

Chapter 10, verses 1–16

In this passage of the Gospel, the Lord gave His listeners instructions concerning marriage and adultery.

The reason for these instructions was the insidious question of the Pharisees: *Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife?* As a matter of fact, there was no reason to ask the Lord about this, for the fifth book of the Law of Moses – Deuteronomy – contained specific regulations regarding divorce, and the Pharisees certainly knew these rules very well.

When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, said the Old Law, and it come to pass that she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house (Deut. 24:1).

Since the law did not define precisely the reasons for divorce here, this ambiguity led to terrible abuses in practice, and the Jewish interpreters of the law – scribes and lawyers – obligingly extended the scope of the permission for divorce to the uttermost limits. Basically, a husband could send away his wife for no reason. Meat overcooked by his wife or her breaking a pot already gave him the right to seek a divorce, the procedure for which was extremely simple. The husband only had to hand her the bill of divorcement in front of witnesses, and from the moment she took it in her hands, the divorce was considered a fact, and she was no longer able to make an appeal to anyone. While the spirit of ancient piety still persisted among the Jewish people and family foundations were strong, abuse of this law was relatively rare. However, by the time of the appearance of the Lord, the moral laxity of the people was so great that divorces constantly occurred for the most insignificant reasons, and this threatened society and the institution of family with the most serious consequences. The question of the Pharisees was insidious since they knew the purity of the views and moral rules of the Lord; they knew that He could not approve of this laxity and kind of legalized fornication, and yet if He openly expressed condemnation of the law which in its ambiguity had caused this sad phenomenon in life, this would inevitably weaken His authority in the eyes of His listeners, and the same Pharisees would accuse Him of disrespect for the Law of Moses.

We know the answer of the Lord.

For the hardness of your heart, said the Lord, he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder (verses 5-9).

Thus, according to the Lord, marriage which has taken place is indissoluble, for God has joined it together. The Lord again confirmed this idea of the indissolubility of marriage when he was alone with his disciples, and he called divorce, committed for the purpose of entering a new marriage, adultery.

Whosoever shall put away his wife, He says, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery (verses 11-12).

This is the Lord's high view of marriage, and this is how strict He is about divorce.

How little we now take into consideration these words of our Savior, and what a pitiful picture the contemporary life of so-called Christians offers in this respect!

Divorce has become a daily event. Especially when civil marriage was first introduced to our country, divorce took on the nature of a dreadful epidemic. People get divorced for the slightest reason and even without any reason. "They have different personalities" – this is the usual motivation for the modern-day divorce, although in fact this phrase, like a fig leaf, often covers up a completely unequivocal desire to add some variety to the pleasures of love. Unbridled lust requires a novelty of sensations, and family happiness, the children's future, and fate of the abandoned wife are sacrificed to this idol of adultery.

This shallow attitude towards marriage and divorce is sometimes simply unbelievable.

Once a woman came to a bishop with a request to remove the blessing from her church marriage, that is, to allow her a divorce. She wanted to leave her husband and marry another man who had recently left his wife and divorced her as a civil act.

"Well, are you tired of your husband?" the bishop asked.

"No, Vladyka!"

"Or maybe you are too carried away with that...other one?"

"Oh no ... not at all!"

"So what's the matter? Why are you seeking a divorce...? Look, your chosen one has already left one wife... He will leave you too!"

"Maybe ... But you see, he and I have started to raise geese together... If I leave him now and live with my husband again, I will have to leave the geese...! Please, Your Eminence!"

This is not a joke, but a true fact.

It often happens that spouses who got divorced because of a momentary misunderstanding, soon become reconciled to one another and start to live together again not knowing what they really are now: either husband and wife, or complete strangers to one another!

Many manage in the space of one year to get divorced several times and change several wives!

Is this not debauchery? Is this not adultery?

Adultery was strictly forbidden in the Old Testament.

Thou shalt not commit adultery, said the seventh commandment of the Law of Moses (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18), and its violation was punishable by death by stoning (Deut. 22:22-24). Those who were convicted of fornication of various kinds were subjected to exactly the same severe punishment (Deut. 22:21, 24-25; Ex. 22:19; Lev. 20:10-18).

The Orthodox Church is just as strict about sins against the seventh commandment, punishing these sins with excommunication from the Holy Mysteries as well as from communication with believers. According to the canon of Basil the Great, adulterers, that is, those who committed the sin in marriage, are to be excommunicated for fifteen years (see Basil of Caesarea, rule 58). This penance is reduced to seven years if the guilty person repents of the crime with tears (Sixth Ecumenical Council, canon 87; Basil of Caesarea, canon 77).

The sin of fornication, that is, violation of chastity not associated with breaking marital fidelity, is punished somewhat more leniently. But nevertheless, here, too, the penance of excommunication lasts for nine years and, according to the fourth canon of St. Gregory of Nyssa,¹ it is conducted as follows:

“For those who have polluted themselves by fornication, they are [for three years to be completely removed from church prayer, for three years to participate only in listening to the Scriptures, and for three more years] to pray along with kneelers...in a state of return, and are then to be allowed to partake of the Sanctified Elements².”³

In some cases, this penance is reduced to four years (Basil of Caesarea, canon 22), while even a young woman who marries without the consent of her father is recognized as a fornicator and is excommunicated from the Holy Mysteries for three years⁴ (Basil of Caesarea, canon 38).

If these rules were to be applied with all severity at the present time, probably, there would be few people not excommunicated.

The last Local Council of the Russian Church in 1917–1918 determined loss of the right to be elected to parish offices, that is, to the positions of church starosta, members of parish councils, etc. for an adulterous, reproachable life.

¹ *The Rudder (Pedalion)*, trans. D. Cummings, New York, NY: Luna Printing Co., 1983, p. 872.

² The “Sanctified Elements” are a reference to the Holy Mysteries.

³ The section enclosed in brackets was originally omitted from the Greek Pedalion, but later was restored and included in the Slavonic Pedalion.

⁴ That is, three years from the point that her father’s consent is later obtained and the marriage is approved.

We find the fatherly admonition to keep ourselves from fornication and adultery in the First Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians:

I wrote unto you in an epistle, he says, not to company with fornicators...not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator...with such a one, no, not to eat.... Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate⁵, nor abusers of themselves with mankind⁶...shall inherit the kingdom of God...Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body....Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of a harlot? God forbid. What! know ye not that he which is joined to a harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. What! know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's (1 Cor. 5:9, 11; 6:9-10, 13, 15-20).

Even lustful thoughts, impure desires, dreaming and pictures of one's depraved imagination are forbidden by the law of Christ. "What is the point of keeping external purity," writes St. Macarius, "if the heart is filled with impure desires?"

Protecting believers from temptation, the Orthodox Church prohibits even fancy female hairstyles and thus decrees in the 96th canon of the Sixth Ecumenical Council: "Those who arrange and dress the hair of their head by contriving to plait or wave it in a fashion which has disastrous effects on beholders, and hence offers a lure to unbolstered souls, we undertake to treat them in a fatherly fashion with a suitable penance, while training them like children and teaching them how to live in a sober and sane manner...If, however, anyone should conduct himself in a manner contrary to the present Canon, let him be excommunicated."⁷

⁵ This word in the Russian and Slavonic versions of the Bible is *malakiy*, equivalent to the Greek *malakoi* which refers to those who commit passive sodomy.

⁶ In the Slavonic version of the Bible: men who lie with men, that is who commit active sodomy. According to the fourth rule of St. Gregory of Nyssa (included in the Rudder (Pedalion), the sins of copulation with animals and men lying with men are considered adultery and not fornication "because they too are a sort of adultery...the wrongfulness consists in infringing upon what belongs to another or acting contrary to nature." According to the interpretation of St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain of the 18th century: "As for sodomy...and bestiality (or sexual intercourse with beasts), in these too besides the unlawful pleasure they afford, there is an actual injustice done to what is strange or unnatural, or, more explicitly speaking, they violate the laws of nature, in that they are sins contrary to nature." *The Rudder (Pedalion)*, trans. D. Cummings, New York, NY: Luna Printing Co., 1983, p. 872, 873-4.

⁷ Ibid p. 403

Speaking about the same temptations of fancy and flaunting clothes which evoke unchaste thoughts, the great preacher of the ancient Church, St. John Chrysostom, severely denounced fancily-dressed ladies who would go to church in his time not so much to pray as to tempt men: “Your sighs and tears,” he says in one of his sermons, “are only ridiculous, for it is clear that they come from the same soul who thinks so much about and cares for tinsel trinkets. You only evoke sarcastic laughter and contemptuous looks...”

Holy ascetics of piety used all of their strength and extreme strictness to preserve purity of body, not stopping before the most heroic measures. We already know about the fierce struggle endured by Joseph, the Patriarch of the Old Testament, St. Martinian, St. Moses the Black, St. John the Long-Suffering from the Kiev Caves, St. Benedict of Nursia who threw himself into prickly thorns whenever he was overwhelmed by excitement of the passions and many others, when defending their chastity.

Here is another striking fact of this kind, recorded in the *Prologue*.

During one of the persecutions against the Christians, a young man of deep faith and pure, noble life was taken for torturing. Before subjecting him to the torments, the pagans wanted to desecrate him and for this purpose they set up a richly decorated bed in a luxurious, fragrant garden, to which they tied the martyr. A harlot was let into the garden so she would kindle the lust of the young man with her caresses and seduce him to sin. The poor young man was in the complete power of the unclean woman: he could neither push her away from him, since his hands were tied, nor get away from her. But when he felt that passion was arousing in him and that temptation was overcoming, he bit off his tongue with his own teeth and spat it out with blood into the face of the harlot... And she left in horror.

So zealously, without sparing themselves, did the holy ascetics guard their purity.

Where are these heroes of chastity now? What a pitiful contrast to them is the youth of today, and even our entire society, which is licentious, unbridled, and depraved! People regard sins of the body more than condescendingly. The mad opinion that abstinence is harmful for a young man, that he needs to “sow his wild oats,” or, in other words, needs to waste his spiritual and physical powers on fornication and bury his purity of youth and the fervour of young love in the mud of debauchery, has become common.

Sins of this kind are not hidden with shame like an disgraceful stain, but are displayed, are boasted about, are flaunted. If they are absent, they are invented; fictional stories are told about them in a circle of cheerful, drinking companions. Prowess and success in flirtation are considered almost as heroism, and the so-called social lions, secular show-offs who specialize in lustful debauchery, are sincerely envied by many.

The spirit of fornication reigns in modern life as an absolute sovereign.

Of course, our ill-fated literature, especially that of the most recent period, is largely to blame for this mess of morally perverted concepts of society. All these Artsybashevs, Verbitskys, etc. have done a truly dirty, vile deed, corrupting the imagination of readers with their pornographic works and killing the last remnants of shame in society. But even their literary grandfathers – the founders of modern poetry and fiction – worked hard to clothe wanton lust in the most beautiful forms, to cover up the actual hideousness of this ugly little god and the stench of lustful debauchery with the fragrance of sonorous speech and flowing poetry. What subtle poison pours out from the pages of novels and stories by the luminaries of our literature! It is all the more dangerous because it is presented in the most elegant form of a fascinating story which pleasantly excites the reader's imagination, or is draped in a toga of scholarly discourses on the psychology of love and on the question of women. No wonder young people revel in the sweet poison which permeates the works of these singers and romantics of adultery.

