed Him” (Lk 5:28). Levi’s example highlights the key facet of our obedience to the Lord Jesus: it entails repentance. To obey Him is to repent, which is ever the hallmark of Wisdom’s children.

Let us not miss what is at stake in such repentance, for Levi changes his occupation, his morals, his way of life, and his eternal destiny when he answers the Lord’s call. In the original Greek, the word “repentance” appears as *metanoia*. Literally, this word means “to change the nous or deep center of the heart.” Repentance is thus to reform the inner core of ourselves.

In English, the root of the word repentance is “penitence.” However, repentance in Christ is not merely a sorrowful act of personal recognition – a matter of hanging our heads in grief. Sorrow is only a first and minor part of the change.

Let us carefully how Levi’s life changes when he follows our Lord. First, Levi “left all” (vs. 28). We should not assume, from this statement, that he suddenly abandons everything. Yes, he arises from his usual place at the tax office and becomes a disciple, training full-time under the Lord Jesus. However, he first holds a great feast for the Lord Jesus with his fellow tax-collectors at his home (vs. 29).

Levi did not leave at once but began withdrawing, bit by bit, from his former life. First he left his occupation, then his home, and finally even his native land. Holy Tradition records that as Saint Matthew he preached in Parthia (Iran) and Ethiopia. By becoming a disciple, he gave up much. God, however, replaced these losses with the inestimable riches of His Kingdom and a victor’s crown!

We too have answered the call of Christ, the Wisdom of God. We began dropping our former values to follow Wisdom more fully. Much of this “leaving” required by true repentance is actually interior. We may let go of relationships, jobs, places, and even thoughts – it is an ongoing inward process.

Saint Paul says of himself, “When I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Cor 13:11). The process takes time. Tragically, for some of us followers, the point may come when the cost of letting go seems too great. May this never happen to us, so that we never go away sorrowfully (Mt 19:22). We must not hold too tightly to things of this world, for the Wisdom of God is calling. He is too valuable ever to lose!

Levi discovered that when Wisdom confronts a person, a fork appears in the road of life. Indeed, in Christ, we are free to choose our direction. Wisdom faithfully points out the right way, free from error, for us to follow at each milestone. The “old man” (Eph 4:22) in us often longs to follow the old deceitful path of desires and indulgence, but our task is to follow where Wisdom leads, always!

Levi invites his fellow tax collectors to dine with Wisdom, so that He might heal them as well. Many around us are sick, but some are ready to risk change to gain genuine health. Let us invite them into our banquet halls where the Wisdom of God is found: the Divine Liturgy.

Grant, O Lord, that we may complete the remaining time of our life in repentance. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

October 12 - Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 7:11-16

Glory to the Lifegiver: Luke 7:11-16, especially vs. 16: *“Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying . . . ‘God has visited His people.’”* No matter what our culture and religion, all of us must face mortality, the universal human reality. As the Prophet Job writes, “For mortal man born of woman is short-lived and full of wrath. He falls like a flower that blooms, and like a shadow, he does not continue” (Job 14:1-2).

Today’s Gospel concerns a meeting between Christ and a dead man being taken to his grave. The Lord approaches the man’s mother as she travels with the funeral procession. Her circumstances are most poignant, for she is a widow. Bereft of her only son and all source of livelihood, sadness permeates her. Then Christ appears and changes everything.

Of this scene, Saint Cyril of Alexandria says, “But there meets him Christ, the Life and Resurrection, for He is the destroyer of death and of corruption; He it is ‘in whom we live and move and have our being’ (see Acts 17:28); He it is who has restored the nature of man to that which it originally was; and has set free our death-fraught flesh from the bonds of death” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 121).

This meeting disrupts the inevitability of death, for Life comes with compassion and triumphs over death. He gives us cause to glorify Him as Lifegiver. Being Jews, the people of Nain respond to the astounding turn of events in an appropriately Jewish manner: they perceive the Lord Jesus to be a great prophet through whom God has “visited His people” (Lk 7:16).

Traditionally, most Jews did not believe in the immortality of the soul. Undoubtedly, some at Nain believed in a general resurrection (Jn 11:24), but most shared the opinion of the son of Korah: “I am counted with them that go down to the pit; I am become as a man without help, free among the dead, like the bodies of the slain that sleep in the grave, whom Thou rememberest no more, and they are cut off from Thy hand” (Ps 87:4-5).

In other cultures that believe in the immortality of the soul, an awareness persists that physical end of life is not the entire story. In Asia, the great sages and practitioners of Buddhism and Hinduism believe that each soul travels through a succession of physical bodies, one after another, until it reaches full, irreversible enlightenment, leaving behind the illusory cycle of birth and death. Islam holds that righteous and worthy Muslims go to an eternal paradise after death. Shamanistic believers, including the followers of Shinto in Japan and many of the world’s tribal peoples, hold similar beliefs concerning the endurance of the soul beyond death.

Christ, the Wisdom of God, frees us from this longing for a life after death and also from its alternative: resignation in the face of final extinction. During the verses of Sunday Orthros, we recite the angel’s astonishing words to the Myrrhbearing women: “In that He is God, He is risen from the grave.”

Today’s reading likewise discloses this reality. “In that He is God,” He naturally resuscitates a corpse, for He has mastery over death and life. The revelation of a general resurrection that the Jews received from God is correct, but incomplete. Christ Jesus is “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.” And what is more, in Him “all shall be made alive” (1 Cor 15:20, 22). Let us give glory to the Lifegiver Himself, seeking mercy from Him (Jn 5:26).

O Giver of life, glory to Thy Resurrection! Glory to Thy Kingdom! Glory to Thy providence, O Thou Who alone art the lover of mankind. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

October 13 - Monday of the Twenty-first Week after Pentecost
Luke 7:36-50

Wisdom's Children, continued – Love Much: Luke 7:36-50, especially vs. 47: *“Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.”* Wisdom's children keep the Lord Jesus' word, regardless of whether He is asking us to repent, to “leave all,” or even to accept death in His name. We keep the Lord's word because Wisdom meets us in the deepest chamber of our hearts – the deep center of our being. Wisdom completes us, not by edicts or alien commands, but by affirming us as new creations (2 Cor 5:17). Naturally, Wisdom's children turn to Him and seize the sure and steadfast hope He offers (Heb 6:19).

The present passage from Saint Luke reveals the Lord's power to renew our lives. A sinful woman disregards propriety to express her love and adoration for our Lord. This child of Wisdom is meeting Love Himself. She encounters a kind of love she has never experienced, nor even imagined, from the One who cleanses and heals His children wordlessly. As Wisdom and Love, He renews her heart. In return, she loves Him much. He yearns to do the same for us!

We can best appreciate this woman's heart by reviewing the ministry of Christ our God prior to the event. When He begins His public ministry, “news of Him went out through all the surrounding region” (Lk 4:14). Everyone glorified Him because He spoke to the poor, the disenfranchised, the brokenhearted, and those in bondage (vs. 18).

The sinful woman who comes that evening to Simon's house identifies with those who have been welcomed by Jesus (vs. 7:37). She has sold herself; disenfranchised and brokenhearted, she finds herself trapped, as a result of her choices, on the dark margins of society.

She knows that this man (vs. 39) serves the poor, the alienated, the grieving, and the enslaved. These broken ones, especially, glorify Him because He cares for them! His authoritative power is wrapped in forgiveness and loving compassion (vs. 4:35, 41; 5:5-7, 13, 20; 6:10; 7:13-14).

This broken woman acts in sure hope and love – and attains release from her sins. She never says a word to Him. Indeed, if we peruse the record of the evangelist, we discover that few who experience His love have much to say. The liberated demoniac remains silent (vs. 4:35). Simon Peter's mother-in-law simply arises and serves Him (vs. 39). Peter merely blurts out, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (vs. 5:8). Matthew follows Him without a word (vs. 28). Even the widow who receives her son from the dead does not speak (vs. 7:15)!

