

September 1 - Tuesday of Fourteenth Week after Pentecost
2 Corinthians 12:20-13:2

Forsaking: 2 Corinthians 12:20-13:2, especially vs. 2: *“I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare. . . .”* The Apostle Paul warns the Christians at Corinth that he is prepared to take disciplinary action if necessary. His message is clear: they are to forsake every thought and action opposed to the life in Christ (vss. 20-21).

Although he is armed with the authority of the Lord, Saint Paul does not wish to endure the pain of correcting those whom he has catechized. Their behavior is unseemly, however, and the wrongdoers know better (vs. 21)! His warnings are merciful, as if coming from the Lord.

Since we live in a neo-pagan environment – a bawdy, pleasure-centered milieu very similar to first-century Corinth – we would do well to heed Saint Paul’s rebukes. Our present culture differs little from that of Saint Paul’s day: all we have to do is compare the sins the apostle describes with what pours out of the media.

The apostle urges us to forsake such sins, purify ourselves, and determine to struggle against the pleasure-loving culture that prevails on every side. Otherwise, we may find ourselves worthy of firm, corrective pastoral action.

The apostle mentions two sorts of sins: those divisive offenses that beset us as we quarrel or disdain others (vs. 20), and uncleanness – the impurities of heart, soul, and body that arise from sensual temptations (vs. 21). In the former case we become *contentious*, *jealous*, and given to angry *outbursts* (vs. 20). An example of the latter is when we condone or indulge in prurient thoughts such as: “What’s the matter with watching that program?” “What’s wrong with a little off-color joke?” “I don’t think it is the end of the world if someone has an affair.”

Saint Paul explains to the faithful at Corinth, “I wrote to you . . . not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But . . . not to keep company with anyone named a brother” who does these things (1 Cor 5:9-11).

This world, lacking spiritual moorings, drifts away from the beauty of salvation. Let us be quick to remember that “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9)! Instead, we monitor our inner life to avoid engaging even with thoughts about the sins Saint Paul deplors.

Before the Lord, and by His grace, we can refuse the moral disorder that endangered the faithful at Corinth (vs. 20). If we are attracted to sin, let it become a call to repentance! We start with monitoring and self-examination. We then turn to godly sorrow and sacramental confession, begging help from the Holy Spirit. We avoid tempting occasions, quiet our random thoughts, and express heartfelt gratitude to God who snatched us “out of the fire” (Amos 4:11).

As determined Christians, we must take up this process as our personal cross, since the surest way of living is to die with Christ “walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). May we settle on our choices and never allow ourselves to drift into the tide of immorality rising on every side.

Only in this way do we avoid the painful discipline of which the apostle warns. Our priests guard their flock and forgive those who stray, but they also correct us when we persist in sin. Like Saint Paul, they “live with [Christ] by the power of God” (2 Cor 13:4). Let us forsake sin and never provoke our pastors.

Let my beseechings be wholly acceptable to Thee, that my transgressions not prevent the descent of the Holy Spirit, and that I may ever cry to Thee without condemnation, O Lord. – Great Blessing of the Waters

September 2 - Wednesday of the Fourteenth Week after Pentecost
2 Corinthians 13:3-14

Is Christ in You? 2 Corinthians 13:3-14, especially vss. 3, 5: *“Since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me. . . . Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?”* False apostles came to Corinth undermining Saint Paul’s character and ministry (2 Cor 11:5-12). They successfully eroded the confidence of the members of the congregation and forced him to counter their challenge, for the gospel and salvation are at stake.

The question Paul poses in verse 5 is an appropriate challenge for us as Christians. Just as Saint Paul urges the Corinthians to “examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith” (vs. 5), let us likewise “test [ourselves]” (vs. 5).

The issue of “Christ within” is the litmus test of our genuine commitment to Christ. Saint Paul would have us examine whether Christ is truly within us. Is an inner voice motivating me in Christ? Let us test this voice to see if it belongs to the Lord who was crucified in weakness, but now lives by the power of God. Who is the governing Truth in my life?

Through the Holy Spirit, Christ Jesus indwells those who receives the mystery of holy baptism, for He shares His life, death, and Resurrection with His own. As the baptismal hymn declares, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27).

Yet Archimandrite Sophrony adds, “Unless the connection is a personal one, there can be no conception of sin, no love between man and God, no existential knowledge of God; and all is swallowed up by death, obliterated in a very literal non-existence” (*On Prayer*, p. 187).

This possibility of death and obliteration leads Saint Paul to another arresting question: “Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you are disqualified” (2 Cor 13:5). When the voice speaking within us is Christ our God, we hear Him when sin looms. He confronts our rationalizations; He does not accept excuses. Christ is gentle but firm, truthful yet ready to forgive. Do we hear this Christ, our God and King?

Christ Jesus our Lord confronts our misguided thoughts and action as no one else can, or will. He moves past our defenses and calls us to acknowledge our sin and cry out, “Have mercy upon me and save me.”

Christ within directs us to the sacrament of confession. As we are kneeling before Him, He fills us with loving assurance of forgiveness. He awakens us by loving us in spite of our sin: “Bring me into the house of wine; set love before me” (SS 2:4). He encourages our relationship with Him to grow and blossom: “My beloved is mine, and I am his, he who shepherds his flock among the lilies” (vs. 2:16).

Are we able to say “I know Him”? Such knowledge needs testing, “for Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14) to deceive many. Christ always comes to us in weakness so as never to force Himself on us. Domination is not the way of divine love.

Christ lets love and truth alone draw us to purity of life. Only a living Lord is able to raise us from the death of sin to newness of life (Rom 6:6-8). Christ’s love offers the greatest power to enable and support. He enables us to yield ourselves “as instruments of righteousness to God,” never permitting “sin to have dominion over” us (vss. 13-14).

Let us pray for Christ to live within us; let Him become the governing truth in our life; let Him shape our every decision and choice with His light and love. If we find His presence growing dim, then we are to light the lamp, sweep the house, and search diligently until we have found the coin of His presence again (Lk 15:8).

O Jesus Christ, enlighten my mind with the imperishable light of knowledge of Thee. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

September 3 - Thursday of the Fourteenth Week after Pentecost
Galatians 1:1-10, 20-2:5

Unyielding Orthodoxy: Galatians 1:1-10, 20-2:5, especially vs. 2:5: *“We did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.”* A popular historical revision of our day declares that in apostolic times the Church was a perfect, Spirit-filled, saintly community. Advocates of such a fantasy are deluded! Yet some have even invented churches which claim to offer “pure” practices and teachings inspired by their followers’ imaginations, thereby aiding and abetting schism and heresy in an attempt to reproduce the perfect church.

Orthodox Christians familiar with Holy Tradition – that living heritage which has survived countless twists and turns through time – are repelled by such misinterpretations of fact. If any doubt arises in our minds, if we are tempted to indulge in idealistic, unsubstantiated dreaming, we need only read today’s passage from Galatians. The conflict it reveals shatters any fanciful embellishment of Church history. We must never fear to stand firm in our Orthodoxy and to hold to the true light, the true faith, and the true worship of the undivided Trinity.

Two important historical facts emerge from the present passage. We learn that in the first century “false brethren” (vs. 2:4) already troubled the churches with a perverted gospel, one divergent from the true “gospel of Christ” (vs. 1:7). Then, as now, there is only one true gospel taught by all the apostles (vss. 2:2-3).

Confronted with these false gospels, Saint Paul is unyielding. In these verses he shows us how to remain solidly established in the true faith. We are to affirm that God is the Source of every truth we hold, and that we receive our faith as a gift by divine grace through Christ. Any proposal to modify this orthodoxy is unthinkable and unacceptable, for such notions are based on mere human invention.

First and foremost, we affirm that Orthodoxy is the true faith because it is God-given; it does not come from human invention. Divine origin is the very basis of Saint Paul’s apostleship, which comes “not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (vs. 1:1). The gospel of Christ reveals our spiritual freedom by God’s “revelation” (vs. 2:2), and through “Christ Jesus” (vs. 2:4). Genuine Orthodox Christianity results from God’s actions.

We assert the divine origin of the Orthodox faith, even when it can be neither proved nor disproved by human techniques. We either trust or else we reject what the apostles handed down to us. And God continues to reveal it to human hearts, for our faith is His creation.

God is inestimably greater than the sum of all of human wisdom. We must say either yes or no to Him: either we believe in God’s word, or we do not.” Divine truth cannot be proven by human logic.

To be a Christian involves risk: it requires us to take a stand on the question of apostolic witness, as the Holy Spirit illumines our hearts. We remain unflinchingly Orthodox so long as we, like Saint Paul, receive faith as a gift of God’s grace.

The people who are attacking the Apostle Paul urge the Galatians to reject “the grace of Christ” (vs. 1:6) in favor of their own concepts. These false brethren promote circumcision as the true way, insinuating that the Apostle Paul abandoned this rite in order to win over the Gentiles and make the gospel more acceptable to them (vs. 2:3).

The apostle repeats his anathemas (vss. 1:8-9) and asks, “Do I seek to please men?” (vs. 1:10). We, too, must be prepared to reject any modification, enhancement, or accommodation of the faith for the sake of those who have gone astray. Like the apostle, we kindly but firmly oppose every pressure to “qualify” Jesus, for He is the Truth by whom we live. Amen!

O Lord, grant us to receive Thy perfect will and to be preserved in the Orthodox faith.

September 4 - Friday of the Fourteenth Week after Pentecost
Galatians 2:6-10

Favoritism and Grace: *Galatians 2:6-10, especially vs. 6:* “*God shows personal favoritism to no man. . . .*” This portion of verse 6 employs a classic Scriptural idiom rich in imagery and wisdom. In the original Greek, the passage literally reads, “God does not receive the face of a man.” These words recall the divine theophany (appearance) at the oak of Mamre, when the three angels visit the Patriarch Abraham (Gn 18:1-33). As soon Abraham sees the three young men, “he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground” (vs. 18:2).

In ancient practice, every lord, king, and great personage was expected to take hold of his prostrate subject and lift him up – thus receiving the face of his abject inferior. In such a fashion the mighty and the powerful showered favor on their subordinates, expressing good will toward those who abased themselves by bowing their faces to the ground.

Yet men of every rank must humbly approach the “God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, [who] shows no partiality” – in other words, who looks man in the face without favoritism (Dt 10:17). God administers “justice for the . . . alien, the fatherless, and the widow” (vs. 18), for “there is no partiality with God” (Rom 2:11).

This standard measures every human ruler and judge. All are sternly warned, “It is not good to admire the person of the ungodly, nor is it holy to pervert righteousness in judgment” (Prv 18:5). This is the culture of God’s people, who address the Lord Jesus with the words: “Teacher, we know that You say and teach rightly, and You do not show personal favoritism, but teach the way of God in truth” (Lk 20:21).

In this passage from Galatians, Saint Paul refers to events earlier in his apostolic career, and in particular to a time when some imagined that he showed favoritism to win the support of the original apostles for his work among the Gentiles. However, he makes clear that such was not the case: “But from those who seemed to be something – whatever they were, it makes no difference to me . . . for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me” (Gal 2:6).

In fact, those “who seemed to be something” included Saint James, the Brother of the Lord, the Apostles Peter and John (vs. 9). They welcomed Paul’s work among the Gentiles. True apostolic leaders favor persons, work, and ministries where there is clear evidence of the grace of God (vss. 8-9). This inclination to follow proof of grace should not be taken as favoritism, but as respect for the hand of God at work in men’s hearts.

