

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church

Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor



Glory be to Jesus Christ!

Glory be Forever!



Volume 13 Issue 602

33rd Sunday after Pentecost-The Publican and the Pharisee

January 21, 2024



In today's Gospel, Christ tells what must be a shocking parable to many who were doing their best to obey God, as good Jews, and be obedient to the law to the best of their ability. In this parable, it seems that all the best efforts of those trying extra hard to follow God, the Pharisees, are said to be of little value.

With this parable and others like it, for some Christ shattered their whole

belief system. He takes someone despised as a lawless sinner, a tax collector, and says that this man can be justified simply by a sincere acknowledgment of his sin, and a request for mercy. This must have been outrageous to those who were convinced that strict obedience to God's law was the only way to please God and have salvation. After all, isn't this what all the prophets, beginning with Moses, had said? Isn't this what God had been communicating with his people all along?

In regard to zealously following the Law and trying to obey the commandments, Christ was on the side of the Pharisee! We must remember that at the very beginning of his teaching ministry, Christ said, *Do not think I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, I have come to fulfill them.* And further, *whoever relaxes the least* (continued p.3)

++ 33rd Sunday after Pentecost ++

+ St. Maximos the Confessor +

Epistle: 2 Timothy 3:10-15

Gospel: Luke 18: 10-14

St. George Orthodox Christian Church is a community of believers who strive to live a life according to the Gospel of Christ and teachings of the Church.

We worship God in Trinity - Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

We are dedicated to Christ's commandment, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*

The Mystery of Obedience, by Archpriest Alexander Shargunov

The feast of the Circumcision of the Lord and the commemoration of St. Basil the Great are connected to each other. The Church tells us of the mystery of obedience. We all remember the words: "Obedience is higher than fasting and prayer."

But as St. Seraphim of Sarov says, we need to understand this properly. It means that here we are talking first of all about God's laws, about what clearly relates to spiritual life. But not only about this. To this relates eve-

rything that is done according to natural human customs, be they family or civil laws; everything that does not contradict a Christian conscience.

As the apostle Paul says, *Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things* (Phil.4:8).

The Church speaks

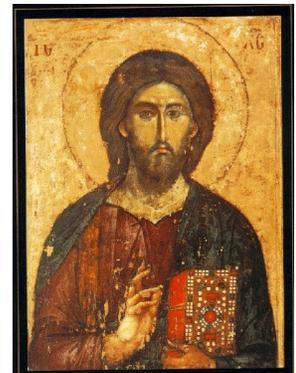
about such obedience as being filled with remembrance of God, love, and faithfulness to Him. Behind simple earthly obedience an incomparable, great depth can be discovered.

Christ manifests this obedience from His very birth, and even before His birth. We recall how His Most Pure Mother and Righteous Joseph the Betrothed, submitting to the imperial command concerning the population census, come to a city where they are to (continued on p.2)

We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

If you have any questions about the church or would like to speak with our pastor, please call Fr. Matthew at 607-280-1586

Glory be to Jesus Christ.
Glory be Forever.





As the deliverer
of captives
and defender
of the poor,
healer of the infirm
and champion of kings,
victorious great
martyr George
intercede with Christ
our God that our souls
may be saved.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are with us today and invite you to join us at our coffee social following the Divine Liturgy.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Mother Onufria, Larissa, Jack, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Daniel, Michael, Abraham, George, Rochelle, Brianna, Tamam, Catherine, Chuck, Theresa, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

From St. John Kronstadt

Let no one think that sin is something unimportant--no, sin is a terrible evil, that destroys the soul, both now and in the future life. The sinner in the future life will be bound hand and foot (meaning the soul) and cast into outer darkness. As the Savior said: "Bind him hand and foot and cast him into outer darkness;" that is, he entirely loses the freedom of his spiritual powers, which, being created for free activity,

suffer through this a kind of overwhelming inactivity for every good work: in his soul the sinner recognizes his powers and at the same time he feels that these powers are bound by unbreakable chains. To this must be added the terrible torment arising from the very sins themselves, from the consciousness of our own foolishness during the earthly life, and from the image of the angry Creator.