The love of God often renders us speechless, even as He empowers us. The wordless actions of the woman in this Gospel embody love. She worships Christ, pouring out her grief over her estranged existence and kissing the feet of the Man she perceives to be the God of love, compassion, and forgiveness.

The sinful woman anoints the blessed feet that draw near to her life, and as a result she stands among the world's greatest theologians. She understands the icon with the precision of the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Her Christology recognizes His two natures, God and Man. She teaches us how to worship God through her adoration of the living icon of Christ, the Wisdom of God.

Why does she respond to Him in this way? Very simply, He raises her from the dead! Another sinner, the Prophet David, says, “A heart that is broken and humbled God will not despise” (Ps 50:17). We echo his words in the liturgy as we receive Love Himself, praying before the Little Entrance: “Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ our God.”

Thou, O Christ, dost bring us into being and raise us up again when we fall away. – From the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

October 14 - Tuesday of the Twenty-first Week after Pentecost
Luke 8:1-3

Wisdom's Children, continued – Freed from Evil Spirits: Luke 8:1-3, especially vs. 2: “*And certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities – Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons. . . .*” According to Blessed Theophylact, “Just as there are seven spirits of virtue, so also there are seven spirits of wickedness. There is . . . the spirit of the fear of God, and its opposite, the spirit of irreverence, which does not fear God. There is the spirit of understanding, and its opposite, the spirit of incomprehension. . . . Unless these seven spirits of wickedness are cast out of the soul, one cannot follow Christ. First Satan must be cast out; only then can Christ dwell within” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, p. 83).

When Theophylact speaks of seven virtues or gifts of the Holy Spirit, he is referring to the list first given to us by the Prophet Isaiah (Is 11:2-3). If we wish for Christ to dwell within us, we must not overlook the evil and impure spirits “which hideth and . . . operateth through the prompting of the devil” (baptismal prayer of exorcism). These demons constantly try to snare and defile us.

Yet we give thanks to God, for we are partakers of Christ in sure hope of “the power of the Holy Spirit, in the unity of . . . Christ: that we might be no more children of the body, but children of Christ’s Kingdom.” Let us never make the mistake, however, of supposing that because we have received the seal of the Holy Spirit, Satan is no longer aiming his machinations at our souls and pursuing their destruction. We must stay alert against him!

To this end, we wisely consider Theophylact’s lists as windows into our spiritual state. We hold fast to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, without minimizing the seven dreadful demonic spirits that would pull us back into the bondage of the enemy, if we let down our guard: foolishness, deceit, apathy, incomprehension, delusion, perversion, and irreverence.

To preserve “the earnest of the Spirit pure and undefiled unto the dread Day of Christ,” as the Church prays during the mystery of chrismation, we must commit ourselves to the path of Mary Magdalene. She stays with the Lord. He frees everyone who clings to Him from the evil spirits and infirmities that prevent us from receiving healing from the Wisdom of God, our Lord Jesus Christ.

In our contemporary secular, neo-pagan culture, life is presented in distorted, non-spiritual terms. Masses of people live without reference to their Creator, proud of what they “achieve.” These unfortunate souls have no gratitude to God, nor do they acknowledge their dependence on Him. Worse, they have no inkling of their enslavement to impure spirits.

Satan’s greatest achievement in the present age has been to convince many people that there are no evil spirits. Let us refuse to fall prey to glittering techniques that promise us success through slick forms of enlightenment. Wisdom’s children “have received the heavenly Spirit.”

Our Orthodox faith provides spiritual strength for living, for breaking the domination of the dark forces that human power cannot control. The impact of the demons and foul spirits can be observed all around us. Hearts and minds are surrendered to fate as if it were a fact of life.

Let us be children of Wisdom, like Mary Magdalene, trusting God and thanking Him every day for our existence. We are children of God and thus free from dead materialism and deceit of those who deny the existence of evil powers. We draw from Christ the power to cast out the demonic spirits. Christ gives His Spirit to the Church to illumine our former darkness, to keep us wise and free, and save our souls.

Be merciful to me, O Master of all, that my soul not behold the lurid glance of the cunning demons who would drag me to the depths of hell, but protect me and be my Defender. – Saint Theophan the Recluse

October 15 - Wednesday of the Twenty-first Week after Pentecost
Luke 8:22-25

The Lord Who Shows Us Light – Two Natures: Luke 8:22-25, especially vs. 25: *“And they were afraid, and marveled, saying to one another, ‘Who can this be?’”* For the next three days, our Gospel readings concern the struggle to comprehend the nature and Person of our Lord Jesus. The question asked by Jesus’ disciples (“Who can this be?”) invites honest exploration. The Church in her dogmas provides clear answers, as do Jesus’ actions as disclosed in the two subsequent Gospel passages in this series.

Let us begin by considering Christ Jesus’ dual nature as God and man. The Fourth Ecumenical Council, held in Chalcedon in AD 451, declared that “our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same [Person], that He is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood . . . unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, distinctly.”

In this Gospel passage, Saint Luke points to the duality of natures in the single Person of the Lord. Christ Jesus reveals His human nature when “as they sailed He fell asleep” (vs. 23) as a weary man. On the other hand, He dramatically reveals His divinity when He is roused from sleep! He “rebuked the wind and the raging of the water. And they ceased, and there was a calm” (vs. 24).

The man knew fatigue, while the Incarnate God was entirely in command of nature. Christ is He “who establisheth the earth” and “the abyss like a garment,” at whose “rebuke they will flee” and at whose voice “shall they be afraid” (Ps 103:6-8).

Why did the Lord Jesus become a man, assuming the physical, psychological, and spiritual limits of our human nature from the Theotokos? He desired to join our nature to the Godhead, for we were created for such a union from the beginning, before the fall of Adam. We see evidence of Christ’s humanity present in all four Gospels, whether He is resting at Jacob’s well in Samaria (Jn 4:6), or sleeping on a pillow in the stern of the boat (Mk 4:38), lulled by the waves.

The Church Fathers stress the importance of the divine economy of God – the Word fully assuming human nature. The Nicene Creed states: “For us and for our salvation [He] came down from heaven, and was Incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” His descent from heaven, the overshadowing of the Virgin Mary by the Spirit, and her cooperation in bearing and rearing Jesus to manhood, were all “for our salvation.”

According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, “If the divine Logos of God the Father became son of man and man so that He might make men gods and the sons of God, let us believe that we shall reach the realm where Christ Himself now is; for He is the head of the whole body (Col 1:18), and endowed with our humanity has gone to the Father as forerunner on our behalf. God will stand ‘in the congregation of the gods’ (Ps 81:1)” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 143).

We acknowledge “Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God . . . by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him” (Acts 2:22) as our immortal God. We find in our Scripture reading a verbal icon of this truth in the rebuking of the wind and raging water. It illustrates what the Creed states dogmatically.

Christ is “Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten not made; of one essence with the Father.” Yes, God in the flesh, with only a word, manages the elements, as we read in the Psalms: “Wonderful are the surgings of the sea, wonderful on high is the Lord. Thy testimonies are made very sure” (Ps 92:6-7).

What shall we render to Thee, O Christ, for that Thou didst appear on earth as a man for our sake? Wherefore, O God before the ages, have mercy upon us. – Vespers of the Nativity

October 16 - Thursday of the Twenty-first Week after Pentecost
Luke 9:7-11

The Lord Who Shows Us Light, continued – Visible to Faith: Luke 9:7-11, especially vs. 7: “Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was done by Him; and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had risen from the dead.” When the Lord Jesus stills the storm, the disciples ask, “Who can this be?” (vs. 8:25). When Herod hears of “all that was done” by Christ (vs. 9:7), he wonders, “Who is this of whom I hear such things?” (vs. 9).

For Herod, Jesus remains an enigma until He is arraigned before him. Then, at long last, Herod has an opportunity to satisfy his curiosity, for “he had desired for a long time to see Him, because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him” (vs. 23:8).

According to Blessed Theophylact the disciples, unlike Herod, “were not asking a question to which they did not know the answer. Rather, they exclaimed it in wonderment and astonishment.” Christ, unknown in other ages, is “revealed by the Spirit to His holy Apostles and Prophets” (Eph 3:5), by a “dispensation of the grace of God” (vs. 2). The Lord Jesus shows us light, and to faith He remains visible.