As we noted above, Orthodoxy rejects any teaching that suggests God gives grace capriciously. When God “lifts up a man’s face” and favors him, it is because He knows the man’s heart, his contrition and openness. When we love God, He knows; He is aware. When our love for God grows, “we feel divine longing well up within us from the depths of our heart” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 280). According to Saint John Cassian, “The thief who received the kingdom of heaven, though not as a reward of virtue, is a true witness to the fact that salvation is ours through the grace and mercy of God” (p. 93).

God’s grace or favor toward us is known or experienced as a personal encounter. “Grace is not just a ‘gift’ of God, not just an object which God bestows on men, but a direct manifestation of the living God Himself, a personal confrontation between creature and Creator,” declares Bishop Kallistos Ware.

“When we say that the saints have been transformed or ‘deified’ by the grace of God, what we mean is that they have a direct experience of God Himself. They know God” (*The Orthodox Church*, p. 68). Blessed is the penitent whose face is lifted up by the hand of God!

May I ever remember Thy grace and live not unto myself, but unto Thee, O good Master. –
Post-communion Prayer

September 5 - Saturday of the Fourteenth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Self-Examination: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5, especially vss. 3-4: *“In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.”* The Apostle Paul raises an important issue for us when he says: “Consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (vs. 1). Do we, like Saint Paul, consider ourselves to be servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God?

If someone does not consider himself Christ’s servant, then he is free to set aside the need for self-examination. The questions we explore here are oriented to those of us who know that we are *servants*. At our baptism, we are asked, “Dost thou unite thyself unto Christ?” And if we can still assert, “I believe, O Lord, and I confess that Thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the living God who didst come into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief,” then self-examination is required of us. These two “ifs” are the watersheds of servanthood.

“Brethren, having come to see the shortness of our life and the vanity of this age, let us take care for the hour of death, leaving off the tumult of this world and the useless worldly cares,” Saint Paisius Velichkovsky says in urging Christ’s servants to undertake self-examination. “[Rather], we should even hide ourselves under the earth, mourn there over our sins while we are still alive, and live while dying for the sake of God in struggle” (*Little Russian Philokalia*, Vol. 4, 71).

Christ’s faithful servants are like navigators: we need to review how well we are “holding the course.” Are we, as stewards, managing the mysteries of God even as we claim to live in Christ? Christian life demands constant correction and self-evaluation, using the Lord’s standard of faithfulness, for “it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (vs. 2).

Since we are “to live while dying for the sake of God in struggle,” let us turn to our father-confessor for help in considering our faithfulness. He is here to help us in our struggle in Christ. As our confessor directs, let us examine ourselves!

“Every evening we must test ourselves as to how the day passed with us,” continues Saint Paisius, “and every morning we again should test ourselves as to how the night passed. And not only at some definite time but at every time and in every place and concerning everything we must give account to ourselves” (p. 81).

However, when we accept Saint Paul’s assertion that we, as stewards, are required to examine ourselves, we must take care to avoid a dangerous reef where we may easily founder and destroy ourselves. When we conduct our self-examination, let us never confuse this process with *judgment* (vss. 3-5). Thanks be to God, the apostle sharply warns against such confusion!

Judging, in the spiritual life, is the business of God alone. All judging, including spiritual judgment, concerns disposition. When an examination is conducted and all the evidence is weighed, the judge issues a disposition concerning the penitent standing before him. Such disposition details judgment; it is not the same as an on-course correction.

Ultimately, Christ will pass judgment and hand down our disposition as His stewards. This is why Saint Paul refuses to accept any human being’s judgment of his stewardship (vs. 3). Nor will he hazard judgments concerning himself, for “He who judges me is the Lord” (vs. 4). He explicitly directs us to “judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes” (vs. 5).

Our present urgent need is self-examination. As Saint Paisius says, “First, one must clean the royal house from every impurity and adorn it with every beauty, then the king may enter.”

O Lord, before Thee is all my desire, and my groaning is not hid from Thee. For in Thee have I hoped, O Lord. For I will declare mine iniquity, and I will take heed concerning my sin. – Psalm 37: 9, 15, 18

September 6 - Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
2 Corinthians 1:21-2:4

The Gift of the Holy Spirit: 2 Corinthians 1:21-2:4, especially vss. 21-22: “Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.” Every Orthodox Christian, upon reading these two verses, will make a connection with our baptism and chrismation. The first sacrament establishes us as “a member and partaker of the death and resurrection of Christ,” while the other bestows on us “the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Such references are not coincidental, for in explaining why he changed his travel plans (vss. 1:15-2:13), the Apostle Paul alludes to these initiatory mysteries to call attention to the spiritual bond between himself and the Corinthians. In particular, he speaks of his apostolic team as “fellow workers for your joy” (2 Cor 1:24).

In the mystery of holy baptism, the candidate is “established” in the Lord Jesus – and with all others who are united to Christ (vs. 21). According to Father Alexander Schmemmann, baptism offers us a “unique and totally new possibility: truly to die with Christ, truly to rise again with Him . . . [and] thus truly to unite the human to the divine in the ‘newness of life’” (*Of Water and the Spirit*, p. 58). This bonding and uniting with Christ are what it means for us to be *established* in the Lord.

The *anointing* of which the Apostle speaks in verse 21 actually refers to the anointing with “the Oil of Gladness” which precedes holy baptism. This pre-baptismal anointment is for our healing: for the restoration of the “hearing” of our heart, for the cleansing of our hands from evil, for our feet to walk in a life pleasing to God. By means of this holy oil, God “illumineth and sanctifieth.”

In verse 22, the apostle distinguishes this baptismal anointing from the anointing with holy chrism by his use of the word “also.” This “also” signals to us that God has done more, beyond establishing us in Christ. Hence, we understand that the two oils serve different sacramental purposes within the initiatory mystery.

The anointing before holy baptism is associated with our regeneration, which God carries out through our dying and rising with Christ. However, “the ‘sealing’ with holy chrism,” says Father Schmemmann, “is obviously a new act which, although prepared for and made possible by baptism, gives the liturgy of initiation a dimension so radically new that the Church always knew it to be another ‘mystery’ – a gift and a sacrament distinct from baptism. . . . [It is] the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit as gift!” (pp. 78-79).

Thus Holy Spirit acts in the mystery of baptism to effect regeneration and to unite us to Christ for healing and renewal. Furthermore, He comes within us constantly, becoming the divine indwelling presence within our spirits, souls, and bodies.

Father Schmemmann continues, “This gift of Christ’s own Holy Spirit and Christ’s own high calling is precisely a ‘gift.’ It does not belong to human nature as such, even though it is in order to receive this gift that man was created by God. Prepared and made possible by baptism . . . it takes man beyond baptism . . . making him ‘christ’ in Christ; by anointing him with the anointment of the Anointed One, it opens to man the door of theosis, of deification” (p. 80).

Let us always remember that these rites are only starting points, with a guaranteed potential in time. Established in the Lord, we are intended to move constantly closer to what God intends for us to become.

O Holy Spirit, Giver of life incorruptible, work in us those things which are pleasing in Thy sight and sanctify us with an imprescriptible hallowing of our souls and bodies. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

September 7 – Monday of the Fifteenth Week after Pentecost
Galatians 2:11-16

Church Unity: Galatians 2:11-16, especially vs. 11: “Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face. . . .” Before His Passion, Christ prayed to His heavenly Father that those who believe in Him would always “be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us” (Jn 17:21). Likewise Peter, apostle “to the circumcised” (Gal 2:9), and Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, labored and prayed for such unity. Indeed, Saint Peter says, “Be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers” (1 Pt 3:8-9).

Saint Paul’s message to us is the same, as clearly stated in his appeal to the brethren at Corinth: “Now I plead with you . . . that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor 1:10).

The truth is that any of us can contribute to a breach of unity in the Church, whether intentionally or unintentionally. None of us is above fomenting division by our words and actions. We know it happened in Antioch in apostolic times, when Saint Peter “withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision” (Gal 2:12).

No one is excused when such a breach occurs. Saint Paul recognizes this, for when he “saw that they [with Peter] were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel,” he speaks to Peter before all present (vs. 14). As our Master and Lord, Christ holds us responsible for contributing to the very unity that He entreated His Father to grant to us.

If we are responsible for a breach in the fellowship of the Church – whether out of fear (vs. 12) or hypocrisy (vs. 13), as in the Apostle Peter’s case, or from pride, vanity, selfishness, indulgence, or another sin – we are to follow Saint Peter’s godly example. We are to repent, admitting that we helped to cause the break, and then do what is necessary to correct the division and prevent it from continuing. We must promote the kind of healing that occurred at Antioch, as recorded in Holy Scripture.

In addition, we are to labor for the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace, just as Saint Peter did. Later in his career, he wrote to the Church concerning the same apostle who had called him to task at Antioch: “Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation – as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you” (2 Pt 3:14-15).

Further, we are to imitate the Apostle Paul by not standing idly by when divisions appear, but rather speaking out for the sake of healing. We are members of the Body of Christ, with a responsibility to do what we can from the place in the Church to which Christ has called us.

Saint Paul addresses his brother apostle “to his face, because he was to be blamed” (Gal 2:11). Nor does he restrict his comments to Peter alone, but includes “the rest of the Jews [who] also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy” (vs. 13).

We note that the separation of Peter and the others exposes an issue essential to “the truth of the gospel” (vs. 14). Action must be taken to affirm the truth that no one is “justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we [who] have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law” (vs. 16).

The protection of the unity of the Church is our moral and spiritual obligation. Let us always bear in mind that we are united to one another because we are forever one in Christ.

O holy apostles, intercede with the merciful God to save us and unite us in Himself. – From the Festal Hymn for an Apostle

September 8 – Nativity of the Theotokos
Philippians 2:5-11

Mary, Theotokos: *Philippians 2:5-11, especially vs. 11:* “Every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” The Akathist service to the Theotokos is among the best-loved services of the Orthodox Church. The name derives from the custom of standing as we listen to the verses (*akathisma* meaning “not seated”). There are thirteen sets of *kontakia*, or abbreviated songs, and the *oikia*, or condensed hymns. *Oikos* means “house.” Just as homes provide for our physical necessities, so the spiritual and scriptural riches of the Akathist Hymn reveal the Virgin Mary interceding for our spiritual needs.

Today’s celebration of the Nativity of the Theotokos is an opportunity for us to experience the blessings of the Akathist Hymn and encounter the treasures laid down by its authors. We can trace many of its images to Holy Scripture, with one source being the epistle appointed for this feast.

Writing to the church at Philippi, Saint Paul speaks of three attributes of Christ our God: His service on our behalf, His obedience to the will of God, and His exaltation in heaven. While these words apply to the Lord Jesus, the same attributes also characterize the Theotokos and appear in abundance throughout the Akathist. In this portrait of Mary’s self-giving, obedience, and service, we hear is God’s call on us to make these virtues foundational in our own lives.

Service. To save us, the Lord took “the form of a bondservant” (vs. 7), healing lepers, the blind, the lame, the grief-stricken, the possessed, and troubled sinners. In selecting the Virgin Mary as His mother, Christ transforms her into a God’s “maidservant” (Lk 1:38) who will be remembered “in every generation and generation” (Ps 44:16).

The Akathist Hymn describes Mary as the “heavenly ladder by which God came down” (oikos 2). She offered herself for the Lord’s descent into the human realm. He who descended to us by Mary the “ladder” is more than an angel (Gn 28:12): He is Sovereign of all that is (Jn 1:51). And so the Akathist praises the Theotokos as a servant: she is the “bridge that conveyest us from earth to heaven” (oikos 2), the “laborer that laboreth for the Lover of mankind” (oikos 3). She is a “ship for those wishing to be saved” and a “harbor for the sailors on the sea of life” (oikos 9).

