

A Commentary on St. Mark's Gospel

by

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(Chapter 2, verses 1-12)

When Jesus came to Capernaum, a multitude of people gathered around Him. They crowded Him to look at the newly appeared Great Prophet who was so much spoken of, listen to His teachings, and be healed by Him. In a short time, the small, eastern house where the Lord was staying was filled with the thronging crowd, so there was no longer any room in it. At that time, four people brought a paralyzed man to ask the Lord Jesus to heal him. However, it turned out to be physically impossible to enter the house, especially with such a load, since it was particularly overcrowded at the door. So they climbed an outer ladder onto the flat roof of the house, dug through the clay roof, dismantled the ceiling, and lowered the paralyzed on ropes to the feet of Jesus.

It is clear that these people loved the sick man. They ardently desired his healing and believed that the only way to achieve this was the touch or word of the Lord Jesus Christ. By all means they had to place the paralyzed before Him.

The crowd was in the way; the obstacle was almost insurmountable. But they made a decision and they attained what they needed. If it was impossible through the doors, it was possible through the window. If it was impossible through the window, it was possible to break through the roof! But one way or another, the gaze of the Great Prophet would fall on their sick friend!

What perseverance! What adamant energy! These people had character and will; and we see that this perseverance was rewarded. The paralyzed man was healed. They reached their goal.

What a lesson for us! And how accurately it targets the most painful place of the Russian soul! We have many good, sincere, and ardent gusts of inspiration, but...“we are destined to have good impulses, but not to get anything done.”¹ They are rarely followed through, both in the area of the structuring of our own external and community life, and even less so in the area of our personal development and salvation of the soul.

We often stop the fight in the middle, because the path to Christ turns out to be difficult and cluttered. Countless obstacles, piles of stones, steep climbs, impenetrable thickets... Some try to fight, but difficulties and temptations are everywhere, at every step. Our energy runs low and a terrible, disloyal thought suddenly appears from somewhere and takes over the mind: “Salvation

¹ Reference to the poem of N.A. Nekrasov, “Knight for an Hour” (1862).

is impossible for us... We are perished!” And almost indifferently people turn back, giving up any further struggle.

But listen, you who are discouraged, who have lost hope: have you used all means? Have you spent all your energy? You cannot squeeze through the door – you can disassemble the roof. You can break through the wall... Look, it is already shaking! One more effort, and it will fall! And you want to leave? Wait...it will lead to nothing good. A sluggish, uncultivated will gives up further efforts.

Are you familiar with this picture? Is it not true that this laxity of will, this lack of hardiness and iron in one’s character is a specific illness of the Russian soul? How many apostasies, betrayals, and lapses we have, and not because of an active, evil will, but because of cowardice, weakness, and laxity. We do not pay any attention to cultivating our will. Parents’ care for their children is limited to external nurturing, while the diseases of the soul are ignored and the science of life which we absorb starting in childhood does not tell us anything about independence and power of beliefs, but only teaches us how to adapt and comply with the circumstances.

Meanwhile, perseverance and persistent pursuit of one goal are needed in the Christian spiritual life more than anywhere else. Painstaking everyday perseverance here is much more important than a great, single effort of will or heroic feat. This rule applies equally to both one’s personal and community life. A brilliant enthusiast who is easily fascinated and soon cools off, will bring less benefit in a Christian society than a modest hard worker who inconspicuously, but persistently does his job.

Why? Because Christian spiritual life grows gradually, organically developing along with the growth of the soul, and therefore requires constant, continuous, and long-term efforts of will. Excessive efforts can only cause its intense artificial growth, or as doctors say, hypertrophy. Even if this does not destroy the sprouts of growth (as it often happens), this will still result in very harmful consequences. That is why excessive feats which novice monks often undertake impulsively are usually prohibited by experienced spiritual fathers.

The late Father Anatoly, the spiritual father from the Optina Monastery and former cell attendant of the famous Father Ambrosius used to say, “It’s not difficult to collect a large armful, but will you manage to carry it all the way? The path is far: you need to carry it to the end of your life... You will lose it all. Do things according to your strength...!”

I remember from distant childhood that we had a flower pot on the window sill, and a lush, fragrant jasmine plant grew in it. When the first buds would appear on it, we often did not have patience to wait until they unfolded into white, fragrant flowers; and in impatience we often dug out the bud, releasing the delicate petals from the green cover. The flower unfolded to our

delight, delicate and fragrant, but sadly, not for long. Usually by the evening of the same day it shriveled, faded and died, and nothing could revive it.

The same is true in the spiritual life: artificially forcing it, means destroying it. You won't immediately jump to the fifth floor: you'll break down! We must go up the stairs, step by step, through all the floors, starting with the first. Spiritual life is like a flower; it requires constant attention and long-term care; perseverance and continuous work on oneself are needed.

But how can one cultivate perseverance in oneself, if it is not there?

If we study the lives of the holy ascetics, we will find three conditions on which the continuity and perseverance of their spiritual work mostly depended.