Even in this present life sin binds and destroys the soul. What God-fearing man does not know what sorrow and oppression strike his soul when he has sinned? But besides binding and destroying the soul as it does temporarily, sin also destroys it eternally if we do not repent here of our sins with our whole heart. Here is also a proof by experience that sin destroys the soul temporarily and eternally.

If any God-fearing person goes to sleep without having repented of the sins he has committed during the day, and which have tormented his soul, these torments will accompany him the whole night, until he has heartily repented of his sin, and washed his heart with tears.

The Mystery of Obedience, cont'd from p.1

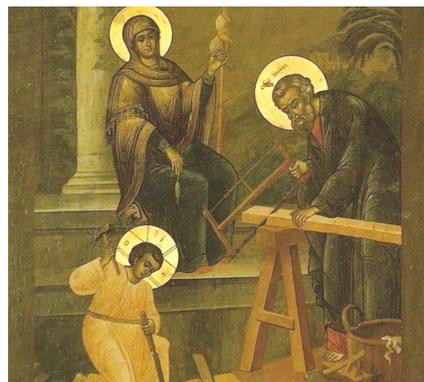
give birth to Christ.

On the eight day after his birth, the Savior was circumcised in accordance with the commandment given to Abraham, when God promised to make an eternal covenant with him and his descendants. The pure, sinless Lord receives the sign of reconciliation, which He established Himself, as God and the Creator of the Law.

From the first days of His Coming to earth, He humbly submitted to the prescribed law, showing that all the Old Testament foretypes find their completion in Him. The fleshly circumcision of Old Testament ends with the circumcision of the Second Adam, and the New and true Testament begins, sealed by spiritual circumcision at the cost of His Blood. Christian Baptism is the true spiritual circumcision, a sign of belonging to a new people that partakes of the life-creating death and Resurrection of the Lord.

All who have been Baptized in the name of Christ must learn this mystery of obedience. On this day, the

Infant God was given the name that the heavenly herald revealed to Righteous Joseph before the Lord's birth. Jesus means Savior. This name revealed His service on earth, for the sake of which the Pre-eternal God and Creator became man.



The name Jesus expresses the whole mystery of our salvation. *He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things*

in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father Phil. 2:8-11).

Those who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.

And Saint Basil the Great reveals to us with exceptional force what it means to be a baptized person, what the mystery of obedience means.

Since childhood, even before receiving Baptism, he humbly obeys everything taught to him in his family (it's impossible not to notice that this family was quite extraordinary, literally an icon of the family, especially pertinent to our time.

In it were ten children, five of whom are counted among saints, and its main caregiver was his grandmother Macrina, a disciple of St. Gregory the Wonder Worker. He studied rhetoric, which is the art of expressing one's thoughts precisely and vividly, under the guidance of his father. Later, he pursued a secular education in Capadocia, Constantinople, and Athens.

(continued next issue)

Homily on the Publican and Pharisee, (cont'd from p.1)

of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; he who does them and teaches others to do so, will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ was pleased with the Pharisee's good works.

But listen to his next words: *For unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* And Christ goes on to talk about the kind of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees: not only do not kill, but do not even be angry with another. Not only stay chaste in marriage, but do not lust—you must be chaste in your mind, too. Instead of being fair (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth), suffer injustice. Instead of loving those who love you, *love those who hate you.* And lest we think the bar is set too high, he simply confirms it: *You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

This is the radical inner righteousness that Christ requires of us. Christ does not condemn the Pharisee for being honest, just, and moral as the Pharisee claimed himself to be. But the Pharisee's righteousness was incomplete. His pursuit of righteousness did not lead to love for God or men. He had started down the path of righteousness, toward God, but on the way he took a wrong turn! He had probably started honestly, as many of the Pharisees, such as St. Paul, had started out honestly in pursuit of God.