Obedience. Our Savior shows us the depths of obedience to God the Father; for “being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the Cross” (Phil 2:8). The Virgin Mary, first among the saints, is an eternally obedient “initiate of God’s ineffable will” (oikos 2). She submits to the divine news of the Archangel Gabriel, saying, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). Hence, she shines as a “radiant token of grace” (oikos 4). She obeys, whereas our first mother Eve disobeyed (Gn 3:2-6). Thus, Mary “didst extinguish the furnace of error” (oikos 5), becoming the compliant “guide of the faithful to chastity” (oikos 5).

Exaltation. Christ reigns and is “given. . . the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow” (Phil 2:9-10). Likewise, every generation magnifies “the Theotokos and the Mother of the Light,” whose motherly prayers evoke magnification as she foretold: “Behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed” (Lk 1:48). We exalt her as “the King’s throne” (oikos 1) “all-holy chariot of Him who sitteth upon the Cherubim” (oikos 8). With the Akathist Hymn, we honor the Theotokos as the “land of promise” (oikos 6) and the “flower of incorruptibility” (oikos 7).

O maiden Mary, the unwedded bride who didst give birth to God, the whole universe rejoiceth today at thy birth through which thou didst undo the first curse of Eve at birth giving. – Festal verse for the Nativity of the Theotokos

September 9 - Wednesday of the Fifteenth Week after Pentecost
Galatians 3:15-22

The Promises: Galatians 3:15-22, especially vs. 18: *“For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise.”* The message Saint Paul delivers to the Galatians focuses primarily on his opposition to religious legalism. The Holy Spirit prompts Saint Paul to write against certain teachers who wish to see the Church revert to a system of laws, as practiced in Judaism. Any of us, at any time, may fall into this error and lose sight of the fullness of life in Christ. The present passage is especially helpful, for here the apostle shows us how legalism empties the promises we have received in Christ.

The apostle begins by referring to God’s covenant with the Patriarch Abraham. (To review that covenant, read Gn 12:1-3;15:1-21;17:1-7 before turning to vss. 22:16-18). He quotes the divine promise from Genesis 22:18: “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you obeyed My voice.” The key to the Apostle Paul’s teaching is that this “seed” is Christ (Gal 3:16).

We understand from Genesis that the promise was given to Abraham by God in response to the former’s absolute, unswerving faith in the Lord and the trustworthiness of His promises (Gn 22:1-15). The emphasis is on how faith in God leads us to a willingness to act contrary to appearances, if necessary, for we trust God’s promises above all else.

The foundation of faith, according to Saint Paul, is thus established long before the Mosaic Law – indeed, some 430 years earlier, if we follow the Old Testament timeline. This temporal primacy of faith points to its eternal primacy with God: a trusting heart which has faith in God is of greater worth to the Lord than one merely obedient to the details of His statutes.

The apostle goes on to cite several reasons why this is so. No matter how important the Law may be, no matter how holy and good its intentions, it does not annul the promises made before it was given (vs. 17). When God gives the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, He does not set aside any of His promises which are already in place. Simply put, God’s holy Law will never supersede His promises, which remain pertinent even after Moses receives the Law.

The inheritance promised to the seed of Abraham is foremost among God’s promises. The Lord extends that promise to all who, like Abraham, have unwavering faith in Him (vs. 18). Note, however, that Saint Paul does not insist that the Law was a waste of time, nor was it superfluous. In a later verse, he states that the Law actually functioned as “our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (vs. 24).

In the present passage, the Apostle is setting the stage for this insight by showing us how the custodianship of the Law functions. Those who live under the Law are confined “under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (vs. 22).

God’s law is an able instrument for exposing His people’s sins. Yet even godly rules have a way of provoking sinners to disobey them – and sin certainly operates within us! If we foolishly believe that following a clear-cut set of rules will allow us to attain righteousness, we are tragically mistaken. At best, the Law only restrains us; it is limited. For “if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law” (vs. 21). Only God’s promise conveys an assurance of life and righteousness.

God’s promise to Abraham was also made to his *seed* – to Christ. In Christ, the Seed of Abraham, “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gn 22:18). That promise has now been fulfilled in Christ. People of every nation, language, and tongue are being blessed with life in Christ. May we never trade fulfillment in the Lord for any form of legalism!

Behold, the Hope of Israel hath come. Rejoice, O nations, for the Light appeareth! – Verse for the Feast of Theophany

September 10 – Thursday of the Fifteenth Week after Pentecost
Galatians 3:23-4:5

Adoption as Sons: Galatians 3:23-4:5, especially vss. 4-5: *“But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”* If we consider how the life in Christ fulfills us, we can better appreciate what it means to be in bondage to the Law, slavishly obeying strict rules. Saint Paul tells us that faith in Christ results not only in an “inheritance” (vs. 18) but also in our “adoption as sons” (vs. 4:5). These results contrast sharply with the slavery (vs. 1) of those who rely on the Law, which imposes guardianship on those who wish to please God (vs. 2).

Living under the statutes given to Moses, God’s People were “under guard by the law” as they awaited the coming of faith (vs. 23). Saint Paul knows this way of life from firsthand experience. He draws a vivid portrait of what it means to live under strict bondage to the Law: the very words “under guard” and “kept” (vs. 23) convey spiritual imprisonment.

In the NIV translation, verse 23 reads: “We were held prisoners by the law, locked up.” The point is that the law is “custodial,” for its rules govern a person’s whole life. Some translations use the word “tutor” to convey the original Greek, missing the point that in the ancient world teachers were often slaves themselves, responsible for protecting children from accident or attack.

As custodians, these slaves taught children manners, and their instruction often was harsh. Their primary role to confine and restrain their charges in order to protect them. Those who revert to legalism as a way of life elect to have rules dominate their lives. They are “kept” by commandments – or they become rebels in sin, which always plays its part.

The Apostle Paul points out that life under the stricture of law was needed only until the coming of Christ (vs. 23). Now, the “sons of God” (vs. 26), who are “baptized into Christ” and have “put on Christ” (vs. 27), are become “Abraham’s seed” in Him (vs. 29). Thus, the time of our “managed” childhood obedience ought to be over (vs. 3).

Indeed, the “fullness of the time [has] come” (vs. 4). We are redeemed from spiritual slavery (vs. 5). The appearance of God in the flesh, “born of a woman” (vs. 4), created two conditions necessary for ending Law’s dominion over a person’s life.

First, the true alternative to bondage under Law is now *revealed* (vs. 23). The Seed to whom the promises were given has come, so that God’s people might trust in His mercy rather than in the Law (vs. 22).

Second, the alternative – the “faith” now being “revealed” (vs. 23) – is to place our trust rightly where it belongs: in the Lord Jesus. Trusting in Him requires faith. At this juncture the apostle mentions baptism, for in the Church baptism and faith function as dynamic equivalents: one who has faith is baptized, while to be baptized expresses one’s faith in Christ. This is why we refer to the baptismal mystery as literally “putting on Christ” (vs. 27).

What happens when we put on Christ, when we are baptized into Him? Our faith and trust in Christ must continue to grow. Our childhood is ended. The time of our custody under law ceases. We are no longer slaves (vs. 1), but adopted sons (vs. 5). Our obedience to Law now becomes a true relationship with Christ our God, for we live in Him and He lives in us.

The Lord now assists and guides us directly as our merciful Helper. In the New Testament, a *disciple* is a “trainee.” As disciples, we fail or succeed; we reflect on our efforts and try again. In this way we grow in Christ, aided by His illumination and His sustaining support.

We who have put on Thee, O Christ, beseech Thee, make us victors even unto the end.

September 11 - Friday of the Fifteenth Week after Pentecost
Galatians 4:8-21

Christ Formed Within Us: Galatians 4:8-21, especially vs. 19: *“My little children. . . . I labor in birth again until Christ be formed in you. . . .”* In Christ we receive the life-giving Spirit and no longer need to depend on our imperfect works according to the flesh (Rom 8:12-13). We have the sure promises of God in place of our confinement under sin (2 Cor 7:1). We are heirs of God by adoption, rather than slaves under the rule and custody of laws (Gal 3:24). Now, in today’s passage, the Apostle Paul provides us with yet another image of our life in Christ: we have Christ *formed* within us (vs. 4:19) instead of serving under spiritual powers that are “not gods” (vs. 8).

The Church’s ancient baptismal hymn derives from the epistle to the Galatians: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (vs. 3:27). This hymn evokes the image of wearing Christ like a garment. Another verse from the baptismal service expresses a similar action: “Vouchsafe unto me a robe of light!”

These hymns remind us that we are to embrace the Lord Jesus’ words and actions completely – to literally fill our minds with His thoughts, words, and deeds. It is imperative for us to emulate the Lord: to desire what He desires and speak in a manner worthy of Him.

The Apostle Paul, by using the imagery of rebirth (vs. 4:19), directs us to consider what it means when Christ is “born in us.” Our emphasis shifts inward toward our spiritual formation and the interior growth that ultimately produces godly thoughts, actions, choices, and words.

How does this inner formation occur? To have Christ formed in us, we must enjoy day-to-day contact with Him and engage in regular personal interaction with the Lord. This Spirit-endowed relationship is very different from a mere rote obedience to a code of rules. Those who organize their lives around law or custom need only learn the rules, and apply them as best they can.

Such legalism is essentially impersonal. It operates within the self, reinforced by the surrounding culture. Saint Paul calls such a “rule-based” life a form of servitude to the “the weak and beggarly elements” (vs. 9), which “by nature are not gods” (vs. 8). These *elements* are the external and worldly forces that affect us, such as social pressures, norms, sanctions, and various forms of social control. These, in turn, create a form of bondage within our personality that is the hallmark of legalism (vs. 9).

In Christ, by contrast, we have a relationship with the living God. He loves us, illumines us, stands with us, and forgives us as we struggle to have Him and His being formed within our hearts and souls.

These two distinct approaches impact every facet of life. The apostle is dismayed to see the Galatian Christians reverting to Old Covenant legalism, especially when they were not even born Jews. “You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain” (vss. 10-11).

In other words, the Galatians have begun observing the holy days commanded under the Mosaic law while ignoring those based on the Gospels. Their Sabbath does not include the Lord’s Day, Passover lacks the risen Christ, and Pentecost celebrates the giving of the Law while ignoring the gifts of the Holy Spirit!

At first the Galatians were adaptable (vs. 12), compassionate (vs.-14), and self-sacrificing (vs. 15). Their lives exhibited what it means to have Christ formed within. Saint Paul wants them to be zealous, but only for the sake of Christ, the One who alone is worthy of zeal. May we live our faith as the apostle teaches and seek to have Christ formed within, to love God our Father, and to find strength from the Holy Spirit.

Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ. Save us, O Son of God, who art risen from the dead, who sing unto Thee. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

September 12 - Saturday of the Fifteenth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 4:17-5:5

Excommunicating Myself: 1 Corinthians 4:17-5:5, especially vs. 20: “*For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power.*” Saint John of Kronstadt recounts the story of “a young girl who was almost dying, [but] after the communion of the holy sacrament began to recover on the same day from her illness; began to eat, drink, and speak; whilst before this she was almost in a state of unconsciousness, violently tossed about, and could neither eat nor drink anything.” Having seen the power of life in holy communion, he exclaims: “Glory to Thy life-giving and terrible mysteries, O Lord” (*My Life in Christ*, p. 292).

What keeps any of us from partaking of the Holy Mysteries? Sickness did not hold back the girl in the story, even though she was near death. Evils such as pride, lust, or sloth may afflict us and alienate us from the Church, and yet the Prophet Joel encourages us: “Now says the Lord your God, ‘Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting and wailing and with mourning; rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for He is merciful and compassionate. He is longsuffering and plenteous in mercy’” (Joel 2:12-13).