Herod wants to see Jesus because he has heard about Him. While rumor and hearsay may evoke our curiosity and desire to learn about someone, questions about the Lord Jesus lead only to speculation, which is Herod’s experience. Herod’s guilt very likely led him to theorize that the Lord Jesus might be the same John whom he had beheaded at the behest of his wife (Lk 9:7; Mk 6:14-29).

Herod also wonders if Jesus might be the Prophet Elijah, forerunner of the Messiah (Lk 9:8; Mal 4:5). Or, perhaps He may be the prophet whose coming Moses had foretold (Lk 9:8; Dt 18:15-18). Content with his speculation, Herod enjoys life in his palace.

Contrast his story with the case of a fireman who became curious about Christianity after fighting a fire at a local church. He was puzzled how God could permit a fire in one of His temples. He began to attend services and eventually found God. Like the Apostle Nathanael, the fireman moved beyond speculation when he met the Lord Jesus for himself (Jn. 1:46,47). The kind of sight which faith produces comes through our encounter with the living Lord.

Saint Luke and the other evangelists take us a step further when they teach that such an encounter, while necessary, is not in itself what leads us to see “the true Light.” The Lord Jesus reveals that seeing God belongs only to “the pure in heart” (Mt 5:8) – those whose egos are so broken through purification, repentance, and poverty that God can reveal Himself to them.

Herod the Great, the father of the speculative tetrarch Herod, had like his son a special desire to see Jesus. However, his reasons were far more sinister (Mt 2:8, 16). He sought the Lord diligently, but he did not see Him (Mt 2:20).

We meet a wealthy official in the Roman treasury who is determined to see Jesus when He visits Jericho. This man exerts great personal energy. As a result, he meets the Lord in a way that neither Herod the Great nor his son were privileged to do (Lk 19:3-6). Why does Zacchaeus see Christ while the two monarchs do not? His meeting with the Lord reflects the attitude of his heart, for the Lord discloses Himself to open hearts that seek Him in faith.

Many people seek an encounter with the Lord, yet with wrong motives. Early in the Lord’s ministry, a crowd “tried to keep Him from leaving them” (vs. 4:42), but failed. The Lord readily commits Himself to the earnest in heart. May we join those multitudes who seek the Lord, receive His teaching, and find the healing for which they long (vs. 9:11).

Help me to seek Thee with my whole heart, O Lord, that I may be found by Thee.

October 17 - Friday of the Twenty-first Week after Pentecost
Luke 9:12-18

The God Who Shows Us Light, continued – Hospitality: Luke 9:12-18, especially vs. 17-18: “So they all ate and were filled, and. . . . He asked [the disciples], saying, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’” In 1997 a seven-ton cargo vessel collided with the Mir space station. There followed a terrifying hiss as the life-sustaining atmosphere rushed away into the vacuum of space. It took twenty desperate minutes to isolate the damage.

The solar panels were left useless, while steering, orientation, human waste disposal systems, and air-conditioning were shut down. The main systems for generating oxygen and removing carbon dioxide were inoperative. Solar batteries ran at fifty percent of their normal power. It weeks to restore the station’s life support systems, at which point Russian Commander Tsibliyev offered thanks to God for the crew’s preservation.

The experience of the Mir’s Russian-American crew reveals how dependent we are on the operation of a myriad of delicate factors to sustain life on the space station we call Earth. For example, this planet rotates at 1,000 mph; if it turned at 100 mph instead, the days and nights would alternately burn and freeze. Vegetation would die as surface temperatures reached 12,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

Again, if the tilt of the Earth’s axis were altered, ocean vapors would move north and south to create great continents of ice. Should the distance from the moon be changed by a fraction, the tides would inundate every land surface twice a day. Or, if the ocean were just a few feet deeper, it would absorb all oxygen and carbon dioxide until no vegetable life could survive. If our atmosphere were thinner, meteors would bombard the surface, setting fires instead of burning out as shooting stars.

Day after day, as we are filled with an “abundance of the fruits of the Earth,” our God and Savior continues to ask, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” (vs. 18). Each time we recite the Nicene Creed, we affirm that “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. . . . And in one Lord Jesus Christ . . . of one essence with the Father, by whom all things were made.”

We assert that God the Father made the universe and declare that Jesus Christ made all things. Which one brought us “from non-existence into being?” The answer found in the Creed, and in today’s reading, is that the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is Lord and giver of life. We worship and glorify all three as one God, indivisible from before time and forever.

He who calls upon His disciples to “give them something to eat” (vs. 13) and “make[s] them sit down in groups of fifty” (vs. 14) is the same Living God who provides us with the fruits of the Earth every day. Along with the Church Fathers, we find ourselves astonished by the message of hospitality in today’s Gospel.

According to Blessed Theophylact, “There were twelve baskets of pieces remaining so that we might learn how much hospitality is able to accomplish, and that whatever we have is multiplied when we offer it to those in need” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, p. 96). Adds Saint Cyril of Alexandria, “And what do we infer from this? A plain assurance that hospitality receives a rich recompense from God” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 65).

Why is hospitality incumbent on every Christian? Hospitality flows to us from our provident Creator, who daily sustains us all. These gifts are to be shared with others, as He so richly shares with us.

O Lord Jesus Christ our God, who didst bless the five loaves and feed the five thousand, and hast multiplied Thine earthly good things for us in all the world, glory to Thee. – Service of Holy Unction

October 18 - Saturday of the Twenty-first Week after Pentecost
Luke 6:1-10

Supreme Mercy: Luke 6:1-10, especially vs. 9: *“Then Jesus said to them, ‘I will ask you one thing: Is it lawful on the Sabbath days to do good, or to do evil, to save life, or to destroy?’”* The gulf between the Old and New Covenants is most evident in the conflicts that arose between the Lord Jesus and the Pharisees concerning the Sabbath observance. The Lord’s insistence on ministering and teaching on the Sabbath prompts the Pharisees to consider “what they might do to Jesus” (vs. 11).

Saint Cyril of Alexandria challenges even those of us who allegedly live under the New Covenant. “If, therefore, the New Covenant is the second, and different from the first, there is every necessity for those who wish to live according to it, to abandon the old laws, and conform to those which will guide them into the newness of the gospel polity” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 121).

In this present passage, Christ our Lord reveals how we may fulfill His living Way in all its newness. When His disciples “plucked the heads of grain and ate them, rubbing them in their hands” on the Sabbath (vs. 1), the Pharisees accuse them of harvesting and milling. These activities run counter to Old Covenant regulations (vs. 2; Dt 5:14) that actually define them as “working.”

Christ, however, declares that this interpretation violates God’s insistence that basic human needs reign supreme (Lk 6:3-4). In support of His claim, the Lord Jesus gives an example from the time of the Prophet David’s flight from King Saul. When David comes to the city of Nob to find food, he asks Abimelech the priest, “Now if there are five loaves under your hand being ready, give them into my hand” (1 Kgs 21:4),

After David assures him that he and his men are “keeping themselves from women” and “purified,” the priest “gave him the showbread; for there were no loaves there except the bread of the Presence which had been removed from before the Lord, in order not to put hot bread in its place when it was taken away” (1 Kgs 21:6-7).

The Lord Jesus knows the commandment of the Law. The twelve loaves set before the Lord are “for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat these things in a holy place; for this is most holy to him from the things sacrificed to the Lord” (Lv 24:9). When Christ mentions David eating these loaves even though he was not a priest of Aaron, He elevates David’s use to a higher moral plane: “You shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your poor brother; but you shall surely open your hands to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need” (Dt 15:7-8). Charity and human need outrank ceremonial obedience.

Our Lord declares mercy to be the superior authority, for “the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath” (Lk 6:5). The Sabbath exists for mankind, not men for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27). As God, Christ’s authority is higher than any human interpretation of the Law. “He is saying, ‘how can you condemn My disciples? Moreover, I Myself, the Son of Man, am Lord of the Sabbath, since I am Creator, Maker, Master, and Lawgiver, and I have the authority to relax the laws of the Sabbath,’” explains Theophylact.