The first condition is oneness of purpose. Their whole life was imbued with a single goal: striving for God and the salvation of the soul.

The second condition is complete renunciation of oneself and surrendering one's life to the will of God.

The third condition, born out of these two conditions, is enormous patience.

Oneness of purpose results from oneness of the center of life. When a person is completely imbued with love for God, when every little thing in his life is connected with thoughts about God, when he constantly feels the presence of God invisibly omnipresent near him, God naturally becomes the center of all his aspirations, and each action is determined by the desire to please God and by fear of breaking His commandments. Of course, we see this unity of center and goal in a perfect, completely finished form in the Lord Jesus Christ – this highest ideal of moral character. His whole life and activity are imbued with thoughts of God the Father and the sole purpose of saving man who is perishing. Wherever He would preach, no matter what He said, His main topic was always God and the salvation of mankind.

Throughout the Gospels, not a single fact can be indicated manifesting His concern for Himself or desire for some earthly, temporary goals. Everything for Him was obscured by thoughts about God. He said, *Ye cannot serve God and mammon* (Mt. 6:24), and He Himself was the first example of this wholeness of service to God in His life.

As long as the person is serving two masters, God and mammon, which means that he is tainting his service to God by aspiring for earthly goals and serving earthly idols, there can be no perseverance in him, since these services are incompatible. They mutually contradict one another and the person is forced to alternate them in his life, replacing God with mammon and vice versa, and this makes the general line of his behavior unstable and wavering.

Only when a single center and single goal emerge in his soul, only then does the direction of his activity become constant and only then can he achieve great success.

This is the law of will not only in the realm of religious life, but also in every other realm. All great achievements of the human mind and creativity have been obtained in this way.

When Newton, a most brilliant world astronomer of all times and nations, who discovered the law of gravity and explained the equilibrium system of the celestial bodies, was asked how he reached this discovery, he replied: "I thought about it all the time!" This meant that the mystery of the movement of planets and stars for him was the only question which relentlessly occupied his thought for a long time, being a kind of single center of his consciousness.

The Rumyantsev Museum has a beautiful painting by the artist Alexander Ivanov, "The Appearance of Christ before the People." When you look at it, it seems that it was painted all at once, in one great impulse of inspiration: the poses of the figures are so spontaneous, the composition is so natural, and the impression conveyed by the artist is so integral – the upsurge of attention from a large crowd directed at the Lord Jesus Christ. But go into the next room and you will see a lot of preparatory studies there. Each figure was separately drawn beforehand, often in several sketches with different poses from which the one that most satisfied the artist was then chosen for the painting.

It becomes clear how time-consuming and painstaking was the work of the artist on his creation, how carefully he thought over every detail, and for how long this painting occupied all his attention, serving as the main center of his creative imagination. This persistent, long-term labor resulted in a truly wonderful work of art.

In the period of classical antiquity, a citizen of the Athenian Republic named Demosthenes lived in Greece. Under the Republican system, when all issues of political and public life were discussed openly from the tribunal of the people before a huge audience, good public speakers were of particular importance due to the enormous influence of their speeches on the masses. In the Athenian Republic, this influence was particularly strong, since the Athenians were very sensitive to everything beautiful, including beautiful speech. Therefore, good speakers enjoyed great honor and fame. This honorable career enticed Demosthenes. He decided to become a famous orator. But his first speech to the people was unsuccessful: he was jeered at. The reason was that despite his great mind, oratorical talent, and capacity to express his thoughts eloquently, he had absolutely no physical features to make the right impression on the crowd. He was short in stature, rather unattractive, with inarticulate pronunciation, a weak voice and short breath, which did not permit smooth speech and long, rounded phrases, and he could not count on due effect. On top of all that he had a nervous habit of twitching with one shoulder, which made him look funny in the eyes of the Athenians, accustomed to the beautiful, elaborate gestures of famous speakers. However, this failure did not discourage Demosthenes.

He recognized his shortcomings and decided to overcome them.

Persistent and steadfast work on himself began.

He retreated to the seashore where he hid in a secluded cave, so no one would disturb his concentration. In order to overcome his desire to see friends and acquaintances, and resolutely abandon noisy life in the capital, he shaved half of his head. Looking like that, he could not appear anywhere and whether he wanted to or not, he had to wait until the shaved hair grew back.

In his solitude, he began a series of consecutive exercises. For developing deep breathing, he would climb steep cliffs and tried to speak without stopping during climbing. For developing a beautiful, sonorous voice, he would give long speeches on the seashore during the time of the beating of the surf, trying to out roar the noise of the waves. To overcome his inarticulate pronunciation and make himself speak clearly, he would take a pebble into his mouth and try to pronounce distinctly every sound holding the stone in his mouth. Finally, in order to wean himself from the unpleasant habit of twitching his shoulder, he hung a sharp sword in the vaults of his cave and, while making a speech, he would stand under the sword in such a way that its tip would stick into his body with every sharp movement of his shoulder.