Our poor youth! How many impermissible experiments were and are being done on it now sometimes in the name of classicism, sometimes in the name of realism, sometimes in the name of politics and Marxism, and sometimes in the name of other fashionable idols!

It is easy to go astray in this labyrinth of various directions and lose the only true path marked by the milestones of the Gospels. It is not surprising that disoriented youth either throw themselves into pornography, organizing groups of "Candle Stubs,"⁸ etc., or are carried away by the mysteries of the occult sciences, or, not finding satisfaction with anything, seek a way out in suicide...

Once one respected elder with great spiritual experience and wide confessional practice spoke with great sadness about the rapid spread of secret vices among young people, which was already taking on the threatening scale of a real epidemic.

"Youth is perishing; it is perishing," he said, lowering his gray head, "Degenerating...! And the worst thing is that priests do not pay attention to this: they do not ask about secret vices during confession, do not explain their harm, do not warn young people... To put it briefly, youth is perishing and priests are at fault!"

There is a certain grain of truth in these words, although, of course, not only priests are to blame for the present-day moral laxity. Temptation threatens from all sides.

⁸ Immoral secret societies of Gymnasium students, which became notorious after newspaper publications in 1907.

And yet there is hardly any other vice which would corrupt the physical and moral powers of a person to such an extent and make him completely incapable of perceiving the Spirit of God, as does lustful debauchery.

Why is this sin so harmful and why does the Church treat it so strictly in her attempts to protect her children from this defilement?

First, this vice corrupts the physical powers of a person and his health. *He that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body* (1 Cor. 6:18), says the Apostle Paul. So, first of all, it is a sin against one's own body. The usual results of lustful debauchery are nervous system disorders, draining of the body, and sometimes tabes dorsalis of the spinal cord⁹. The opinion that absolute chastity is harmful to the health is completely incorrect. Medicine knows no cases of such harm at all, and only charlatans can assert such an absurdity. On the contrary, the vice of fornication always leaves a mark on one's health, sometimes causing irreparable harm. The very sight of an inveterate fornicator speaks of how dear a price one must pay for secret pleasures.

Add to this the possibility of the dire consequences of venereal diseases, the danger of which constantly threatens the fornicator. The terrible harvest that this vice is reaping in Russia can be seen by the fact that 32,000 soldiers infected with venereal disease passed through just one medical post located in a rather remote sector of the battle front in the recent war. Terrible numbers! How many such patients are in all of Russia! According to doctors, it is often possible to find this disease even in so-called respectable houses, among respectable fathers and mothers of families. Is this not the beginning of the complete degeneration of people...? It is said that there are white ants in Africa which completely eat away the cores of trees... And such a rotten tree stands, empty on the inside, deceiving people for some time by its appearance. But a relatively light thunderstorm is enough to crumble it into powder.

Why are men so weak in spirit now and why are there almost no real men among them – people of strong will and high spirit? It seems that one of the main reasons, apart from the loss of religion, is precisely the fact that modern men so easily indulge in fornication and almost none of them have preserved chastity.

A person's sensitivity is dulled by lustful debauchery. Impressions are no longer perceived with the usual liveliness and strength, and joys of life do not give the former pleasure. One's cheerful mood fades; one's whole worldview takes on a gloomy and dull tone. Attacks of despondency, especially after falls in young people whose conscience has not yet died out, are

⁹ Due to sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis.

sometimes so strong that they lead to suicide, as is described in one of the stories of Anton Chekhov.

Further, the whole ideal of life sinks down. Dreams of universal happiness, selfless work for the benefit of others, feats of serving people, of a future of mankind full of love and joy – all these holy dreams which inspire a young heart, which attract it like a guiding light and keep a person from the vulgarity of life, dreams which have created in life everything that is beautiful and high – all this idealism of youth fades away and dies out. Instead, one's consciousness becomes more and more filled with pictures of lust, which are dirty, burning, and seductive. The power and poisonous fumes of these images, enchanting and shameful, are such that they drive out all the lofty thoughts and desires from the soul which once attracted it. It often happens that a person is not able to think about anything else: he is completely possessed by the demon of passion. He cannot look at another woman other than as a female mate. Thoughts, one filthier than another, crawl in his foggy brain, and there is one desire in his heart – to satisfy his lust. This is already the state of an animal, or rather worse than an animal, because animals do not reach the level of lustful debauchery that humans do.

In this state, a person can no longer perceive the wafting of grace at all and loses all sensitivity to the influence of the Spirit of God. He no longer has a responsiveness to good things, to which the Lord attracts a person through the hidden call of his conscience: he does not hear this inner voice; he becomes morally dull. This spiritual death is a more dangerous state than the state of anger, for in anger, spiritual forces are not destroyed, but are only pointed in the wrong direction. Here they not only weaken, but may disappear completely. That is why the Lord punishes, usually with His wrath, such people who are already incapable of rebirth. *My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh* (Gen. 6:3) – this harsh sentence was pronounced over people before the Flood, when *the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them...* and when *God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth* (Gen. 6:4-5). A dreadful punishment followed this verdict: the worldwide flood washed away the entire human race, torpid in lustful debauchery, from the face of the earth. The same sad fate later befell the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, also for the sins of lustful depravity: *Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven...And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground* (Gen. 19:24-25).

The peoples of the land of Canaan were also mercilessly exterminated during the conquest by the Jews. They were rejected by God for the sins of lustful debauchery and perished, and the land was taken from them and given to Israel. Speaking to Moses about the abominations of

fornication which defiled Canaan,¹⁰ the Lord thus required from His people: *Defile not ye yourselves in any of these things: for in all these the nations are defiled which I cast out before you: And the land is defiled: therefore I do visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and the land itself vomiteth out her inhabitants. Ye shall therefore keep my statutes and my judgments, and shall not commit any of these abominations; neither any of your own nation, nor any stranger that sojourneth among you: (For all these abominations have the men of the land done, which were before you, and the land is defiled;) That the land spew not you out also, when ye defile it, as it spewed out the nations that were before you. For whosoever shall commit any of these abominations, even the souls that commit them shall be cut off from among their people. Therefore shall ye keep mine ordinance, that ye commit not any one of these abominable customs, which were committed before you, and that ye defile not yourselves therein: I am the Lord your God (Lev. 18: 24-30).*

The loss of chastity also affects the family life and family relationships of people who had a turbulent, defiled youth, with extremely grave consequences. How much evil so-called flirting brings – the passionate courting of one another, common among youth, all of this liberty of mutual relations, kisses which arouse and yet are without commitment, flirtatious play on feelings, sometimes very dangerous and inflammable! The pure gold of sincere love is exchanged here for the dirty pennies of flirting, and this is very sad.

Honest love, the good love of young hearts is a precious gift from the Creator, given to man as a great happiness and joy in life, and this gift must be treated with care. However, people often lose this gift due to carelessness or thoughtless handling of it. Gradually, the heart grows coarse in the unhealthy excitements of flirting, and you can no longer love sincerely, selflessly and purely. There comes a moment when you meet a good person on the path of life, whom you have dreamed of for a long time, to whom you would like to give all your heart, a person who can make up the happiness of your whole life, quite worthy of your love... and you notice with horror that you can no longer love, that you have nothing to love with: your heart has become worn out, frayed, and incapable of deep, lasting feeling. And how painful it is, looking at your past, to see that the pure, bright, and great happiness of love has been exchanged for the mud of dubious pleasures. And it is almost impossible to alleviate this grief.

So, guard your heart! Guard young love!

It is tender like the fragrant petal of a lily which is so easy to stain and crumple with one's rough hands...!

¹⁰ In Leviticus 18:6-23 the abominations of fornication which defiled Canaan are listed, including various forms of incest, adultery, homosexual practices and bestiality.

Perhaps it is children that suffer the most from the dissolute youth of their parents. Physically, this is reflected in them by abnormalities of the organism and various diseases, psychologically – by bad heredity.

Vices of parents are easily inherited by children, and often through their children the Lord sends punishment to parents for their defiled past, which is undoubtedly a crime first and foremost against their offspring. We can say without hesitation that the most important responsibility of parents towards their children is chastity until marriage.

How to fight against lustful passion and temptations against the seventh commandment?

To a large extent, here we will have to repeat what was said earlier about the fight against temptations in general.

1. Above all, protect yourself from temptation. Sin is contagious, and one should not be exposed to the danger of contagion. Avoid a dissolute society where you can be carried away by a bad example. Do not listen to cynical jokes which young people love to flaunt. Boldly stop a joke-teller who gets carried away, calling him to decency, or without further ado leave the company where they start to tell such things, or even better, do not go where you can hear them. Never talk freely and do not allow yourself ambiguous hints. Be strict with your reading: do not indiscriminately read everything which comes to hand, and avoid not only shamelessly pornographic stories and novels, but also those novels which tease and inflame the imagination with pictures of impure passion. Likewise, be careful while choosing shows when you visit the theater.

2. It is good to lead a strict, abstinent life: a simple, frugal table; nothing high-fat, spicy, nothing which excites; pure water instead of wine, tea, and coffee; rough underclothes and simple, modest clothing; a hard bed; moderate sleep and waking up early; bathing or washing up in cold water; regular walks in open air and physical labor – all of this elementary hygiene of life assists in fighting sexual arousal and significantly softens its severity and strength.

3. Always try to occupy your mind with something. “An idle mind is the devil’s workshop,” says the American proverb. When the mind is not busy with anything, thoughts wander involuntarily and most likely stop on something bad and seductive. Temptation is best dealt with in positive ways by offering the mind, as work and exercise, the healthy food of good reading, good thoughts, and lofty imagery.

4. Never play with temptations. Dancing, games with kissing, walking in public gardens and on boulevards, and especially dates, flirting, and coquetry, are all dangerous games. It is easy to slip and fall! Young people, especially young girls, sometimes have a kind of restless urge to look beyond the line behind which sin is hidden. Curiosity and some kind of secret

feeling leads to the edge of the abyss. “What a big deal!” whispers a sly voice. “You can walk to the edge and look beyond it! It is not a sin yet....Just do not fall!” There is something intoxicating in the idea that you are sliding along the edge of the abyss. But do not ever do this. You may not be able to calculate your strength. One moment – you get dizzy, the edge of the abyss crumbles... And here you are in the power of sin! Do not play with fire, especially in a gunpowder magazine: there can be an explosion.

5. In the struggle, do not allow any compromises or concessions. Be strict with your desires and ruthless with yourself.

6. If, with all your caution, you nevertheless are faced with temptation, start the struggle with your thoughts, for it is here that the germ of sin appears. *Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, says the Lord, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart* (Matt. 5:28). Therefore, avoid even the thought of fornication. Speaking about the sin of fornication, St. Augustine outlined four successive points in the development of temptation: first a look, then an image or impure thought, then being captivated by the person, which subjugates the will, and finally the fall. The easiest way to stop temptation is at the first stage, when the look at a woman or her image has not yet been united with lustful thoughts. If a person has not been able to banish this thought on time, has allowed himself to nurture it in his imagination, he soon reaches the state of captivation after which a fall is almost inevitable. But even in the final stages, one should continue the struggle intensely, without despair, adhering to the rule — win or die.