Indeed, we may return to our Father even when we have “wasted our possessions with prodigal living” (Lk 15:13)! Christ’s teachings show us how to repent, while the Apostle Paul reminds us how to weed out the sins that constantly grow up in our hearts. Why do we continue to excommunicate ourselves? If we listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, He will help us to repel the attractions of self-indulgence and excuse-making.

Saint Paul urges the Corinthians to welcome Saint Timothy, his “beloved and faithful son in the Lord” whom he has sent to remind them of his “ways in Christ” – that mode of living he teaches “everywhere and in every church” (Gal 4:17). We, likewise, are to seek the coming of “the beloved and faithful” Holy Spirit.

We are reminded that the Spirit comes, as Saint Timothy does in this passage, to recall us to the universal life in Christ found only in the Church. Unlike the Corinthians, we have a two-thousand-year tradition passed down to us from the Church Fathers. They, too, struggled for purification and illumination, and they speak to us as does Saint Paul: with the voice of the Lord.

When the Spirit of the Lord speaks, He directs us not to become “puffed up,” as Saint Paul warns the Corinthians (vs. 18). Let us never be so full of self as to forget that God “will come to [us] shortly” (vs. 19) – not merely “in word but in power” (vs. 20). If necessary, He comes with a rod (vs. 21, Heb 12:6) to correct us.

Perhaps the secularists believe that “what goes around, comes around.” God, however, is a personal participant in the course of this world. We ought never discount or underestimate His awareness of our thoughts and actions. We indeed reap what we sow.

Let us rather *mourn*, as the Apostle Paul suggests to the Corinthian disciples, so as not to “be taken away from” our share in the Mysteries of Christ (vs. 2). We are to avoid whispered excuses and the self-serving demands of our favorite indulgences. No matter that the world views those who sin as victims of social conditions or unfortunate circumstances; we are to hold ourselves accountable for our actions and choices.

In the manner of Saint Paul and “with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 4), let us choose to live in awe of the Holy Mysteries and strive consciously to be worthy of their greatness and life-giving properties, remembering that “a heart that is broken and humbled God will not despise” (Ps 50:17).

O Word whom we magnify, let us who enjoy the banquet of Thine immortal table . . . in the upper chamber, receive with uplifted minds Thine exalted words and ways. – Orthros for Great and Holy Thursday

September 13 - Sunday before the Elevation of the Holy Cross
Galatians 6:11-18

Only the Cross: Galatians 6:11-18, especially vs 14: *“But God forbid that I should boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”* Consider this spiritual experience of Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov: “And suddenly the Almighty reveals Himself in His indescribable humility. This vision moves the soul, astonishes the mind. Involuntarily, we bow before Him. And however much we try to become like Him in humility, we do not attain to Him.” Behold Him on the Cross, living Truth immersed in death, and receive the love of the Crucified, now risen from the dead. New priorities overtake old values. Embracing Him we may move into “a new creation” (vs 15).

In every century some (perhaps most) settle for the world rather than God’s new creation. Now, in the present passage Saint Paul strives for the hearts of those he had introduced to Christ: he urges them and us to embrace the Cross as a way of life and to “walk according to this rule” (vs 16). Yes, he is speaking to us also, for the temptation to adopt lesser visions and evade God persists. If we pick and choose among the Lord’s words to our liking rather than embracing the Incarnate Word Himself completely, then we choose to walk according to the flesh.

What does a human vision of God look like? Throughout Galatians, Saint Paul speaks of such a lesser vision: “turn again to the weak and beggarly elements” (vs 4:9), “to be under the law” (vs 4:21), to be “entangled...with a yoke of bondage” (vs 5:1), to “attempt to be justified by law” (vs.5:4). Such a diminished vision appeared openly in the Old Covenant, and today still “gives birth to bondage” (vs 4:24). God, however, partially revealed Himself at Mount Sinai - to prepare for the New Covenant “the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:14).

Reduce God’s revelation to law and we embrace rules and codes and narrowest of relationships with God, endless struggle with obedience. In a religion of pure obedience, God the Lord is defined as the Law-Giver Who must be obeyed on pain of death (Dt 28:15-68). While this is true of God, we are those sorely diminished. Saint Paul says, “God forbid that I should boast except in the Cross” (Gal 6:14). He does not boast in his law-abiding obedience, scrupulous as that may have been. He boasts in the One on the Cross, God in the flesh, the God-man embracing our most bitter enemy: death. The Law-Giving God is disclosed in indescribable humility, obediently dying - much as we do, although we are disobedient.

Suddenly we move beyond God’s righteous and holy laws to His unrestrained love. The image of pure mercy calls to our hearts. He forgives with a humility beyond imagining. Now we see that the good life is not mere obedience, but affirmation, a “Yes!” to Jesus our Savior and God, a reframing of every thought and act in response to Him. He loves us!

The Cross is no “yoke of bondage,” but “God’s yoke,” which is “easy and...light” (Mt 11:29,30). My battered soul questions such a vision: is there a yoke that is easy and light? Yes, because our Lord Himself labors with us as a yokefellow, pulling with us, for us. Could we ever imagine God born from a human Virgin yoking Himself to us? How poor are those who turn from the Crucified and Risen One to settle solely for obedience to a set of laws!

Enough of seeking after mere obedience! Let us sign on with the Cross and say, “the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14). Let us bear in our bodies “the marks [the stigmata] of the Lord Jesus” (vs 17). Rejoice: His grace is with and in our poor spirits (vs 18). Let us live in response to being loved by God, even unto death.

O Lord, save Thy People and bless Thine inheritance, granting to Thy People victory over all their enemies, and by the power of Thy Cross preserving Thine Kingdom.

September 14 – Elevation of the Cross
1 Corinthians 1:18-24

Two Fallacies: 1 Corinthians 1:18-24, especially vs. 22: *“For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom. . . .”* The astronomer Allan Sandage spent a lifetime peering through telescopes into space, studying supernovae. He never ceased to wonder, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” Finally, as he confessed, “My science . . . drove me to the conclusion that the world is much more complicated than can be explained by science. It is only through the supernatural that I can understand the mystery of existence.”

Two millennia earlier the Apostle Paul, a man rigorously trained from his early years in the best Rabbinic schools, “was caught up to the third heaven . . . into Paradise and heard inexpressible words” (2 Cor 12:2-4). This experience, along with his vision on the road to Damascus, overpowered his logical mind and confirmed the crucified Messiah and His Resurrection.

Often, because of our knowledge, pride, and self-assurance, we refuse to bow before the wisdom of God until our own resources and confidence have been exhausted. Only when a quiet descends on our soul do we cease to blame God, confessing with the Prophet Job: “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You. Therefore I depreciate myself, and waste away. I regard myself as dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6).

In today’s epistle passage, the Apostle Paul writes to the congregation of Christians at Corinth. These babes in Christ had fallen into quarreling and were belaboring each other, claiming, “‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ’” (1 Cor 1:12). Although we may cloak our errors in the teachings of a Saint, or even the words of Christ, they actually reveal our self-exaltation and pride.

The Apostle Paul sees that these converts, though nominally united to the Lord, have yielded to a false reliance on the “wisdom of words” (vs. 17) in place of the ineffable wisdom of the “message of the Cross” (vs. 18). Saint Paul exposes the limits of Greek philosophy and Rabbinic teaching, the two systems of thought upon which these converts have placed their trust. Of course, his diagnosis applies equally to Orthodox Christians in this present age, for we are products of a culture that disdains “the foolishness of God” in favor of science and technology.

The worldviews of the Greek philosophers and rabbis of first-century Judaism, although very different from one another, rely upon ideas formed by the human mind. The philosophers believed that by reasoning and dialogue they could plumb the mystery of existence. However, the Stoics, Platonists, Aristoteleans, and Epicureans merely quarreled among themselves.

Similarly, the rabbis were articulate in the details of Scripture, yet they did not know the living God proclaimed in its verses. Then, as now, the Cross of the crucified Christ made “foolish [all the] wisdom of this world” (vs. 20).

Presently, modern science and rationalism permeate the world’s cultures. We expect our computer terminals and satellites to infuse all mankind with technological confidence. Father Seraphim Rose says of these teachers of human achievement and wisdom: “We are just as sophisticated as they are; we are just as aware of modern science and modern learning” (*Orthodox Word*, No. 175-176, 1994, p. 152).

Human “wisdom” will always falter before that of God Incarnate. We are unable to understand Love, meekly accepting wounds and death for those He Himself created.

By the mere planting of Thy Cross, O Christ, death didst shake; for Thou whom hades did swallow eagerly, it delivered up with trembling, for Thou hast revealed salvation, O Lord. – Orthros verse for the Elevation of the Cross

September 15 - Tuesday of the Sixteenth Week after Pentecost
Galatians 5:11-21

Two Paths: Galatians 5:11-21, especially vs. 18: *“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”* Long before Christ was born of Mary in Bethlehem of Judah, the Prophet Solomon contrasted two opposing ways of life: “the paths of uprightness” and “the ways of darkness” (Prv 2:13). These two modes have existed from the dawn of history, when Cain and Abel brought sacrifices to the Lord, and “the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his sacrifices” (Gn 4:4-5).

The bitter impulse to murder overtook Cain’s heart not because he was irreligious, but because he was darkened by jealousy and pride. We see the first hint of this flaw in Cain’s angry sorrow and fallen countenance (vs. 5).

The Lord, in His long-suffering mercy, extends saving grace and counsel to Cain (vss. 6-7). Yet Cain continues to “walk in the ways of darkness” (Prv 2:13), until the sin lurking in his heart manifests itself in fratricide (Gn 4:8).

In today’s epistle passage, the Apostle Paul warns us against walking in the ways of darkness and encourages us instead to “walk in the Spirit” (Gal 5:16). He exposes the religious error of slavish obedience to rules, which goad them to do that which they do not wish to do (vs. 17) and render them incapable of restraining “the lust of the flesh” (vs. 16).

Rules constrict our relationship with God and others, negating the rule of trust and love. Saint Paul exposes the temptation to find self-satisfaction in legalism and asks: “And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision [a law], why do I still suffer persecution?” (vs. 11). Instead, he embraces the “offense of the Cross” (vs. 11), refusing to deny his liberty in Christ. He chooses to “walk in the Spirit” (vs. 16) and to serve, rather than to “bite and devour” (vs. 15).

These verses reveal the true threat to our liberty in Christ: a life of rules and score-keeping. The apostle explains why we are attracted to “the works of the flesh” (vs. 19), i.e., living only by rules. He then reveals what enables us to fulfill the law and to love others (vs. 14).

It is noteworthy that adherents of both ways of life claim to oppose “the works of the flesh” (vss. 19-21). Both insist “that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (vs. 21), but these approaches are mutually exclusive.

It is no accident that what Solomon calls the “paths of uprightness” (Prv 2:13), Saint Paul identified as walking “in the Spirit” (vs. 16). Our relationship with the Holy Spirit is what separates these two ways of life. Thus the apostle links the Christian’s call to liberty with walking “in the Spirit,” for in Christ, by grace, we receive God’s call “to liberty” (vs. 13) and are empowered to “walk in the Spirit” (vs. 16). Further, we are strengthened against fulfilling “the lust of the flesh” (vs. 16) so long as we are “led by the Spirit” (vs. 18).

Although God’s sacred law tells us that certain acts are wrong, laws do not restrain us. Cain knew that murder was wrong, but knowledge did not prevent his action, for sin was raging in him. We can choose to be led by the Spirit, as Saint Paul teaches in a later verse (5:22-25), and the Spirit will help us “crucify the flesh with its passions and desires” (vs. 24).