But it had taken such a wrong turn that even someone who had not even started on the path—the tax collector in the story—was ahead of him. How had the Pharisee gotten so far off track? I think it was this: the Pharisee had as his reference point other people, instead of God. He didn't have his eyes on God's righteousness and holiness, he had his eyes on other people.

And this was disastrous, because in his sinfulness and pride, this led to exalting himself above others, inwardly condemning others, and despising them. And so therefore he really blew it. Because of this wrong turn, all his good works were useless, because they strayed from the ultimate goal using his works of righteousness as a weapon against others, to condemn them, and to despise them.

The tax collector, on the other hand, saw no one but God. He wasn't looking at the Pharisee . . . he didn't

even physically look up to God, out of shame. But this was because God was *too present* in his vision. It's safe to say the only thing in his mind, the only thing in his inner vision, was God and his righteousness. And making God his reference point, he was able to honestly pray the prayer, *God, be merciful to me, a sinner.* And here, we have what is essentially the Jesus Prayer, one more time.

This story that Christ tells should never be used to somehow try to promote "having faith" over and against good works. This is a false opposition. Christ commanded good works. Good works are meant to be a means to learn true love of God and others, just as the Law was also meant as a means to learn to love God, for the Jews.

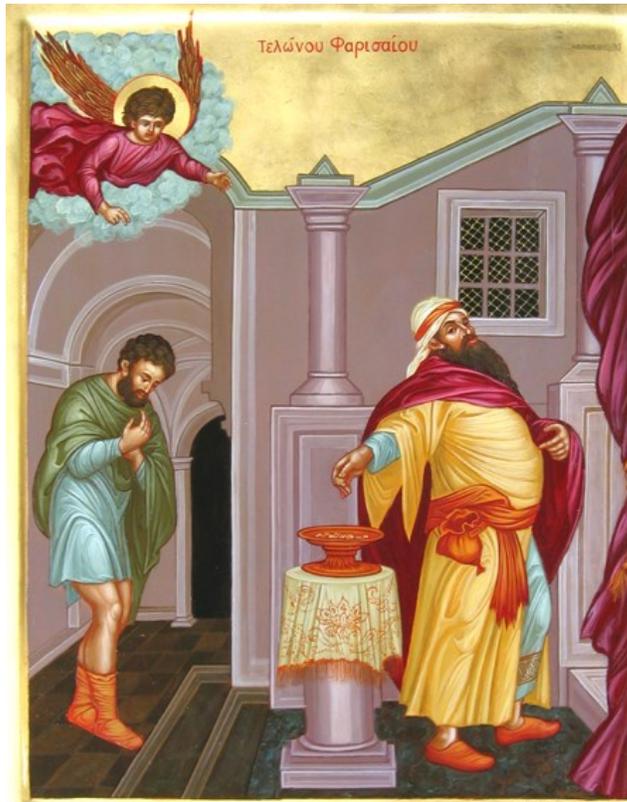
Orthodox spirituality teaches that we cannot cultivate love for God in our hearts without overt acts of mercy and service to others. In two weeks, we will hear the parable of the Last Judgment to drive this home.

But this parable is a strong warning from Christ that our good works can become a curse if we turn from our true reference point; that good works are meant to lead us to repentance, not self-justification; that our good works are a necessary beginning, and paradoxically the end fruit, of a heart turned toward God, a heart that recognizes its own need for God, a heart that truly loves God with everything it has, and other people as well.

So today Christ warns us strongly about comparing ourselves to others. . . using others,

instead of God, as our reference point. I have found this to be very subtle. Do you find yourself subtly judging others? This is an inward disposition that leaves no room for true love. It's destructive to others because it is not loving them; it's destructive to ourselves, because it breeds a confidence in oneself, a trusting in ourselves for our own salvation.