7. If you feel that your strength is betraying you, and sin is ready to overcome you, there is still one great remedy – prayer.

Wherever there is not enough human power, there is hope in God’s help. The Lord is able to save a person even at the edge of the abyss. Especially at those moments when passionate excitement overtakes you and evil thoughts crawl into your head, you should resort to prayer. The most efficient thing in such cases is a short but persistently repeated prayer: “Lord, have mercy!” The late elder Father Macarius of Sviyazhsk advised people to walk slowly at such moments with the short Jesus Prayer on their lips. Other fathers advise washing with cold water or lying on a cold bare floor until the outburst of passion has passed. But in any case, sincere prayer, direct appeal to God, the cry of a contrite heart, as always in the struggle against temptations, are here too the most reliable means of resisting sin, for at times God will help you to fight.

Amen, amen, I tell you, *for without me ye can do nothing* (John 15:5), says the Lord.

Chapter 10, verses 17–31

Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? (verse 17). This is the burning question with which the rich youth turned to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Is not this the most important, perhaps the only question in life that must be resolved at whatever cost for each person? And do we not feel together with the youth that our attention is immediately awakened while we await the answer with uneasy fear?

Thou knowest the commandments, said the Lord, *Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honour thy father and mother* (verse 19). The usual order of commandments in the Savior's answer was slightly changed: first of all, the first four commandments of the Mosaic Law, which speak of man's relationship to God, were omitted; second of all, the seventh commandment was put at the top of the list, and the fifth commandment was at the very end. This probably can be explained by the fact that the youth speaking with the Lord was undoubtedly a religious person, as far as one can judge by his answer and by the nature of the question he asked. Therefore, he did not need to be reminded to fulfill his religious duties in relation to God; on the contrary, he needed to be reminded, first of all, of those commandments against which youth, being giddy-headed and easily carried away, sins most often, and above all, the commandment of chastity.

Master, he answered, *all these have I observed from my youth* (verse 20).

He kept all the commandments and yet did not feel satisfied; there still stirred a gnawing worm of doubt in his soul – otherwise he would not have posed his question. He was sincere in his inquiry. *Then Jesus beholding him*, says the Evangelist, *loved him* (verse 21), as the Lord did not tolerate hypocrisy and pretense. Moreover, the question of eternal life for him was not a question of empty curiosity only serving as a subject of abstract reasoning and verbal disputes. He was not tempting the Lord like the Pharisees. He really was seeking eternal life, for he strictly obeyed the commandments and with all his soul he felt the need to resolve the heavy doubts tormenting him.

He was not sure of the correctness of the path he was on; something was missing, although he fulfilled all the commandments prescribed by the Law. What more was there? What more was needed?

With anxiety and hope, he waited for a response and the explanation for his troublesome perplexity. His hope did not deceive him.

One thing thou lackest, he heard the voice of the One who knew the innermost thoughts of man and to Whom the councils of the heart were open, *go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me* (verse 21).

The Lord immediately detected what lay as a heavy weight in the depths of the young man's soul as an obstacle to further perfection and eternal life, and what even for him was unclear as to the reason for his melancholy and dissatisfaction.

The poor young man suffered from attachment to wealth. Perhaps he himself was not aware of the full force of this attachment until the present moment, but undoubtedly it was the main ulcer of his soul. It distracted him from selfless and complete service to God and split his love between God and mammon. In the end, all of his righteousness was no higher than the pharisaical righteousness of purely external piety, and when the question of what to choose – service to God and eternal life, or riches – arose before him, *he was sad...and went away grieved: for he had great possessions* (verse 22).

He chose mammon.

It is so difficult for a person who owns wealth to keep his heart from the poison of attachment to this idol and give up habitual luxury and comfort! One needs much determination and a sincere urge to exchange all this for a poor life full of deprivations, even if the light of eternal bliss shines in the distance as a reward for the endeavour of voluntary poverty.

The Lord immediately noted this weakness of the human heart.

How hardly shall they that have riches, He says, enter into the kingdom of God! (verse 23). And since owning wealth does not constitute a sin on its own, He added an explanation: *Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God* (verses 24-25).

Thus, the Lord condemns love of and attachment to wealth, condemns those who give their hearts to the golden idol and trust in wealth more than God.

Some suggest on the basis of this Gospel episode that the Lord demands from each of His followers a compulsory renunciation of wealth which constitutes an insurmountable barrier to entry into the Kingdom of God. "A camel," they say, "can never pass through the ear of a needle and therefore the Kingdom of God is unconditionally closed for the rich."

This opinion is certainly wrong, for although the Lord spoke about the difficulty of salvation for the rich, He immediately added that whatever is impossible for the natural powers of man is possible for God, that is, with the help of God. And we know indeed many rich people, for example the Old Testament patriarchs who in all fairness proved to be worthy of the Kingdom of God.

Others give the Lord's words the meaning of a social rule and claim that according to the Savior, there should be no wealth or private property at all and that all belongings of Christians

should be in common possession, as it was in the original community of Christians when *neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common* (Acts 4:32).

It is certainly true that questions of material well-being are almost the most important obstacle on the way to salvation; it is true that the majority of the holy ascetics who attained heavenly glory did not bind themselves at all with any possessions, nor with the “affairs of this life” (2 Tim. 2:4), but nevertheless, there is no reason to say that Christianity prohibits the very principle of private property.

In the Old Testament, revealing His will at Sinai, the Lord gave a very specific commandment: *thou shalt not steal* (Ex. 20:15). The lawgiver of the New Testament Jesus Christ reconfirmed that commandment precisely in the present passage of the Gospel, when, addressing the young man, he said: *Thou knowest the commandments...Do not steal.*

Since the Lord forbids stealing, it is clear that He permits the right of private property, because wherever there is no personal property, where no one has anything of one’s own, there can be no talk of stealing, that is, of appropriating someone else’s property. Otherwise, in such a case, if I take the shirt that you are wearing from you, or the pot in which you are cooking cabbage soup, I am not stealing your thing, since you have nothing of your own, but I am only taking an object of public use, to which I have the same right as you.

Furthermore, in the lives of the Lord and His disciples we constantly encounter objects of personal possession: clothing, money, etc.

Yet while recognizing private property and even the right to wealth, the Lord requires a completely different use of possessions than that which is quite natural from our point of view, and looks at the purpose of ownership in a completely different way than we do.

We usually think that our possessions were given exclusively to us, only for our personal, selfish use. We do not find such a point of view anywhere in the Lord’s teachings. The Lord never said anything about such a right of exclusive use. On the contrary, precepts of the opposite nature are recurrent in His speeches: *Sell that ye have, and give alms* (Lk. 12:33); *Give alms of such things as ye have* (Lk. 11:41); *Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away* (Matt. 5:42), etc. The Lord gave the same commandment to the rich young man, to sell his possessions and give to the poor. One gets the impression that while allowing possession of personal property, the Lord requires, however, that we use these possessions not so much for ourselves, as for charity to our neighbors who are in need. And this is truly the case. Some parables of the Savior, such as those of the talents, of the unjust steward, of the foolish rich man, of the rich man and Lazarus, allow one to think that the Lord looks at

rich owners simply as custodians or stewards of possessions which were temporarily entrusted to them, and they will have to give an account to God for their management of them. If these possessions are used only for their personal needs and pleasures, they will not avoid the sad fate of the rich man who is mentioned in the parable of poor Lazarus.

“But what is the point?” you may ask. To give a person wealth and demand that he spend it not on himself, but on others? Was not it easier to reward directly with material possessions those who are in need of them? Why should this be done through stewards who perhaps will not even want to fulfill this task?

There is a deep meaning to all of this.

The spiritual basis of life is love... All commandments are *comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*, says the Apostle Paul (Rom. 13:9). The fulfillment of the commandment of love for one’s neighbor is the highest duty of man in relation to man. *If...I have no charity,¹¹ I am nothing* (1 Cor. 13: 2). But love in its highest form is not given as a natural gift, and although there are seeds of love in every heart, their development depends on the nature of life that a person leads. Love can be developed, but it can also be extinguished entirely. Deeds of mercy, charity, care for others – these are the best means for fostering love. For this purpose, the Lord gives material possessions to a person.

All talents, all blessings of life, both spiritual and material, are given for the purpose of mutual service which is the only way to develop love. We must use them precisely for this purpose. This is a great educational tool in the hands of God. We are callous due to our sinful nature. Giving alms, offering help and mutual favors – in a word, all the practical activities of love soften the heart, make the grief of others more understandable and close to a person, generate gratitude in the hearts of those who are the recipients of the good deeds, and develop love in those who do them, perhaps even more so in those who give than in the recipients. If we keep the resources given to us by God only for ourselves, by doing this, on the contrary, we develop egoism and serve ourselves, that is, something completely opposite to God’s intentions. Generally speaking, a resource in the spiritual life can be directed either towards good – for God, or towards evil – for the devil, and each instance where the moral foundations of a person are put on trial can either strengthen him spiritually, raise him higher, or vice versa, weaken him and lower him morally.

¹¹ In the Russian version of the Bible: love.

Wealth used for serving one's neighbors is a means of moral uplifting and strengthening. In this sense, the principle of ownership can be called sacred, because in this case it serves the higher purposes of God.

Wealth spent exclusively on oneself and on one's pleasures, is an instrument of sin and moral falling, for in this case, its use is contrary to the will of God and fosters only self-love.

On the other hand, the attitude towards other people's wealth on the part of those who do not have it, can be twofold: it can be correct, moral, in accordance with the Divine will, or, on the contrary, it can be false, immoral, and contrary to the Commandments of God.

When people without wealth, who make use of what is given out of the hands of others, have a feeling of gratitude towards their benefactors, this being nothing other than a well-known form of love, the amount of love increases in the life of the world due to this relationship. New, spiritually binding ties are extended into the mass of society and the Divine laws which life is built on are fulfilled. This attitude is correct from a Christian point of view.

But there can be other forms of attitudes towards other people's property – envy, impudent pretensions, forced appropriation, etc. – relationships which bring discord, hostility, confusion, and which are in decisive contradiction to the Creator's commandments and the laws of harmony in life. Such relationships are wrong and immoral, because they corrupt society.

The most common form of such a relationship is theft. The commandment not to steal was given in the Old Testament through Moses and it is the eighth commandment of the Sinai Law.

It was also confirmed by the Lord, as we have seen above (Mk. 10:19). In the Old Testament, it was observed very strictly as were all the commandments of the Law of Moses, and penalties for stealing were rather severe. In the book of Exodus, the following punitive norms were established: *If a man shall steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it; he shall restore five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. If a thief be found breaking up, and be smitten that he die, there shall no blood be shed for him. If the sun be risen upon him, there shall be blood shed for him; for he should make full restitution; if he have nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft* (Ex. 22:1-3). As we can see, according to the law, the person committing theft faced not only a fine, but also slavery, if he could not pay the fine, and even the possibility of being killed if he was caught stealing at night. In extreme cases, this crime was punishable by death.

When, during the capture of Jericho, Achan, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, stole a beautiful Shinarite garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a gold bar weighing fifty shekels from the booty of Israel, which was called accursed, Joshua and *all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver, and the garment, and the wedge of gold, and his sons,*

and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had: and they brought them unto the valley of Achor...And all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned them with fire...And they raised over him a great heap of stones unto this day (Joshua 7: 24-26). So severely was theft punished in ancient times.