Once we taste the “fruit of the Spirit” in our lives (vs. 22), even the Law may become useful, for it helps to reveal how the Spirit would have us walk. By trusting in the living God and sharing His love in the power of the Holy Spirit, it is possible to obey Christ and to serve others (vs. 13).

O Christ, may I ever be led by Thy good Spirit, until I behold Thine ineffable beauty. – Post-communion Prayer

September 16 - Wednesday of the Sixteenth Week after Pentecost
Galatians 6:2-10

Two Harvests: Galatians 6:2-10, especially vs. 8: *“For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.”* Earlier in Galatians (vss. 5:13-21), we were reminded of the two opposing directions in which we may walk in this present life: in the ways of darkness, or on the paths of uprightness. God’s wisdom (and our own experience) shows us that those who walk in darkness “fulfill the lust of the flesh” (vs. 5:16), for sooner or later they produce the “works of the flesh” (vs. 19).

Thanks be to God, we may choose to be led by the Spirit, to crucify our flesh and passions, to follow upright paths, and to yield the fruit of the Spirit (vss. 22-25). The two paths plainly “are contrary to one another” (vs. 17), yielding very different fruits, or harvests, according to the path and its destination.

Now, in the present reading, the Apostle Paul identifies these two harvests as “corruption” and “everlasting life” (vs. 6:8). His teaching is clear enough: we are meant to walk in the Spirit and to labor for the harvest of eternal life. To this end, the apostle presents seven habits that we should seek to adopt, for they yield the blessed harvest.

First, he admonishes us to “bear one another’s burdens” (vs. 2). This apostolic rule is contrary to our modern heresy of self-fulfillment. The indulgent cult of self-actualization ignores the faith and healing found in the Body of Christ, and instead promotes independence and doing our own thing. May we bear one another’s burdens in love, joy, and peace in the Church family (see vs. 4:28), for we are children of one Father and brethren of one another (vss. 3:28; 4:6)!

Second, “let each one examine his own work” and refuse to measure himself by others around him (vs. 6:4). Each of us is accountable to Christ and to God the Father, as the Holy Spirit reveals the Lord’s will to us. The Church, as our home, school, and hospital, seeks to unite us to one another in Christ.

Judging ourselves by others is a sin. Let us leave all final judgment to God and offer mutual support in the struggle set before us by the Lord: “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt 5:48). We each stand before our Master (Rom 14:4). Hence, we are presumptuous if we take on God’s role as judge, either of ourselves or of others.

Third, just as we each need self-examination, so also “each one shall bear his own load” (Gal 6:5). Let us avoid weighing down others, for the Master permits burdens in our life as means for growth. Our priests are prepared to help us face, resolve, and grow from our burdens.

Fourth, concerning those who serve the Church full-time – our pastors and teachers – the apostle directs: “Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches” (vs. 6). Simply put, those who feed their brethren the bread of the word full-time depend on the rest of us for their daily bread. The exchange is fair and just. Remember tithes and offerings!

Fifth, a godly harvest does not come if we fail to sow, cultivate, and labor. So what if some workers come late in the day and are paid handsomely along with us (Mt 20:1-15)? We are to resist “[growing] weary while doing good,” for “if we do not lose heart” but persevere in the tasks assigned by the Master, God promises that “we shall reap” (Gal 6:9).

Sixth, “let us do good to all” (vs. 10). We are not held accountable to God for every need in this world. The parable of the Good Samaritan informs our understanding of the words “to all.” The one we are to help is the one we find in need on the road. He is my neighbor (Lk 10:29). Pray for guidance and wisdom concerning all appeals.

Finally, our primary kinship is with Christ, in the Church. Our first obligation, in giving aid, is to remember “those who are of the household of faith” (Gal 6:10).

O Lord, by Thy grace, may I not stand idle nor apart from the harvest while it is day.

September 17 - Thursday of the Sixteenth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 1:1-9

Spiritual Blessings: *Ephesians 1:1-9, especially vs. 3:* “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.*” At the beginning of his epistle to the Ephesians, Saint Paul blesses God and describes the divine blessings brought by our Lord Jesus Christ. What a difference between the two blessings! When we human creatures bless God, we must resort to words, ever imperfect and imprecise. When God blesses us, that which did not exist comes to be: “Thou wilt send forth Thy Spirit, and they shall be created; and Thou shalt renew the face of the earth” (Ps 103:32).

Concerning blessings in the spiritual realm, Saint Paul says that we, the faithful, are showered with “every spiritual blessing” (vs. 3). Indeed, God lavishes blessings on the entire human race. In particular His own people – the Church – receive innumerable spiritual blessings, as well as material ones. In Christ we are given everything that mankind could ever desire!

Lest we take his remarks as hyperbole, the Apostle Paul names four of our spiritual blessings: union with Christ (vs. 4), adoption as God’s heirs (vs. 5), redemption from slavery to sin (vs. 7), and perception rich with wisdom and practical insights (vs. 8).

In the contests and games of our school days, the captains chose members for their teams. How exhilarating it felt to be chosen first, but how humiliating to be the last choice! Likewise, when we are searching for a job, there is nothing more exciting than a phone call bringing an offer. Yet how empty we feel when we hear not even a word about our application.

All of these are earthly situations, but the Apostle Paul reminds us that “[God] chose us [in Christ Jesus]” (vs. 4). When a priest receives a catechumen, he says: “I lay my hand upon Thy servant who hath been found worthy to flee unto Thy holy name.” We have been found worthy!

Each time we come before the icon of the Lord, we look upon the face of the Savior. He has chosen us: in Him there is no humiliating dismissal, nor rejection, nor bitter silence, nor indifference or fading hope. The light of God’s choice beams brightly upon us.

We always remember that we are God’s “first choice,” honored and beloved, called to be members of the “Church of the firstborn” (Heb 12:23). God called us before the world existed, before time was calculated, before any human being existed (Eph 1:4). He chose to make us whole and holy, free of blame before Him as Adam was in the beginning. The operative word, is “love” (vs. 4): God loves us!

For what are we chosen? Our blessing is “adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to [God] Himself” (vs. 5). All of us were born into this world, as Scripture says, not “of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn 1:13). We are not accidents.

Consider the spiritual realm, where every action that begins and ends is eternal in essence, everlasting. In the heavens, we are among those who please God, those whom He chose to be His sons and daughters, those whom He brought into His household (Eph 1:5).

Perhaps we feel unworthy, but still we can cry out, “according to Thy mercy remember me, for the sake of Thy goodness, O Lord” (Ps 24:7). God arranged “adoption as sons” (Eph 1:5) for us. In Christ “we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins” (vs. 7). Although we were slaves, He has set free. He gives us high standing, for we are His for eternity.

God has illumined our hearts and minds to understand all of these things. He reveals a *wisdom* that surpasses earthly knowledge – a *prudence* with eternal and practical consequences (vs. 8). God illumines us with the Holy Spirit so we may perceive the mystery of His eternal purpose for us (vs. 9). *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us* (vs. 3).

September 18 - Friday of the Sixteenth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 1:7-17

Christ's Saving Work: *Ephesians 1:7-17, especially vss. 16-17:* “[I] do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him....” Hymns to the saints often conclude with a request that they “intercede with Christ our God to save our souls.” We boldly ask for their intercessions since they, being glorified in heaven, have gained favor with Christ. However, what they ask of the Lord in their intercessions may not be known to us in our finite and fallen state.

We do know that their prayers include petitions similar to those Saint Paul cites above. Throughout this passage, as the apostle addresses the Lord's saving work, he also illumines several facets of the saints' prayers on our behalf, especially their praises for what God *has* accomplished, what He *is* achieving in us as our struggle to repent, and what He *will* complete in us for our ultimate salvation in the age to come.

The saints pray that Christ, who accomplished redemption for all mankind when He took on our flesh and suffered for us, may heal and grant us forgiveness “according to the riches of His grace” (vs. 7). Holy Scripture celebrates all that Christ achieved “in the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4). For this reason, readings from the gospel accounts and from the apostles' teachings predominate during the Liturgy of the Word.

During the Liturgy of the Faithful, however, Christ's achievements become eternally present as He gives Himself to us. Thus we know the Lord Jesus' actions both as history and as an immediate, tangible, and saving presence in the Divine Liturgy.

We understand that Christ's saving acts are timeless, for during the liturgy we specifically “remember” the Lord's “saving commandment and all those things which have come to pass for us: the Cross, the Grave, the Resurrection on the Third day, the Ascension into heaven, the Session at the right hand and the second and glorious Advent.”

This particular prayer is known as the *anamnesis*, roughly equivalent to the English word “remembrance.” The latter term, however, does not convey how Christ's acts are immediately effective and redemptive. They are not merely past incidents to be called to mind, but the eternal God in action now. As a result, we participate in them directly. This explains why we say that we “remember” an event that, from an earthly perspective, still lies in the future: the second and glorious Advent, or Second Coming.

The saints understand that we are in bondage to time because of our sin. They pray for our freedom and our “redemption through His blood” (Eph 1:7). They seek forgiveness for us, joining their prayers to the forgiving Lord of the Cross (Lk 23:34).

The saints also pray that we may enter fully into “the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself” (Eph 1:9). The word “mystery” conveys the truth that God makes “abound toward us . . . all wisdom and prudence” (vs. 8), for as we meet Him within the Liturgy, we know God who is without limits, whose presence is inexhaustible and wondrous. This quality of our relationship with God continues to develop, ever expanding and deepening. The saints pray for this limitless growth to take place in us.

Because we have been granted the seal of “the Holy Spirit of promise” (vs. 13), the saints also pray that we may attain “the guarantee of our inheritance . . . to the praise of His glory” (vss. 13-14). At all times the apostles, the All-pure Theotokos, and the company of saints pray that we may receive a blessed rest when we leave this temporal world. Let us likewise cry out to Christ our God:

Remember me, O Lord, when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.

September 19 - Saturday of the Sixteenth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 10:23-28

Charity and Everyday Caring: 1 Corinthians 10:23-28, especially vs. 24: “*Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being.*” Saint John Chrysostom, commenting on this verse, writes: “For since it is usual . . . for men to love those who are benefitted by them, and for those who receive benefits to be more kindly affected towards their benefactors, he made this law, constituting it a bond of friendship. . . .

“And let us consider, if [this law] were everywhere in abundance, what great benefits would ensue: how there would be no need then of laws, or tribunals, or punishments, or avenging, or any other such things: since if all loved and were beloved, no man would injure another” (“Homily 32 on First Corinthians,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 12, pp. 190-191).

Saint Paul reminds us in today’s passage that we are called to caring. Nor do we limit our caring to financial giving through philanthropies, charitable donations, and other sorts of altruism. We extend our charity to our every relationship and every encounter with others.

Note that the apostle does not link his counsel on pursuing “the other’s well-being” to the virtue of almsgiving. Instead, he speaks of kindness in our day-to-day contacts shopping at the market, having dinner with friends, or discussing religious practices (vss. 25-28).

Certainly, these everyday activities took a different form in the first century than they do today. Ancient culture was saturated with idolatry, which touched every facet of life. Today our food supply is secular, sold and handled by butchers, clerks, and other retail grocery and market staff without a particular religious affiliation. Not so in New Testament times: almost all food in the markets had been offered ceremonially to idols and then afterward made available for sale.

Perhaps we are unlikely to confront the moral issue of eating food “offered to idols” (vs. 28), or have occasion to worry about sending the wrong message to friends and neighbors who may be tempted by idolatry. Still, the need to care for others and to put their *well-being* first in every encounter remains unchanged.