“On another Sabbath” soon after (Lk 6:6), the Lord once again finds occasion to endorse the primacy of mercy over obedience. Out of mercy He heals a man’s withered arm in a synagogue on the Sabbath.

The rabbis of the day are debating what degree of need justifies healing on the Sabbath. Some scribes concede that healing is allowed if a person’s life is in danger. The Lord Jesus brushes the debate aside in favor of the higher claims of mercy, in order “to do good” (vss. 9).

Thou art a merciful God, and lovest mankind, and unto Thee we ascribe glory. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

October 19 - Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 8:5-15

To Succumb: Luke 8:5-15, especially vs. 10: “*To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God. . . .*” The Lord Jesus’ parable in this reading is a familiar one, but there is always a danger that we will be tempted to apply the examples in the parable to others. By doing so, we externalize what our Savior says and reject “the word of God” (vs. 11), damaging ourselves.

Yes, many Christians listen to the devil (vs. 12), fall into temptation (vs. 13), and are distracted from the struggle of living for Christ, yielding nothing worthy of Him (vs. 14). But do we see ourselves in these examples? We must never take the risk of identifying only with those who hear the word of God and “bear fruit with patience” (vs. 15)! The Lord Jesus’ description of how God’s word gets lost should make us cautious, for we all fall under satanic deception, get distracted, or let ourselves become choked with life’s cares.

Self-assurance in the spiritual life is always a temptation, for to keep the word truly and bear “fruit with patience” (vs. 15) brings pain. “Entry into the kingdom for created beings inevitably entails great suffering,” says Archimandrite Sophrony. “Many decline the Father’s gift of love precisely because the utmost effort is required to assimilate it” (*On Prayer*, p. 59).

If we would prefer not to succumb, but rather to *bear fruit with patience*, then we must look deeply into our hearts. They show us how readily we heed the devil, fall in temptation, move off course, and embrace delights and distraction!

Yes, we heed the devil’s voice. This painful truth can be recognized when we accept the reality that satanic “voices” are commonly mediated through sources such as misguided friends, self-indulgent acquaintances, and the sellers of ideologies, products, or services, whose mantra is “Tell them anything, but close the deal.” Let us also include the power-hungry, who design their speeches to gain our votes and contributions. How often do we wake up to see that they have again taken “away the word out of [our] hearts” (vs. 12).

Our actual condition is far worse than an occasional slip in fulfilling our Lord’s commandments. How many times, when we attend the Divine Liturgy, do “receive the word with joy” and “believe for a while” (vs. 13), only to be confounded a short while later by some little thing and fall away as if we never knew Christ’s truth? Saint James warns us against being “a hearer of the word and not a doer . . . like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was” (Jas 1:23-24).

Let us honestly affirm that we often succumb to distractions. We are easily “choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity” (Lk 8:14). In the funeral service we sing, “I weep and I wail when I think upon death.” This is true not only of physical death, but also the bitter and shameful death of our spirit whenever we yield to any one of a thousand things that lure us away from the source of life – from Christ our Savior.

Until his dying breath, Archimandrite Sophrony fought the good fight against succumbing. “I had only to think for an instant of departing from [the Lord], to find myself plunged in murky darkness. I saw that to withdraw from Him would be death. Life lay forward only, in a hand-to-hand struggle,” he writes. “The painfulness of the effort, however, showed me that if I willingly accepted the battle, it meant that I was free” (p. 59-60).

We too can be free by taking up the fight to hear “the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience” (vs. 15).

O Lord Jesus Christ, who didst give Thyself as a ransom to death, and cause life incorruptible to flow from Thy pierced side, turn not Thy face from us, Thine unworthy servants. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

October 20 - Monday of the Twenty-second Week after Pentecost
Luke 9:18-22

Anointed to Suffer: Luke 9:18-22, especially vs. 22: *“The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.”* When the Lord Jesus first begins teaching and healing, He reveals to His hometown synagogue at Nazareth why He was anointed with the Holy Spirit (Lk 4:16-21). As He continues to teach, heal, and perform miracles, He recruits and trains a cadre of disciples (vss. 4:31-9:17). He steadily reveals His nature and the scope of God’s kingdom.

Now, in a subsequent stage of our Lord’s ministry, His forthcoming Passion overshadows His work and teaching. In this penultimate phase of Christ’s sojourn among us, the place of suffering inherent in the Lord Jesus’ anointing is revealed: “The Son of Man must suffer many things and . . . be killed” (vs. 9:22).

As the Gospel narrative nears its climax, we see the Lord Jesus alone in prayer (vs. 18). Then He begins drawing the “wise fishermen” into closer union with the Godhead by disclosing the reality of the sufferings to be undertaken by this Jesus whom they have chosen to follow.

As the disciples join themselves to Christ, He puts forward the key to the kingdom of God and to His identity – who He really is. He leads them toward a full understanding of His divine Person by gently asking, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” (vs. 18).

The disciples review the current theories, many of which continue to circulate today, concerning Christ (vs. 19). They say, “He is a great teacher. He is a prophet. He is a reformer, preaching non-violence.” But now He asks those who choose to unite themselves to Him for their own opinion: “Who do you say that I am?” (vs. 20).

It is time to leave theory behind. Here is Christ, presenting Himself to us face to face. Who is He? Peter offers this answer: “The Christ of God” (vs. 20). This title literally means “anointed one.” It is another way of referring to the Messiah – the special, anointed king who, according to the prophets, was to come in time. God led His ancient people to understand that their last and greatest king would usher God’s kingdom into history.

Peter’s answer applies truths already revealed to the patriarchs, seers, and prophets of Israel. The Messiah would be anointed by the Spirit of God to complete God’s work of salvation among the nations. During their time with the Lord, the disciples are gaining the evidence necessary to discern that Jesus is indeed this Messiah, the Anointed of God.

Christ, however, immediately suppresses Peter’s correct, yet limited, statement (vs. 21). He goes on instead to disclose a deeper dimension of His anointing: “The Son of Man must suffer many things” (vs. 22). The light of glory must blaze forth from the Cross and the Tomb before His kingdom of life can shine upon all mankind.

The Messiah brings this kingdom of life to the world through His suffering and voluntary death. By death He tramples upon death, that great tyrant over mankind. When He is raised from the dead, He bestows life not only on those already in the tombs but also on us, who are likewise destined for the grave.

Why does the Lord Jesus suppress the truth that He is the Anointed One of God? The time is not yet come. According to Saint John Chrysostom, only “when the things which offend are taken out of the way; and the Cross is accomplished . . . and when there is nothing more to interrupt . . . [will] the faith of the people in Him . . . be engraven pure and immovable in the mind of the hearers” (“Homily 54 on Saint Matthew,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 334).

May we, like those first disciples, embrace Him who was anointed to suffer, die, and defeat death for our salvation!

O Christ, consent to have mercy upon us and forgive our sins by Thy Resurrection. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

October 21 - Tuesday of the Twenty-second Week after Pentecost
Luke 9:23-27

Following Christ: Saint Luke 9:23-27, especially vs. 23: “Then He said to them, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.’ As He discloses Himself to be the Christ, the Lord places His Passion and Resurrection within His divinity (vs. 22). His messiahship is a precious gem set in a golden setting – divinity in the midst of rejection, self-surrender, humiliation, and ultimately the defeat of death. Such, He declares, will likewise be the cost for all of us who choose to follow Him.

Because we are conscious of the self, we realize the pending obliteration of this life and the destruction that one day will come upon our being. Our self-consciousness ushers in an awareness of death, which in turn draws us toward the voices of the world encouraging us to pursue various “necessities” that will stave off this loss of self and “save” us from death. They delude us! We need a Savior to rescue us from the death of our souls, for death of the body is one thing, but death of the soul is everything.