For some forms of theft, for example if a person steals wax candles or oil from the church, he is excommunicated by the Orthodox Church (Apostolic Canon 72).

People of a high spiritual life, Christian ascetics, strictly kept the eighth commandment and were extremely careful about other people's property, diligently protecting themselves even from accidental appropriation of what did not belong to them.

Once Abba Agathon and his disciple found a bundle of pea pods dropped by someone on the road.

"Abba! Bless me to pick them up...," said the disciple.

"But you did not put them there!" answered the elder. "Why do you want to take that which does not belong to you?"

And so they passed them by.

When St. Isaac would pass through a field, if he wanted to pluck an ear of grain, he would first ask permission from the owner of the field and, if he did not find him nearby, he would never do this of his own will.

Once, on a hot, sultry day, St. Zeno, suffering from thirst, plucked and ate a cucumber from someone else's garden. But then he felt such strong remorse that he forced himself to stand motionless for three days under the scorching rays of the southern sun as a punishment. By the end of the third day, the holy elder was completely exhausted and could no longer continue his penitential endeavour. Then he left the place, giving himself the instruction: "Zeno cannot endure not only the fire of hell, but even the heat of the sun... So, Zeno should not take anything that does not belong to him...!"

The Life of St. John of Persia tells us the following event.

He owed one brother a small amount of money and, since he could not pay the debt, he was strongly grieved and prayed to God for help. One day, passing through the desert, he noticed a gold coin on the sand. At first he wanted to pick it up, but then he restrained himself and walked past. Three times, on different occasions, he ended up passing the place where the coin lay on the yellow sand, glistening in the sun, and it seemed to mock him. Each time he was overwhelmed by temptation to use the find, and each time he suppressed this desire within himself. Finally, he told everything to his spiritual father, the aged Abba Jacob. The old monk gave orders to make an announcement about the find in the neighboring monasteries and cells, and only after a long

time, when no one claimed the loss, did the Abba allow St. John to take the coin and pay the debt, after being convinced that this find was the work of the goodness of God, in response to the prayer of the monk.

People of a righteous life carefully avoided not only outright theft, but also any deception associated with material loss for others.

When St. Epiphanius of Cyprus was still a youth, he was once sent to the market to sell a donkey. There was an old Jew among the noisy crowd of buyers who surrounded him. He quietly pulled the boy aside.

“Listen,” he said to him, “We believe in the same God... Tell me the truth: is there a blemish in your donkey? Is it worth what you ask?”

“No,” Epiphanius answered truthfully, “Its legs are no good... Look for yourself!”

He showed him the spoiled leg of the animal, and added, “I do not recommend buying it!”

He told the same thing to the other buyers.

These holy people were so conscientious and irreproachably honest.

And not only saints. Honesty and conscientiousness in contracts and transactions of various kinds are considered obligatory for every decent person who respects himself among the most ordinary citizens of Western European society. In some countries, the honesty of its inhabitants is surprising and extraordinary for our morals.

One Russian traveler, while passing through Finland, lost his gold pocket watch on the road. Grieving a bit about the loss, he wanted to give up and go on, assuming that nothing would help and that no one would return the watch to him even if it were found. Fortunately, his companions found out about his loss.

“You are wrong to think this,” they told him in response to his hopeless, discouraged complaints. “Report about the loss to the nearest parish.”

He did just that; he told the pastor of the nearest church about the lost watch.

“Wait here until Sunday,” the pastor told him kindly. “If someone from our parish picked up your watch, you will receive it.”

The traveler stayed.

On Sunday at the service, during the usual announcement of news on parish life in this Lutheran church, the pastor informed the people who were gathered about the loss of the watch and asked them to return it to the person whom it belonged to.

The watch was returned immediately.

Again in Finland, this traveler was extremely surprised that when handing over his hand luggage to a railway porter at the station, he was not given any receipt from him.

“But how do I get my things back?” he asked.

“It’s very simple: go into the baggage car and take them.”

“Is this customary here?”

“Yes.”

“But what if someone else takes my things?”

“Don’t worry... This doesn’t happen here.”

“How strange... but it is possible? Listen, what if I go and take someone else’s suitcase instead of mine?”

“Someone else’s? But what will that do for you?”

“Well... well, if I like it better?”

“So you will steal it?” the porter interrupted sharply. “Well, there is a court for that!”

And he turned away with indignation, making it clear that it was inappropriate for decent people to even talk about such a thing.¹²

In many places, owners do not lock the doors of their houses when they leave. Theft is so rare there!

What a sad contrast to this honesty can be seen by us in Russia!

Once, during an excursion for teachers abroad, a small group of Russian teachers entered a public English school in London. They were received very kindly. They were taken to all the classes, and were shown and given explanations about everything. Some of them attended a geography lesson. One of the teachers became interested in what was being taught to English children about Russia. He took a geography textbook from the desk, flipped through it, found the section on Russia, and began to read. And what did he find?! After an excellent and accurate geographical and ethnographic description of the country, the textbook contained a small note about the ethnic character of the Russians, which made him redden with deep shame: “A distinctive feature of the Russians is dishonesty.”

This is a feature of the Russian people which English schoolchildren study.

Nevertheless, one can redden from such a description which foreigners give us, but one must admit that it is not far from the truth.

There is a so-called blackboard in the London Stock Exchange, on which the names of unscrupulous firms and merchants, which one should not do business with, are written. Russian last names prevail.

¹² A similar trust of people’s honesty can be found at the baggage claim in airports in Russia today.

It will suffice to mention some Russian proverbs expressing the popular view on honesty, especially in trade matters: “If you don’t cheat, it won’t sell,” “From honest labours, you won’t acquire a stone house,” “Lower your soul to hell, and you will become rich.” And worst of all, it is not irony which can be discerned in these proverbs, not mockery, but one might say, a completely calm, ideological justification of trickery.

In decent society, it is even somewhat uncomfortable to bring forth arguments that one should not steal, yet nevertheless, many of us, especially in recent times, have become corrupted to such an extent that we seriously need such arguments. Many look at someone else’s property from the point of view of the swindler who answered the question about his occupation in the following way:

“I am a healer... Yes, a healer: I treat social ailments and deal with fairer distribution of valuables in people’s pockets...!”

A flippant attitude, to put it mildly, towards appropriating someone else’s property is unusually great, to the point of crime, and threatens to become a universal disease. Apparently, here the majority stick to the rule: “Steal, but don’t get caught,” “One is not a thief until one is caught.” And there are very few inner principles of honesty among people.

Meanwhile, not to mention the fact that theft is a violation of the commandment of God, simple practical observations speak against it. Stolen property is rarely of benefit, and what is easily acquired, is easily squandered. As St. Tikhon of Zadonsk said: “Things that are acquired by unrighteous means flow like water through one’s fingers... Trying to increase one’s well-being at someone else’s expense is the same as drawing water with a sieve.”

Several years ago, a barge with cotton wool was badly damaged by a storm on the Volga River near Bogorodsk. The peasants of the surrounding villages rushed there and stole all the cotton wool from the damaged barge. Since the cotton wool was soaked, it was laid out on the roofs of the houses to dry: but raw cotton wool, as you know, has the ability to ignite spontaneously, and it quickly ignited while spread on the roofs. A fire started, from which forty-five households burned down. Only then did the peasants realize their sin and in fear threw their booty into the Volga, but unfortunately, it was too late!

Gregory, the author of the biography of St. Basil the New, told the following account about himself.

Once, while staying at a hotel when traveling, he found a belt which was left by some passing merchants, and took it. The merchants returned to the hotel, looked for the belt everywhere in vain. Gregory hid his find. And what happened...? Soon after that, he lost his own belt which was embroidered in gold, moreover, with money sewn into it. When brought to his

senses by this incident, he began to grieve and repent. St. Basil appeared to him in a dream holding a broken pot and, pointing at it, told him: “If anyone steals even this, he will lose four times more here... And if he does not have possessions, his torment will quadruple in the future.”

Dishonesty has a particularly detrimental effect on public activities and on government life, giving rise to mutual mistrust and suspicion, which corrupt society. Theft probably takes its worst form here in embezzlement of state funds, which apparently constitutes a widespread sin among the Russian serving class. Even Tsar Peter the Great, irritated by constant bribery and theft on the part of civil servants, threatened them with severe punishment up to and including the death penalty. One of the prominent nobles of that time, Yaguzhinsky, quite frankly remarked:

“Your Majesty, maybe you want to reign alone? After all, everyone steals: some more, others less.”

Meanwhile, this dishonesty in public or government affairs threatens us with the most serious consequences. It is already a kind of self-destruction or self-decomposition of the social organism. The state then represents a gigantic anthill where each ant, seeking profit for itself, takes state property into its own lair, for its own needs. It is not difficult to see the result of such a process: common property will soon be plundered, the state will collapse economically, and sooner or later a time will come when there will be nothing left to steal and no one to steal it from. Economic life will reach a dead end.

Finally, dishonesty disgraces a nation, disgraces and discredits its beliefs and ideals in the eyes of other nations, even those of a lower cultural level. People then lose their right to be respected and can no longer fulfill their Christian mission of converting and enlightening other peoples, to which the greatness of the religion they profess would give them the right.

How painful it is to read, for example, such stories:

“A young missionary monk was giving a speech to a gathering of pagans in Tibet. With fervor and ardent inspiration, the young monk spoke about our Savior, about His sufferings which were an atonement for man’s sin, about His great love for people, about His wondrous teaching which brought light and happiness to life, about eternal bliss, etc. The lama priests listened to the preacher carefully and thoughtfully, not interrupting his speech with a single sound: Oriental etiquette was strict.

Finally the missionary finished. Slowly and majestically, an old lama rose up from the circle of listeners. He bowed low in the Oriental manner, crossing his arms on his chest, and began a speech in response: ‘We listened with great love to our brother, listened to his wonderful speech about Christ the Savior who taught us to love each other and sacrifice ourselves for

others... Yes, Christ is higher, wider, and brighter than Buddha. His teaching is infinitely better and can constitute the happiness of mankind. One has to be a stupid blind man not to see and understand this. Paradise would be on earth if His teachings were fulfilled... But where are the practitioners? We do not see them and cannot find them, and your people, possessing such a great religion, have not become either better or happier because of it. With our humble beliefs, we were better than you. We did not know Christ, but were honest, straightforward, truthful, chaste, sober... We did not know locks on our doors, and we could put a purse of gold coins on the road with certainty that no one would touch it. Theft was not heard of in our land until your people came. You brought us drunkenness, fornication, and dishonesty. Anger, hatred and theft appeared along with you. Crimes of all kinds began. Mistrust and locks appeared. One cannot recognize our honest, kind people. Our youth are dying from dissipation and drunkenness. You have made us unhappy with your Christ...'

That is what the old lama said.

'I felt as if I was spit upon,' adds the missionary. 'Never in my life have I experienced a deeper sorrow than at that moment, with the inner realization that the old lama was right and that the shining banner of Christ was trampled into the mud by the unworthy life and vices of the people to whom it was entrusted.'"

Yes, it is a great joy to be a Christian, but this great title comes with great responsibilities.

