December 1 - Tuesday of the Twenty-seventh Week after Pentecost
1 Timothy 5:11-21

Church as Community – Presbyters and Pastors: ***1 Timothy 5:11-21, especially vs. 17:*** *"Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine."* Our readings this week from First Timothy address the status and needs of particular groups or classes of persons within the Church. In the present passage, the Apostle Paul instructs us concerning elders or "presbyters" (the clergy known as "priests" today). The presbyter provides onsite, pastoral leadership in the local church on behalf of the bishop.

In 1 Timothy 3:1-13, the apostle does not mention the presbyters. Earlier, we noted that the organization of the ordained ministry had a different appearance in the first century from the pattern we are accustomed to today. Toward the end of his letter, Saint Paul offers counsel concerning the presbyters. We take note of his wise principles, which still apply to the Church today.

In the earliest churches, the pastors of local congregations appear to have been the bishops. These men were directly appointed by the apostles (vss. 3:1-7). As the Church grew, there soon came to be multiple congregations of the faithful in different neighborhoods, all under the supervision of a single bishop. The bishops would assign presbyters to carry on the pastoral work in their subsidiary congregations. These temporary assignments led to the development of the diocese, as we understand it today.

In the era during which First Timothy was written, however, presbyters formed a committee, assisting their bishop in "word and doctrine" (vs. 5:17). The deacons during this period bore much of the responsibility for the management of money and material assets.

The official laborers in ministry have remained constant throughout history: bishops, presbyters (elders, priests, pastors), and deacons. Today, as in Saint Paul's day, any man who serves in these capacities with a local congregation "is worthy of his wages" (vs. 18). The need for fair and equitable compensation does not change.

However, in some congregations of the contemporary Church, there is a lack of adequate compensation for pastors. These clergy give up time with their own families to serve the people of God. Let us do all we can to see that their expenses and material needs are met.

Another issue that arises today, as it did in Saint Paul's day, is criticism of the presbyters. It is so easy to criticize a pastor! Much of what he does happens unseen: preparations for the services, teaching, counseling, organizational meetings, community relations, and diocesan responsibilities. Other duties, equally time-consuming, are more public, such as hearing confessions, baptisms, marriages, funerals, and hospital visits.

The apostle is explicit in cautioning us against negative remarks concerning the clergy: "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses" (vs. 19). When matters reach the point where there are specific charges of violations of morality or Church teaching, then it is necessary for the bishop to intervene. On the other hand, gossip and whispering about the clergy serves only to degrade fellowship within the Church.

When there are problems locally, it is up to the bishop to rule on such matters. Our hierarchs are to "observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality" (vs. 21). Our bishops must be careful about each ordination, so as not to "lay hands on anyone hastily" and thereby "share in other people's sins" (vs. 22). Let us never fault our bishops when the clergy fail the Church, for not every sin or good work is plainly evident, and our chief pastors have much to sort through in the relations between parishes and their priests.

Bless, O Lord, our bishops, the honorable presbytery, the diaconate and all Thy people. – Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 2 - Wednesday of the Twenty-seventh Week after Pentecost
1 Timothy 5:22-6:11

Church as Community, continued – Slaves & Teachers: ***1 Timothy 5:22-6:11, especially vs. 6:*** *"Now godliness with contentment is great gain."* The faithful of the first century knew all too well the living conditions of their fellow members who were slaves. Some were owned outright, while others were indentured servants of non-Christian masters. When both masters and slaves converted to Christianity, these relationships could become complicated, as we read in Saint Paul's letter to Philemon.

The counsel of the Church to slaves, which Saint Paul sets forth in this reading, was not intended to change or challenge the social institution of slavery. Rather, the apostles encourage slaves to "count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed" (vs. 6:1). Likewise, the apostle advises those who have Christian masters to serve honorably, "because those who are benefited are believers and beloved" (vs. 2).

These first-century admonitions of Saint Paul apply quite well to the arena of employment in contemporary society. We who have managers, employers, supervisors, and directors ought also to count them "worthy of all honor" (vs. 1) for the same reason explained above, "that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed" (vs 1).

Every relationship in the workplace, whether with superiors and subordinates, peers and colleagues, or customers and others, should be honored for God's sake. We render to society its rightful claims on us, retaining always for God those things that are His prerogative (Mt 22:21).

Let each of us, in whatever station we find ourselves, remember that we are teachers and examples. Our lives instruct in the "wholesome words . . . of our Lord Jesus Christ, and . . . the doctrine which accords with godliness" (vs. 3). Otherwise, we betray Christ.

To live the faith is more than words and pious gestures. Rather, it involves the determination to "flee . . . [all kinds of evil] and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness" (vs. 11).

We guard against pride in the grace of our Lord Jesus, for He withholds His wrath against us, "slothful and sinful" as we are, and does not destroy us in our transgressions. In compassion He seeks to raise us up as we "lay in heedlessness" (Morning Prayer to the Holy Trinity). He calls us to fill our lives with His light. Perhaps He humbles us and makes us least among men, but He also calls us and claims us as His own. This is true joy!

The proud, as Saint Paul says, "knowing nothing . . . [are] obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth" (vss. 4-5).

If we reverse the image, we see a reflection of the humble (Lk 6:20-22). They know all things, are filled with peace, and have no quarrel with anyone. Their truth is the Incarnate Word who gives His peace to His own. Each one has Christ's peace in his heart.

While the world tries to gain peace through wars and treaties, Christ tells us, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (Jn 14:27). We are tempted to envy the rich, but we have greater riches than the world's wealthy. If we bring strife into the world (Mt 10:34-37), then it is because others prefer darkness (Jn 3:19). Let us never sow discord!

The Lord Jesus assures us that we are blessed when reviled, when men "say all manner of evil against [us] falsely for [His] sake" (Mt 5:11). He releases us from corrupt minds. He sets the Way before us that we might cleanse ourselves and be pure, "just as He is pure" (1 Jn 3:3). Let us celebrate our Teacher and Master "who hath saved us." We may begin serving today, from this moment, for eternity is already present with Christ.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: both now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

December 3 - Thursday of the Twenty-seventh Week after Pentecost
1 Timothy 6:17-21

Church as Community, continued – What of the Wealthy? ***1 Timothy 6:17-21, especially vs. 17:*** *"Command those who are rich in this present age not . . . to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy."* When a wealthy young ruler faced the fact that he was unwilling to pay the price for acquiring the treasures of heaven, he went away sorrowfully. "Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God'" (Mt 19:23-24).

Our compassionate Savior knows the deceitfulness of riches, which pose uncertainty in the present age and have the potential to be a deadly spiritual obstacle. Deep down we all yearn for the true life in Christ, whether we are rich and poor, men or women, slaves or masters (1 Tim 6:19). For this reason Christ Jesus enlightened His apostles to understand both the spiritual pitfalls and the potentials for good inherent in material wealth.

In the present reading, Saint Paul addresses the heart and soul of the wealthy disciple. He warns against the snares into which the heart can fall, while at the same time showing the way that riches may be used "to lay hold of life."

First, let the rich "not . . . be haughty" (vs. 17). From the beginning Satan has used material things to distract us from God, leading us to believe that through knowledge we might "be like gods" (Gn 3:5). Things can be "pleasant to the eyes" (Gn 3:6), and a lie – for example, that one must be wise, since he has possessions – may appear as truth. Seeing material wealth instead of men's hearts can seduce us into believing that possessions are the result of wisdom.

Awash in such a falsehood, we can easily become "lifted up and . . . forget the Lord your God" (Dt 8:14), who establishes us in true life through Christ. We may easily become haughty because of material riches, for wealth gives temporal power to those who possess it, tempting them to believe that they are superior or more important than others.

Thus Saint Paul advises the wealthy not to "trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim 6:17). Of course wealth does bestow power, influence, and status, and so the insidious deceiver suggests that we are wise to trust in riches. Such trust is a "devil's bargain." As the apostle reminds us here, material riches are uncertain, ephemeral, and passing: markets crash, technologies change, illness impoverishes.

First and foremost, let us trust in the living God, whether we are rich or poor. When we trust in Him, we are free to enjoy and do good with whatever He has given us, regardless of whether we are great or small among men (see vs. 18).

However, we must avoid confusion about the meaning of "doing good." The apostle cites three aspects of using wealth to do good: "be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share" (vs 18). Each of us can be rich in good work by giving and sharing with those in need. By good works we store up "a good foundation for the time to come" (vs. 19).

In the original Greek, the literal meaning of "storing up" is *treasuring up*. It uses the same root word as the Lord's promise to the rich young man: "You will have treasure in heaven" (Mt 19:21). According to Saint Maximos, "If . . . Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Eph 3:17), and all the treasures of wisdom and spiritual knowledge are hidden in Him (Col 2:3), then all the treasures of wisdom . . . are hidden in our hearts [and] . . . revealed in proportion to our purification" (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 109).

O Lord, who providest far more than we require, enable us to love Thee in all things and above all things that we may obtain Thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire. – Orthodox Missal

December 4 – Great Martyr Barbara
Galatians 3:23-4:5

Sons in Christ: ***Galatians 3:23-4:5, especially vs 26:*** *"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus."* When Saint Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, he was horrified that they were "turning away...from Him who called [them] in the grace of Christ" (Gal 1:6). Turning away in favor of what? Turning toward what? Certain Jewish Christians were persuading the Galatians to keep the practices of traditional Judaism, in defiance of their freedom in Christ.

Even today some ill-informed souls see Judaism as perfectly acceptable, with its high morality, fear of the Lord, and pious worship. However, Saint Paul plainly warns that Christ will be of no profit to those who revert to the strictness of the Mosaic Law for salvation. Worse, such misguided choices cause us to lose the priceless gift of being "sons of God" (Gal 3:26)!

In this passage, Saint Paul presents the Apostolic alternative to the estrangement that occurs when anyone tries to live fully by the Mosaic Law. Orthodoxy provides the God-given gift of being "baptized into Christ" and of putting on Christ (vs 27)! The opportunity to become "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (vs 26) is ours - which is why at the great Feasts we sing, "As many of you as have been Baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia!"