After long and persistent work, Demosthenes achieved remarkable success. When he returned from his solitude and appeared again before the people on the oratorical tribunal, he was a completely different person. A beautiful, strong voice; distinct diction; flowing, spectacular gestures; beautifully constructed speech; resounding, rhythmic phrases – all this immediately enchanted and conquered the crowd. Thus Demosthenes became a famous orator.

Yet how much perseverance was needed to defeat himself and his natural flaws! This perseverance was exclusively supported by a passionate, irresistible desire to become an orator, a desire which for this time ousted everything else from his soul and became the center of his whole life.

If concentration of will in a single center gives such results in a purely worldly, secular field, these results are truly remarkable in the spiritual and religious field, since the weak human will is assisted here by the omnipotent grace of God. When a person is strengthened by grace, he becomes completely reborn and renewed, or as the Apostle Paul says, becomes *a new creature* in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The history of Christian asceticism has numerous examples of such complete rebirth. Strictly speaking, almost every saint went through this process of internal struggle with himself, and victory in each case was achieved by perseverance, striving for one goal: unity with God.

Of the many examples of this kind, let us take only one: Saint Moses the Black, the former ferocious chief of robbers, who later became a humble, holy monk. But before he achieved this, he had to endure an extremely difficult and persevering struggle against temptations.

Soon after his conversion, the demons tried to awaken his former bodily impurity in him. The temptation was so strong that, as he himself would later tell, he nearly abandoned his intention to live a pious life. Exhausted from the struggle, he went to great Isidore, who was a presbyter in the Desert of Scetis and was famous for his holiness of life and the wisdom of his advice.

Isidore tried to console Moses and urged him not to be surprised at this temptation, since having only recently abandoned his depraved lifestyle, he would undoubtedly have to endure a strong urge for his former evil. The experienced old man explained to him that these habits of bodily impurity were similar to dogs. Getting accustomed to gnawing bones in some meat shop, they always return there if it is possible to enter it. But if one does not throw them a single bone and locks the door of the meat shop in front of them, they no longer return and go to other places to find a way to satisfy their hunger.

Moses, strengthened and comforted by this saving instruction, closed himself in his cell and began to humble his body with various feats, especially fasting.

He ate nothing but a small amount of bread each day, worked hard, and prayed fifty times a day. The thought of God, of union with Him, of forgiveness and salvation of his soul did not leave him. The whole purpose of life for him was focused only on this. But the time for his deliverance from temptations had not yet come. The Lord, Who wanted to exalt his dignity by multiplying his victory, allowed that in spite of all his efforts to subjugate his flesh, he would not have peace of mind, especially at night. This prompted Moses again to resort to the advice of other people, and he told of his situation to an old hermit who was considered to be a monk of perfect life.

“What should I do, father?” Moses asked. “My dreams darken my mind and my old habit of evil makes my soul indulge in unclean images.”

The old monk thus replied to the confession of Moses:

“This is because you do not turn your mind away from these memories with enough persistence. Teach yourself to stay awake, pray zealously, and you will see that the temptations will go away.”

Moses returned to his cell determined to act on this advice, and began to spend nights standing in the middle of his cell without closing his eyes, constantly praying and not kneeling for prayer out of fear that his body would feel relief from this change of position and would give the demon a chance to tempt him. Despite everything, his passions continued to rage. Then he undertook a new feat of self-mortification and hard work. Every night he would walk around the cells of those hermits who due to their age and infirmity of strength, could not go for water on

their own, since it was far away. He would take their jugs without their knowledge and would bring them back full, sometimes going up to five miles depending on the location of the cell.

These subtle works of mercy which gave him great fatigue and thereby destroyed the burning fire of passions further aroused the fury of the demons against him. Yet Moses would usually say: "I will not stop fighting until the demons stop tormenting me with seductive dreams" (E. Poselyanin, *Pustynya*).

For six years Saint Moses fought in this way until finally the desired peace and tranquility settled in his soul.

He had won. His perseverance won. Yet this would have been completely impossible for him if his soul had not been controlled by a single thought, a single goal: to come to God. A terrible barrier which was barely possible to overcome grew up for him on this path: his raging passions. In order to defeat them with patient work on himself for six years and not retreat, not hesitate, it was necessary that his main goal of life always shone for him like a guiding star, irresistibly attracting him, and encouraging continuous struggle. In the same way, for every Christian the image of the Lord Jesus Christ should be the central point near which all spiritual life crystallizes, in order for the entire will to develop in a single direction, acquiring tremendous tenacity and perseverance.

The second condition of perseverance in the life of Christian ascetics is the complete surrendering of themselves to the will of God. It seems strange at first sight. When we talk about perseverance, we usually mean the ability and strength to insist on our own opinions, to achieve the fulfillment of our own desires. But here, renunciation of one's will and submission to God is required. Perseverance and submission! Are they compatible at all?