Indeed, we may be tempted to invest our energy into being lovable and garnering the esteem of others, or feeling pleasure and enjoying the comforts of food and pleasant surroundings. Our deceitful culture assures us we can have it our way, exercise our rights, maintain our privileges, and uphold our status so that we may retain access to every conveniences. We teach children to share their toys, but we applaud adults who defend their rights and their “turf.”

Christ our God teaches us the reality of what it means to save one’s life. If we plunge into satisfying all the desires the world promotes, we may live outwardly while we are dying from the inside out (see vs. 24). We will become dead to Him who is our source of life. For this reason He begs us consider “what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world” and yet loses his self (vs. 25)?

We the faithful have chosen the way of the Lord, trusting that His words are true. The choice He holds up is for us to lose our “life,” in and through sacrifice and service “for My sake,” in every relationship (vs. 24). This is why we pray, “Thy kingdom come” (Mt 6:10). Through a thousand choices, we follow the Lord’s will and take up our “cross daily and follow” Him (Lk 9:23). Our true life lies in a pattern of consistent decisions in opposition to the desires of the self: “Not My will, but Yours, be done” (vs. 22:42).

Denial of self in favor of Christ’s will is necessary, for we know that following His way yields genuine blessing. Of course, this path must be learned and mastered bit by bit through practice, failure, and repeated efforts carried out with the support and loving tutelage of the Holy Spirit.

Attraction to the way of the Lord is a noble calling. His self-giving path of the Cross turns out to be truly glorious. Yet in the so-called real world we see others disdaining self-denial, take advantage of givers and labeling them as weak. They may ask us, “Why do you let others run roughshod over you?” Let us always remember that our Lord reveals the Cross as life (vs. 6:29).

When torn between following Him and standing up for our rights, let us refuse to be ashamed of Him! We understand that blessing comes to those who embrace the struggle on behalf of Christ. Our Savior shares our life in order to “release those who through fear of death [are] . . . subject to bondage” (Heb 2:15).

Thou wilt hearken unto me, O Lord my God. For I said . . . when my feet were shaken, those men spake boastful words against me. . . . And my sorrow is continually before me. . . . Forsake me not, O Lord. . . .” – Psalm 37:15-21

October 22 - Wednesday of the Twenty-second Week after Pentecost
Luke 9:44-50

To Exalt Lowliness: Luke 9:44-50, especially vs. 48: *“For he who is least among you all will be great.”* In the Magnificat, the Virgin Mary says of the reign of her Son: “He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly” (Lk 1:52). We know that God expects us to take our place with the lowly in His kingdom, for the Lord affirms it in the verse quoted above. The only difference between His statement and Mary’s is the context in which they are spoken. The Virgin speaks prophetically, anticipating the kingdom of God, while the Lord’s statement is intended to convert us to do the work of His kingdom. We are to humbly cast off our inertia, refuse to behave as if we are superior to others, and abandon our need to be in control.

Let us examine what the Lord says concerning each of these requirements. We know that the Lord is anointed by the Father so that He may actualize the kingdom of life in this world through His suffering and saving Passion (see vss. 9:18-27). As human beings, however, we are filled with an insidious lethargy. We sluggishly resist the Lord’s call for many reasons, including ignorance, sinful darkness, and the captivating cares and pleasures of this present existence (vs. 8:14). As a result we seek to avoid every kind of suffering and effort (vs. 9:45).

Nevertheless, our Savior speaks of suffering as the way of the kingdom. When the disciples hear the Lord’s prediction of His Passion (vs. 44), their present comforts make them “afraid to ask Him about this saying” (vs. 45). The Lord, however, implores us to “let these words sink down into your ears” (vs. 44). He wishes to awaken us from the inertia in which we are immersed.

When we consciously united ourselves to Jesus Christ at baptism, we also united ourselves to His Passion and Resurrection (Rom 6:5). May the Lord strengthen our hearts to trample down the languor that impedes us from spiritual exertion! Our inertia is a symptom of our true problem – our need for deeper conversion to lowliness.

Note the spiritual impoverishment of the disciples as described in today’s reading. They hear the prophecy of Christ’s Passion, yet fear prevents them from inquiring about such an unpleasant prospect. Instead, they dispute among themselves “as to which of them would be greatest” (Lk 9:46). How often do we foolishly concern ourselves with our importance in this world!

The Prophet Asaph speaks of this tendency in Psalm 72: “For I was jealous of the transgressors, when I beheld the peace of sinners. For they make no sign of refusal in the time of their death, and they have steadfastness in the time of their scourging. They are not in such toils as other men” (vss. 3-5). The desire for recognition leads only to spiritual death: “Surely, for their crafty dealings Thou hast appointed evils for them; Thou hast cast them down in their exaltation” (vs. 17).

Finally, we always want things to go our way. That desire obstructs our willingness to struggle for the kingdom of God. Instead, we are ready to give orders to others, direct parish activities, and determine our affairs in our own way. The Lord must force his own disciples to cease from preventing a man who is not one of them from doing the work of His kingdom (Lk 9:50)!

We need to acquire the consciousness of a tiny, dependent child. Lord, give us the heart of a child that we may love all that is simple and lowly on this earth. Let us resolve to give control over our lives to the Lord Jesus, thanking Him for the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

I, who was robed with the glory of immortality, have become like one dead. O Thou, mantled in compassion, who didst create me from the earth, recall, and save me from bondage. – Cheesefare Sunday Orthros

October 23 – Thursday of the Twenty-second Week after Pentecost
Luke 9:49-56

Anointed to Save: Luke 9:49-56, especially vs. 56: “*For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them.*” With these words, our Savior continues to reveal the purpose of His incarnation and His anointing by the Spirit. The Apostle Paul further attests to God’s steadfast desire that “all men . . . be saved and . . . come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).

The Gospel of Saint Luke makes our Savior’s goal very clear, for salvation is His central aim throughout the ages. In the present passage we see Christ’s determination to “go to Jerusalem,” for “the time had come for Him to be received up” (vs. 51) – that is, to save all men. The Lord Jesus never deviates from this aim even when some reject Him (vs. 53). He continuously calls us to join Him in the work of saving mankind (vss. 54-56).

Saint Luke uses several devices to underscore God’s intention to save all men. He subtly emphasizes the point by using the phrase *egeneto de*, meaning “it came to pass” or “so it was” (see vss. 1:8, 9:51). This phrase appears fifty-five times in Luke’s Gospel, but on only ten other occasions in the rest of the New Testament.

The significance of this phrase can be traced to the Old Testament. It prefaces the account of the deliverance of God’s people from slavery in Egypt (Ex 2:11). It reappears when they enter the Promised Land (Jos 1:1). This same phrase initiates the story of King David, the progenitor of Christ (1 Kgs 16:6).

Its most notable usage is in Isaiah’s prophecy of the birth of the Lord Jesus to the Theotokos (Is 7:1). It is no coincidence, then, that Saint Luke employs this phrase at the start of the events leading to the Lord Jesus’ birth (Lk 1:8). The Biblical authors who preceded him use this expression to announce God’s saving intervention in human affairs.

A similar but often overlooked phrase found in today’s passage is “when the time had come” (vs. 9:51). Here Saint Luke uses this expression to highlight God’s determination to carry out His will. In Greek the literal meaning is “to be fulfilled.”

God’s saving will also is registered in the statement, “He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem” (vs. 51). Using three different means, the evangelist signals God’s intention to save our fallen race. Eternal life is God’s purpose.

Further events recorded in this passage demonstrate that we cannot turn God aside from His desire to save us. The Lord Jesus sends James and John as an advance team to prepare for His visit to a Samaritan village (vs. 52). When the Samaritans learn that Jesus is coming on His way to Jerusalem, they refuse to receive this Jewish teacher (vs. 53).

Ironically, Christ is on a journey to accomplish the salvation of all men, yet these Samaritans will not receive Him. We see His Passion foreshadowed by this rejection, and yet His will to save does not vary. James and John suggest that He destroy such people, but Christ’s heart remains fixed on everyone’s salvation (vs. 56). We remain free to refuse God, but His gift is still available for those who wish to accept it.