Thus, in these verses, Saint Paul reminds us of what it means to be one of the Sons of God. Since the Faith came to us, "we are no longer under a tutor" (vs 25). Instead, we are a new creation in Christ, and all of us are "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (vs 26). No longer in slavery to rules and regulations, we have "the Spirit of His Son [in our] hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Gal 4:6). We are no longer slaves under Law (important as God's commandments are) but are sons, "and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ" (Gal 4:7). We may call God our Father, even as prodigals, and to return to Him.

Rejoice in a unique, priceless relationship to God provided by Baptism into Christ; for having "put on Christ" (Gal 3:27), every ethnic, economic, and biological distinction is swept away in favor of the new status that is ours as "heirs according to the promise" that God made to Abraham (vss 28,29). Adoption is what we have received in Christ. By trusting God and receiving Baptism, we become Christ's. Now the promise is ours, since in Christ Jesus we "are all sons of God" (vs 26).

The Laws of God are good and holy. They guide us in daily living; but anyone who tries to keep the Divine commandments perfectly may fall into the trap of believing he can do the will of God perfectly. Such is the temptation with all rules, even God's holy Laws. The root problem is sin, our inclination to rebel, to be disobedient. Sin is as old as Adam and Eve facing temptation in Paradise. Wrongdoing disrupts kingdoms and nations, as it did in the kingdom of the holy Prophet and King, David. His sin with Bathsheba ultimately tore his kingdom apart and faced him with civil war with his own son. No amount of effort to fulfill the Law will succeed! When we separate from God, Paradise is lost, and we weep (Gn 3:24)!

God wills it otherwise: having made a promise of restoration to Abraham, God added another promise, "when the fullness of the time had come, [He would send] forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal 4:4), a True Son Who would deal with sins on the Cross and make it possible for anyone to come back in trust to our good and loving Father, and "receive the adoption as sons" (vs 5). Law is good, but apart from Christ italienates and makes us illegitimate before God. We are only made Sons of God through faith inJesus (vs 3:26).

O Master, Who hast revealed the water of Baptism as redemption, sanctification, the loosing of bonds and the gift of adoption to sonship, renew us after Thine image, O our Creator.

December 5 - Saturday of the Twenty-Seventh Week after Pentecost
Galatians 5:22-6:2

The Fruit of the Spirit: ***Galatians 5:22-6:2, especially vs. 22-23:*** *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."* In the mystery of holy chrismation, we receive the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Prayers are offered asking our Lord to uphold us by His grace, to show us His mercy, and to "keep us ever warriors invincible in every attack of those who assail us . . . and make us all victors, even unto the end."

Let us take note of the tentative tone of these petitions. The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit has a limit – not on God's part, certainly, but on our part. Never doubt that the grace of our Master is all-powerful, inviolable, ever-merciful, and invincible unto the ages of ages. However, we know very well that we have the ability to override the prompting voice of the Spirit of God. When we fail and are overcome by the forces that assail us, we affront God's goodness, break His commandments, disorder our lives, and literally put ourselves out on a limb.

All is not lost when we stumble, however. In His compassion, God encourages us to repent, that we may labor once again with Him. For we "are Christ's" (vs. 24) and we can "live in the Spirit . . . [and] also walk in the Spirit" (vs. 25). We may be "overtaken in . . . trespass," but we can also be restored "in a spirit of gentleness" (vs. 6:1).

The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit is ours so long we avail ourselves of His presence, ask His forgiveness, heed Him, and "walk in the Spirit" (vs. 5:25). We are not to remain in our "conceit" (vs. 26), but rather to labor with God the Holy Spirit, the Lord's undying gift, since "there is no law" impeding us (vs. 23).

On old farm properties, one often finds a well once used by the previous owners, but now closed and sealed. It is possible, however, to drill a new well into the same vein of water. Spiritually, as long as we are in this life, it is possible to clean out the passage into our heart and allow the life-giving Holy Spirit to flow once more.

This is accomplished through repentance, for God awaits our return. Through sin, we clog and plug up the line between us and God, effectively blocking the Holy Spirit given to us at holy chrismation. Our genuine tears, our humbling ourselves before God in confession, our true commitment to cease sinning – all of these help to open up the vein that leads us to life again, making the Lord's wisdom, strength, and light available to us once more.

Note that the apostle does not call "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" gifts, but rather the *fruit* of the Spirit (vss. 22-23). Fruit needs protection against insects and predators. Fertilizer is required to produce healthy, disease-resistant fruit. Weeds must be kept down so that water and air free of pollutants may feed the trees and aid the fruiting. Likewise with the virtues: the Spirit does His part; we must do ours.

The Church Fathers teach that certain basics are needed to produce the fruit of the Spirit. Our sins must be purged. The deep center of our heart must be cleansed and kept free of pollutants by persistent watchfulness. "Three giants of the devil . . . demolish the spiritual life of the fighter to its very foundation . . . forgetfulness, ignorance, and indolence. Watchfulness, however, shows itself much stronger than these three treacherous malfactors. It can seize the giants, imprison them, and handcuff them" (*Themes from the Philokalia: No. 1, Watchfulness and Prayer*, p. 26).

We are cultivators. To keep the Spirit flowing, we must use what the Lord provides in the mystery of confession, earnest prayer, the holy gifts from the chalice of grace, and the saturation of our hearts with the words of Holy Scripture and the Fathers.

Help me, Lord, to resolve myself to persistent prayer and watchfulness unto purity.

December 6: Feast of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker of Myra in Lycia
Hebrews 13:17-21

Submission: ***Hebrews 13:17-21, especially vs. 17:*** *"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account."* In Orthodox churches there is a custom of every altar server, reader, and chanter coming to the priest for a blessing before beginning their service at liturgy, vespers, or orthros.

What is the message behind these actions? Submission! We are to come under the rightful leadership of those designated to rule within the Church, even as they themselves submit to the Lord. Acts of submission demonstrate our respect and our readiness to obey those appointed to watch over our souls.

Saint Paul believes that true submission should be undertaken readily, with heartfelt delight, "with joy and not with grief" (vs. 17). Let us all, whether we are actively serving or not, have truly submissive hearts toward our spiritual fathers ordained in Christ to care for our souls.

What is the apostle's point in admonishing us to submit to those in the Church? Foremost, submission relates to the eternal destiny of our souls. Saint Paul points to our stance before God when he reminds us that our pastors "watch out for [our] souls" (vs. 17).Consider this pastoral burden: every priest and bishop will give account to Christ the Lord concerning those submitted to him. Submission is the warp interwoven into the woof of Christian faith.

When a candidate is ready to be baptized, he is asked: "Do you unite yourself to Christ?" Then, "Do you believe in Him?" When both desire and commitment are established, there follows a repeated questioning: "Have you united yourself to Christ?" But once the candidate answers, "I have:" no further questions follow, nor is a statement made. Rather, a command is given: "Bow down also before Him." Submission is the essence of life in Christ!

A further act of submission follows: after the candidate bows down, he kneels before the icon of the Lord. The fact and reality of submission continues. Not only is it unprofitable for us (vs. 17) if we fail to submit to the Lord in our hearts and deeds, but also when we refuse to submit to the godly pastors He appoints. For then we may be judged incomplete "in every good work to do His will" (vs. 21). Rebellion and resistance are attitudes with both temporal and eternal consequences.

How do we manifest our compliance under the Lord? In today's reading, the apostle speaks for every pastor of the Church as he pleads, "Pray for us" (vs. 18). Let us ask God for hearts ready to obey the Lord in and through all our relationships, so that we may realize a holy submission to each other that is "well pleasing in [the Lord's] sight" (vs. 21).

When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Hebrews, he was absent from his flock. Therefore, he asks them, "I especially urge you to [pray for me], that I may be restored to you the sooner" (vs. 19). Do not overlook the double entendre here: if there is resistance within us, then prayer will function to restore us to our pastors and superiors "the sooner." Let us learn to watch for any sign of resistance, restiveness, or rebellion within us, praying for a wholesome submissiveness so that our souls will not fall into mortal danger.

As we consider wholesome submission, we also recognize that there is such a thing as obsequiousness and servility, as well as inappropriate domination and "lording it over" the faithful, as some are given to doing (Mt 20:25-28). Our priests and bishops are to submit to the Lord as they rule, even as the faithful submit first to the Great Shepherd, and only then to the pastors and bishops who represent Him on earth.

O Master, unite us to Thee that we may be Thy children, ever submitted to Thee. – Baptismal Prayer

December 7 – Monday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost
2 Timothy 2:20-26

Servants of Honor – Good Works: ***2 Timothy 2:20-26, especially vs. 21:*** *"Therefore if anyone cleanses himself . . . he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work."* As we approach Christ's Nativity, we hear the words of the Apostl Paul to Timothy, his fellow worker for the Savior. Like Paul and Timothy, every believer is a servant of one Master – our Lord Jesus Christ. If we read with close attention, we may receive instruction from one of the Lord's finest trainers, so that we may become honorable servants "in a great house" (vs. 20), with the prospect of becoming blessed vessels for honor (see vs 21).

Saint Paul teaches us to cleanse ourselves (vs. 21), for until we are purified we will not be useful to the Master for good works. Cleansing is the primary effort required if we are to be "prepared for every good work" (vs. 21). It is the basic regimen of the entry-level servant.

This cleansing effort has both negative and positive aspects, both of which must be carried out simultaneously. We must flee from "youthful lusts" and at the same time pursue "righteousness, faith, love, peace . . . out of a pure heart" (vs. 22).

What does it mean to flee from "youthful lusts" (vs. 22)? The Fathers of the Church echo Saint Paul in stressing the necessity to struggle against lust (in Greek *epithymia,* a strong desire arising from the soul). According to Saint Gregory of Sinai, "The soul by virtue of its creation as a deiform . . . entity possesses an intrinsic power of desire and an intrinsic incessive power, and these lead it to manifest both courage and divine love."

However, he cautions, "The soul has acquired the qualities of the passions or, rather, of the demons; and the powers of the body and the soul have . . . produced a single animal driven impulsively by anger and desire" (*Philokalia* vol. 4, pp. 227-28). And so we find in ourselves licentiousness, a love of material things, and a desire for glory, wealth, and the pleasures of the flesh. Are we not familiar with the lust for such things in ourselves?