I...beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, the Apostle Paul instructs us (Eph. 4:1).

You may say, "But we do not steal, and you cannot reproach us for dishonesty...!"

Is that the case? Look over your life: are there any cases of petty theft? A borrowed book not given back to its owner, unreturned change which was miscalculated by a clerk, a tree cut down in the forest, an apple plucked in passing from someone else's garden, an appropriated find, etc. — after all, this is also theft. It may seem like a trifle, but it gradually develops the habit of a careless and thoughtless attitude towards other people's property, and given the chance, major sins can grow on the basis of this habit. Fine dust, accumulating over the years, may clog and stop the entire mechanism of one's spiritual life.

Therefore, be strict and attentive to little things. Theft is always theft, whether you steal a million or do not return a found penny. And the Lord says in no uncertain terms: *thou shalt not steal.*

Chapter 10, verses 32-45

Approaching Jerusalem with His disciples, the Lord began to speak again about the sufferings which awaited Him in the city. This was the fourth time that He spoke about this with His disciples over a relatively short period of time. On the way to Caesarea Philippi (Mk. 8:31), as they came down from the Mount of the Transfiguration (9:12), when passing through Galilee (9:31), and upon approaching the eternal city (10:32-34), He spoke about the same thing – His forthcoming torments, shame, and death. The task of His messiahship had been fulfilled; the final endeavour, the fatal endeavour which was to crown His great work of saving man, was near; the cross was already visible at the end of the path of His difficult life; He no longer separated himself from thoughts of this phantom of death, which was menacing and inevitable. He was fully immersed in thoughts about the impending climax. Yet, no weakness was seen in Him, no desire to evade the terrible cup, and He voluntarily went to meet death.

And what about his disciples? Timid, trembling with fear, anticipating something terrible, they obediently followed their Teacher, but they still did not understand Him. Knowing their faint-heartedness and weak faith, the Lord foresaw that their faith in Him as the Messiah might be shaken, taken off guard by the dreadful events of the execution of their Rabbi. Therefore, He repeatedly warned them that He would have to suffer, that this was His messianic ministry, and that He took on this cross voluntarily... And despite all of these explanations, the disciples could not free themselves from the prejudices of their ethnic pride and they still expected to see their Teacher, the Messiah, in a halo of earthly glory and royal power. The thought of a suffering and dishonored Messiah was still beyond their capacity to comprehend. While the Lord was speaking about His coming sufferings, two of His beloved disciples approached Him with a request, which showed that they did not understand His words.

They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory (verse 37).

It is clear that the words of the Lord did not dissuade them in any way, that they did not have even the slightest idea about the terrible fate awaiting their Teacher, and that they dreamed only about the glory of the earthly reign, in which they asked for better places for themselves. And this was said by James and John, the closest disciples to the Savior, the very disciples whom He chose from among all the others to be taken upon the Mount of Transfiguration in order to prepare them for the upcoming events. How hard this persistent misunderstanding must have been, especially at such a sorrowful moment when the soul, agitated by grievous forebodings, needed more than ever the sympathy and compassion of loving and understanding hearts.

Jesus said unto them: Ye know not what ye ask.

Yes, most certainly they did not know. If only they had suspected what dark irony their vainglory and naive lack of understanding of the unfolding events gave to this request! Asking the Lord for places to the right and left of Him! This meant asking for the lot of those two thieves who were crucified next to Him! Was that what they wanted?

Further, an interesting conversation began between them and the Lord, which, since the disciples did not understand its true meaning, sounds like an ominous play on words.

Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? the Lord asked them.

This meant: “Will you dare to die on the cross, like me? Are you able to endure the suffering that awaits Me? Can you drink the cup of humiliation, shame, and torment prepared for Me?”

And they said unto him, We can.

But they were thinking in their own way. It seemed to them that the Teacher was asking whether they had the strength and ability to share with Him the labor of conquering and ruling the future kingdom, and they self-confidently replied: “We can.”

The Savior did not discourage them. Three futile attempts to open their eyes were enough to demonstrate the pointlessness of further experiments of this kind. He only ended His speech prophetically: *Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized: But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared* (verses 39-40).

The Lord predicted for His disciples suffering and persecution which they would endure as fervent heralds of His teachings. Where, when, and under which conditions this would happen depended on the Almighty Providence and plans of God, but they would not die together with their Teacher.

The conversation of the sons of Zebedee with the Lord was not kept secret from the rest of the disciples. They heard what was being said and became indignant with James and John.

This is always the case where human vainglory and competition for earthly blessings become mixed in. The small community of the Lord’s disciples lived peacefully and amicably until this dispute about primacy arose. It had arisen even earlier, during their travels in Galilee, but then the disciples were still ashamed of these manifestations of self-conceit and egoism, and did not even dare to tell the Lord about their dispute. It was resolved without any particular consequences within their close circle, although it caused a remark and lesson about humility from the omniscient Teacher. Now rivalry flared up again among the disciples, and the most ardent of them, *The sons of Thunder* (Mk. 3:17), were already taking practical steps to secure

better places for themselves in the future kingdom of the Messiah. No wonder they provoked the indignation of the other ten.

On what grounds, in reality, could this claim to primacy have been based on? After all, each of the other disciples equally bore the burdens and hardships of the wandering life together with the Lord, leaving their home and family, and all previous attachments for His sake. Some of them, for example Andrew and Peter, were called earlier and were the first to join the circle of the disciples. Nobody wanted to recognize the superiority of the sons of Zebedee. The first cloud of discord appeared in the azure sky of the peaceful apostolic life.

Then the Lord, reconciling the disciples, gave them one of the greatest of His covenants, which was to transform their lives. He pinpointed not only the usual cause of human discord and the best way to avoid it, but established a completely new, hitherto unknown principle of the Christian arrangement of society.

Ye know, He said, that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (verses 42-45).

The discord between the disciples was caused by the desire of James and John to seize the top places. This attempt caused general murmuring and indignation. Love of power and pride always evokes envy and rivalry. This is the most important and common reason for hostility and animosity among people. People always strive for predominance and for something which, according to their beliefs, constitutes the greatness and splendor of life, and since these benefits cannot be shared, people tear them out of each other's hands.

There are two opposing worldviews, two different courses for one's will, two irreconcilable understandings of the goals of life and its true greatness. Usually people do not understand the latter and strive for external, flashy, ostentatious things, but the idol of ostentatious greatness requires sacrifices and struggle.

Indeed, what is it that is usually considered great, what is it that causes young hearts to light up with passion, and what are thousands of greedy hands drawn to?

Let us imagine a long line of nations which have appeared in history, passing before us. Coming out of the darkness onto the narrow stage of life, they again are lost without a trace in the past. The Chaldeans, Egyptians, Babylonians, Goths, Sarmatians... How many there are! The nameless line of people stretches in an endless ribbon. Their life has appeared and disappeared,

and only forgotten graves mark that they once lived. Which of them was chosen by history and immortalized in the memory of posterity, marking them with the seal of greatness?

Here comes Alexander of Macedon, who was called the Great. A man of boundless military ardour. Already in his youth he would say, “my father will conquer everything and leave nothing for me to do.” Thirst for glory and power burned in his heart; he was intoxicated by the whirlwind of battles and great victories; his entire life was sacrificed to this passion. And what was the result? With a crashing noise, his triumphal chariot swept over almost the entire world. He achieved his goal. But when the dusty cloud of glory and servile delights dispersed, only corpses, destroyed towns, charred ruins, and a sea of tears and blood remained where this proud young man had passed...!

Here comes Napoleon, called Le Grand, that is the Great by the French, undoubtedly a prominent figure who once resounded in history – a man who managed to conquer almost half the world. But look at the inside, at the moral underpinnings of his life.

During a fierce battle with the Muslims in Palestine, near Jaffa, when the French were close to victory, they still could not break the resistance of a select detachment of several thousand soldiers, which consisted mainly of Arvanites.¹³ Then Napoleon offered those valiant soldiers to surrender, making a solemn promise to save their lives. The Turks believed the oath of the Christian commander and laid down their arms. They were surrounded, brought to the seashore and...were all shot dead.

A plague broke out in the camp of the French troops. A terrible disease mowed down hundreds of its victims. It was impossible to move on with the mass of sick soldiers and overcrowded hospitals. Napoleon called for the chief physician of his detachment and suggested that he poison all of the sick soldiers, since they were hampering the movement of the troops.

“Sire!” answered the doctor. “I was taught to heal, and killing my brothers is not my trade...”

Nevertheless, all the patients “died.” Napoleon’s hands were untied.

Millions of ruined lives were sacrificed to the insatiable ambition of this spoiled man. It is easy to imagine this man in his cocked hat and short coat on a colossal pedestal of corpses, throwing more and more hecatombs¹⁴ into the jaws of death...

And this is greatness?!

There is the so-called Pont d’Arcole – the Arcole Bridge – in Paris, on the Seine River. The history of the name is as follows: during a civil massacre in Paris, troops attacked the bridge, the

¹³ Albanians.

¹⁴ In ancient Greece a large sacrifice of 100 oxen.

opposite end of which was occupied by the enemy column. The approaches to the bridge were under crossfire. The narrow square that lay in front of the bridge was strewn with corpses. The flag-bearer was killed. The troops were hesitating... And suddenly, an unknown young man, almost a boy, with glowing eyes and hair flowing, picked up the fallen banner and waving his sabre exclaimed:

“My name is Arcole!.. Follow me!.. Hurrah!”

He rushed toward the bridge and was immediately killed. But his example encouraged the soldiers. The bridge was captured. Now it bears the name of the young man Arcole, of whom nothing else is known by anyone.

This flash of momentary determination of a man intoxicated with thirst for fame, who before dying did not forget to advertise his name, this feat in front of the crowd, beautiful as a theatrical performance, is called heroism.

This is great according to the crowd, and this is what people strive for.

But there are heroes of a different kind. Here is one of them.

Many years ago an unknown person appeared in Verkhoturye. He was a traveling tailor who sewed fur coats. No one knew where he came from, but he was strange: when he was invited to work, he would choose a poor hut, stay there and sew for everyone in the house for free, and he tried to do this in such a way as to avoid gratitude. After finishing his work, he would suddenly leave, so people would not know where to find him in order to pay him for his work. If he earned something, he would give it to the poor. He not only sewed; he helped with the children, taught them to read and write, and he read the Gospels to them. Sometimes people saw him in pagan yurts where he looked after the sick and spoke about Christ, spreading the light of the Orthodox faith... He lived in this way, modestly, imperceptibly, was quiet and humble. But when he died, healings began at his grave. The blind received their sight; the lame started to walk... People began to talk about him: the Lord was clearly glorifying His saint. People began visiting his grave and to talk about his canonization. People started collecting information, asking around, and what a surprise: no one even knew the name of the deceased! Just a “kind man” – that was all they knew about him. The name of the righteous man was only revealed by the Lord in a miraculous vision.

It was St. Simeon of Verkhoturye.

Such are heroes in the Christian sense: modest, humble, who completely forget about themselves and give themselves over entirely to serving others. This is true greatness, the first example of which was given by the Lord Himself. He undoubtedly could have been king of the world. People pushed Him to this; people expected this of Him. He could have seen mankind

servile and kneeling at His feet; He could have surrounded Himself with a splendor of such earthly glory and power that no one has ever had before. Satan tempted Him with this at the beginning of His earthly journey... But He did not want this; He voluntarily pushed away this tempting mirage of earthly greatness from Himself and took up the cross, for *the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many* (verse 45). He expects the same from His disciples and followers.