Many people falsely associate charity with the notion of a saintly life requiring certain types of sacrifice in order to care for others – perhaps even a complete alteration of our manner of life. According to Saint Theophan the Recluse, “It is a great misconception to think . . . that one must undertake great, reverberating tasks. Not at all. It is necessary only to do everything according to the commandments of God . . . those things which present themselves to everyone in the circumstances of life.”

For example, the Samaritan on the road to Jericho did not pass “by on the other side” (Lk 10:31-32). “When he saw” the injured man, “he had compassion. So he went to him” (vss. 33-34). “Generalize this occurrence,” continues Saint Theophan, “and you will find that in every situation and in every encounter one must do what God wants him to do” (Manley, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 516).

Such encounters will include our spouse, children, and neighbors, the checker at the market and the receptionist at a front desk. We are to extend our caring even in casual contacts.

What prevents us from following Saint Theophan’s advice and inclining ourselves to such everyday charity? We cannot “have selfless love, which is one of the goals of the spiritual life, when [we are] possessed by passions,” according to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 325).

Let us seek to rid ourselves of self-seeking, with God’s help, lest we short-change our relationships. Then, according to Saint John Chrysostom, we shall achieve “an excellence . . . born of love.” Yes, exactly what the Lord commands: seek the well-being of others!

O Lord, help me to fulfill Thy will toward every person whom Thou givest me this day.

September 20 - Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
2 Corinthians 6:1-10

How Will It Be? 2 Corinthians 6:1-10, especially vs. 1: “We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” May God help us to heed the apostle’s entreaty! If we listen to Saint Paul’s *pleading* and accept the grace of God without reservation, we will receive God’s favor. If not, we will falter and lose the gift of grace.

The choice before us involves three distinct parties: the Lord God, the apostles, and ourselves as their disciples. Saint Paul, the apostle of Christ, places the word of the Lord before us. His words represent the consensus of the apostolic band. The response, however, depends upon us.

The life-giving word of God, spoken through His prophet in Isaiah 49:8, is quoted by Saint Paul to summarize God’s case. The Lord has “heard” and has “helped” us (2 Cor 6:2). The second verb, translated here as “helped,” is actually a compound suggesting “to run to one who has cried for help.” According to Theodoret of Cyrus, our divine service – and God’s response – is not limited to the Temple: it must be given in every city, field, and mountain on earth.

The image of God responding to the cries of His people resonates with a recurring theme in the Book of Judges: “Then the sons of Israel did evil before the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord God of their fathers. . . . They provoked the Lord to anger . . . as the Lord had sworn to them. He greatly distressed them. Nevertheless, the Lord raised up judges and the Lord saved them from the hand of those who plundered them” (Jgs 2:11-16).

The judges who delivered ancient Israel are types of the Incarnate Lord, for God the Son came in person upon hearing the cry of mankind. “Who is more utterly a captive than he who is bound by sin?” asks Saint Nikolai of Zicha. “Is there a greater darkness than the darkness of sin, death, and hell? Who can loose from sin? The One God” (*Prologue from Ochrid*, vol. 3, p. 240).

God has descended into the darkness of sin, death and hell to deliver the souls of the righteous. “Behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). Shall we not respond to Him?

Saint Paul goes on to state the case for himself and all the apostles: “We give no offense in anything. . . . But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God” (vss. 3-4). As God has extended salvation to us, so too have the apostles, as His servants, extended salvation to us by proclaiming God’s “day of salvation” (vss. 2-3). They hold nothing back!

The Apostle Paul summarizes the apostles’ sacrifice on our behalf, the impetus that causes their hearts to reach out to us and share the blessings they have received. They entreat us to embrace these gifts and claim them for ourselves.

The apostles endured great afflictions and calamities for the sake of truth. They were beaten (Acts 5:40) and imprisoned (vss. 16:19-40). They barely survived riots (vs. 14:19). They traveled by foot across the eastern Mediterranean, teaching, praying, and working with congregations everywhere they went. They went without food, even fasting in seasons when sustenance was plentiful. They gave their all.

The apostles speak God’s truth from first-hand knowledge (2 Cor 6:6); their hearts are pure (Gal 1:20). They are patient (vs. 6:4) and submit to the strict direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). They are men of love (Phil 1:8) and filled with the power of God (Acts 3:1-7).

In their deep commitment to the Lord Jesus’ commands, they embrace poverty, “as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing and yet possessing all things” (2 Cor 6:10). How rich a treasure they hold out to us! Here and now, these men appeal to us, saying, “Our heart is wide open” (vs. 11). What then will our response be?

Show me as the abode of Thy Spirit only, and in nowise as the abode of sin. – Post-communion Prayer

September 21 - Monday of the Seventeenth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 1:22-2:3

The Church and Salvation – The Body of Christ: *Ephesians 1:22-2:3, especially vss. 22-23*: “*And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*” Over the course of the two millennia that separate us from “those things which have come to pass for us: the Cross, the Grave, the Resurrection on the third day,” much has been said about the relationship between the Church and salvation. The Book of Ephesians, which dwells on salvation and the Church, is a fruitful point of study for exploring these spiritual truths and learning how to apply them in life. Over the next five days we will consider what Ephesians says concerning these mysteries.

In the present passage Saint Paul makes three statements concerning the action of God in Christ. The Lord “put all things under” Christ’s feet (vs. 22); He “gave Him to be head over all things” (vs. 22); and He “made [us] alive” (vs. 1). Here we have an overview of salvation that spans the exaltation of Christ, with His defeat of sin and death, and the creation of the Church – the Body of which Christ is the Head.

The Apostle Paul begins by speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ who bears the fullness of our humanity in His Person, and yet is seated as monarch over all creation, both the visible, tangible cosmos and the invisible, spiritual realms of the bodiless powers. Orthodox Christians often observe salvation in Christ reduced to a kind of individualistic deliverance by heterodox teachers of limited understanding. Yet God truly aims at the restoration of all mankind – the entire universe – in and through the Church.

We call the Lord Jesus “Pantocrator,” which means “almighty,” or “ruler of all.” In a traditional Orthodox church, the Pantocrator icon is placed in the central dome. What, then, is under our Lord’s feet? Everything – every achievement and empire of mankind, and even the evil demons who oppose God – is under the sway of the Ruler of all.

The limited capacity of nature’s powers is exposed by Christ’s exaltation. Death, life, the farthest stars and galaxies, are all beneath His feet. None may resist His reign eternally. For the moment, however, He is restraining the full exercise of His sovereignty, giving us the chance to turn to Him, to pledge our fidelity and love to Him, amending our lives and living not for ourselves but unto Him as Savior and God.

This Christ Pantocrator is not someone distant, removed, and unavailable. According to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, “Headless humanity is given a head in the Lord Jesus, risen from the dead. The body, severed from the head, begins to knit together with that head, bit by bit and part by part.

“All men are called, yet not all respond to be received under the Head. Some will not knit themselves into His Body, the Church,” even though incorporation into the Body of Christ is the path to our rebirth – to attaining purification and union with the exalted Christ (*Prologue from Ochrid* vol. 4, p. 165).

Belonging to Christ is what God requires of us when He gives us salvation. He *makes alive* those “who were dead in trespasses and sins” (vs. 1), for “as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27).

If we look back in time, we see how God’s hand covered us through the years of our life. Even now, He is offering us strength so that we complete our salvation, Truly, we “were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1) and now we are alive. The “prince of the power of the air” (vs. 2) was our ruler, but now Christ is our King and God. We were once “children of wrath” (vs. 3), but now are children of God. May we not quit, but stay with Christ to the end of life!

Grant us in this age, the knowledge of Thy truth, and in the age to come, life everlasting. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

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September 22 - Tuesday of the Seventeenth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 2:19-3:7

The Church and Salvation, continued – The True Israel: *Ephesians 2:19-3:7, especially vss. 21-22*: “*The whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.*” Salvation, as experienced and lived in the Church, has everything to do with our personal identity. Church members “belong:” we are part of a family with an ancient history on earth. We have a rightful share in that household of which God is the Father. And we enjoy a unique basis for living on this planet, a membership that assures us that we are no longer are foreigners or aliens “getting by” on temporary residency permits.

Earlier in his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul reminds the members of his flock that although they were once considered “Gentiles in the flesh” by those “called the Circumcision” (vs. 2:11), yet now they are full citizens of the true Israel of God, the people whom the Lord has chosen, accepted, and embraced as members of His family. Underscoring this point, he asserts, “But now . . . you who once were far off [from Israel] have been brought near” (vs. 13).

In today’s passage, he makes the very same point: in Christ we are full members of the household of God. We need never accept marginal, foreign, or alien status during life in this world. We belong.

This passage opens with the line: “Now, therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (vs. 19). Saint Paul’s “no longer” alludes to the Ephesians’ previous non-membership and to their present full membership in the *household of God*. He teaches that the Church is truly the people of God, founded on the Messiah and Lord.

The Church is the saving community whose members are heirs of God’s promises under the Old Covenant, which is now fulfilled in Christ. Saint Paul’s declaration signals that the Church offers the salvation promised to the people of Israel by the prophets. Thus, the legacy of Israel continues within the Church. Anyone, whether Jew or Gentile, who confesses Christ Jesus as Lord within the Body is a partaker of God’s “promise in Christ through the Gospel” (vs. 3:6).

The ministry of our Lord and His apostles ended certain expectations held by ancient Israel. It opened Israel’s membership to every people on earth. Those Jews – including the twelve apostles, Saint Paul, the Seventy, and others – who followed Christ as Messiah received the grace of God the Father through the Lord Jesus, by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit.

As Jews who became members of Christ, they fought off every attempt to limit the faith to the strictures of Old Covenant ritualism. At the same time, they stoutly upheld the Church as the inheritor of God’s promises – as the true as Israel of the Old Covenant.

We who count ourselves as Christians today, centuries later, declare that we, too, are Israel. This is no mere feat of mental gymnastics. In fact, we are “fellow citizens with the saints” of old (vs. 2:19), including Abraham, Isaac, Israel, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Elijah, and all the prophets. We truly are God’s chosen people.

What does this mean? Saint Paul reveals the Church to be a creation of the Holy Trinity: a new people founded on the Lord Jesus, fulfilling the will of God our Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus the Church offers salvation to all peoples. We receive full membership in Christ, becoming part of “a holy temple in the Lord . . . a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (vss. 21-22).

Life-giving Spirit, grant to Thy people Thy perpetual mercy and lead all men to salvation. – Western Rite Orthodox Missal

September 23 - Wednesday of the Seventeenth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 3:8-21

The Church and Salvation, continued – Fulfillment: *Ephesians 3:8-21, especially vss. 14, 16*: “*I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man.*” What are we seeking when we pray God to “have mercy on us and save us?” Does not the saving work of Christ lie at the heart of many prayers? Let us explore what we mean by “salvation” – the divine and human actions that *complete* us, for salvation surely includes the divine promise to fulfill and restore the pristine beauty that God intends for his creatures.

We find an excellent starting point in the lives of the saints, for they reveal the rich potential in the process we call deification, or theosis. In the present passage, Saint Paul identifies five gifts that God gives to us “according to the riches of His glory” (vs. 16), helping us to move forward in the divine-human struggle for salvation.

First of all, the apostle says that God grants the faithful “to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man” (vs. 16). One mark of the saints is their inward, Spirit-given strength – the power to stand up against the assaults of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

True *inner* strength is the work of the Holy Spirit. Saint Seraphim of Sarov likens the Spirit’s activity within us to the oil in the lamps of the wise virgins (Mt 25:4). The Spirit “changes souls from one state to another – that is, from corruption to incorruption, from spiritual death to spiritual life, from darkness to light, from the stable of our being (where the passions are tied up like dumb animals and wild beasts) into a temple of the divinity” (*Little Russian Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 90).