Indeed, no one is free from all traces of unlawful desire; there are many lusts after every kind of thing, even beyond those mentioned by Saint Gregory. We flee from them to begin to cleanse ourselves. If we pray and fast, the Holy Spirit will identify our most troublesome sins and strengthen us in this flight (see vs. 22). To flee is a most appropriate term, for it suggests earnestly running from the first sight or hint of sinful desires as they awaken within us.

The Apostle Paul includes two other activities as part of *cleansing* (vs. 21): avoiding "foolish and ignorant disputes" (vs. 23) so as not to fall into quarrels (vs. 24), and seeking from God the gift of repentance (vs. 25). He places greatest emphasis on this latter gift, which is attained by our striving to change the heart. By repentance alone will we "know the truth, and . . . come to [our] senses and escape the snare of the devil" (vss. 25-26).

Cleansing from sin cannot be separated from pursuing virtue (vs. 22), for the two activities must be carried on together, which is why Saint Paul interweaves them in his teaching. We read in the *Philokalia*, "Strive to love every man equally, and you will simultaneously expel all the passions." Pursuing virtue is an active, purposeful acquisition of righteousness, faith, love and peace.

Saint Paul mentions other positive actions that are to be included in our overall pursuit of righteousness. We are to be gentle, understanding, and patient to all (vs. 24), and to correct others with humility (vs. 25). These good works are proven aids in attaining honor in God's service.

O Christ, keep us ever as warriors invincible, and make us victors even unto the end. – Chrismation Prayer

December 8 – Tuesday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost
2 Timothy 3:16-4:4

Servants of Honor, continued – To Serve God's Truth: ***2 Timothy 3:16-4:4, especially vss. 1- 2:*** *"I charge you. . . . Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season."* In Saint Paul's second letter to Timothy, we learn how to draw divine truth from God-inspired sources to insure a godly foundation for our life. The apostle helps us share the truth with others in an honest, helpful manner, always alert for the resistance we encounter within ourselves as well as others.

Isaiah the Prophet declares, "Behold, God is my Savior and Lord. I will trust in Him and be saved by Him. I will not be afraid, for the Lord is my glory and my praise. He has become my salvation. You will draw water with gladness from the wells of salvation" (Is 12:2-3).

What are these wells that yield the true water of salvation? Saint Paul offers us two. First, there is Scripture, which is "given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim 3:16). Holy Scripture is one source of truth. Secondly, he says, "I *charge* you . . . before God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (vs. 4:1). Another source of truth is that body of oral instruction given by the apostles to the Church.

Together, these constitute the building blocks of holy tradition. Note that when Saint Paul speaks of Scripture, he is referring to the books of the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. He confidently places what he teaches alongside those Scriptures, for he knows that the truth we encounter in Christ is the "key" to all Scripture.

Like Saint Paul, the other apostles are direct recipients of divine truth from Christ. Thus, their writings came to be called Scripture in the New Testament. Some apostolic teachings "we have received . . . from written sources, while others have been given to us secretly through apostolic tradition," notes Saint Basil the Great. "Both sources have equal force in true religion. No one would deny either source – no one, at any rate, who is even slightly familiar with the ordinances of the Church" (*On The Holy Spirit*, p. 98).

In *The Orthodox Church*, Bishop Kallistos Ware lists non-scriptural sources of the true "water of salvation." They include the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils, the writings of the Church Fathers, our liturgical texts, canon law, and the holy icons. Saint Basil's observation is worthy, for not everything is written down. Truth, however, remains in the Church, made present and given authority by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, we look to the Church to find the "wells" of which Isaiah speaks. To draw truth, we need to remain within the Church. Here, the sources of truth are available, along with training in how to pull up true, living water.

Saint Paul not only teaches us where to find truth, but also charges us to present it to others in helpful ways. He says, "Preach the word!" (vs. 4:2). The Greek verb "to preach" also means to impart, share, inculcate, proclaim, or announce." All these words imply a *public* activity – a ministry of edifying, such as the one upon which Timothy has engaged.

For those of us who live in the arena of the world, Saint Paul's admonition applies to our workplace, neighborhood, and other associations beyond the Church. Our lives, actions, and words are the means by which we share the truth of the gospel according to our position and opportunities. They need not always be cast in "religious" terms. When we meet genuine interest in the faith, let us "convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (vs. 2) in a life-giving way.

The implication is that we must be *watchful* and guard against self-serving and resistance to the truth (vs. 5). We may nurture a lingering unwillingness to "endure sound doctrine" (vs. 3). This we must fight against, along with the preference of men in the world to live "according their own desires" (vs. 3). God help us to be faithful to the truth!

Help us, O Lord, to uphold truth by Thy truth, and to remain watchful against all error.

December 9 – Conception of the Theotokos by the Righteous Anna
Galatians 4:22-27

Thy Kingdom Come: ***Galatians 4:22-27, especially vs 27: "****For it is written: 'Rejoice, O barren, You who do not bear! Break forth and shout, You who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children Than she who has a husband.'"* The Feast that celebrates the conception of the Theotokos by righteous Anna relies upon sources found in Holy Tradition rather than from Holy Scripture, yet the Feast draws from the same well of Salvation: "God Who sitteth on noetic thrones prepared Himself a holy throne on earth. He Who hath established the heavens in wisdom hath, by His love to mankind, made a living heaven; for...He hath brought forth His Mother, a life-bearing branch. And she alone admitted Christ into the universe for the salvation of our souls" (from the Vesperal Psalm for the Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos.

In the present passage, Saint Paul contrasts the two Biblical Covenants in a symbolic manner (vs 24), describing the older covenant from Mount Sinai as giving "birth to bondage" (vs 24), while the covenant from the Lord Jesus, bears "many more children" (vs 27). We may affirm the message that "we are not children of the bondwoman" (through Abraham by his slave, Hagar, Gn 16:15), "but of the free" (Gal 4:31) descended from Abraham through his wife, Sarah. Therefore, we are "children of promise" (Gal 4:28).

When God promised an "everlasting covenant" (Gn 17:7) to Abraham and his descendants, the Lord overcame the limitations of nature so that the barren Sarah conceived and bore the promised son to Abraham in his old age - Yizaakh, or Isaac, meaning "laughter." The child's name expresses the joy that Sarah felt at his birth: "God has made me laugh; all who hear will laugh with me" (Gn 21:6).

Let us observe with wonder the record of Holy Tradition that reports the conception of the Virgin, the completion of that which gives joy to God's people; for, in time, blessed Mary bore Him Who inaugurated the fullness of the promise to Abraham. In and through the Son of the Theotokos, our Lord Jesus, God's promise renew mankind is achieved. Hence, both at the giving of the promise of "the re-creation of the nations" and at its fulfillment, God overrode the laws of nature to make clear to men that "Our God is the God of salvation, and the pathways leading forth from death are those of the Lord's Lord" (Ps 67:21).

Tradition records that "Saint Joachim was of the tribe of Judah and a descendant of King David," and that Anna was of the tribe of Levi, as were the High Priests of Israel, all of whom were descendants of Aaron (Ex 29:29). Living devoutly, the couple used "only one third of their income for themselves and [gave] a third to the poor and a third to the Temple." When they were far past child-bearing age and still childless, Joachim came to the Temple to offer sacrifices to the Lord, but the High Priest and the others with him cruelly taunted the pious old man and drove him away as one barren and unworthy to sacrifice to God. In their eyes, the fact that he had no children was sure proof of secret sin and repudiation by God.

Grieving, Joachim and Anna sought the Lord through intense prayer, and "God sent them His angel, who gave them tidings of the birth of a daughter most blessed, by whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed, and through whom will come the salvation of the world." That child was the Virgin, whose birth-giving would bring "the salvation of the world." The blessing of a child for Joachim and Anna manifested the glory of the coming kingdom of Christ.

As we celebrate the remembrance of Thy righteous grandparents, Joachim and Anna, O our Savior, through them we beseech Thee to save our souls.

December 10 – Thursday of the Twenty-eight Week after Pentecost
Titus 1:5-2:1

The Faithful Word: ***Titus 1:5-2:1, especially vss. 7, 9:*** *"For a bishop must be blameless . . . holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict."* From bits of information in Saint Paul's letters, we learn a great deal about the process the apostles followed in establishing the first churches. With clear goals in mind, they fostered fellowships capable of nurturing the faithful to live in purity despite a society corrupted by lying, inhumanity, laziness, and gluttony (vs. 12).

The apostles knew that if the churches they were founding were to thrive, they would need blameless leaders capable of "holding fast the faithful word" (vs. 9), teaching and manifesting the Lord Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such leadership is necessary if men and women are to be refashioned as saints. Hence, the importance of the search for "stewards of God" able "both to exhort and convict" – men of sound doctrine and mature in "holding fast the faithful word" (vss. 7, 9).

In every age it is difficult to raise up godly leaders for the Church, for the world prefers insubordination and self-indulgence to obedience and purity. Today's epistle encourages the selection of clergy from men of integrity, for they alone can heal the wounds of their flock.

Saint Paul observes that "there [are] many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers . . . whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not" (vss. 10-11). He reminds Titus: "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city" (vs. 5).

Christian leaders are to be marked by holiness, justice, and blamelessness (vss. 6-8). Further, each clergyman must be "the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination" (vs. 6). A leader submits himself to Christ as Lord and displays true virtues: being fair and just in all things, sustaining a faultless life, remaining faithfully with the wife of his youth (Mal 2:14-15) and raising up obedient, respectful children.

Those selected for leadership must have a capacity to grow in these virtues despite the context of the immoral world surrounding them. Today the Church still requires such men to serve as priests [presbyters], bishops, and lay leaders.

Saint Paul indicates to Titus the causes of insubordination, but also praises its opposite: blamelessness. A true Christian purges himself of quick temper. He avoids over-indulgence in wine, violence, stubbornness, and greed (Tts 1:7).

In the contemporary world, as in the first century, many people enthusiastically promote all kinds of things they ought not to teach, "for the sake of dishonest gain" (vs. 11). However, Church leaders in every generation should be self-denying, even-tempered, sober-minded, peaceful, and lovers of what is good (vs. 8).