By all means. One can be as persistent in the fulfillment of God's preordinations and commandments as in the fulfillment of one's own desires and even much more so, because in the submission to God, the human will finds powerful support which cannot exist in activities based on self-will and self-determination. Subjectively, this support is in the fact that the requirements of God's Law have much greater authority for a person than his own desires. No matter how proud a person may be, no matter how inclined he is to exaggerate his merits and capacities, in the depths of his consciousness he still cannot place them as high as a believer places God for himself. Therefore, his personal desires may be experienced in a very acute manner, may reach the level of passion, but they will never gain the moral and imperative power which the commandments and demands of the Divine will have for the believer. In his own desires, a person may invariably notice elements of pride and selfishness, which deprive them of moral purity and obligation for his conscience. In the cases when his activity is free from selfish motives and everything is directed for the benefit of his neighbor, he still cannot be

unconditionally certain about the correctness of the path chosen for their practical implementation, since he recognizes that this choice is determined by his own mind whose power he cannot consider to be absolute. In both cases, inevitable doubts weaken the firmness and confidence of his activities. A believer who has completely submitted himself to the will of God does not know these doubts.

Objectively, God's support in activities coordinated with His will lies in the fact that the Lord invisibly helps His faithful servant who is doing His will. This great and powerful help, combined with confidence in the correctness of the path indicated by the finger of God and in the unconditional holiness and infallibility of the norms given by the Lord to human actions, make a believer who obeys God and relies completely on His omnipotent will infinitely more spiritually perseverant and strong than an unbeliever who serves exclusively his "self" and is guided by his selfish desires and the recommendations of his reason.

The third condition for perseverance is patience. The holy ascetics always had enormous patience. Its role in the Christian feat, in waging a continuous struggle against temptations, constantly working hard on oneself, not giving up until the last minute of one's life and not abandoning the work that has been begun without bringing it to an end is absolutely clear. To do this, one must be able to courageously endure, first of all, suffering and deprivation which are always associated with the Christian endeavor, and second of all, inevitable mistakes, falls, and failures which can easily cause discouragement and weaken the energy of an inexperienced Christian. The devil always takes advantage of failures, trying to inflate their importance to the size of a real disaster in order to bring the ascetic to despair and force him to stop his struggle. The capacity to endure suffering and not become discouraged by failures is precisely a form of Christian patience. It naturally evolves from the two previously mentioned conditions of perseverance, namely, from oneness of the purpose of life and from submission to God, and without them one can hardly achieve a high level. It is immeasurably easier to endure suffering, knowing that it is pleasing to God, and to bear failures knowing that they are allowed by God for our training in humility, than to do this without understanding why and for whom it is needed. Meaningless, unnecessary hardships, even the most insignificant, are felt as much more burdensome and annoying than great grief, the purpose of which is clear to us.

The following remarks may be helpful in cultivating patience.

Our impatience in Christian work often depends on the fact that we rather like to enjoy the fruits of the efforts we make and have success which would be quick and noticeable for us. We already want to be saints the next day after turning to God.

If this does not work out, it starts to feel like our efforts are futile, and little by little despondency takes possession of our soul. We are often capable of a major, heroic deed, because

success is immediately apparent there, but our energy soon becomes weakened and wanes in everyday labor which does not yield quick, noticeable results.

To prevent discouragement, one must always remember that not a single effort, no matter how small it is, is done in vain. It leaves its mark on the soul. If we do not notice successes, this most often is the case because our spiritual gaze is not yet experienced enough to distinguish them if they are not manifested on a large scale. Yet if the effort is made in good faith, the results are undeniable; one can be confident of it. Look how slowly and inconspicuously a tree grows. It is almost impossible to see how much it grows in the space of one day, and only at the end of the year significant growth can be seen. It is the same in the spiritual life.

It is always better to look not at the ultimate goal of one's aspirations, but at the next step to be taken. In Christian life, it is almost impossible to clearly discern this ultimate goal, since the ideal is infinite and is barely visible in the distance, while comparing the distance covered so far with the distance which still remains to be traveled is an exercise both worthless and capable of inspiring discouragement. No matter how far a man advances forward, it is such an infinitely long road which still stretches before him, that he always feels like he is at the very beginning of the path. Therefore, one should never measure how much one has grown spiritually, but focus on how to take the next step in the best possible way.

It is better to think about what you should do, than what you may achieve. Do your duty in good faith and do not care much about the results. Entrust this to the Lord.

Always remember the rule of the ancient sage Semaes: "Duties are yours, while the consequences are God's."

Chapter 2, verses 13-28

In this passage, the Evangelist Mark for the first time mentions the discord that surfaced between Jesus Christ and the leading class of the Jewish people – the Pharisees and scribes – in their views on religion and its role in human life. A completely different understanding of religion and its goals gave rise first to arguments between them, which soon turned into hidden enmity and suppressed hatred on the part of the Pharisees. Three points of disagreement were mentioned by the Apostle Mark. Three serious criticisms of Christ were made by the Pharisees.