The presence of the Holy Spirit, then, brings us into the presence of Christ “through faith” (Eph 3:17), as the Lord Jesus promises: “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (Jn 14:23).

According to Saint Hesychios, “He who with all diligence keeps his purity of heart will have Christ, establisher of that purity, as his teacher, and Christ will secretly communicate His will to him. ‘I will hear what God the Lord will speak in me,’ says David, giving expression to this” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 195).

In turn, those who have Christ dwelling in them become “rooted and grounded in love” (Eph 3:17). Saint Nikolai of Zicha attests that “with the presence of Christ comes the presence of love and, with love, inexpressible good things” (*Prologue from Ochrid*, vol. 4, p. 206).

So it was that the risen Lord asked Peter three times, “Do you love Me?” (Jn 21:15-17). He thus awakened in the chief apostle the need to have the roots of his heart and soul grounded in Love – the incarnate Christ.

Experiencing the love of God enables us to comprehend “the width and length and depth and height” (Eph 3:18) of Christ’s nature and His life among us. These dimensions include the width of God’s love for all men; the length to which the Lord is willing to go for us, even to death on the Cross; the depth of God’s humility in Christ; and the height of His exaltation above “every name that is named” (vs. 1:21).

Finally, because the saints know “the love of Christ which passes knowledge,” they are “filled with all the fullness of God” (vs. 3:19). We ourselves are incomplete, unable to know the mind of God, powerless to see fully. And yet God, who is omniscient and unlimited, created us to become the dwelling place of His presence. He intends for us to receive the salvation He bestows: wisdom, power, insight, “the riches of His glory” (vs. 16).

O Lord Jesus, Thou goal of all our journeying: draw near to us and save us. – Saint Nikolai of Zicha

September 24 – Thursday of the Seventeenth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 4:14-19

The Church and Salvation, continued – Working Out Salvation: *Ephesians 4:14-19, especially vss. 14-15*: “*We should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried along with every wind of doctrine . . . but . . . grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ.*” We have been reviewing the apostolic vision of salvation in relation to the Church and to creation. In both cases, Christ is the Source of salvation. The Lord Jesus’ saving work occurs principally within the life of the Church. Saint Paul’s vision for us, in our restored future state, reveals the glory of the age to come – if only we apply ourselves to the saving work which the apostle describes.

How do we “work out our salvation?” Saint Paul declares, “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). Now, he teaches us that a confessing heart must work cooperatively with God if we are to attain salvation. God gives us eternal life – and the will to strive for it – but it is up to us to labor with Him: “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me” (Mt 11:29).

Our first task in the process of salvation is “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). There are many ways to speak the truth: bluntly, with detachment, cruelly, haughtily, with love arising from our personal experience and thanksgiving. We may take any one of these approaches, all the while using nice manners and socially approved words. However, none of these models is the one that the Apostle Paul commends to us.

Only the Lord Jesus Christ speaks the truth perfectly, with full personal involvement and true concern for others’ illumination and well-being. The apostle follows in the Lord’s manner of speaking the truth. He speaks with Christ’s love – with that caring we associate with the Lord as Love Incarnate.

Saint Paul calls us to embrace the manner of loving and truthful speech exemplified by the Lord Jesus. The more Christ dwells in our hearts, the more we will find ourselves able to speak to others with the Lord’s life-giving love – and the more He will speak through us.

A second facet in the work of salvation is for us to share in the growth and upbuilding of the Body of Christ (vs. 16). While salvation is worked out in our relationships with everyone, we do so especially with our fellow disciples. We are not saved alone, apart from the Church.

To speak “the truth in love” (vs. 15) is Christ-like when we edify our brethren in the struggle for purity, repentance, receptivity to the Holy Spirit, transparent humility, genuine faith, and unqualified hope. With God’s help, we seek to nurture within ourselves true poverty of spirit, sorrow of heart, meekness, thirst for righteousness, mercy, peacemaking, and an acceptance of persecution for the sake of the kingdom of God (see Mt 5:3-10).

The third dimension of the labor for salvation is “giving [ourselves] over” to the life of God (vs. 19) and refusing the ways of this world. Let us avoid walking “in the futility of [our] mind” (vs. 17), as do those who live without Christ. Instead, let us follow the Way of the Savior, applying His mind day by day.

In suggesting this third aspect of the work of salvation, the apostle uses a series of negatives (vss. 17-19). Let us consider their opposites: to seek the Lord and His will, to search for His illumination, to respond to His love with love through personal purity, and to be generous in all that we think and do.

Why should God save us in this life, or in the age to come, if we give only lip service to the gospel, if we mainly serve our own passions and desires? Let us emulate the radiant Way of Jesus, which alone can heal “the blindness of [our] heart[s]” (vss. 18).

Illumine our hearts, O Master who loveth mankind, with the pure light of Thy gospel. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

September 25 - Friday of the Seventeenth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 4:17-25

The Church and Salvation, continued – Interior Work: *Ephesians 4:17-25, especially vs. 23*: “*Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.*” Saint Paul calls on the disciples at Ephesus to desist from living like their pagan neighbors in pursuit of a futile lifestyle alien to the truth “learned [in] Christ” (vss. 20). His call applies to us as well. Do we choose to live in and for Christ, steadfastly embracing the Lord’s will from the center of our heart? In Christ we are “created according to God” (vs. 24) so that we may live the one, true spiritual life.

The apostle’s vocabulary is important here. The word translated as “mind” in verses 17 and 23 is actually *nous* in the original Greek. Hence, in verse 17, the apostle says that majority of people in this world “walk, in the futility of their *nous*.” He urges us to pursue the inner work of the life in Christ earnestly, so that we may be “renewed in the spirit of [our] *nous*” (vs. 23).

The Church understands the *nous* to be the deep center of our inner life: the location of our fall and also our restoration in Christ. By God’s grace, the *nous* can become a Mount Tabor where the Lord reveals Himself as the everlasting Light, for within the *nous* Christ is transfigured “as far as [we can] bear it” (hymn of the Transfiguration).

Indeed, the interior work of salvation necessarily centers on the healing of our *nous* – our noetic restoration – so that we “no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles, in the futility of the *nous*” (vs. 17). According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, a “great battle . . . is waged by the demons to capture the *nous* and to attract it to impassioned thoughts.”

When our *nous* is defeated, Saint Maximos observes, the demons “lead it to sin in the mind [*dianoia*, the ‘rational faculties’] and, when this has been done, they induce it, captive as it is, to commit the sin in action” (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 133).

Saint Maximos echoes the apostle’s description of the peoples of this world who, “having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God . . . being past feeling, have given themselves over . . . to work all uncleanness with greediness” (vss. 18-19). Once the *nous* is captured and the heart corrupted, the behavioral aspects of sin follow.

Let us ever give “thanks . . . to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:57). As members of the Church, we are shown the way to salvation, learning how to “be renewed in the spirit of [our *nous*]” (Eph 4:23).

According to Saint Paul, we “have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus” (vs. 21). When we hear and learn from the Lord, He initiates the first (and most obvious) work of putting off our “former conduct,” for it can only lead to corruption and greater sharing in “deceitful lusts” (vs. 22).

Saint John Climacus, who understands how sinful action follows the darkening of the interior life, advises, “Control your impetuous *nous* in your distracted body . . . hold back your *nous*, so busy with its own concerns” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 140).

Restraining or holding back the *nous* requires efforts related to *hearing* and *learning* from Christ Jesus as Lord. Principal among these are ascetical self-control (fasting and the other bodily disciplines); stilling the heart through watchfulness; praying, especially using the Jesus Prayer; expressing our love for God through worship; and constant remembrance of the Lord, the martyrs’ zeal, our departure from this life, the kingdom, and the Last Judgment.

The foremost goal of all of these activities, as the apostle notes, is the renewal of our *nous*. Guided by the Holy Spirit, we make a determined effort to unite our actions to the divine acts revealed to us in Christ for our noetic restoration.

O Christ our God, most gentle Love, enter Thou our hearts and receive us to Thyself. – Saint Nikolai of Zicha

September 26 – Saturday of the Seventeenth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 14:20-25

Tongues and Prophecy: 1 Corinthians 14:20-25, especially vs. 22: “*Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe.*” Over the centuries, Orthodox Christians have often lived in heterogeneous environments whose morality is alien to the Spirit of God. Sadly, this opposing climate affects the Church in America today, and sometimes confuses and disturbs the hearts of the faithful. “Woe to those poor, unprepared innocents who do not expect to find the dark side of humanity trying to insinuate itself into Church life!” said the Russian priest Valentine Sventitsky in the 1920s. He observed that “a sin within the Church is not a sin of the Church, but against the Church” (Fudel, *Light in the Darkness*, p. 33).

In the present epistle reading, the Apostle Paul addresses problems caused by the exercise of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church. Most of its members were converts who, until recently, had been “carried away to . . . dumb idols” (vs. 12:2). The experience of “charismata,” or spiritual gifts, was new to them. Many thought that members of the Church should practice all the gifts (vss. 12:27-30), which caused the community to divide into factions (vss. 13-18).

Saint Paul addresses these charismatic excesses in two ways: first, by calling the faithful to the evangelical truths of the gospel of self-denying love (vss. 12:31-14:1) and second, by directing the Corinthians toward the gift of prophecy and away from the less useful speaking in tongues.

In our Orthodox tradition, both of these spiritual gifts have been known and practiced to the present day. Today, just as in Saint Paul’s day, the Church continues to place high value on prophecy, but gives only hesitant attention to speaking in tongues.

In the contemporary world, however, we encounter certain sects that interpret the words and the practice of the apostles in an un-Orthodox manner. Some do exactly what the Apostle Paul warns against: they “major” in the minor gifts, such as speaking in tongues. Even some members of the Orthodox Church, troubled by these teachings, may wonder if something is missing in Orthodoxy.

To this fear we reply: not at all. Our emphasis continues to be on the faith “as the apostles have taught” and passed down to us.

Speaking in tongues is nothing more than “foreign speech or language,” as the word *heteroglosis*, in the original Greek, suggests. Typically, the speaker does not understand the language he speaks. The basis for tongue-speaking is a release of rational control over the speech organs. However, exposure to demonic influence becomes a serious danger when one surrenders the faculty of speech, since the practice is spiritual in nature.

Because of the dangers of demonic distortion, Saint Paul counsels us to seek the higher spiritual gifts, such as prophecy. History has verified his caution. For example, the Montanist heresy of the second century claimed that certain of tongue-speakers *were* the Holy Spirit. Hence, the practice has been stoutly resisted in the corporate Church, although never forbidden in private prayer.

Genuine prophecy – the God-given ability to understand what is in another’s heart without being told – is highly valued in the Church, although manifested only by the spiritually mature. Many great ascetics have convicted both unbelievers and the faithful by revealing the secrets of their hearts (vss. 14:24-25). Of course, deceivers and psychics also may “prophesy” but the Lord warns us against these false prophets: test them by their fruits (Mt 7:15-16).

O Lord, establish us in Thy sanctification, that we may meditate upon Thy righteousness. –
Post-communion Prayer

September 27 – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1

This Holy House: 2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1, especially vs. 7:1: *“Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”* The Orthodox Church, understood rightly and embraced in faith, is truly “the temple of the living God” (vs. 6:16). This is no hyperbole, but a known and present reality, the very foundation of our congregational life. At the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, the clergy remind us of this reality by praying to the Lord “for this holy house, and for those who with faith, reverence, and fear of God enter therein.”