Indeed, purity of heart is the goal of every Christian. For Christian leaders, however, holiness is an absolute essential: "To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled" (vs. 15). The pure in heart shall see God (Mt 5:8). They follow the Lord, being qualified "for every good work" (Tts 1:16), for we "know them by their fruits" (Mt 7:16).

Men who hold "fast the faithful word" are "able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (vs. 9). Often, the Lord Jesus' opponents tried to silence Him with contrary teaching, but He silenced them by faithful words. Likewise, we Christians are victors when we speak "things . . . proper for sound doctrine" (vs. 2:1).

Grant, O Lord, to Thy priests, by Thy Holy Spirit, pureness of life and unswerving faith. – Service for the Ordination of a Priest

December 11 - Friday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost
Titus 1:15-2:10

Exhibit Your Integrity: ***Titus 1:15-2:10, especially vs. 7:*** *"In all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility. . . ."* According to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, right doctrine is inseparable from how we live our faith. He writes, "We Orthodox attach great importance to preserving the faith, just because we know that when the faith is distorted, the cure is automatically distorted. . . . Theology is the teaching of the Church about spiritual health, but also about the path which the sick must follow in order to be healed. That is why we Orthodox give great weight to keeping the doctrine intact" (*Orthodox Psychotherapy,* pp. 42- 43).

The careful reader of today's epistle passage will perceive that the Apostle Paul held this same conviction. There is a direct correlation between right doctrine and right behavior. Such unity of belief and action is evidence of our personal integrity.

Seeking to help us integrate our belief and action, Saint Paul urges Titus to "speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine" (vs. 2:1). He also insists "that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate . . . the older women likewise . . . reverent in behavior . . . that they admonish the young women to love their husbands [and] children" (vss. 2:2-4).

The apostle is calling Titus to uphold both sound doctrine and a definite "pattern of good works" (vss. 7-8). Saint Paul's teaching flows from doctrine to resulting behavior while barely distinguishing between them, always assuming the full integrity of belief and action.

How do we keep intact our Orthodox doctrine, which shows us the true path to health and salvation and guides us along that right path? According to Metropolitan Hierotheos, "Christ said that the kingdom of heaven is within us, indicating that the divinity dwells in our hearts. When God dwells in our hearts, He teaches and writes His doctrines and His law in our hearts and minds; for supremely, the heart is the site where God's commandments are written" (p. 168).

The Apostle Paul understands that purity and defilement both begin in our *nous* – the spiritual center of a person's heart and the seat of our conscience. "To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and the conscience are defiled" (vs. 15).

If our *nous* and our conscience are pure, then we know God and our works affirm Him (vs. 15). However, if our heart is defiled, it does not matter if we profess to know God. We will deny the Lord, "being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work" (vs. 16).

The communities Saint Paul formed were composed of young and old, men and women. He urges sobriety, love, reverence, temperance, and patience to all, but especially to the older men. He knows that the virtues flow naturally from them to the other members of the community, so long as the elders remain "sound in faith" (vs 2:2). Hence, the apostle urges older men to speak "the things which are proper for sound doctrine" (vs. 1).

Saint Paul reminds Titus that he will necessarily have to exhibit integrity in his own "pattern of good works," carefully matching it to the integrity of his doctrine (vs. 7). For example, the apostle commands Titus to instruct the faithful who are slaves to be obedient to their masters and "well pleasing in all things, not answering back, not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity" (vss. 9-10), and thus adorning "the doctrine of God our Savior" (vs. 10).

What of *our* integrity? May God help us purify our hearts so that He may dwell within us, teach us to hold fast to His laws and exhibit His grace on a daily basis.

Holy Father, deliver us from the sorrow of sin that we may serve Thee in spirit and truth. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

December 12 – Saint Spyridon the Wonderworker
Ephesians 5:8-19

The Illumination of the Spirit: ***Ephesians 5:9-19, especially vs 9:*** *"For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth...."* We have many ancient manuscripts of Saint Paul's letter to Ephesus and there are two traditions concerning a key word in the verse quoted above - one tradition mostly from Eastern Fathers and one largely from Western Fathers. In the West the preferred reading is "the fruit of the Light" but in the East "the fruit of the Spirit." Ultimately, as Saint Mark the Ascetic teaches concerning the Holy Spirit: "On those who have been baptized He pours Himself out in His fulness like the sun. Each of us is illumined by Him to the extent to which we hate the passions that darken us and get rid of them." To speak of the Spirit as the Light simply changes the focus from the Spirit Himself to the manner in which we experience His presence.

Mostly we should understand the point that Saint Paul makes in the verse, which is well-stated by Saint John Chrysostom: "the fruit of the Spirit ought to be evinced in everything, 'proving what is well-pleasing unto the Lord'" (vs 9 KJV). Thus, when the Lord Jesus, acknowledges "I Am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (Jn 8:12), He also is laying responsibility on us who follow Him: "You are the light of the world...Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:14,16).

We should "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them" (Eph 5:11) through lives so illumined by the Holy Spirit that they allow others to behold God within us. Ought there not be a contrast between the manner in which we live in Christ and the lifestyles of the great numbers around us who are children of this world and committed to its darkness? For this reason, God Himself chides us: "Awake, you who sleep, Arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light" (vs 14). We can be so nice, considerate, and accommodating of the feelings of others that we remain dead-silent before blatant immorality and effectively become accomplices in wickedness. God forbid!

This life is very brief, after all. Let us not, through carelessness or fear of having others ostracize us, be found of God "as fools" (vs 15), but heed the Spirit within us and labor with Him toward our own purity until we bring forth fruit "in all goodness, righteousness, and truth" (vs 9). Let us be wise (vs 15). Why does God give us "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit"? Because this Seal will "...ever graciously illumine our heart....maintain the shield of our faith unassailed by the enemy, [and] preserve pure and unpolluted the garment of incorruption, wherewith [Christ our God] hast endowed us."

On every corner, in every theater, at the office, and on the production line, opportunities to drink the "wine, in which is dissipation" (vs 18) are offered under a hundred different labels. Whatever your place or mine in this world, our foremost task is to manifest, to live openly, that all may see what it means to bear "the fruit of the Spirit...in all goodness, righteousness, and truth" (vs 9). We are not alone. The Spirit of the living God is sealed upon us; "be filled with the Spirit" (vs 18).

The worst mistake is to think we are alone. God is with us and gives us strength in the flesh through the Church – our fellow Christian with whom we may grow "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in [our] heart to the Lord" (vs 19).

"O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth for ever" (Ps 135:1).

December 13 - Sunday of the Holy Forefathers
Colossians 3:4-11

Future, Present, Past: ***Colossians 3:4-11, especially vss. 5-7:*** *"Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth. . . . Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked. . . ."* In this opening quote, the changing grammatical tenses refer to the passage of time. They serve cover the entire working of salvation, from the past into the present and future. All of time is summarized in these three verses. Thus, while the Apostle Paul primarily exhorts us concerning the labors and tasks of this present life, he also sketches the future in swift, impressionistic strokes while referring to the past. Then he returns again to the present, where we must daily evaluate, decide, and act.

At the start of today's passage, the apostle indicates our present condition: "Christ who is our life" (vs 4). However, even as he speaks of this life in Christ, he places the present in the context of the future. In the time yet to come, the Life-giver will appear, and "then you also will appear with Him in glory" (vs 4). Participating in the Christian mystery now places us on the path toward the glory that shall be.

Those of us who firmly hold to Christ in the depth of our being will share in His magnificence when He is manifested in glory. Wondrously, we who are now motivated by our belief in Him will be glorified together with Him (Rom 8:17). We would be utterly at a loss to receive these words if we did not have the revelation of the glory of God in the flesh, the gospel of Savior who was born among us, in all humility, so that our finite senses could comprehend God. We can now project from the limited present to an eternal future!

In this reading the apostle invites us to consider what is demanded of us now by the future that will surely come. We are to "put to death [our] members which are upon earth" (vs. 5). Saint Paul lists what must be mortified: "fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry" (vs. 5). Are these sins operating in us now?

Why must we continually mortify our passions? Saint John Chrysostom asks us to imagine someone who "has scoured clean a statue that was filthy, or rather who has recast it, and displayed it bright afresh." He can truly say that the rust "was eaten off and destroyed, and yet [still] recommend diligence in clearing away the rust. He doth not contradict himself, for it is not that rust which he scoured off that he recommends should be cleared away, but that which grew afterwards" ("Homily 8 on Colossians," *NPN Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 13, p. 294).

New and former sins continue to flare up in our hearts and souls. We are called to continually purify and cleanse every trace of sin that grows within us, so that we may be found worthy of the glorious future appearing of our Savior.

Having encouraged us by means of a God-promised, ineffable future, the Apostle Paul reminds us of another of God's promises: there will be retribution for those who disobey. The "sons of disobedience" will face wrath when the Lord returns (vs. 6). Further, Saint Paul reminds us, we too "once walked . . . [in] . . . anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, [and] filthy language" (vss. 7,8). We are to "put off" all traces of these wrongs (vs. 8)!

At the beginning, in the waters of baptism, we were illumined, we were sanctified, we were washed. Now, "even unto a ripe old age," we are to ascribe glory to God by putting "on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him" (vs. 10). We labor now so that "Christ is all and in all" (vs. 11): in us, and also in everyone we influence by our life. Let us remain "rust free" until He appears in glory, so that we too shall appear with Him (vs. 4).

Grant a Christian ending to our life and a good defense before Thy dread Judgment seat. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 14 - Monday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 3:5-11, 17-19

The Household of God: ***Hebrews 3:5-11, 17-19, especially vss. 5-6:*** *"And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end."* Each year, as the celebration of the Lord Jesus' nativity approaches, the Church undertakes a course of readings through the epistle to the Hebrews. This week we reflect on a series of passages from the early chapters. The first three passages make excellent preparation for the upcoming feast of Christ's Incarnation.

Since the birth of the Son of God in the flesh is of great import for the Church, we rejoice today as members of His *house* (that is, of the "household of God," vs. 3:5-19). Christ, of course, is the promised Heir of God's household (vss. 4:1-13). Therefore, the Apostle Paul urges us to continue our journey with faith in God, that we may receive His blessing (vss. 7:1-6).

The Church reads the Old Testament as the history of God's relationship with His people. She understands the New Testament as defining the transformation of that relationship as a result of Christ's ministry among us. The apostle illumines this contrast vividly in the present reading.