When the Lord called Levy, the son of Alphaeus, a tax collector who later became the Apostle named Matthew, to become his disciple, in an upsurge of great joy Levy organized a feast in his house.

He invited his former friends, the same publicans as he was, to this feast, as well as many people from the crowd which constantly surrounded the Lord Jesus Christ and which for the most part consisted not of religious professionals, but of people leading an ordinary, earthly, and

sinful life like most of us. At Levy's feast, the Lord found himself in the company of publicans and sinners.

This circumstance provoked the indignation of the Pharisees.

"How is it that your teacher," they said to the disciples of the Lord, "eats and drinks with publicans and sinners?"

The Pharisees hated tax collectors, regarding them as traitors of the nation, because tax collectors served the hated, foreign Roman authorities by inspecting goods, collecting import and export duties, and gathering tolls on bridges and roads. Pharisees deeply despised and considered sinners all those who did not belong to their circle and who did not adhere strictly to the fulfillment of the ritual Mosaic Law and traditions of the elders.

The Pharisees acknowledged only themselves as "pure" and worthy followers of Moses and would never have abased themselves to have fellowship with publicans and people who were careless or not orderly in religious terms. And suddenly this famous Prophet from Nazareth, whom people talked so much about, eats and drinks with this rabble. He talks with them, He teaches them! What profanation of religious preaching and what shame for a person who pretends to be a teacher and mentor of Israel!

The second disagreement was related to the issue of fasting. Strict followers of the Law in everything, the Pharisees did the same with regard to fasts. They considered all fasts commanded by the Law and tradition to be strictly obligatory not only for those people who constituted the religious community and wished to lead a religious life, as the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ seemed to them, but generally for all the sons of Israel. And all of a sudden, fasting is not recognized in the small community which emerged around the new Prophet! The disciples of Jesus do not fast!

The indignant question is clear: "Why do not your disciples fast?"

The third misunderstanding arose concerning the attitudes toward the Sabbath, this kind of "taboo" of Rabbinic Judaism where no deviation from once established rules was allowed. The incident that caused this misunderstanding was the following: *And it came to pass, that he went through the corn fields on the sabbath day; and his disciples began, as they went, to pluck the ears of corn* (verse 23).

The Evangelist Luke adds: *His disciples plucked the ears of corn, and did eat, rubbing them in their hands* (Lk. 6:1).

And certain of the Pharisees said unto him, Behold, why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful? (verse 24).

The Mosaic Law permitted plucking ears of grain with one's hands from other people's fields without using a sickle (Deut. 23:25). This was not considered theft, and that was not the

crime of the disciples which provoked the rebuke of the Pharisees. The violation of the Law from their point of view consisted firstly of the fact that it was still not allowed to eat new bread on this day. The first sheaf of the new harvest was usually offered to the priest who would sacrifice it to the Lord. According to the Law, this should be done on the next day of the feast of unleavened bread or the third day of Passover on the 16th of the month of Nisan. *And ye shall eat neither bread, said the Law, nor parched corn, nor green ears, until the selfsame day that ye have brought an offering unto your God: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings* (Lev. 23:14). According to the testimony of the Apostle Luke, the Lord Jesus Christ and His disciples went through the field on the so-called second Sabbath after the first, that is, on the Sabbath that fell on the 15th of Nisan (according to the interpretation of St. Isidore of Pelusium). Thus, by plucking and eating ears of grain, the disciples did not wait exactly one day until they could have done this legally. But the worst thing, according to the Pharisees, was that the disciples plucked ears of grain and rubbed them with their hands on the Sabbath day! After all, by extension, it might become permissible to allow both harvesting and threshing on the Sabbath day! And this was definitively forbidden by the Law: *Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of rest, a holy convocation; ye shall do no work therein* (Lev. 23:3).

The Pharisees probably expected the Lord to stop the disciples and remind them of the ancient rule. However, when they did not see this happen, they themselves draw His attention to this outrageous violation of the Law: *Behold, why do they on the sabbath day do this?* (verse 24).

These are the three facts which revealed the disagreement between the Lord Jesus Christ and the Pharisees.

In none of these cases did the Lord take the stand of the Pharisees and support their indignation. It is clear that they sharply disagreed in assessing the facts of religious life and understanding its essence. Strictly speaking, the statements of the Pharisees did have some formal grounds, particularly in the matters of fasting and the Sabbath. They stood on the grounds of literal understanding of the Law, but their attitude towards the Law was as if it was something dead, ossified, decisively not allowing any changes or adaptations to the living soul of a person, and therefore losing its spirit of life like a dry tree which can no longer grow and develop, but can only rot.

The Lord Jesus Christ had a completely different attitude toward the Mosaic Law.