The great strength of Christianity is that it is based on this new worldview, on this extraordinary understanding of the goals of life, on this principle of humility and self-denial which permeates both private and public life. On this is based the guarantee of the peace of society built on new principles. In our lives the law of wild beasts – the right of the strong – reigns. People use their talents and powers to get to the surface of life, mercilessly trampling and pushing away others.

There is a painting by Rochegrosse, entitled “The Pursuit of Happiness” [сделать на обложке книги?]. A high, pointed cliff... Above it a dull, leaden sky covered with hazy clouds, which are heavy and joyless. Only in one place, right over the cliff, is this dull veil of gray clouds broken, and a bright, caressing ray of the sun breaks through from above. This is happiness. People are madly reaching out for this happiness, climbing the precipitous steep slope of the cliff. There are many, infinitely many people. There is an important dignitary, a dreamy poet, a banker with diamonds on his fingers and a thick gold chain on his fat belly, a young lady wearing a fashionable dress, and a stalwart sailor with huge fists... A whole crowd of people! And they all are fighting to reach one spot, where this ray of happiness is shining from among the clouds. They fight amongst themselves – a wild, bestial fight – where decency, shame, and pity are forgotten. He who is weaker, is knocked down and lies helpless, crushed by the heels of a thousand people climbing up over him and forgetting anything and everything in their desperate struggle. Some lucky man reaches the top, but the rock ends with such a narrow spire that it is impossible to remain on it, and the next moment the rough hands of his rivals pull the lucky man down, and he flies into the abyss, helplessly stretching his arms up towards the deceptive, elusive phantom...

Such is modern life.

We call it the law of the struggle for existence. “Crush everyone, otherwise you will be crushed,” “Either gnaw everyone, or lie in the mud,” “Grab the last piece from your neighbor, otherwise he will grab it from you,” “Don’t miss your chance” – these are the rules of modern life. It ought to be this way, they say, since all of nature, even in the world of plants, has this eternal struggle for existence, a struggle for sunlight, for moisture, for a breath of fresh air. Life

is a struggle of everybody against everybody. The result is eternal hostility, tears, groans, and grief.

The strong win and dominate in this field of everyday struggle. The weak either must yield or are condemned to extinction. The strong rise to the top of life on the corpses of the fallen, over the bodies of the weakened, crushing under themselves everything weak and helpless and pressing on the shoulders of the disadvantaged with all their weight. Life assumes the form of an ugly building whose foundation is made up of the weakest elements, upon which, nevertheless, the entire enormous weight of the building rests. The strong all are in the upper tier pressing on the weak foundation. Unsurprisingly, with such an incorrect distribution of materials, social life becomes very fragile, threatening to collapse given the slightest impact. With any serious-minded attitude toward life, none of the gentlemen of the second tier can be calm about their position.

The law of Christian life is completely different, and society is built here in a different way. The main rule here is: *Bear ye one another's burdens* (Gal 6:2) and *whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all* (verse 44). Each member of Christian society should not only avoid dominance, but is obliged to serve all. The stronger a person is spiritually, the greater the burden of service he takes upon himself, the more willingly he bears the burdens of others, and the lower he lies down in the building of social life. "Those who are strong, go down!" If this rule is observed, the spiritually strongest turn out to be in the base, in the foundation, and all that are helpless, weak, and lightweight are at the top. The structure turns out to be stable and durable. There can be no disputes or hostility, for these are prevented by conceding to one another and maintaining humility, whereas competition can only be for the noble right of serving others.

The most common objection to Christian humility and selfless service to others from an ordinary point of view is that humility is weakness, and helpfulness can be abused. "Only put out your neck, and everyone will ride on it." "He who concedes, will end up drinking only water." A humble person will always remain in the tail of life, downtrodden, and overdriven. If he is not worn out to the utmost degree, life will still give him little joy. No, a person should be strong, courageous. "He who is courageous, will eat double." "He who takes the stick, will become a corporal." A man with his own hand must take from life what it does not want to give him. This is the philosophy of the majority and narrow-minded morality based on it.

The main mistake of this theory is that humility in life is not weakness at all. It is a great power, a conquering power.

The psychology of how one person influences the soul of another person clearly proves that nobody voluntarily submits to force. If the orders of a despotic power are carried out, they are always executed with irritation and invariably cause rebellion in the soul, which sooner or later will be manifested openly at a favorable moment. Slaves are always insurgents. Only when an external force finds a moral basis and justification for itself does it receive the right to be recognized by its subjects and becomes strong. Man voluntarily submits to love and humility. What would you be more willing to fulfill: the order of a power-hungry despot or advice of a humble, loving elder? There can hardly be two answers here. The reason for this voluntary submission is that a tyrannical order outrages your self-love and pride, which rear up. The advice of a loving, humble person does not outrage you because you clearly see and feel that it is not given out of selfish motives, not in order to saddle and subjugate you, for a humble person seeks to obey everyone, but is given exclusively for your benefit. Your self-love not only does not suffer, but on the contrary, feels flattered and easily agrees with the advice, which may even be somewhat unforeseen. This is why humble people have much more influence on others than whimsical, petty tyrants and despotic egoists. All in all, the words of the Lord are deeply true even in relation to earthly life, not to mention the afterlife, and people who have made themselves voluntary slaves and servants of others become the first and greatest in terms of their influence. Who are the real leaders and chiefs of the life of people here in Russia? Not scholars, not the rich, not the noble, not the strong, but humble elders. People go to them for advice from distant regions, traversing thousands of miles, and whoever has seen that innumerable crowd of people of all ranks and states, gathering on the threshold of the cell of St. Seraphim or Father Ambrose of Optina, understands that the heart of the people beats here, and that those unwritten laws which govern real life were issued here.

A man of brute, egoistic strength, a man of the Nietzschean type, despite all strength of character and talent, can only remain on the rock of happiness for a short moment, for sooner or later there will be the stronger fist of another egoist who will sweep him away from there as in the painting by Rochemousse.

There is an old children's tale which portrays well the comparative power of a gentle caress and rough attack.

Once the sun and wind argued, which of them was stronger.

"Do you see that traveler," said the wind, "who is walking along the road wrapped in a cloak? Whoever takes the cloak off him is stronger!"

"Fine!" the sun agreed.

The wind blew on the traveler and wanted to tear off his cloak in one blow. The traveler held on to it with his hands.

The wind howled and made his cloak flutter even more, trying to snatch it from his hands. The traveler fastened the clasps at his throat.

Then, with all the fury of his anger, the wind roared like a real hurricane and rushed at the traveler. He put his arms into the sleeves of the cloak, and no matter how the wind tried, he had to admit that he was defeated.

Now it was the sun's turn. It looked out affectionately from behind the scattered clouds and smiled at the exhausted traveler. It dried, warmed, and caressed him with its rays.

The traveler willingly took off his cloak and blessed the sun.

Do not forget this sweet, children's fairy tale. It contains a wise rule in life.

In the Lives of the saints, as well as in modern life, we may find many examples of the conquering power of loving humility. There is no more irresistible force. In its eternal struggle with evil, Christianity always and with unchanging success uses precisely this force.

"One may stand perplexed before some thought," says Elder Zosima in Dostoevsky's novel, "especially seeing men's sin, asking oneself: 'Shall I take it by force, or by humble love?' Always resolve to take it by humble love....loving humility is a terrible power, the most powerful of all, nothing compares with it."¹⁵

The *Prologue* tells us the following account:

Two bishops had a fight. Their enmity grew with time and took on more and more scandalous forms. Finally, one of them, who was more right-minded and more imbued with the spirit of Christ's teaching, gathered his clergy and said:

"What are we doing? In enmity we are breaking the commandment of God and cause our spiritual children to be tempted... Let's all go together to our rival, ask for forgiveness, and be reconciled."

They went. As soon as the other bishop saw them, his heart became inflamed and he was already ready to meet them with a threatening accusatory speech. But the bishop who came with all his clergy fell at his feet and humbly asked for forgiveness. And the heart of the implacable bishop was shaken. He also bowed to the ground before his former adversary and said:

"Forgive me, my brother in Christ! I have sinned against you! You are better and more worthy than me! You have defeated me!"

¹⁵F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, transl. R. Pevear and L. Volkhonsky, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002, 319.

A great ascetic of the desert, Abba Pimen, once settled in an area where another elder, highly respected among the people, already lived. But when St. Pimen settled not far from him, all the people turned to St. Pimen, and the elder was left without disciples and without visitors. His offended self-love could not bear this, and his heart flared up with hatred for the saint. The holy Abba Pimen learned about this.

“What should we do with those people, who lack understanding?” he said to his disciples. “They left the great luminary and turned to me, the unworthy one. But let’s go and give him peace of mind!”

When they knocked at the door of the cell, the elder looked out of the window, but when he recognized it was St. Pimen, he did not open the door.

“Our father!” said the monk humbly. “We will not leave here until you open and receive us.”

They sat at the door and began to wait. The day was unbearably hot; the southern sun beat down on them mercilessly. But St. Pimen and his disciples sat near the cell and waited patiently. Several times the elder looked out of the window, but seeing that they were not leaving, he was touched by this humility and patience, and opened the door. Pimen and his disciples bowed to the ground before him.

“Forgive us, holy father,” said Pimen, “that we are disturbing you, and forgive those unreasonable people who do not appreciate you...”

“No,” objected the elder, “You forgive me... I see that people told the truth about you: you are the sun of the desert, and I no longer wonder why they come to you!”

From that time on, he did not speak of St. Pimen in any other way but with great respect and would send everyone he knew to him.

Hatred was defeated by humility.

The Abba Sergius told his disciples about a holy elder: “Once we lost our way and ended up on a plowed field, and trampled it a little. The peasant who owned the field noticed and began to curse us: ‘Are you not afraid of God? If you had the fear of God, you wouldn’t have done this!’ The holy elder who was with us told us: ‘For God’s sake, brothers, let no one answer him!’ And, turning to the peasant, he remarked meekly: ‘You say it fairly, my brother: if we had the fear of God, we would not have done this!’ The peasant continued to curse and revile us with renewed fury. ‘For the sake of the Lord, forgive us,’ the elder begged humbly. ‘We have sinned!’ And he did not answer with a single word of annoyance, but with love and humility. And he finally touched the heart of the peasant to such a degree that he stopped scolding and became

silent... And then suddenly he fell at the feet of the saint and began to ask forgiveness for his anger and irritation.”

And here is a case from everyday life, told by an old woman of a truly holy life, who has already passed away.

“You know,” she related, “that sometimes I would do charity work, and, I must admit, you encounter a lot of aggravating things on the part of those whom you sincerely wish well. You come across very tempermental characters. But there is always the opportunity to soften and calm them.

Once I took care of a poor, sick widow who remained with two young children after the death of her husband. She had some sort of serious, chronic ailment which even the doctors could not determine exactly: something due to malnutrition and anemia... She was unusually irritable, but, you know, you always excuse this... you need to know the life of the poor in order to understand that even strong nerves can be frayed. Yet, once I hardly could bear it.