First, he reminds us that the Prophet Moses was the key figure in God's household, the man charged by the Lord with responsibility for the Israel of God. Without question, Moses carried out his assigned task very faithfully (vs. 3:5).

But then the apostle reflects that even this great prophet was only a servant of God, although certainly the foremost among all His servants. When we address the present state of God's household, we encounter our Lord Jesus Christ, who is not a mere servant in the household but "a Son over His own house" (vs. 6).

The difference in status within the household between Moses and Christ is qualitative and immense. The household belongs to the Lord Jesus, even though He ministers to its members as a servant (Mk 10:45; Jn 13:14). Talk about the humility of God!

In addition, Saint Paul points out that the groundwork for Christ was laid by Moses, who gave "testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward" (Heb 3:5). What are "those things" that we, as members of the household of God, ought to observe from the Mosaic era?

The apostle, quoting Prophet David, says, "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion," referring to the revolt against Moses in the wilderness (vss. 7-8). The people of God paid dearly for straying in their hearts (vs. 10), for an entire generation failed to enter the Promised Land "because of unbelief" (vs. 19).

Now, we are that "house" through our baptism into Christ (vs..6), but only on the condition that we are not willful against God through unbelief. We must "hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end" (vs. 6), even in the wilderness of this life (vs. 17). Let us never pine and yearn for the comforts and provisions we had as slaves of the "Egypt" of this created and temporary world!

Christ our Passover (Pascha) has led us from death and slavery into life and freedom. He has made us sons with Him in the household of God. The rest that Christ provides awaits us if we steadfastly hold fast our confidence in Him. What the earlier members of the household lost in a temporal way through rebellion, let us not lose eternally!

Lo, with Judah and Levi we magnify Moses the great, and Aaron the wonderful; and with David we celebrate the memory of Joshua and Samuel, inviting all with divine songs and divine praise to the preparation of the Nativity of Christ, praying to receive His goodness; for He it is that granteth the world the great mercy. – Orthros for the Sunday before Christmas

December 15 - Tuesday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 4:1-13

God's Promise of Rest: ***Hebrews 4:1-13, especially vs. 1:*** *"Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His [God's] rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it."* Saint Paul encourages us to hold fast to our confidence in Christ (vs. 3:6) so that we will not be like the children of ancient Israel, our predecessors in God's household, who lost the Promised Land through unbelief. He does not wish us to lose our way amidst the distractions of this impermanent world. For this reason, the apostle now expands on the nature and meaning of eternal rest of God.

Most especially, Saint Paul reminds us that the promise of entering God's rest still "remains" (vs. 1). Let us be clear, however: the *rest* he outlines is not a time-bound territory like the Promised Land. That land was the principal objective of the sons of Israel, who left Egypt and sojourned for decades in the wilderness, and yet very few of them ever entered it

The apostle, speaking of a *greater* rest, cautions us to "fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it" (vs 1). He recognizes that God's promised rest is contained in the gospel, which "was preached to us as well as to them" (vs. 2). God's rest has to do with His eternal kingdom, which will only be revealed fully at the end of the age, although we may anticipate it now by faith. Our trust in God is required if we are to attain this true, eternal rest – something that ancient Israel failed to risk at Kadesh (Nm 13:1-14:23).

Saint Paul's major goal in today's passage is to encourage us never to lose heart! We are members of God's household through faith, "for we who have believed do enter that rest" (Heb 4:3). He refers three times in the lesson to a prophecy given through David in Psalm 94 (see Heb 4:3, 5, 7). The apostle's point is that God would not have given us King David's prophecy, were not the eternal promise of rest always in force and available to us even now.

Note especially how the apostle underscores the ongoing nature of the promise by referring to God's rest after the creation of the world. "For He [God] has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way, 'And God rested on the seventh day from all His works'" (vs. 4:4; Gn 2:2).

Saint Paul actually has us consider three relate "rests:" the rest of the Promised Land, the Sabbath rest, and the promised rest of the age to come. The land is a type, while the eternal antitype is God's true rest, since the Lord our God is eternal.

The apostle brings together his various points about God's rest with a remark that hearkens back to the beginning of the passage: "There remains therefore a rest for the people of God" (vs. 9). The following verses are full of encouragement.

"Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest" (vs. 11). We must not overlook Israel's failure to enter that rest, nor its disobedience (vs. 11), for God is "a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (vs. 12). He sees all and knows all, "and there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (vs. 13). We are attentive, if we would hope to attain rest.

Orthodox life and worship offer us the opportunity to anticipate the eternal, promised rest that Saint Paul describes. To share in the liturgy is to join the assembly where true and right belief is upheld. We are in the presence of the Lord Jesus, the great High Priest (see vs. 14), and stand with those "who have ceased from [their] works" (vs. 10), and enjoy rest with the Creator of all.

Blessed is the kingdom of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! – Opening prayer of the Divine Liturgy

December 16 - Wednesday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 5:11-6:8

Useful Crops: ***Hebrews 5:11-6:8, especially vs. 6:7:*** *"For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God. . . ."* We will soon celebrate the wonder of the Lord Jesus' nativity in the flesh, joining with the faithful to profess to God: "O Christ, true Light that lighteth and sanctifieth every man that cometh into the world, may the light of Thy countenance be impressed on our faces that we may see therewith the unapproachable Light [and] order our steps after Thy commandments" (First Royal Hour of the Nativity).

Surely it is not enough to soak up the joy of this feast without producing a harvest useful to the Lord who cultivates our souls. Do we hear lovely carols and hymns at our churches so that we may bear to bear thorns and briers? These to be "rejected and . . . cursed, whose end is to be burned" (vs. 6:8)! Let us not be found among those whom the apostle chides, saying, "We have much to say, and [it is] hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing" (vs. 5:11).

Let us take the apostle's message to heart and offer it on the secret altar of our prayers. We make our petitions as the Church teaches, begging God to "order our steps after Thy commandments," to help us move forward in the life in Christ. We allow the ineffable wonder of the Incarnate Son to blossom in our hearts, from this day forward.

Saint Paul is concerned that we not stagnate, remaining like babes in the faith. Surely there is something wrong if days and years pass and yet we still need "someone to teach [us] again the first principles of the oracles of God; [still need] milk and not solid food" from God's hand (vs.12). The apostle encourages us rather to grow in the faith, "in the word of righteousness" (vs. 13), so that we may partake of the solid food that belongs to those who are mature (vs.14).

Think for a moment about how many times we say the prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Mt 6:11). We know that God provides the earthly good things we enjoy, but the prayer holds much more for us as faithful disciples.

According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, "To understand this passage of the prayer in its clearest meaning we should say, 'Our bread,' which You prepared in the beginning for the immortality of nature, 'give us this day,' to us who belong to the mortal condition of the present life, so that nourishment by the bread of life and knowledge triumph over the death of sin.

"The one who prays to receive this super substantial bread does not receive it altogether as this bread is in itself, but as he is able to receive it" (*Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, p. 113). In other words, the more we drift away from faith, the less benefit we receive from communion with our Lord.

But let us never despair over our failures, but rather address our true need. We must not misinterpret the statement that "it is impossible for those who were once enlightened . . . if they fall away, to renew themselves again to repentance" (vss. 6:4-6). Here, Saint Paul simply states that we are cleansed by baptism only once.

However, we still have tears, repentance, confession, prayer, and almsgiving to restore God's grace. According to Saint John Chrysostom, "To make men new is the work of the laver [baptism] only . . . But it is the work of repentance, when those who have been made new, have afterwards become old through sins, to set them free from this old age, and to make them strong" ("Homily 9 on Hebrews," *NPN Fathers* First Series, Vol. 14, p. 410). May the Christ Child's grace stir us toward this true repentance and lead us toward eternal life!

Come, ye that have put on Christ, let us behold a wonder that overtaketh all minds. – Sixth Royal Hour of the Nativity

December 17 - Thursday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 7:1-6

Resembling: ***Hebrews 7:1-6, especially vss. 1, 3:*** *"Melchizedek, king of Salem . . . without father, without mother, without genealogy, and having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually."* In today's reading, Saint Paul interprets two passages from the Old Testament, Genesis 14:17-20 and Psalm 109:4. Both describe the shadowy personage of Melchizedek, king of Salem, and proclaim the wonder and greatness of our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God and eternal High Priest (Heb 3:1).

Saint Paul focuses on seven ways that Melchizedek resembles Christ, inviting us to consider how the Lord Jesus fulfills this prophecy of David: "From the womb before the morning star have I begotten Thee. The Lord hath sworn and will not repent: Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps 109:4).

If Melchizedek was a great priest (Heb 7:1), the Lord Jesus is even greater. He is both the One who makes the offering *and* the sacrifice offered for sin. Later in this chapter, Saint Paul calls the Lord Jesus "a High Priest . . . who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners and has become higher than the heavens . . . who . . . offered up Himself" (vss. 26-27).

The Lord Jesus, like Melchizedek, receives tithes from the faithful (vs. 7:2). As Saint Paul notes, tithes in this world are presented to mortal kings, while Christ our High Priest eternally presents the offerings of our hearts "upon His holy, most heavenly, and ideal altar" (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

Melchizedek is called "king of righteousness," for he resembles "the Lord our righteousness" (Jer 23:6) through whom grace reigns to eternal life (Rom 5:21). For God says to the only-begotten Son: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your Kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of gladness" (Heb 1:8-9).

Melchizedek's title is king of Salem (*shalom*, "peace"), but Christ is the true King of Peace (Heb 7:2), and not in a finite physical manner, like Melchizedek. He is the One who comes to earth bringing God's peace and good will, as the angels sing (Lk 2:14).

Saint Paul notes that Melchizedek emerges on the stage of human history "without genealogy," being "without father, without mother" (Heb 7:3). Similarly, the Lord, as the Church proclaims, is born "in the flesh . . . without father . . . who before eternity was begotten of the Father without mother" (Vespers, tone 3).

Melchizedek appeared without a genealogy, with no mention of his birth. Therefore, he seems to be one who has no "beginning of days" (vs. 3). The Lord Jesus can truly be said to have no beginning, for as God He is outside of time and was present when time began. Of course, within time, the Lord was born of the Virgin Mary, so He has a temporal beginning. His birth divides history into two periods, BC and AD.