Lastly, we learn from today’s reading that we sinners cannot help others receive salvation until we receive God’s grace ourselves. James and John explode in outrage at the Samaritans (vss. 54), proposing that the Lord call down fire as Elijah does on the companies of men who try to arrest him (2 Kgs 1:10-12). Their error reminds us that even Christ’s original disciples could not help in the salvation of others until they had experienced forgiveness and restoration.

Put me not away, O God, but accept me repentant and save me, O Lover of mankind. –
Bridegroom Orthros

October 24 - Friday of the Twenty-second Week after Pentecost
Luke 10:1-15

Anointed to Send: Luke 10:1-15, especially vs. 2: *“Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”* This week’s meditations focus on the purposes of God as revealed through the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Lord was anointed and came into human history to restore the kingdom of God to this world so that we might be saved from eternal death. Now, in the present passage, the Lord identifies ten essential attitudes required of those He sends into the world to labor for the salvation of others (Mt 28:19-20).

Cooperation: The Lord works through the interdependent life of His Body, the Church. For our actions to be blessed, they must occur by His appointment and be carried out in collaboration with others: “The Lord appointed . . . and sent them two by two” (Lk 10:1).

Expectancy: Christ sends the Seventy, as He sends us, “before His face into every city and place” (vs. 1). Christ’s disciples assume that the Lord is present in every situation of life. Let us shape our acts and words to prepare the way for Him.

Prayerfulness: We see Lord praying (vs. 9:18); now He also commands each disciple to “pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (vs. 10:2). Prayer sustains the Church and every Christian.

Defenselessness: The Lord sends His servants into the world “as lambs among wolves” (vs. 3). We are to adopt a non-predatory attitude, becoming vulnerable to others and embracing God’s blessings along with persecution, reviling, and rejection (Mt 5:10-12).

Urgency: In sending out the Seventy, the Lord commands them not to rely upon material support alone, nor to waste time on polite formalities and greetings along the way (Lk 10:4). His message to us is, “Get on with the task, for the work is urgent.”

Peace: A peaceful attitude toward all men is fundamental to the Christian life. We greet in peace and expect peace, and so we find the “sons of peace” (vs. 5-6).

Trust: The Lord informs us that some people will cooperate with His goals while some will not. We are not to be diverted from our primary task by pursuing material needs. Rather, we are to trust God for the necessary relationships and resources (vss. 7-8).

Healing: The Lord knows that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Christ fashions the Church as a community that extends the healing of the kingdom of God into the world (Lk 10:9). We understand how much others need the same healing, love, forgiveness, and faith that we have received. We invite those around us to partake in the good things of God’s reign.

Respect: In verses 6-12, we observe the Lord’s overarching assumption that some people will receive the Gospel and some will not. The Church, as the body of the faithful in Christ, does not use pressure, persuasion, or slick promotion to advance the faith. We are rather to respect the freedom of others to say yes or no, and let the Spirit address their hearts.

Constancy: Although we respect others’ freedom to say no, we are to waste no time trying to win over those who plainly reject the Faith. We are told to “wipe off the dust” and move on (vs. 11). At the same time we must remain constant in virtue so that people may apprehend “that the kingdom of God has come near” them. Eternal judgment is the Lord’s prerogative, not ours (vss. 12-15).

Preserve us, O God, in Thy Holy Orthodox Church, in holiness all the days of our lives, that many may see Thine everlasting light and receive the heavenly Spirit of the true faith.

October 25 – Saturday of the Twenty-second Week after Pentecost
Luke 7:1-10

Great Faith: Luke 7:1-10, especially vs. 9: *“I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!”* The Lord Jesus discerns great faith in a foreign military officer – a faith greater than any he has encountered among the people of Israel, who are the designated guardians of the Law given to Moses. So outstanding is this centurion’s trust that Christ deliberately turns to the crowd following Him and declares the man to be a model of “great” faith.

As we reflect on the centurion’s faith, we understand that such deep trust does not stem from an isolated grasping after opportunity. His trust flows from qualities deep within him. We learn that he is a caring man (vss. 2, 5, 7) of thoroughgoing humility (vs. 6). He is comfortable working within the structures of authority (vs. 8). Out of these long-established virtues, great faith emerges.

The centurion’s character is marked by a genuine concern for others. The man’s slave is called “dear” by him (vs. 2). In the original Greek, this adjective conveys honor and respect. The centurion expresses more than mere concern for a valuable servant: he cares for the slave as a person worthy in his own right.

We further note that when the centurion sends a delegation of Jewish elders, they come “pleading” rather than merely delivering a request (vs. 3). There is no implication of duress forcing the elders to intercede. They know this Roman soldier as a man who genuinely supports them, and they are moved to do more than the bare minimum for someone in authority over them.

The elders “begged” the Lord, Jew to Jew (vs. 4), because “he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue” (vs. 5). The officer’s love bridges the separation between Jew and Gentile, and the Jews love him in return. When we trust in the God who acts with compassion and love, it prompts us to show true concern for others.

The centurion demonstrates his humility in two ways. First, he makes his request to the Jews’ famous holy man indirectly, not in person. Then, as the Lord Jesus nears his home, it dawns on him that Christ might actually consider entering his house. Out of respect for Jewish tradition, the centurion hastens to avoid any suggestion that someone of Jesus’ stature would even consider entering a Gentile’s home and thus defile Himself (vs. 6).

Prompted by humility, he sends friends to intervene and avert an occasion of ritual defilement for the Lord. He naturally assumes that he is unworthy to approach Jesus in person (vs. 7). Humility of such depth is a precondition of true faith in God. The centurion evinces such great trust because he harbors no expectations of God. He does not believe God owes him something in return for his kindness toward others, nor because he graciously provided a religious facility for the community (vs. 5).

Finally, the centurion is at home with authority, a trait which creates a firm foundation for trust and faith. He is accustomed to taking and giving orders (vs. 8). Thus he can appreciate the importance of superior-subordinate relationships. He displays no hint of informality or casualness in his attitude toward God.

Those attitudes characterize people of weak faith – or those who presume upon God and consider Him to be just like us (Ps 49:22). People of great faith understand that all authority derives from God. They respect authority when they exercise command over others just as they function well under another’s command.

Teach us to treat all that comes to us throughout the days of this present life with peace of soul, and with the firm conviction that Thy will governs all. – Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow

October 26 – Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 16:19-31

Two Mortals: Luke 16:19-31, especially vs. 22: “So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried.” When God appears to Job after the prophet’s protracted sufferings, the Lord asks him, “Who is this that hides counsel from Me, and holds words in his heart, and thinks to conceal them from Me? Gird your waist like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me” (Job 38:2-3). Job confesses, “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I depreciate myself, and I waste away. I regard myself as dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6).

In his funeral service, Saint John of Damascus echoes the dialogue between God to Job. “Where is the display of transient mortals? . . . All are dust, all are ashes, all are shadows. . . . Who then is the king or the warrior, the rich man or the needy, the upright or the sinner?”

The Lord Jesus chooses to die with us as a man, yet as God He gives life to rich men and beggars alike. In today’s Gospel, Christ confronts us with the story of two fellow mortals, one rich and one poor. When these two men die, the beggar is “carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom” (Lk 16:22), while the rich man is simply buried. “All are dust, all are ashes, all are shadows.” As mortals, let us consider our Lord’s opinion of these two men.

Naturally, the Lord compares the wealth and easy life of the rich man with Lazarus’ mendicant lifestyle of begging for crumbs (vss. 19-21). However, there are other facets to the contrast the Lord draws between the two.

As Saint Cyril of Alexandria observes, “The rich man, being uncompassionate, was nameless in God’s presence.” (“Homily 111,” *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 453). Yet the beggar, Lazarus, is mentioned by name.

The rich man has every means and capacity to clothe himself in purple and fine linen and to “fare sumptuously” every day, not just on special occasions (vs. 19). By contrast, Lazarus lives in abject poverty. Too debilitated to come to the rich man’s door, he has to be “laid at his gate” (vs. 20). While the one eats, the other yearns “to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table” (vs. 21). Lazarus is too weak to drive off the dogs that “came and licked his sores” (vs. 21) – he simply accepts them.