Of course, the priest is not praying for a mere building in this petition. From apostolic times to the present, these words mean the gathering – the assembly – of the faithful in Christ’s name. “The miracle of the church Assembly lies in that it is not the ‘sum’ of the sinful and unworthy people who comprise it,” says Father Alexander Schmemmann, “but [that it is] the body of Christ” (*The Eucharist*, p. 23).

Community is what Saint Paul wishes to impress upon us when he says: “For you are the temple of the living God” (vs. 16). We are the Body of Christ, the holy household wherein God, the Life-giving Trinity, dwells among us.

To awaken us to the Church as we experience it in our communal life, the apostle presents seven declarations from God, a series of definitions and promises concerning the miracle of the Church: “I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people. . . . And I will receive you.” “I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters” (vss. 16-18).

What is God saying? He is telling us that He is in our midst: He does not come and go, but remains among us, involved in our relationships with one another as our loving Father who receives us. There is warmth, paternal affection, guidance, help, oversight, correction, and adoption laced together through these promises. They are stunning assurances!

As we reflect on these promises, we must bear in mind that the Apostle Paul places God’s gifts in the context of stringent conditions, for there is no “agreement [between] the temple of God [and] idols” (vs. 16). Twice, in this short passage filled with promises from God, the apostle introduces a conditional “therefore” into the text (vss. 6:17, 7:1).

If we do not wish to lose sight of what is ours as members of the Body of Christ, we must focus on the boundary between ourselves and the world, as if we are wearing a set of corrective lenses. “Come out,” “separate,” and “do not touch” are the parental words of our Father in Heaven. As little children, we thought our parents saw everything we did. God, however, *does* perceive all that we do and say.

The Lord our God cautions us in this way because He knows, far better than we do, how easily we are caught up in the worship of material things, and how stained our hands become from caressing and playing with idols. At the end, the Apostle Paul pleads with us to “cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit” (vs. 7:1) by means of prayer and fasting, through immersion in God’s word, through confession and worship.

The key to our *cleansing* and the *perfecting* of holiness surely lies “in the fear of God” (vs. 1). Let us never lose sight of His presence, never forget that He knows our heart, never stray from His side. For “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9).

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. – Psalm 50:10-11

September 28 – Monday of the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 4:25-32

The Seal of the Spirit – Imparting Grace: *Ephesians 4:25-32, especially vss. 29-30:* “*Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*” During the sacrament of chrismation, the priest anoints the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands and feet, and also the chest and back of the candidate. Each time, as he applies the chrism, he says, “The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

In this reading, the Apostle Paul reminds us that our sealing with chrism tells us that God’s Spirit is actively present within us, helping us “not [to] grieve the Holy Spirit” (vs. 30) but to follow His guidance in our hearts. We allow Him to rule over our senses with His grace, so that we impart blessings to others.

We are thus blessed in a two-fold way as we work with the Holy Spirit: first, by keeping God-pleasing control over our senses, and second, by imparting His grace to others. Saint Paul focuses especially on the power of speech, contrasting lying with truth-telling, for only the latter can impart grace to others.

In verse 25, he quotes a passage from the Prophet Zechariah: “Let each one of you speak truth to with his neighbor.” Note the close parallel between the apostle’s exhortation and the pattern we find in Zechariah: “These are the things you shall do: speak the truth, each man to his neighbor” (Zec 8:15-16). The prophet stresses three areas where truth-telling needs to be practiced: in judging, in forming policy, and in giving oaths (Zec 8:16-17).

The Apostle Paul, however, places his emphasis the spiritual reason underlying truth-telling: “We are members of one another” (Eph 4:25). Saint John Chrysostom uses this comparison: “If the eye were to spy a serpent or a wild beast, will it lie to the foot? Will it not at once inform it, and the foot thus informed by it refrain from going on?” (“Homily 14 on Ephesians,” *NPNF* First Series, Vol. 13, p. 117).

Continuing with his concerns about speech, the apostle adds: “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” (vs. 29). Furthermore, let “clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you. . . . And be kind to one another” (vss. 31-32). Control over our speech bring God’s grace to us – and this message applies to all the passions.

Thus, Saint Paul also directs us to manage our anger: “Do not let the sun go down on your wrath” (vs. 26). Uncontrolled anger gives “place to the devil” (vs. 27). Similarly, he warns against the urge to steal, commending honest work instead (vs. 28).

Later in this passage, the apostle considers forms of anger such as bitterness, wrath, and clamor (vs. 31). “Observe the progress of mischief,” Saint John Chrysostom advises us. “Bitterness produces wrath, wrath anger, anger clamor, clamor railing, that is, revilings; next from evil-speaking it goes on to blows, from blows to wounds, from wounds to death” (“Homily 15,” p. 125).

Self-control is urgent! The most profitable approach, as the apostle shows, is to combine self-restraint with positive efforts to impart grace to others. We are to “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave [us]” (vs. 32). Self-control opens the way for the Holy Spirit to impart grace to us, and then to others.

The primary obstacles before us are our passions. Therefore, our efforts should be directed toward inward restraint, for “only the Holy Spirit can purify the *nous*” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 260). May our efforts be Spirit-led, responding to His promptings with the aim of not grieving Him in whom we are “sealed for the day of redemption” (vs. 30).

All-Holy Spirit, cleanse, save, and sanctify all those who know Thee as God. – Feast of Pentecost

September 29 – Tuesday of the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 5:20-25

The Seal of the Spirit, continued – Mutual Submission: *Ephesians 5:20-26, especially vs. 20-21:* “Submitting to one another in the fear of God.” When writing to the faithful at Ephesus, the Apostle Paul encourages them to be “filled with the Spirit” (vs. 18). He amplifies this teaching with a series of clauses: “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” “making melody in your heart to the Lord” (vs. 19); “giving thanks always” (vs. 20); and, finally, “submitting to one another in the fear of God” (vs. 21).

The placement of this last clause identifies *submission* as the primary theme of the entire passage. By insisting that we are to be “filled with the Spirit” (vs. 18) in the verses preceding today’s reading, the Apostle Paul shows us that our mutual submission to the Holy Spirit is the key to understanding the present teaching.

In other words, we are to understand our “infilling with the Spirit” as the prerequisite for true *submission*. Once we truly yield to the Holy Spirit, we will be able to avoid drunkenness and *dissipation* (vs. 18). We will speak to each other in “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs . . . to the Lord” (vs. 19) and make Eucharistic offerings “to God the Father” (vs. 20). Worship thus becomes the environment in which God’s grace comes to us – our chief means for gaining grace, and for submitting to the Holy Spirit and one another.

The turning point in the apostle’s presentation comes in verse 21, with its focus on mutual submission. As he continues his letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul addresses a variety of relationships: husband and wife, parent and child, slave and master. He considers each one in terms of this theme of mutual submission.

Let us examine the verb “to submit” as expressed in the original Greek. The root word *istemi* implies “arranging” or “setting in order” persons, things, or plans in order to reduce confusion. But when the prefix *hypo*, meaning “under,” is added, it broadens the meaning of simple submission, conveying the reality that in every relationship we are “under” something or someone. Mutual *submission* in Christ involves all our relationships and at the same time honors God’s claim on us before all other claims.

The present reading focuses on the marital relationship in particular. In Christian marriage, the husband’s “headship” should reflect the kind of relationship Christ maintains with the Church: loving and self-giving (vs. 25). The role of the head does not imply domination, but rather deliverance. Oppression and tyranny are replaced by release and freedom.

The submission of wives requires working with, enhancing, and supporting the husband’s labor as protector of the marriage, for the burden is on husband. Men are to love their wives “as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for her” (vs. 25) – a truly impossible task without the Holy Spirit!

Where do we find the supreme expression of the Lord’s love for the Church? It is in His Passion, of course, as He endures pain and death for the sake of mankind. The Cross thus has important significance for husbands in marriage: if a man’s headship is to resemble that of the Lord Jesus, it means total submission to the God-given needs of his wife (as opposed to everything she may *want*).

The clear image we are given is of the struggle to die to self, to releasing our wants and desires in favor of the other’s. Such love can never be tyrannous, or we seriously misrepresent the apostle. We follow the way of the Lord in self-sacrifice for the redemption of marriage and life.

Unite and bless, O Lord, all Thy married servants in peace and oneness of mind. – From the Betrothal Service

September 30 - Wednesday of the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 5:25-33

The Seal of the Spirit, continued – The Defining Mystery: *Ephesians 5:25-33, especially vs. 32:* “*This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.*” Having declared mutual submission to be the foundation of Christian marriage (vss. 20-26), Saint Paul now reveals the marital union as a type of the great Mystery of Christ and the Church (vs. 32). In His self-emptying on the Cross (vs. 25), Christ unites Himself to humanity in the painful depths of our life experience, while His victorious Resurrection serves to unite Him to His Bride, the Church, through all eternity.

In and through His humanity, the Lord Jesus reveals truth, grace, and glory (Jn 1:14). Sent from God the Father, the Son of God offers Himself for us (Rom 8:3), humbling and emptying Himself (Phil 2:2-7) so that He might redeem us forever, although we are sinners. His humble self-effacement is our prototype for true self-denial (Mk 8:34) – the model for anyone who must shoulder a cross, including the partners in a Christian marriage.

The relationship of the Lord Jesus with His Bride defines the essential dynamic of every true marriage. Husbands should love their wives in such a way that their shared life daily reveals the truth, grace, and glory of God. Yes, the great union of Christ and the Church discloses the inner essence, vocation, and true work of marriage.

The Apostle Paul develops this type further by describing five ways that marital partners are to live out their union. We begin with self-giving (Eph 5:25) and dying to self (vs. 26); we glorify (vs. 27) and love the other (vss. 28-29) while functioning as one body and one flesh (vss. 30-32).

The Incarnation of the Word effected an eternal union between God and man. The Lord who walked on earth in the flesh now retains our human flesh as He sits at the right hand of the Father. He gave Himself to us so that we might give ourselves to Him.

We can find no better way for married persons to share in this mystery than to give themselves wholly to one another. A true Christian marriage is never a 50-50 proposition, but a matter of 100 percent self-giving for the sake of the other.

The sacrifice of Christ on the Cross to overcome death surely defines the task of husbands and wives in their relationship with one another (vs. 26). Just as we unite ourselves to Christ by “dying” in holy baptism, so also marriage partners must die daily in order to deepen their union with their spouse. Marriage becomes a school for learning how to die, with Christ as the teacher. As we learn to die from Him, His Resurrection is manifested in our marriages.

What glory the Lord has bestowed upon the Church, His Bride (vs. 27)! God brings us to the portal of the Bridal Chamber, where we call out to Him, “Make radiant the garment of my soul, O Thou Giver of Light and save me” (Bridegroom Orthros). Each married person must seek to remove the spots and wrinkles that distort marriage: then the blemishes may be mystically overcome, and we will manifest the glory of our loving and Life-giving God.

We seek a love that nourishes and cherishes (vs. 29) us, in the manner of the love we receive in Christ that “bears all things” (1 Cor 13:4-7). May we grow in His love and never behave in a puffed-up manner that rudely seeks its own.

Christ’s love is for every disciple, whether married or single. He calls each of us to extend our union in the Lord beyond ourselves to include spouse, friend, and loved ones. Let the married truly live as flesh of the other’s flesh and bone of the other’s bone (Eph 5:31), while the Mystery of Christ brings the living Spirit into every relationship to the glory of God!

O holy martyrs who fought the good fight, entreat the Lord to have mercy on our souls. – From the Marriage Service