I caught the flu and lay in bed for two days. On the third day, with great difficulty, I got up and went to visit the sick woman. I found her in a terribly irritated state: for those two days no one had visited her, and she really had a difficult time. But in any case, I did not expect the stream of abuse with which she met me. I don’t remember exactly what she said... ‘Bloodsuckers... Acrobats of charity. You just pretend that you have pity, that you care... Any mangy dog has more heart...!’ Well, it’s not worth repeating what she said... I felt so offended and hurt. I silently turned and left. At home, my husband noticed that I looked upset, and in answering his questions, I had to tell the whole story.

‘Listen,’ said my husband, Pyotr Vasilyevich, ‘If you really feel bad for her and you sympathize with her, don’t spoil a good deed, don’t leave her... Go and apologize to her...’

Frankly, this puzzled me at first. I was insulted by her, I was scolded terribly, yet I have to ask forgiveness! But after thinking for a while, I decided to go. I did feel sorry for her...

I took Anna, my pupil, and we set off. The pouring rain was almost a tempest... We barely reached the house, and when we stood on the porch, streams of water poured from us. I left Anna in the entrance room and entered the main part of the house. The sick woman was still lying on her back in her bed and seemed lost in thoughts.

“Forgive me,” I said to her as kindly as I could, bending over her. “I overreacted... Forgive me for God’s sake, that I could not visit you then...”

Before I could finish, something unimaginable happened to the sick woman: she fell to the floor at my feet. Trembling all over, she writhed with sobs...

“Lord! What is this?! I... you... I insulted you, offended you... In response to all your kindness, I cursed you... And you ask for forgiveness... My sweet dear...my Angel!”

She cried and kissed my hands and dress. I could hardly calm her down...

“Yes,” the old woman added after a pause, “There are no completely evil people... You just need to find what is good in their souls...”

And this, one must add, can only be done with the power which the Lord speaks of in the passage of the Gospel we have read: love, meekness, and humility.

Chapter 10, verses 46-52

The content of this Gospel passage is not complicated. Only the episode of healing a blind man, Bartimaeus, is described. The blind man was sitting at the gate of Jericho begging for alms when the Lord passed by with His disciples. Undoubtedly, the blind man had heard of the great Galilean prophet and the miracles of His healings earlier. He realized that at that precise moment, the happiness of his whole life was passing by and with all the power of his lungs he began to cry out: *Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me* (verse 47).

He believed, deeply believed that this Rabbi had amazing power and that He had only to say a word so that his sight would be restored. Many people in the crowd stopped him, protecting the peace of the Teacher, but what power could stop his belief? He began to cry out even louder: *Thou Son of David, have mercy on me* (verse 48).

His persevering cry reached the ears of the Lord, and there occurred something which happened each time that a call of fervent, unyielding faith reached the Savior.

Jesus stopped and commanded that the blind man be called. *What wilt thou that I should do unto thee?* He asked. *Lord, that I might receive my sight,* answered the beggar. Jesus said to him: *Go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole. And immediately he received his sight* (verses 51-52).

Again what we have here is one of many examples showing the power of faith. Amazing miracles are constantly performed wherever there is living faith. Faith is the best medicine for diseases of all kinds, and not only where the direct power of the Lord is at work, but also in those cases where ordinary people are the actors.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, promised the Lord, *He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do* (John 14:12).

The Savior’s truthful promise has come to pass. By faith people have done the same as the Lord.

Here are two accounts.

...A traveler was walking along a dusty Italian road leading to Ravenna. A rough, well-worn cloak covered his tall, slightly hunched figure, but despite his poor attire there was something dignified in his manner and gait. A weary look and worn sandals showed that he was coming from afar.

It was St. Apollinaris, Bishop of Ravenna.

The sun had already set. The last patch of light on the tops of the trees was fading away, and a moonless southern night was quickly descending on the land. St. Apollinaris stopped. The end of his road was still far away. He had to find a place to spend the night.

He knocked cautiously at the door of a lonely roadside hut and in response to the owner's call, asked permission to spend the night.

He was let in... Reluctantly, was let in.

"Where are you going?" the head of the household began the conversation, sitting down next to him.

"To Ravenna ... I must serve the One who called me there."

"Who is that?"

"I will serve the Lord ... I am a Christian!"

There was a silence. The pagan owner of the house frowned. The first thing that flashed through his mind was the desire to immediately drive away the unbidden guest. But he held himself back: a new thought flashed through his mind.

"Listen," he said in a muffled voice, "I have a blind son... Do you know the torment of a father who has lost his son? That is easier than seeing him crippled... Can you help me? Our gods can do nothing. I have already stopped asking them. But people say that your Christian God works miracles for His own... Can He heal my boy?" And he looked intently at the stranger.

"Yes," St. Apollinaris answered quietly.

"Yes? You said 'yes'? O traveler, don't joke like that! Have pity on us... If you can, I implore you: help us! Ask your God... I will give everything..."

"First, have faith... If you can believe, anything is possible! Believe in the Lord, the Son of God, who came to earth to save mankind, suffered for our redemption, and was resurrected..."

"I believe, I believe...! Just return my son's eyesight! I believe in your God who works miracles...!"

The door opened suddenly. An adorable boy about twelve years old stood on the threshold wearing a light tunic.

"Father!" he exclaimed. "Father! I see you...!"

It was the son of the pagan, who received his sight. Faith had worked a miracle.

Here is another illustration of a time closer to our own. Before us are St. Seraphim and his admirer Motovilov who suffered from a problem with his legs. Motovilov had been sick for a long time; he could not walk, and he was driven around in a cart.

“My joy!” said St. Seraphim. “Are you asking for healing? But do you, the God-loving one, know that this needs faith? Do you believe in the Lord and that He is the God-Man? Do you believe in the Holy Ever-Virgin, in the Most Undeified Mother of God?”

“I do,” answered Motovilov.

“Do you believe that even now the Lord can heal you instantly, with a word?”

“I do!”

“If you believe, then you are already healed! Stand, get up!”

Motovilov made an effort.

“You are walking already! Already walking!”

The saint took him by the hand, lifted him up and led him.

The cripple whom all the doctors had already abandoned, truly got up and walked, leaning on the elder’s hand.

Faith had healed him.

There is hardly any power in the world which can strengthen a person and facilitate his life other than faith; and modern unhappy people need this strengthening power so much! Our society needs not so much the miracles of faith as its calming, pacifying influence on the soul. Life has become so rugged, so restless. We all live like on a volcano, looking anxiously into the eyes of tomorrow. People say that during an earthquake, when the ground shakes underfoot, a person is overcome by a particularly oppressed state, by the feeling of his own helplessness: he does not feel a solid foothold under him. We are presently experiencing approximately the same thing. No one has confidence in the near future. That is why people are so tired, so overstrung. Meanwhile, the soul is so thirsty; it asks for peace at least for a moment, at least for the “smile of the spiritual world,” as someone put it.

Where can we find this peace?

Only in religious faith, for it provides the only reliable support in life.

When a person seeks support in himself and is guided in life by selfish goals of his own well-being, he can never be completely calm. He is always troubled by the question, what should he do to take better advantage of circumstances for his gain? No matter what he undertakes, doubts always swarm up in his soul: will I succeed or not? Will everything end up well? What if I make a mistake? What if I miss something? Maybe I should have done things differently?

Such doubts are always tormenting, and the reason for them is that no one can ever trust himself unconditionally, can ever fully rely on the infallibility of his judgments, on his capacities, on his discernment.

This is the weakness of the egocentric point of view, when a person seeks support for himself only in his own self. The bottom line is that people of an egoistic disposition are never sure of the correctness of their chosen path, and this uncertainty makes them weak.

People of religious faith have support not in themselves, but in God. This support is absolute for them and does not allow for any doubts. Even if their activities end up a disaster for themselves, they do not lose heart, since they are not looking for their own well-being, but only for the fulfillment of God's designs, and when this approach is held to in good conscience, everything else including personal benefit makes almost no difference. The consciousness of an honestly borne struggle is better than victory.

This is the reason for the peace of mind of a believer, and this gives him extraordinary strength.

Though *the fig tree shall not blossom, exclaims the Prophet Habakkuk, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength* (Hab. 3:17-19).

This is the voice of a believer.

The Lord God is my strength, and I am calm. I know that there is no other power in the world higher than this, and nothing can violate His designs. At the same time, I know that His designs are good, for the Lord *will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim. 2:4), and I am calm. I know that the Lord leads me on His path, that His Almighty hand is always on me and guides my life, that His All-Seeing eye looks upon all little things which come my way, and whatever they may be – joy or sorrow, luck or misfortune, success or persecution, sorrow or pleasure, pleasant or bitter things – all this is equally determined by the will of the Creator and is sent to me for testing, for instruction, for encouragement, for strengthening. I know that I need all this – and I am calm. Let terrible clouds of disasters gather over my head, let phantoms of fear, instigated by the enemy, rise in front of me, let suffering and deprivation torment me, threatening with death – I know that the whole world, all the powers, and all the elements are in the hand of God, that the Lord is capable of saving me from all trials. I know that if He wills so, the clouds of grief will scatter like a night fog driven by the morning wind, and the sun of joy and happiness will break through again... And I am calm.

Even though suffering may be long and agonizing; even though it sometimes seems that it is without end and that you will die before you see a ray of light, I know that higher goals are hidden in this too, that this is also needed for the plans of the Creator and the Providential One, making *all things work together for good* (Rom. 8:28) and that *Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all* (Ps. 34:19). And I am calm.

This is the attitude of faith.

What is the basis of this confidence and calmness?

It is based on the facts of experience. We know many examples when the Lord protected, guarded, and saved those who trusted in Him and those who believed in Him at the most critical moments.

Already in the Old Testament, when the Lord chose Israel as His people, to arrange the salvation of the world in them, He constantly showed them His protection and shield in a miraculous way, *that the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born...That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments* (Ps. 78:6-7).

When the Jewish people languished and suffered in Egypt, and the Egyptian Pharaoh did not want to let them go despite the resolute demands of Moses and Aaron, God *had wrought his signs in Egypt, and his wonders in the field of Zoan. And had turned their rivers into blood; and their floods, that they could not drink. He sent divers sorts of flies among them, which devoured them; and frogs, which destroyed them. He gave also their increase unto the caterpillar, and their labor unto the locust. He destroyed their vines with hail, and their sycamore trees with frost. He gave up their cattle also to the hail, and their flocks to hot thunderbolts. He cast upon them the fierceness of his anger, wrath, and indignation, and trouble, by sending evil angels among them. He made a way to his anger; he spared not their soul from death, but gave their life over to the pestilence; And smote all the firstborn in Egypt; the chief of their strength in the tabernacles of Ham* (Ps. 78:43-51).

After these plagues, the Pharaoh let the people of Israel go, but immediately regretted giving in and began to chase after the Jews with military chariots in order to bring them back. Then the great miracle of the omnipotence of God took place: the Lord miraculously led His people across the Red Sea, and when the Egyptians rushed after them in pursuit, *the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, and all the host of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them; there remained not so much as one of them.. But the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel*

saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore. And Israel saw that great work¹⁶ which the Lord did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord (Ex. 14:28-31).