What does the Lord Jesus say about the outcome of their lives? One was “in torments in Hades” (vss. 23), while the other “was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom” (vs. 22). Death is not merely the great leveler; it brings us to a moment of eternal realization when, in the divine economy, the import of this life is requited. Both torments and comfort (vs. 25) are among the outcomes that await us at the end of life.

Both men in their lifetimes had “Moses and the prophets” and were able to “hear them” (vs. 29). The eternal gulf (vs. 26) between these two mortals is solely of their own making. On the one hand we see a deadening lack of concern for the plight of others. On the other, we observe patient endurance – a silent unwillingness to protest or rail against the rich man, a conviction that everything comes to us from the hand of God.

“The end of each one is at the doors, whether he be old or young,” observes Saint John Chrysostom, “and it is not possible for men after they have gone hence, either to buy oil any more, or to obtain pardon by prayers, even though he that entreats be Abraham, Noah, Job, or Daniel” (“Homily 20 on Saint Matthew’s Gospel,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 146).

Surely nothing promises us “memory eternal” more certainly than compassion and care for the poor while we are alive! What reveals the divine image in us more clearly than charity and the quiet acceptance of whatever life brings?

Save me, O good Father, for I return to Thee, crying, I have sinned against Thee. – Orthros, Sunday of the Prodigal Son

October 27 – Monday of the Twenty-third Week after Pentecost
Luke 10:22-24

The Gift of Revelation: Luke 10:22-24, especially vs. 22: *“No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.”* Reflecting on this verse, Saint Cyril of Alexandria says, “Blessed are our eyes, and those of all who love Him. We have heard His ineffable teaching; He has given us the knowledge of God the Father; He has shown Him to us in His own nature. The things that were by Moses were but types and symbols; Christ has revealed the truth to us. He has taught us that not by blood and smoke, but rather by spiritual sacrifices, we must honor Him who is incorporeal and immaterial, and above all understanding” (“Homily 67,” *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 286).

Furthermore, Christ is God’s gift of revelation to us: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Cry aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! . . . The Lord, the King of Israel, is in your midst” (Zep 3:14-15)! God discloses to us what “many prophets and kings have desired to see” (Lk 10:24).

Even in the midst of bewildering events, we know beforehand how things will end. We are not confounded by the inexplicable tragedies that befall the world. Imagine the agony of the faithful who survived the fall of Constantinople, who saw Hagia Sophia turned into a mosque! How did they receive that horror with equanimity?

What agony it must have been to see the great Orthodox Christian civilization at Constantinople swept away! The tidal advance of the Ottoman Empire finally overcame the walls of Byzantium. Is the Orthodox faith then a delusion? What does God intend for us, then and now?

To all these questions the Church replies with these triumphal words from the Divine Liturgy: “We have seen the true light . . . we have found the true faith, worshiping the undivided Trinity: for He hath saved us.” The Christ-loving people of Rus gave the same answer when Kiev was pillaged and burned by the Tatars. This was what the Orthodox declared when the Bolsheviks became the masters of the Kremlin and murdered the God-ordained Czar. This is our answer to nuclear holocaust, war, and terrorism.

Orthodox Christians are able to face any and every event with confidence in what the Lords intends. Our Lord puts into words His pure gift of revelation that He addresses to all such queries: “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father” (vs. 22). We know God’s ultimate conclusion: “And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him” (Rv 22:3).

God is in charge during every upheaval in our lives. Whatever happens, God permits it – although much happens that He neither causes nor welcomes. What we do know is that God can use every event to complete His plan for the world, for “neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

God’s gift of revelation enables us to “understand all mysteries” (1 Cor 13:2). Through the blessing of the eyes He gives to us in Scripture, we see all things in Christ. The prophets were blessed to enjoy glimpses of the future. We have received the ultimate revelation and may be confident of how history ends.

Although there will be surprises before the great and final Day, we give thanks to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “for all things of which we know and of which we know not, and for all the benefits bestowed upon us” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

Shine in our hearts, O Good Lord, true Sun of Righteousness, and save us!

October 28 – Tuesday of the Twenty-third Week after Pentecost
Luke 11:1-10

Persistent Prayer – Following the Pattern: Luke 11:1-10, especially vs. 8: *“I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs.”* When a disciple asks Jesus to teach his followers to pray, the Lord offers a two-part answer. He first provides us with a model prayer (vss. 2-4). Then He offers two instructive parables with comments (vss. 5-13) urging us to persist in prayer.

“It was possible that those who had obtained from Him this precious and saving lesson, might sometimes make indeed their supplications according to the pattern given them, but would do so wearily and lazily,” says Saint Cyril of Alexandria in his comments on this passage.

“In order, therefore, that we not experience this . . . He teaches us that we must diligently continue the practice, and, in the form of parable, plainly shows that weariness in prayer is to our loss, while patience therein is greatly to our profit” (“Homily 78,” *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 321).

We will consider in turn each of the two parts of the Lord’s message concerning prayer. Today we begin by examining the pattern: the beloved Lord’s Prayer.

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.” This petition expresses the dignity and manner of living that we are seeking. When we freely unite ourselves to Christ, a door into Heaven opens, assuring us full standing as God’s children.

Although we are children born of earth, slaves to sin, and dependent beings, Christ teaches us to call God “our Father.” Let us call on this name regularly and seek to *hallow* His name by yielding to His will, living to please Him, and following His direction humbly and promptly. By doing so we shall find ourselves moving toward the sonship He offers. Let us try!

“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth.” When we pray for the kingdom of God to *come*, we are asking for the blessing of the Savior’s perfect reign within ourselves and those around us. It means doing the will of God as it is done in heaven by the angels.

Praying in this way requires us to constantly purify ourselves from the impulses of the flesh, resisting anger, indolence, and the other passions. We strive instead to control ourselves, to live the Beatitudes and labor for the kingdom of God our Father.

“Give us day by day our daily bread.” In the original Greek, the word for “daily” is *epiousion*, which means “urgently needed” or “super-essential.” Truly, our bodies need only bread to sustain us. Often we want more, but the Lord warns us, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on” (Mt 6:25).

So let us pray only for what is needful, in order to free ourselves from our slavery to the stomach. What is more, let us persist in praying for what is *super-essential*: to partake worthily of the Bread of Heaven, the immaculate and precious Body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us.” This petition infuses all our relationships with reconciliation. By forgiving and accepting forgiveness, we bind ourselves to one another in genuine love. Our souls are no longer deformed by conflicts of will and desire, for we are committed to choose only what our Father wills.

“And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.” God does not tempt us, but we understand that He will indeed test our resolve. We recognize our inclination toward sin and thus depend on God to help us resist a host of temptations. This petition is a wonderful exhortation, for it reminds us to seek God’s protection whenever the evil one tries to ensnare us with his suggestions and machinations.

O Lord, fulfill the desires and petitions of Thy servants as is most expedient for us.

October 29 - Wednesday of the Twenty-third Week after Pentecost
Luke 11:9-13

Persisting in Prayer, continued: Luke 11:9-13, especially vs. 13: *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”* We all struggle to persist in prayer. According to Saint Makarios of Egypt, “A veil of darkness – the fire of the worldly spirit – surrounds the heart preventing . . . the soul from praying, believing, and loving the Lord as it desires to do” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 300).

Mercifully, Christ aids us in our labors at prayer. Our King and God presents us with three types of action in verse 9: ask, seek, knock. We understand these actions as commands to be obeyed. Furthermore, these required actions must be ongoing or continuous – asking, seeking knocking – for this approach emphasizes persistence. We are to keep praying or, as Saint Paul says, “pray without ceasing” (I Thes 5:17).

The Lord Jesus directs us to continuous prayer because He knows that quick, easy results, obtained conveniently and effortlessly, only tempt us. We of course prefer to ask once and receive immediately, at our convenience. Our self-indulgence prefers methods that involve no struggle. If we receive easily, however, we are likely to remain flabby in our relationship with God.