Similarly, it may be said of the Lord Jesus that He, like Melchizedek, has no "end of life" (vs. 3). Yet here the difference between the two is ineffable. We can believe that Melchizedek died and was buried, as befalls all men. But when our Lord Jesus died and was buried, He trampled down death by death and rose from the dead.

Now He reigns in the heavenly places (Eph 1:20) – a deed that Melchizedek could never accomplish. Melchizedek the king was great (Heb 7:4), yet primarily his greatness is as a type, in his resemblance to Christ Jesus.

Behold, the King hath appeared; the Hope of Israel hath come. Rejoice, O nations; for the Light appeareth. The divine Light hath been manifest in the flesh. Receive us, O Holy One. – Orthros for the Sunday before Theophany

December 18 - Friday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 7:18-25

Our Surety: ***Hebrews 7:18-25, especially vs. 22:*** *"Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant."* The term "surety" means a guarantee against possible default. Bail bondsmen provide a *surety* that a suspect will appear in court by putting up money against the possibility of his flight from prosecution. When a judge denies bail, it means that no imaginable surety can guarantee that the accused will appear for trial – and thus his continued custody is ordered by the court.

A banker loans money to a prospective home buyer only so long as the bank has surety by retaining the deed to the property in question. Sometimes, money lenders demand further collateral for greater surety. Title companies give surety to buyers when they issue title insurance, which gives the new owner the comfort of knowing that there are no outstanding liens or notes against the property.

In today's epistle, the apostle declares that the Lord Jesus stands as "surety of a better covenant" (vs. 22). He is the guarantor of a solemn agreement between God and His people, i.e., the Church. Jesus is *surety* that the former covenant between God and Israel, which was subject to human limitations, is replaced by a divine one (vss. 18-19).

Christ God is our *surety* because He has solemnly sworn that He is our priest forever (vss. 20-21). As divine Guarantor, He "continues forever. . . . since He always lives" as our Intercessor (vss. 24-25). So long as He is surety, there can be no change in the covenant that He has inaugurated (vs. 25).

At the Last Supper, referring to the Eucharist in which we share, the Lord Jesus clearly states, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood" (1 Cor 11:25; Lk 22:20). Let us pay close attention to the word "new" in the Lord's declaration. This *new* signals a superseding of the Old Covenant, which was sealed with the blood of calves and goats (Heb 9:19-20). Christ Jesus sealed the New Covenant with His own blood once and for all (vs. 12). The Old Covenant is replaced, utterly superseded by God's ultimate covenant (vs. 7:18).

God's New Covenant, of which the Lord Jesus is our surety, provides us with certain hope of being able to "draw near to God" (vs. 9:19). He has drawn near to us in an irrevocable manner, becoming one of us while remaining fully God. When we meet God in Christ, we discover "that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, [so that] He is able to aid those who are tempted" (vs. 2:18), having tasted "death for everyone" (vs. 2:9).

One expects a surety to have integrity, reliability, and the capacity to deliver what is promised. The Lord Jesus Himself guarantees His agreement with us. We need not fear that the covenant which God has made with us will lapse, or lose its validity. So many people are looking for a "sure deal" – and here before them is Jesus, our surety of God's promise. "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (vs. 7:21).

People often smirk at commercial guarantees because they are often unreliable, not worth the paper on which they are written. Of course, paper fades, flakes apart, and finally disintegrates. The Lord Jesus, our *surety*, is eternal. "He continues forever" (vs. 24), "since He always lives to make intercession" for us (vs. 25).

Christ's Resurrection has assured us that His priesthood and His Covenant with us is unchangeable (vs. 24).

O God, Thou dost not change; save us as Thou has promised in our Savior, Jesus Christ. – Based on Malachi 3:6

December 19 - Saturday before the Nativity of Christ
Galatians 3:8-12

Blessed in God's Sight: ***Galatians 3:8-12, especially v. 8:*** *"And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed.'"* We are confronted in these verses by a cluster of truths united around the words *justify* (vs. 8) or *justified* (vs. 11). To "justify" is to make right, to balance, to avouch to be true or good, or clear. However, as Saint Paul develops the term in this passage, exploring the process of being justified in God's sight, he demonstrates that one may or may not be justified in the sight of God (vss. 8,11) – something for sober consideration!

When God deems a person justified, obviously the person is blessed (vs. 8), while anyone who seeks to be justified in God's sight by doing all the works of the law will fail in the attempt (vs. 11). This is so necessarily, because living by the works of the law requires "the man who does them [to] live by them" (vs. 12).

The problem with gaining justification in God's sight by keeping the law is that everyone is cursed "who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them" (vs. 10). Now if Holy Scripture documents any fact plainly, it is that no human being can keep the law exactly in every detail. The universal problem of sin defeats our attempts to obey the law of God to perfection. It simply does not happen.

The apostle advises us not even to try to be justified by keeping rules, for we will wind up failing and being cursed in the sight of God. However, he still holds out the possibility that some may yet be justified in God's sight. First, he returns to the era of Abraham, that great patriarch of Israel, and notes that when God preached to Abraham, He promised that He would justify the Gentiles by faith (vs. 8). "Gentiles" refers to the other peoples in the world besides God's chosen people, the Jews.

According Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Paul is assuring us that "faith is older than the law. That is obvious from Abraham's time, since he was justified before the appearance of the law."

This insight is most significant because God, who later gave His law to the His chosen people through Moses, "was the one who decreed before the law was given, that the Gentiles should be justified. And Paul does not say 'revealed' but 'preached the gospel' [beforehand to Abraham], so that you may understand that even the patriarch rejoiced in this kind of righteousness and greatly desired its advent."

Soon we will celebrate the birth in the flesh of Christ our God, the advent of righteousness. Although we "Gentiles" are not ethnically related to Abraham, we certainly are "those who are of faith [and] blessed with believing Abraham" when we declare our faith in Christ. At our baptism we said, "I believe in him as King and God." Then, as now, we offer a statement of faith called the Nicene Creed.

So long as we hold fast to faith in Christ, we "are blessed with believing Abraham" (vs. 9)! We have a good hope of being justified in God's sight, if we continue seeking to "live by faith" as Abraham did (vs. 11).

Being greatly ill and wounded, O Lord, I thank Thee for justifying me by Thy holy birth! – Festal verse

December 20 - Sunday before the Nativity of Christ
Hebrews 11:9-10, 17-23, 32-40

Faith: ***Hebrews 11:9-10, 17-23, 32-40, especially vss. 39-40:*** *"And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us."* In our Paschal icon of the Harrowing of Hades, we see Christ the Life-giver standing astride the gates of Hades. Death is bound in chains beneath His feet while he lifts Adam and Eve from their tombs. For the first time, the righteous men and women of the Old Covenant come face to face with the Messiah whom they anticipated and served faithfully while they were on this earth.

Indeed, they lived by faith. According to Bishop Kallistos Ware, "Faith is not the supposition that something might be true, but the assurance that someone is there." It is now our turn to be instructed in faith by these saints of old, who understood faith as confidence in God, a willingness to trust in His promises, and a full acquiescence to His will.

Faith means living confidently in every circumstance, without tangible proofs. The materialist culture around us insists that such a life is foolhardy, for it is not based on hard, measurable facts. However, the righteous servants of God in today's reading lived confidently because they knew in their hearts that God "is there."

Abraham migrated to a land where settlers already had well-established cities, fields, wells, and a way of life. Finding open pasture for his flocks and herds, he lived and even thrived, yet he always remained a nomad – an alien (vs. 9) among people with fixed boundaries and title to all the land that he could see (Gn 13:14-15).

Nevertheless, he dwelt comfortably in this place because he knew God was at work. The Lord had promised to deliver this land to his descendants. Thus, with patience "he waited for the city . . . whose builder and maker is God" (Heb 11:10). He trusted God's promises.

We find it admirable when someone calmly takes a great risk, despite contravening evidence, and is justified by the final outcome. Abraham, for example, seemed destined never to father a son of his own flesh, and yet in old age he held Isaac, his own infant son, in his arms.

Later, he was prepared to offer that very son upon the altar of God, even at the risk of losing the one in whom his "seed shall be called" (vs. 18; Gn 21:12). He took a great risk, contrary to the evidence, because God assured him that he would be justified beyond all reason by such a sacrifice.

The Apostle Paul points out that Abraham reached the conclusion "that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead" (vs. 19). He chose to obey the instructions of the God who "is there," trusting Him although he did not see Him physically. Thus Abraham shows us that faith means acting at personal risk when God reveals the course that we are to follow.

However, when God discloses such a course to us, we are blessed only when we prepare for it, work at it, and do everything we can to complete what God sets before us. When Joseph made his heirs promise to remove his bones from Egypt (vs. 22), he bound their consciousness to the promises of God. He reveals to us that faith means preparing for what is already promised by God.

"The Lord is well pleased in them that fear Him, and in them that hope in His mercy" (Ps 146:12). The righteous prophets of old were able to "subdue kingdoms . . . obtain promises and stop the mouths of lions" (vs. 33). They were "made strong" (vs. 34), above all, because they accepted death by the sword, destitution, affliction, or whatever came to them as from God's hand. May we be worthy of such a faith, so that we may live confidently, take holy risks, and fulfill the will of God.

O Lord, grant us unwavering faith in Thy presence amidst all that befalls us in this life.

December 21 - Monday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 8:7-13

The New Covenant: ***Hebrews 8:7-13, especially vs. 12:*** *"For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."* The Lord Jesus' ministry instigated a crisis for ancient Israel. God offered Israel a new covenant in Christ, fulfilling the original covenant they had received through Moses at Mount Sinai. That former covenant was "becoming obsolete and growing old" (vs. 13). The resulting crisis divided the Church from its roots in Judaism, with each group affirming itself as the people of God.

The majority of the Jews chose to continue living under the Mosaic covenant. Those who experienced the great mercy of God under the New Covenant encountered true life in the Lord Jesus. God remembered no more "their unrighteousness, and their sins and lawless deeds" (vs. 12). In the light of Jesus Christ, the Old Covenant truly became obsolete.