He never rejected the Old Testament. He said, *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil* (Mt. 5:17). He confirms it with great power, especially when he notices its crafty perversion or violation in the name of the human traditions of the elders. We see this in the dispute about the Fifth Commandment, the spirit of

which the Pharisees had previously distorted so much that contrary to the categorical requirement of the Law, in many instances they allowed people to forget about their obligations towards their parents or evade them through hypocritical hair-splitting (Mk. 7:6-13). In the texts of the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament, He seeks rules of conduct or support in fighting against temptations (Mt. 4:4, 7, 10). He reproaches his disciples for lack of belief in the Old Testament prophets (Lk. 24:25). He considers the doctrines of the Old Testament about the creation of the world, about man, righteousness, or Providence to be unquestionable. He bases His mission on the history of the Israelites described in the books of the Old Testament. In His sermons and teachings, He often uses sayings, thoughts, images, and comparisons taken from the Old Testament. He knows it so well that this knowledge surprises even the scribes.

But the Lord Jesus Christ not only knew the Old Testament; He always demanded its fulfillment.

After healing the leper, He demanded that he should show himself to the priest and offer a sacrifice for purification as was prescribed by the Law of Moses (Mt. 8:4, cf. Lev. 14:3-4).

When a young man turned to Him with the request of teaching him how to inherit eternal life, He first of all required him to fulfill the commandments of the Old Testament (Mk. 10:19).

When the Passover time came, He instructed his disciples to prepare everything needed for the feast as was required by the Law of Moses (Lk. 22:8).

One could give many examples illustrating the respect with which the Lord treated the Old Testament. Undoubtedly, He considered it not only to be useful and necessary for the spiritual life, but also obligatory for people as the Word of God.

Here in passing we may emphasize the lesson that follows for us: if the Lord found the books of the Old Testament necessary and useful, they obviously have the same importance for us even though we use the highest form of Divine Revelation: the New Testament. That which is necessary for Christ is also necessary for us. Therefore, neglect and distrust with respect to the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament, which can be sometimes seen among certain Christians, are totally unfounded.

However, while recognizing and revering the books of the Old Testament as Divine Revelation, the Lord treats them much more freely and completely differently than the Pharisees. Deeply honoring the basic principles contained there as the fruit of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, He considers the Old Testament forms of their practical implementation in life as permitting changes. Never departing from the spirit of the Holy Scriptures, the Lord nevertheless binds neither Himself nor His followers by formal prescriptions of the ancient Law. Life changes; its conditions change as in a kaleidoscope, and those rituals, customs, and norms of external

behavior which were practical and suitable several centuries ago become completely unsuitable and even impossible at the moment.

But the spirit, this eternally absolute and living spirit which constantly acts in a person, in his life, in his history, the spirit of goodness, truth, and righteousness must always be the same, being revealed only in various manifestations depending on the epoch. Thus, for example, the ancient Law of Moses ordered a person who bought a slave from his compatriots to keep him in slavery for no more than six years, and set him free in the seventh year, and added: *And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty: Thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress: of that wherewith the Lord thy God hath blessed thee thou shalt give unto him* (Deut. 15:13-14). This decree reveals the spirit of mercy and spirit of love for one's neighbor, but can we fulfill this rule? It is clear that we can't, since among us people are not sold into slavery anymore, and the very institution of slavery has long been abolished. Therefore, the spirit of mercy must now seek its expression in other, modern forms of charity.

Another example: for involuntary killers, those who committed homicide either unintentionally or through negligence, the Mosaic Law assigned three cities of refuge where they could flee from revenge by the relatives of the killed person. The spirit of justice spoke here, since it is certainly unfair to punish a person guilty only of negligence in the same way as for intentional murder.

But we have neither cities of refuge, nor patrimonial revenge, and this rule becomes redundant by itself. The spirit of justice finds expression in other forms. It is clear that the forms of human behavior and life, which express the dictates of the religious spirit cannot always be the same, frozen and dead. Demanding this inalterability of form means to put a living organ in plaster.

The result will always be the same: weakening of the living power of religion and death of the fabrics of the soul.

Moreover, if one always keeps religious forms meticulously unchanged regardless of the needs of a spiritually developing person, these forms will either maim the spiritual life and give it abnormal development, or will completely stop its growth. If a child is constantly kept in swaddling clothes without removing or loosening them, he will not be able to grow. In order to have tiny feet, which the fashion requires, Chinese women starting in childhood always keep their feet tightly bandaged. This preserves the child's foot size, stopping its growth, but terribly disfigures the foot and is accompanied by severe pain.

This always happens where the living organic force of life and growth is in place. It is the same with religion: to the degree that the spirit of God, the spirit of goodness and truth, more and

more fully becomes embodied in a person's life, old forms like swaddling clothes become more and more tight for him and he inevitably, although often gradually and imperceptibly, changes them. Life itself, inasmuch as it develops and becomes imbued with the new spirit, outgrows the old framework, does not fit into it, and naturally seeks to push it aside. If one ignores this growth and leaves this framework unchanged, life will simply break it like the rising spring water in the river breaks the ice that binds it. This is precisely the law of spiritual life which the Lord expressed in these words: *And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles* (Mk 2:22).