There are other darker, evasive desires that keep us from remaining constant in prayer. We like to keep God at bay, involving Him only when we want something. For this reason we avoid investment! Easily answered prayers are another way to avoid God’s will and His purposes.

The Lord Jesus commands prayer because He knows all the hindrances facing those who pray. He begins by telling us to “ask.” Our prayers may return to us empty, even when we make the effort of asking. We may wonder whether God actually hears or cares. Our Lord flatly rejects such thoughts (see Lk 10:11-13).

What, then, causes this delay in obtaining what we ask? Some obvious possibilities include asking for wrong things, asking contrary to His will, or asking for that which is not good for us. Sometimes we ask without a willingness to invest ourselves. We are impatient, not wanting to wait for God. However, God wills for us to gain patience.

If we are obedient and persist in asking, then God may be preparing us for His second command: to “seek.” God waits for us to search His silence. He is inviting us to look for Him in Holy Scripture. He presses us to look at our motives and test our willingness to be involved. He trains us to listen when we ask, and to “wait on the Lord” (Ps 26:16).

Finally, we must “knock.” We stand outside the heavenly door, like the man at the door of his neighbor (Lk 11:5-8). We ask, seek, and then discover that God is shaking us, waking us to invest ourselves in that for which we pray. We may consider adding ascetic works to prayer: fasting, prostrations, almsgiving. We stand before the icons, confess our sins, seek godly counsel, be attentive at worship, and request the intercession of the Theotokos and all the saints.

God delays so that we stop treating Him like a butler at our beck and call. Our greatest need is to reframe our notion of prayer! The Lord desires that we learn prayer as a labor, an arduous journey into the mystery of His Person, and a discovery of our sinfulness and need. Prayer heals our relationship with God and becomes unending growth. Christ encourages us to discover how to pray, to do God’s will, and to persevere, for He is infinitely good and cares deeply for us (vs. 13).

Direct my will, teach me to pray, and pray Thou Thyself in me, O good One. – Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow

October 30 – Thursday of the Twenty-third Week after Pentecost
Luke 11:14-23

Spiritual Warfare – Conflict of Powers: Luke 11:14-23, especially vs. 20: “*But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.*” The Evangelist Luke depicts the Lord Jesus casting out a demon (vs. 14) who is “mute” (*kophos*). The original Greek word can mean deaf, dumb, or both. According to Blessed Theophylact, the man being exorcised is “mute in both tongue and ear.” As a deaf-mute, this man becomes a symbol of “our human nature . . . possessed by demons and . . . not [able to] endure to hear the words of God.”

Surely our own condition was no different before “the Lord came and drove out the demons . . . of passion, and caused us to speak and to proclaim the truth.” Theophylact reminds us that “while the activity of the demons operates, even though we appear to be speaking, we are not” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, p. 127).

The messages which assault us through the channels, airwaves, and electronic media of contemporary life appear to be human speech, but in reality they are demonic chatter and lies. When we consider the distortion of truth that passes as communication in the modern world, we understand that we are experiencing a constant assault on our hearts and souls.

In the last few decades, the plain meaning of words has often been turned inside out. Barbarous lies are set forth as truth. We are told that fetuses are not human beings, that homosexual activity is a healthy form of self-expression. The roles of men and women are culturally defined, we hear, and thus all gender differences should be eliminated. Personal ethics are unimportant so long as we achieve effective social, political, or economic outcomes.

Such a barrage of lies is, in fact, what Saint Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain calls “spiritual warfare.” In this war human hearts and minds are conquered and enslaved by our spiritual enemies. This demonic campaign against our souls involves a choice: Will we become Satan’s willing accomplices and hapless victims, or active combatants for God’s truth? The questions are worthy.

Those who say that the Lord Jesus cast out the “kophotic” demon “by Beelzebub” nearly have it right (vs. 15). They accept the reality that Satan and his minions are powerful and capable of rendering people *kophos* – physically, psychologically, or spiritually. However, they are wrong concerning the source of Christ’s power. In truth His healing constitutes a divine counter-attack against dominion of evil.

The others who “tested” Christ “sought from Him a sign from heaven” (vs. 16), for they understand that His exorcism involves power. Whereas the afflicted man previously had been unable to speak or hear, he finds his voice after the Lord touches him.

Note how the Lord Jesus makes his comments conditional: “*If Satan also is divided. . . . And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub. . . . But if I cast out demons with the finger of God*” (vss. 18-20). He affirms that Satan and his minions do exist; they hold real, yet limited, power. Many charlatans still dazzle us with signs and wonders today: “For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Mt 24:24).

We are caught up in a war of spiritual powers. Thanks be to God for the victories that our Lord Jesus wins for us. Our holy faith teaches us that “he who overcomes the world, [is] he that believes that Jesus is the Son of God” (1 Jn 5:5). We who believe in the Lord may also overcome Satan, “because He that is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4). We know the “finger of God” (Lk 11:20) has touched us if we are able to hear and speak the truth in the midst of this age’s cold and deadly darkness.

Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance, granting to Thy People victory. . . . –Hymn of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

October 31 - Friday of the Twenty-third Week after Pentecost
Luke 11:23-26

Spiritual Warfare, continued – The Holy Spirit: Luke 11:23-26, especially vs. 24: “When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’” After the Lord Jesus Christ was baptized, “being filled with the Holy Spirit, [He] returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil” (vss. 4:1-2). Satan came to probe the Lord, slyly looking for possible weaknesses. His tests including an offer of bread to satisfy His hunger (vss. 2-4), control over all the world’s kingdoms (vss. 5-8), and an abuse of powers to avoid pain and death (vss. 9-12).

Such probing by the enemy is a common tactic in combat. War planners use small forays to gather information and determine how and where best to launch full-scale attacks. Satan found no soft places in the Lord. Therefore, “when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time” (vs. 4:13).

The war with Satan, we must remember, is continuous. The devil also tests and assesses the faithful after we are baptized into Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit. We should expect to be tested regularly by the enemy. Woe to us if we imagine we are immune to such temptations!

How do we prepare to resist this probing of our souls and our resolve? In the present passage, the Lord directs us to seek the Holy Spirit as our defender. It is He who drives out the unclean spirits, unites us to the Lord, and sustains us in the life in Christ.

The Lord Jesus describes an occasion “when an unclean spirit goes out of a man” (vs. 11:24). Why do the demons depart? The devil’s legions are expelled when we are born anew of water and the Spirit (Jn 3:5), for according to Saint Diadochos of Photiki, “Unless a greater power comes and overthrows the despoiler, what he has taken captive will never be set free” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 260).

For this reason, every baptism is prefaced by the prayers of exorcism which begin with the words, “Expel . . . every evil and impure spirit which hideth and maketh its lair in [the] heart.” The Spirit is the divine exorcist, driving out impure spirits, renewing the image of God within us, and helping us to purify our hearts and live in closer union with Christ.

The Lord Jesus says of our struggle to stay close to Him. “He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters” (Lk 11:23). The battle for each one of us is to remain intimately united to Christ our Savior and Lord.

The Lord’s presence within us is the only effective counter-force by which we defeat Satan, for He tells us, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). As Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos says, “The salvation of the soul is not stripping off of something but the putting on of Christ. It is . . . chiefly communion and union with Christ” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 156).

How do we remain united to Him? When we are baptized, the unclean spirits leave us (Lk 11:24). We are swept clean and put in order (vs. 25). However, rest assured, the wicked spirits will always return to test us. If, Saint Diadochos warns, the Spirit is grieved by our sins, He withdraws and leaves us “without the light of spiritual knowledge, dark and full of gloom.”

Thankfully, when the Holy Spirit is active within us, we have “the oil in the lamps of the virgins . . . the grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God . . . which changes souls from . . . corruption to incorruption, from spiritual death to spiritual life, from darkness to light” (Moore, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov: A Spiritual Biography*, p. 174).

O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, abide in us and save our souls. – Pentecost verse