For centuries this sacred covenant had provided a unique identity to the people of ancient Israel. Jesus' ministry created a disjunction comparable to that caused by a major technological innovation. Suddenly, the older model becomes obsolete, although many people go on using it. The new model, of course, often incorporates elements from the older technology. The automobile, for example, incorporates the frame, axle, and wheels of the horse-drawn carriage, although its "horse power" comes from an internal combustion engine.

With the dawn of the New Covenant, many essentials of the Old Covenant took on new forms. Blood sacrifice remained central, but its previous forms were assumed under the Lord Jesus' single, perfect sacrifice of Himself upon the Cross, once and for all time.

The morality of the Old Covenant was likewise transformed. That covenant included many ethical commandments, given by God to indicate to His people how they should behave. The principles of these laws continue fully under the New Covenant, but they are summarized in two commandments reflecting the Law's essence: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart." (Mt 22:37; Dt 10:12), and "you shalt love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:39; Lv 19:18).

In the epistle to the Hebrews, we observe that what was lacking under the Old Covenant (Heb 8:7) was a result of a defect in the people, not a weakness in the covenant per se (vs. 8). The people fell short and "did not continue in" (vs. 9) God's commandments. Rather, they disregarded them (vs. 9).

The New Covenant, which focuses on the heart instead of an external set of rules (vs. 10), anoints with God's people with His Spirit. All "know the Lord" (vs. 11) and find Him "merciful to their unrighteousness," ready to forgive and to "remember no more" their lawlessness (vs. 12).

Note that Saint Paul does not mention the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, nor the triumphant Resurrection in these verses. His focus is on the work of the Holy Spirit; he speaks of God putting His "laws in their mind" and writing "them on their hearts" (vs. 10).

He also alludes to the intimacy of holy communion when he says, "For all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them" (vs. 11).

We may wish to compare the blessings of the New Covenant, as described here by the apostle, with the words of the Prophet Jeremiah (Jer 38:31-34). Although they were delivered centuries before the coming of the Lord Jesus in the flesh, their full meaning now becomes clear.

Let us rejoice with the Apostle Paul that God "has made the first obsolete" (vs. 13). He has blessed us to live under a new and greater covenant, wherein the Holy Spirit speaks the divine laws within our hearts and minds!

O Christ, we magnify Moses and Jeremiah who prepare us for Thy great mercy. – Orthros for the Sunday before the Nativity

December 22 - Tuesday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 9:8-10, 15-23

Blood Sacrifice: ***Hebrews 9:8-10, 15-23, especially vss. 22, 23:*** *"And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission. Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these."* The very idea that we humans can have intimate friendship with God seems questionable for several reasons. There is God's "otherness" and His incalculable power to create and sustain the universe, which dwarfs even the greatest of man's collective powers. God's knowledge overshadows all that our race has learned, for there are infinite questions that none of us can answer. Above all, our sinful lives are a scandal before the absolute purity and holiness of God.

And yet, in order to have fellowship with us, the Lord of creation allowed Himself to be judged by a Roman procurator. He was delivered up to crucifixion of His own free will, saying to His heavenly Father, "Forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Lk 23:34).

The gospel strains our every sense of proportion, and yet it offers us the unquestionable witness of the word. God not only wishes to be in communion with us, but He has gone out of His way to initiate that rich, intimate fellowship into which He now calls us.

In the beginning, God expressed His desire for communion with mankind through symbols. He commanded an earthly place of worship, in the form of the Mosaic tabernacle. Next, He defined the need for blood sacrifice to purify men wishing to enter into communion with Him. Finally, He offered His own blood in sacrifice, removing the final barrier to relationship with Him by cleansing our sins.

In today's epistle passage, the Apostle Paul draws attention to the connection between the ancient tabernacle, where God's people first worshiped Him, and the heavenly courts where God is worshiped perfectly and eternally. That first earthly tabernacle had an inner room, often called the Holy of Holies or "Holiest of All."

Of that room, Saint Paul says that "it was symbolic" (Heb 9:9) of the heavenly courts that are the true Holiest of All (vs. 8). In the earthly tabernacle, "both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience" (vs. 9).

In the earthly tabernacle, God foreshadowed a reality in which a sacrifice offered to Him would make a worshiper "perfect in regard to the conscience" (vs. 9). Thus, early in history, God planted a promise that would come to fruition in the Lord Jesus. However, the first stage of that promise was a symbolic representation of God's intention to enjoy communion with mankind.

During this stage of symbols, God established blood sacrifice for achieving fellowship with man. Animals were slain and their blood collected in bowls. Moses "took the blood of calves and goats . . . and sprinkled both the book [of the Law] itself and all the people, saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you.' Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry" (vss. 19-21).

With these tangible symbols, God established blood sacrifice as the basis for mankind's fellowship with Him. As the Apostle Paul explains, "Almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission" (vs. 22).

Herein the truth of the gospel is symbolized, in that offerings to heaven should be purified "with *better* sacrifices than these" (vs. 23): by the blood sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. For Christ Jesus declares, "This . . . is the New Covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Lk 22:20). His divine blood enables us to enter into communion with the living God.

Make me worthy to receive Thine immaculate Mysteries unto the life to come. – Service of Preparation for Holy Communion

December 23 - Wednesday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 10:1-18

Once for All: ***Hebrews 10:1-18, especially vs. 10:*** *"We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."* Earlier in his letter to the Hebrews, Saint Paul explains the necessity for blood sacrifice to remove the barrier of sin – a barrier insurmountable for human strength that keeps us from fellowship with God (vss. 9:8-10, 15-23). In today's reading, the apostle builds on his earlier teaching as he contrasts the animal sacrifices of ancient Israel with the inestimable sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the Cross.

Saint Paul begins with the symbolic nature of Israel's worship. He then explores the boundless character of Christ's crucifixion, disclosing to us why our Lord's Self-offering is truly "once for all" (vs. 10:10). The apostle reminds us that the law under the Old Covenant was, at best, merely "a shadow of the good things to come" (vs. 1). It was a type – a suggestive foreshadowing – of the effective blood-sacrifice of Christ that was to come later. The animal sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood were ineffective, for they were not the true "image of the things" in heaven (vs. 1).

It is Christ alone, in His sacrificial death, who imparts God's forgiveness of mankind – a forgiveness effective throughout all eternity. God, as a man on the Cross, is able to say, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Lk 23:34).

By contrast, animal sacrifices were offered repeatedly "year by year" (Heb 10:1) on the Day of Atonement. Nevertheless, they did not "make those who [approached] perfect" (vs. 1), for symbolic rituals can never remove the inner "consciousness of sins" (vs. 2). Only when God forgives us are our sins removed. The Pharisees understood this well, which is why they mistakenly took offense at the Lord Jesus when He forgave men their sins (Lk 5:21).

The animal sacrifices reminded the people of their sins (vs. 3). Faith readily admits that sin exists today among Christians, just as it did among the people of ancient Israel. What, then, is the essential difference between faith in Christ and the rituals of the Law?

We are constantly reminded of our sinfulness, just as Israel was. The difference lies in what God has done about sin. God the eternal Son lived exactly as we do: He became in every respect a man, immersing Himself in our condition to the point of death, the result of our sin.

All aspects of human sin were apparent to the Lord Jesus, and He chose to bear the consequence of sins despite being sinless Himself. There was no sickness He chose to avoid, nor any sickness He did not heal. By shedding His blood, he experienced fully our alienation from God and effected atonement for us with God. He took a body (vs. 5) and completed God's will in and through that which He assumed (vs. 7).

It now becomes clear why animal sacrifice was abolished. When God offered the perfect sacrifice for sin, He took the consequence of sin upon Himself. He died in the body, although He had no cause to die. Thereby, the door to sanctification was thrown open for all eternity.

In the prayer of absolution after confession, we hear, "May . . . God forgive thee all things . . . in this present world, and in that which is to come, and set thee uncondemned before His dread Judgment Seat. And now, having no further care for the sins you have confessed, depart in peace."

During the anaphora, at the climax of the Divine Liturgy, we hear these words: "We offer unto Thee this rational and *bloodless* worship. . . . That to those who partake thereof, they may be unto . . . forgiveness of sins." Our liturgy takes place without the shedding of blood, for Christ offered Himself "once for all" (vs. 10) for the forgiveness of our sins.

Blessed art Thou who didst not cease until Thou hadst brought us back to heaven! – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 24 – Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ
Hebrews 1:1-12

God Has Spoken: ***Hebrews 1:1-12, especially vss. 1-2:*** *"God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds."* In our present age of mass communication, we are bombarded by messages from advertisers, politicians, and government agencies. And yet we note that the Apostle declares God "has . . . spoken to us" (vs. 2). Among all the messages pouring into our ears, the last and the final word is from the Almighty God Himself. for He "has . . . spoken to us by His Son" (vs. 2).

What better time could there be than the eve of our celebration of the Lord Jesus' Nativity to consider the ultimate Word of God? His voice is not just another voice among many. The Apostle Paul insists that we not reduce the value of the message, nor of the Messenger. So now, for a moment, let us consider what it means to receive a message from God – and His *ultimate* Message, at that! We have a divine Word spoken to us by God in Person.

Does God speak to the human race? This is what the Apostle Paul tells us. In the past, God spoke to the holy forefathers and prophets "at various times and in various ways" (vs. 1). It would take too long to review every occasion, message, messenger, and means that God used. However, the Old Testament records the principal occasions and methods by which God spoke prior to the incarnation of Christ.

These Scriptures offer an illumination of the basics in the divine-human relationship. We find audible and visual experiences, visions, angelic messengers, interventions, prophecies (and their fulfillment), direct answers to prayer, confrontations with death and life, divine help in moments of human frailty, God's mercy and justice, and much, much more.

However, we understand the apostle to say specifically that God has spoken to *us* (vs. 2). In the Old Testament, He spoke to our predecessors. Now, He has spoken to us, who call ourselves Christians. And, by God's mercy that "us" includes those who read this meditation. We count ourselves as primary recipients of God's message.

For us, the faithful in Christ, this message is quite specific. Perhaps we think of the Lord Jesus Christ as a man who once lived on earth, and rightly accept Him as God. We address Him in prayer: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner!" But have we considered Him as the Message for us from God? If we personalize the apostle's words, we hear that "God has spoken to *me* by His Son." Are we listening?