We are in the preparatory Sundays leading up to Great Lent. We will soon be saying the prayer of St. Ephraim, which ends with "grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother." Let us begin to prepare, then, by trying to set aside the comparing of ourselves to others, completely. Let us set our eyes on the true reference point, our Lord Jesus Christ. The more we do this, the more we will be able to pray the prayer of the tax collector with sincerity, *God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*



When we talk about Science, we usually mean things that we can see, measure and touch. But when we talk about faith, then the measure is immeasurable, the image is bright and bathed in light, the word is the beginning and the end of everything. Some think that faith is dull and indistinct, while for others it is smooth and clear, it is the way for man to reach fullness, to be free from the phenomena of the world.

The competition between Science and Orthodoxy begins in the 19th century. It was then, that positivism prevailed and people associated scientific and technological development with the well-being of society. Until then, we saw the great scientists looking for God's plan for the creation of the world. They were trying to explain why and how the world was created, What they didn't understand was reduced to a divine origin so they could have a title to 'put' on it.

In the 20th century this competition heats up, the search for the universe and its operation begins, the theories of things sometimes evolve and reformulate and sometimes depose one another. A race for the scientific community to put everything on paper. However, the Orthodox Church offers a different approach. In order to understand the creation and the image of God, perhaps we should make a parable and apply the 'human principle' but with faith in God as a starting point. In this way the observer sees the world that is not understood and not interpreted, things are not understood as material, but as wisdom and providence.

There is no doubt that the debate unfolding in the public sphere about Science and Orthodoxy has many levels of reading and strong points of conflict. Orthodoxy has measures and tools with which we can record and study, but it also has something else, it has faith, it has Christ, it has the word, these are not measurable elements. With the stereotypical contrast between the light of science and in the darkness of religion, in the freedom of inquiry and dogma, an idealized picture of science emerges. But we forget that science changes while religion is immutable because God is immutable.

It is undeniable that science is constantly evolving and trying to expand its knowledge. There is the impression that Science has evolved so much that has the answer to everything. But in reality we know very little. Religion on the other hand is based on the scriptures and beliefs in the Triune God. So since religion, by defini-

tion, does not work like science, why should we use the criteria of science to judge religion?

In liberal democracies, for historical, social and philosophical reasons, religion enjoys special protection and respect. Religious consciousness is given special treatment because it is linked to the individual identity, personal dignity and existential anguish of everyone. And if science comes to question the Divine and prevail as an interpretation of the world and the Universe, Theology has to answer that God has let science evolve and of course predicted its existence.

Jesus Christ came to preach Eternal Truths to the world for all ages. Today, the gospel of the Lord is perceived as an individual and internal case, and is studied through the historical-critical, sociological and philological analysis of the sources. The science behind Orthodoxy is hidden and revealed to the believer and set forth in the Scriptures. Depending on the place that Religion has in a society, sources and interpretations are counted and translated.

So Science and Religion are called upon to answer the great question of the creation of the Universe and indeed with the full range of their dynamics. The content of Theology is different from that of Science. Theology talks about the Creation of the World, about God, about the fall, sickness, communion with God, salvation, while Science, as the word itself says, deals with the scientific, with what controls the senses. The problem arises when science is sanctified and Theology is secularized. There is no reason for insecurity in the face of scientific achievements. The scientist knows the creations while the seer knows the god and between the created and the uncreated nature there are no similarities.

I believe that God foresaw and supported science and research so that humanity can understand and recognize His creation, scientists putting everything in rules that have a specific explanation and sequence do not find a place in inexplicable. So it is inexplicable or maybe science has not yet asked the right question and therefore does not have the answer it recognizes. If we assume that the explanation of the world is read through the prism of the science we know so far and discover every day, maybe we just haven't been in a position to see the answers because we are not yet at that level of evolution and I will go ahead and say: maybe the "Day of Reckoning" will be present when we are scientifically advanced enough to be able to see it!