Through his teaching, life, and death, the Lord has raised religion to such an enormous height and informed those who believed in Him about the spirit of truth and grace in such fullness that not only the forms of external worship became outdated, but even the rules of life and behavior had to be expanded and deepened so they could reflect this breathing of new spirit. Hence a number of antitheses naturally emerge when comparing the new teaching with the old rules:

Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment (Ex. 20:13): *But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment* (Mt. 5:21-22).

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery (Ex. 20:14). *But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart* (Mt. 5:27-28).

It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement (Deut. 24:1): *But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery* (Mt. 5:31-32).

Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths (Lev. 19:12; Deut. 23:21): *But I say unto you, Swear not at all...But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay* (Mt. 5:33-34, 37).

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth (Ex. 21:24): *But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil* (Mt. 5:38-39).

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy (Lev. 19:17). *But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you* (Mt. 5:43-44).

These antitheses do not contradict the ancient rules. They do not cancel, but only develop and improve the norms of the Old Testament. The same spirit of love and truth breathes in them,

but this spirit has already risen from the stage of the infantile state of humanity to an enormous height of advancement and perfection.

The Lord looks at the mutual relationship of the Old and New Testaments in the same manner. *Think not, He says, that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil* (Mt. 5:17). The Russian word for “fulfill,” *ispolnit*, does not quite accurately convey the connotation of the thought. The Greek word used here by Matthew means “to complete”, to give fullness, perfection. In other words, the Lord wants to say that His New Testament teaching does not violate or abolish the Mosaic Law, but completes and develops it. The Pharisees expanded the ancient Law, looking for ever new cases of its application, entangling all life with petty, formal precepts, giving rise to an incredible amount of traditions of the elders, or as the Prophet Isaiah says: *But the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken* (Is. 28:13). In these attempts to regulate all little things in life by unchangeable, dead rules formally derived from the Law, they kept the letter of the Law, but often violated its spirit (Mk. 7:6-13).

On the contrary, Jesus Christ deepens and unfolds the principles of the Old Testament legislation and strengthens its spiritual intensity. He retains its spirit, but often breaks its form. This is the main and essential difference in the attitudes toward the Old Testament of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Pharisees.

Where does this difference come from?

The Lord looks at religion in an immeasurably deeper way than did the Pharisees. For Him, the essence of religion is in the living union of the human soul with God, the union of love. He thus prayed to His Father: *That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us...that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them* (Jn. 17:21, 26). The human soul loving God is what is most valuable to Him, but how this soul reached the love that unites it with God is, strictly speaking, a secondary issue that does not make a significant difference. A person may cultivate this love using orthodox means and strict observance of rituals and regulations developed by religion, which play a pedagogical role. However, the person may achieve the same goal in a completely unique way, as for example the holy hermits did, whose abode in the desert required a special way of life and special rules of external behavior. It is not so much the human activities which are evaluated in Christianity, as the qualities of the soul manifested in these activities. Saint Nicholas publicly slapped Arius and was reproached by the Fathers of the Council, who regarded this as a violation of the discipline of love, but God justified His chosen one, because this slapping revealed the saint’s ardent zeal for faith, his great love for God and of course for Arius, whose blasphemies had to be stopped so

God's wrath would not befall him. The Lord, as always, looks at the root of things. Such a root in the spiritual life is the soul; external actions are only fruits. It is of primary importance that the root – the soul – be healthy and then the fruits will also be good. *Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit* (Mt. 7:17-18).

A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh (Lk. 6:45).

Standing on this point of view, the Lord also evaluates all external establishments of religion, its rituals, rules, and customs solely according to their connection with the soul of a person, that is, inasmuch as they either express religious moods and movements of the soul, or serve as a means of its religious upbringing. He says, *The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath* (Mk. 2:27).

This means that all external forms in which religious life manifests itself are good and valuable if they contribute to spiritual development of a person and help this person to become closer to God. Sincere prayers are valuable because they serve as an expression of faith, reverence, and love for God, and bring God closer to man by disposing the Lord to mercy towards the praying person. Church services are valuable because they are full of symbolism and deeply touching rituals, and develop religious feeling in a person. Works of mercy and various godly deeds are valuable because they foster a well-intentioned will which strives to please God.

Yet all these forms of religious manifestations become meaningless if they lose touch with the living soul. Prayers are meaningless and pointless if they are pronounced only by the mouth and neither the mind nor heart participates in them. Rituals become completely useless if they do not bring up the soul in love and submission to God. Even deeds of charity and service to one's neighbor lose their value if a person does not participate in them with his soul (1 Cor. 13:3).

If we understand all this, if we understand the Lord's view of religion and religious life, we will understand the meaning of all three answers in which His disagreement with the Pharisees was revealed.

When the Pharisees reproached Him that by communicating with publicans and sinners, He dishonors His rank of spiritual teacher, the Lord answered them: *They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance* (verse 17).