Next, note the ultimacy the apostle assigns to this great message: these are the "last days" (vs. 2). In other words, there will not be a subsequent message. All that God wishes to communicate to us He has spoken "by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things" (vs. 2). We receive God the Word today. Let us listen carefully, and put the Word into action, for the Messenger stands squarely before us for our eternal consideration.

The Lord Jesus is our Creator (vs. 2). He owns us, being heir to the entire universe (vs. 2). He is God, "the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person" (vs. 3). Were He to stop upholding us, we would cease to exist (vs. 3). All the heavenly powers worship Him (vss. 4-12). Do we worship too? In this celebration of His birth, we meet Christ directly and know Him as the Lord who loves righteousness and hates lawlessness (vs. 9).

What shall we render to Thee, O Christ, for that Thou didst appear as a man for our sake? – Great Vespers for the Nativity of Christ

December 25 – Feast of the Nativity of Christ
Hebrews 1:1-12

The Gift: ***Galatians 4:4-7, especially vs. 7:*** *"Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ."* Christ, the Son of God, born into history of the Virgin Mary, became one of us "when the fullness of the time had come" (vs. 4). He remains so to this day. He is God's amazing gift to mankind, giving us abundant reasons to be thankful for our creation, our preservation in this life, and for the host of blessings the Lord daily bestows on us.

Yet, nothing can compare with the Christ our God, the Gift of great wonder. The ineffable God came to us from above, from "the Orient on High." Given and received, Christ changes everyone who embraces Him as God and King. The changes He makes are glorious, perfecting, elevating, and life-giving in every respect. What more can be said? Let us be joyful and praise Him for His glory!

This divine Gift offers us the grace necessary to discern Satan's insidious slavery, which alters our consciousness, prevents us from realizing our God-intended purpose, and mocks the image of God within us. We see what evils this slavery works in us and on those around us. Indeed, we are forced into a living subjugation to sin that leads to death, no matter how hard we fight against our oppressor or rebel against his chains.

This slavery is the common lot of the human race. We are mocked by death, and our loves, our dreams, and our achievements are only fleeting. Every beautiful, rapturous experience we enjoy is transient, and terminal. Even artistry and familial love fade in face of the grave. They all are taken away, along with our tears of protest. According to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, "Men remember many things, but there is one thing that they can never remember, however often it is repeated: that they enter this world with nothing, and leave it with nothing" (*Homilies*, Vol. 2, p. 221).

Ye we do not despair, for we have a Gift that once and for all alters the terms of our bondage to death: "the Son, born of the Father before the ages without change, hath been incarnate in these last days of the Virgin, without seed." He has redeemed our slave-existence, although at first glance we remain in bonds. Christ has raised us to the heights with Him: "God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into [our] hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'" (vs. 6).

Today the Spirit dwells in us, prays in us, and enlightens our spirits, leading us into all truth. Christ the Gift stands before us so we may see Him in His beauty. Now, in the midst of death's slavery, our Savior has become our true Life-giver.

Today, through Christ, we are no longer slaves but sons and heirs of the eternal God. Today we are His children, sharing in Christ's sonship with the Father. God is our Father, a relationship we received in the mystery of baptism. Death's ownership has been severed.

"Death no longer has dominion over Him" (Rom 6:9), nor over anyone who receives God's most precious Gift. Today we have true freedom, given to us by our immortal God. He has given us the power to say "no" to sin, "for sin shall not have dominion over you" (Rom 6:14).

Let us worship the Gift, the gracious Life-giver who humbled Himself and accepted our estate. In Him we choose to refuse sin and forever break the chains of the slave master!

Incline, O glorious Benefactor, to the praise of Thy servants, abolishing the boasting of the proud adversary. And help us who sing to Thee to overcome sin, and confirm us on the unshakable foundation of faith. – Hymn for the Nativity of Christ

December 26 – Synaxis of the Most Holy Theotokos
Hebrews 2:11-18

Brethren of Christ: ***Hebrews 2:11-18, especially vs. 17:*** *"Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people."* The pleasures of family gatherings at this Holy Season are delightful! Great also were the joy, love, and sheltering warmth shared among Joseph the Betrothed, the Ever-Virgin Theotokos and the Holy Child, Jesus. To these joys let us add the blessings we share with our brethren as the Church gathers in glad praise of our Heavenly Father Who sent His Son into this world and calls us His brethren (vss 11,12).

The true wonder of the Nativity comes in knowing Christ our God Who deigned to be made one of us - even in temptation and suffering (vs 18). He is without shame pleased to call us brethren (vs 11). How can we plumb the depths of the Incarnation? He calls us brethren! He shares our humanity. We are adopted brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Consider the Word of God, Who is God (Jn 1:1): He is united to us in all respects now and forever, embracing all that we are and making all that we are His own, leaving aside no part of being human. "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same" (Heb 2:14). He assumed our flesh from His Mother, the Ever-Virgin Mary, whose Synaxis or partnership in the Incarnation we celebrate today. She joined herself fully to God in His purpose to unite Himself to us through her flesh and blood.

Did He set aside His Divine nature when He shared in ours? No, He did not! Rather, the Lord Jesus fully reveals the depth of Divine nature (Jn 14:9). Does this mean His Divine and human natures were merged into one nature? No, they were not. The human and Divine remain separate but function in a personal harmony and unity. Likewise, He wishes us to unite ourselves to Him freely. Cooperation between His Divine and human wills is a thing of beauty, revealing how to live as brethren - to will that which He wills, to love as He loves, and to do as He does.

God's goal in uniting Himself to us is "that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb 2:14). Satan pours out untold grief on mankind, throwing the universal tragedy of death over us all. But consider the Cross of the Lord Jesus in the flesh and honor Him Who loved us even unto death; for, to destroy "him who had the power of death" (vs 14), Christ our God "gave Himself up for the life of the world" and "didst submit to the Cross willingly." He Who is deathless Life,fully embraced death in an act of pure love - solely to restore us to Himself. Such is Divine love!

By His death and His Resurrection, the Lord Jesus our Savior made "propitiation for the sins of the people" (vs 17), thereby releasing "those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (vs 15). He did not accomplish this sanctifying work on behalf of those angels who fell into disobedience (vs 16), but for us men and for our salvation. Take note: it was in mankind that the Lord God placed His Own image (Gn 1:27). This is the miracle of our Creation. As exemplified by the woman who lost one of her pieces of silver, God lit a candle to illuminate His world, swept His house, and sought diligently till He found us (Lk 15:8).

As we plumb the depths of the Incarnation, behold One like ourselves, Who "Himself has suffered, being tempted [and is] able to aid those who are tempted" (Heb 2:18). Today He continues in willingness to aid us when we are tempted; for having faced the bitter struggle with sin and death Himself, He now offers us the imperishable riches of His eternal Kingdom.

O Lord, Thou hast dwelt in a cave and hast lain in a manger; O Thou Whose throne is in heaven, Thou didst condescend to the shepherds in order to save our race. Glory to Thee!

December 27 – Sunday after the Nativity of Christ
Galatians 1:11-19

Facing the Lord: ***Galatians 1:11-19, especially vss. 15-16:*** *"It pleased God . . . to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles. . . ."* According to Saint John Chrysostom, from the time that Saul of Tarsus met Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-8), "he was richly endowed with the Spirit, the revelation had enlightened his whole soul, and he had Christ speaking within him" ("Homily 1 on Galatians," *NPN Fathers*, First Series Vol. 13, p. 11). Let us combine this insight with the Apostle Paul's account in today's reading. The impact Christ made on his life stands out vividly.

Throughout Scripture, we find this pattern of radical change repeating itself. When the Holy Trinity intervenes in human life and history, nothing remains the same. In Saint Paul's case, a man once caught up in the darkness of hatred and self-righteousness found his soul illumined, and God made an apostle of him.

Immediately after his baptism, however, Saint Paul withdrew into Arabia, avoiding the centers of Christian activity and teaching. He had come face to face with the Lord Jesus by the will of God the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit. He needed time to assimilate what had transpired inside him in a single moment on the highway.

It is worthwhile to compare Saint Paul's encounter with the experiences of others who came face to face with Christ. Some approached the Lord; others Christ sought out. The Gospels give little detail concerning the recruiting of the Twelve. Saint Mark says only that Christ "called to Him those He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. Then He appointed twelve that they might be with Him and that He might send them out" (Mk 3:13-14).

Although "one born out of due time" (1 Cor 15:8), Saint Paul also shared the common apostolic experience of being called and appointed by the Lord. Perhaps none of the other apostles experienced such a cataclysmic upheaval in his life as did Saint Paul. Yet for each convert, coming face to face with the Lord Jesus brings a whole new orientation to life.

What bearing does our encounter with the Lord have for us? Saint Paul's case is particularly important, because he faced the Lord in a different manner than did the other apostles. The Apostle John describes Christ in terms of "that . . . which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life – the life was manifested, and we have seen" (1 Jn 1:1).

The Twelve knew the Lord firsthand. But we can also say that Saul of Tarsus knew Christ firsthand. Indeed, every Christian comes to know Christ in this way.

Saint Paul's encounter with the Lord reveals that God is not bound by our five senses. The Lord has fashioned us in such a manner that He may speak to our hearts. Thus we pray that God will "illumine our hearts, O Master. Open the eyes of our mind. Implant in us Thy blessed commandments. Come and dwell in us and cleanse us of every stain of sin."

Christ said to Saint Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Mt 16:17). In Saint Peter's case, just as in Saul's conversion, God the Father "revealed" Christ (Gal 1:12, 16).

When we study the lives of those who came face to face with Christ, we understand why this encounter is life's greatest blessing. As Saint Paul said, "He is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27).

Let us seek Him, cry to Him, pray to Him, and wait upon Him. He took our flesh that we might come face to face with Him. Let us call Him Lord, and receive salvation.

Great is the mystery of Thine Incarnation, O Lord; Glory to Thee! – Orthros for the Sunday after the Nativity

December 28 – Monday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 11:17-31

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

December 29 – Tuesday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 12:25-26, 13:22-25

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

December 30 - Wednesday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
James 1:1-18

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

December 31 – Thursday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
James 1:19-27

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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