The soul of man is the most valuable thing for God. Therefore, the duty of a religious teacher is precisely to enlighten, heal, and return this soul which was darkened, sickened by sin, and gone astray from God, back to the Creator. You do not need such a teacher who does not go

after this soul, and disdains its wounds. It would be meaningless for him to maintain a majestically arrogant distance from the people who need his guidance. If he wants to remain only in the spotless circle of the righteous, he is useless and is not doing his job.

When asked why His disciples did not fast, the Lord replied: *Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days* (Mk. 2:19-20).

This means that fasting does not match their current mood. Fasting is the outward expression of spiritual grief and contrition over sins. But now it is a time of joy for them, for I, the Lord and their Teacher, am with them. It would be ridiculous if the guests invited to the wedding feast were to mourn and fast. So for their exultant soul, fasting is not only useless and meaningless, but would only be a harmful hypocrisy. The days will come when I will not be with them, and then they will grieve and fast. Then fasting for them will be the need of the soul and the expression of yearning love. Then it will be needed.

When, finally, the Pharisees reproached the disciples of Jesus for plucking and eating ears of grain on Saturday, the Lord answered: *Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was ahungred, he, and they that were with him? How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the showbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him?* (verses 25-26).

The episode which the Lord pointed out, refers to the time when David was fleeing from Saul, and this is described in detail in chapter 21, verses 1-6 of the first book of Kings.² Bread offerings were considered to be very sacred (Lev. 24:9), and no outsiders had the right to eat them according to the Law of Moses. However, David violated this regulation, because otherwise he and his retinue were in danger of dying from starvation. The Lord did not reproach David, since the decrees of the Law are intended for the benefit of man and his soul, and where their literal execution is associated with obvious harm to men, they certainly can be canceled.

In the same way, the Apostles should not be reproached for violating the Sabbath out of necessity, for *The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath* (verse 27).

The Pharisees held a completely different view. It is unlikely that they ever seriously thought about the need to perfect their souls in the first place. It is unlikely that they saw the will of God and the main goal of religion in this, and they hardly considered the regulations of the Law as an educational tool for religious advancement. For them, fulfillment of the Law in itself was a means of pleasing God, and they imagined that by purely mechanical fulfillment of all ritual prescriptions they could obtain due mercy and reward for themselves, forgetting that God

² In the English-speaking tradition, this is the first book of Samuel.

is not worshipped with men's hands (Acts 17:25). That is why after fulfilling these regulations, a Pharisee was completely satisfied with himself and did not care about anything else. "Have I not fulfilled everything and what did I err in?" This was the ordinary saying of a Pharisee. Rituals and regulations of the Law thus acquired the role of a sort of magical remedy, the fulfillment of which was mandatory for a man if he wanted to receive mercy from God. For the Pharisees, man was made for the Sabbath, not the Sabbath for man. He could be starving to death if he wanted to, but he had to fulfill the Sabbath decrees, for otherwise, in their opinion, he would incur the wrath of God.

This view on the sacramental importance of rituals has not been eradicated even in Christianity, especially among our Old Believers. Among them rituals also acquired the completely untypical role of a self-sufficient means of pleasing God and thus were declared unchangeable and inviolable. "It had been set before our time: let this stay forever and ever," said Protopope Avvakum, the first leader of the Schism of the Old Believers.

But of course, this opinion is unacceptable for us. The view of the Lord Who considered all rites and regulations of the external law from the viewpoint of their benefit for the human soul is infinitely higher. For clarifying this point, let me give you a comparison.

When an architect starts building a church, the first thing he does is erect the scaffolding. Work is impossible without this: you can lay out five to ten layers of bricks, but you would not be able to go higher. Scaffolding allows one to carry out construction to a huge height, and the higher it rises, the higher the stairs and platforms for workers are set on the scaffolding. Only when the building is completed is the scaffolding removed, and the wonderful building of the church of God appears before you in all its beauty.

The scaffolding is the rites and rules of external behavior. Their task is to promote the upbringing of the soul and construction of the church of God in it, which is the main goal of spiritual work.

Are they needed?

It is clear that they are because without them the church cannot be built. Only the first level can be built at best, but the entire structure cannot be completed.

Are they changeable?

Again, it is clear that yes. As the development of the path goes forward, the external aids should also become more sublime and more sophisticated, adapting to this development. Milk is needed for children, solid food for adults (1 Cor. 3:2).

As a tree grows, one needs to extend the stake to which it is tied.

However, is it enough to limit oneself to the construction of scaffolding, that is, to performance of external rites and regulations as the Pharisees limited themselves to?

Of course not. It is pointless to set up scaffolding if you are not building a church. It has no use on its own.

It must be firmly remembered that if the Lord should be the center of all human life and should reign in the soul of a person, the first concern of a Christian should be to build a church worthy of Him in his soul, that is to cleanse, prepare and cultivate the soul.

This is the main concern. All energy and attention should be directed here, and all religious life and activities should be viewed from this angle.

Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? (1 Cor. 3:16). For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (2 Cor. 6:16).