During the forty-year wandering of the Jews in the wilderness, the Lord constantly protected His chosen people from dangers and hardships of all kinds, although the sons of Israel were often ungrateful and disloyal. When they came to the barren Zin Desert, the fainthearted people complained, for it seemed that death from starvation was inevitable in this sandy desert scorched by the sun. *And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God. And it came to pass, that at even the quails came up, and covered the camp: and in the morning the dew lay round about the host. And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground. And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat....And the house of Israel called the name thereof Manna: and it was like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey....And the children of Israel did eat manna forty years, until they came to a land inhabited; they did eat manna, until they came unto the borders of the land of Canaan (Ex. 16:11-15, 31, 35).*

In Rephidim there was no water for the people to drink. *Wherefore the people did chide with Moses, and said, Give us water that we may drink....And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do unto this people?...And the Lord said unto Moses, Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thine hand, and go. Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel (Ex. 17:1-2, 4-6).*

In armed clashes with the nomadic peoples of the desert, the Lord invariably helped His people and gave them victories, except in those cases when the Jews entered into battle against the will of God.

Even misfortunes, such as diseases, poisonous snakes, etc., were sent for the correction and benefit of this rebellious people. Thus did the Lord educate His people with His *strong hand, and with a stretched out arm (Ps. 136:12).*

¹⁶ In the Septuagint and Russian version of the Bible: “And Israel saw the mighty hand, the things which the Lord did to the Egyptians....”

Here is another striking instance likewise from the Old Testament of how the Lord protects His saints. When the Prophet Daniel killed the dragon which was worshiped as a god in Babylon, the Babylonians became indignant and insisted that the prophet be thrown into a den of lions ... *where he was six days. And in the den there were seven lions, and they had given them every day two carcasses, and two sheep: which then were not given to them, to the intent they might devour Daniel. Now there was in Jewry a prophet, called Habakkuk, who had made pottage, and had broken bread in a bowl, and was going into the field, for to bring it to the reapers. But the angel of the Lord said unto Habakkuk, Go, carry the dinner that thou hast into Babylon unto Daniel, who is in the lions' den. And Habakkuk said, Lord, I never saw Babylon; neither do I know where the den is. Then the angel of the Lord took him by the crown, and bare him by the hair of his head, and through the vehemency of his spirit set him in Babylon over the den. And Habakkuk cried, saying, O Daniel, Daniel, take the dinner which God hath sent thee. And Daniel said, Thou hast remembered me, O God: neither hast thou forsaken them that seek thee and love thee. So Daniel arose, and did eat: and the angel of the Lord set Habakkuk in his own place again immediately. Upon the seventh day the king went to bewail Daniel: and when he came to the den, he looked in, and, behold, Daniel was sitting. Then cried the king with a loud voice, saying, Great art thou, O Lord God of Daniel, and there is none other beside thee. And he drew him out, and cast those that were the cause of his destruction into the den: and they were devoured in a moment before his face.*¹⁷

We find many similar cases of God's miraculous protection in the Lives of the saints.

On one of his missionary journeys, St. Polycarp of Smyrna once stopped overnight in an unknown hotel. After finishing his evening prayers, he was about to go to bed, but a strange foreboding overtook him. For a long time he could not sleep, and suddenly someone whispered quite clearly: "Get out!" in the silence of the night. He listened closely – everything was quiet. Without giving much importance to the mysterious voice, he was already preparing to fall asleep, when he suddenly he heard again: "Get out!" He got up, but there was no one in the room. Again it seemed that it was just a play of his imagination, and he lay down. Sleepiness already began to overtake him, when again the same voice even more clearly, even more insistently repeated: "Get out!" Then, without delaying even for a moment, St. Polycarp left the hotel. The moment he crossed the threshold, the roof and ceiling of the hotel collapsed with a crash burying everyone in the house under its rubble...

¹⁷ Chapters 13-14 of the Book of Daniel were added to the Russian Bible from the Greek Septuagint, because they were not included in the Hebrew Bible. Here the Septuagint translation is used (see Bel and the Dragon verses 31-42).

The Lord, eternally vigilant over His chosen ones, did not allow the saint to die.

In the early days, soon after the founding of the Solovetsk monastery, under its first organizers, Sts. Zosima and Sabbatius, the brethren often suffered from a lack of food. Once in the winter, when all communication with the shore was cut off, the monastery completely ran out of bread. Impending famine threatened them, and the faint-hearted of the brethren began to complain. Only the Hegumen of the monastery, the Monk Zosima, remained calm. “Do not worry, my brethren,” he encouraged those who murmured, “remember the covenant of our Savior: *Take no thought for the morrow... But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you* (Matt. 6:33-34). The saint’s firm hope did not deceive him. In the evening of the same day, two strangers came to the monastery from out of nowhere and brought baskets of bread, flour, and oil. After giving their offering, they immediately left, and no one saw where they went and how they had reached the island, which was inaccessible in the winter.

At the terrible time of the Tatar pogroms, the inhabitants of the Russian regions would usually go to the inaccessible forests. St. Macarius of Yellow Water Lake or of the Unzha River was in a crowd of such fugitives fleeing from the Tatars in the lands surrounding Nizhny Novgorod. Among the fugitives, there were many women and children who could barely endure the difficulty of the journey, leading through off-road forest thickets with almost no food supplies. The horror of the impending Tatar invasion, with fear of wild animals in the forest, complete hopelessness concerning the future, uncertainty of the path, the darkness of the almost impenetrable centuries-old forests – all this created an oppressive atmosphere which caused despondency even in courageous hearts. But everyone was consoled and reassured by Monk Macarius who was full of deep faith and had unlimited hope in God’s help. “Do not grieve, brethren,” he would say, “God, who brought Israel out of Egypt and nourished them for forty years in the wilderness with manna, is capable of nourishing and saving us ...” And indeed, none of the fugitives who accompanied St. Macarius died; no one lagged behind and was lost in the forest thicket. Everyone reached a safe haven, even the children.

These innumerable instances of the protection and Providence of God create in the soul of a believer a calmness, which a person feels when on the banks of a raging river. Before him is the seething and bubbling abyss of human passions, with the furiously rushing, crushing stream of everyday struggle, and the capricious whirlpool of events, but all this sweeps past him not arousing fear or anxiety inside. He feels the firm ground of faith under him, feels as if he is in a safe refuge, for he knows that not a hair of his head will perish without the will of the Heavenly

Father (Lk. 21:18). This confidence is even stronger when a person feels the powerful hand of Providence in his personal life.

Thus, in order to acquire peace of mind, which is necessary for spiritual strength, one needs to have the feeling of Providence in one's life.

How can this be attained?

We have already spoken about various ways of awakening and strengthening faith. Here we are mainly discussing the aspect of faith, which can be defined as trust. A Christian must not only believe in God, but also trust in God, that is, not only intellectually acknowledge the existence of God, but also experience empirically that the Lord who is close to him personally, will give him everything he needs for life and for salvation, or, as Father John of Kronstadt says, "Believe and hope to promptly obtain from the Lord everything good for raising up your neighbour, or all things profitable, 'unto salvation.' Do not hesitate, and do not doubt even for a single moment, in the possibility of receiving what you pray for. 'With God all things are possible, and all things are possible to him that believeth; and hope maketh not ashamed'" (cf. Mk 9:23, 10:27).¹⁸

Only one thing is needed for this feeling of trust to be born and matured in the soul: *Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass...Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him* (Ps. 37:5, 7).

This means that in choosing your path or the main work of your life, leave your personal desires aside and follow the path on which the Lord has set you, caring only for one thing – not to deviate from His will, as clearly expressed in the commandments.

There are two opposing views in life. According to the Materialists, life is a chain of simple accidents, a play of the elements, a whirlwind which twists people like particles of dust, where there is neither a plan, nor definite goals. Life is meaningless. Where and in which combinations these swirling particles of dust will end up when the hurricane sweeps through – nobody knows. Everything is determined by blind chance.

If we accept this theory, of course, there would not be any definite or reasonable guidance in life, but, on the other hand, it is clear that in this case a person cannot control life either. Dust particles cannot control the wind. We may expose our right or left side to the blows of a hurricane, but we are powerless to control it, to change the direction of life. All the more strange are the claims of the Materialists with such views imagining themselves to be the kings of life.

¹⁸ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, trans. E.E. Goulaeff, Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, 1984, pp. 554-5.

“We will build happiness in life,” they say. But how is this possible if they themselves are only a plaything of a capricious and changeable whirlwind?

However, there is another view: life is not at all meaningless, but the scale of its activity and the duration of its processes are so great that a person often cannot comprehend them with his mind, cannot trace their inner, unified direction and logical connection, and therefore does not understand the meaning of life, that is, the ultimate goal toward which it is moving and for the achievement of which all laws governing its course are adapted. However, this ultimate goal undoubtedly exists, and all life is nothing but vigorous, tireless, and ceaseless work on constructing a grandiose, great building of human happiness in union with God. Speaking in religious terms, life consists of building the Kingdom of God.

Millions of people are engaged in this dynamic work, and if we do not want to remain idle spectators, but want to take a reasonable part in it, we must completely submit to the will of the Great Architect who manages the construction works. There is no other way.

People have different attitudes towards this work. Some, like blind kittens, do not notice anything – neither the system, nor the goals of life, nor the building itself – and live a life of the belly, only chasing after personal gains and determining all their activities by the interests of the stomach and physical well-being. Others do nothing and also do not know anything, but they imagine that they understand the essence of life and its laws, and therefore they consider it necessary to teach everyone and give their instructions everywhere, introducing unimaginable confusion and deluding people everywhere. Still others, perhaps, do work, but they labor mindlessly and without a plan; they often do what is not needed, and thus only slow down and complicate the overall course of construction.

In fact, all these people only interfere with the job. That is why the temple of human happiness is being built so slowly – their work has to be constantly redone or corrected. But sooner or later the temple will be built, for the will of the Great Architect is immutable, as the laws of life given by Him are immutable, which lead to the goal and preserve from human work only that which is valuable and necessary, while nullifying all things which are vain and unnecessary.

Relatively few people work productively, advancing the building. These are the ones who work sensibly, obeying the instructions and orders of the One Architect according to the specific plan given by Him. This plan lies in the will of God. It is clear that if we want to bring the construction to completion as soon as possible, there is only one method: not to interfere with each other by self-willed, disorderly actions, but to unite our scattered efforts, working according to the single plan, that is, wholly submitting ourselves to the will of God.

In Germany, in the Middle Ages, when huge Gothic cathedrals were built, the architectural plan of the building was usually cut into separate sections, and these sections were distributed to the foremen who were in charge of the workers. Each of them was obliged to complete his part of the building according to the given section and had to strictly and accurately conform to the plan; otherwise the part of the building he built would in no way coincide with the general plan and would ruin the entire structure. It is the same in our life. It falls to the lot of each of us to fulfill a certain part of the plan in building the Kingdom of God. Each one has a section in his hands, which defines his place and his work. It is clear that abandoning your section and grasping at another job will bring disorder to the general course of work. Everyone counts here; everyone is needed in his place; every job is equally important, be it boring or engrossing, high or low, rude or subtle, but order is necessary. This is your place – the staircase: twelve steps up, twelve steps down, and your job is to carry bricks up and down these steps all your life... But you are trying to paint the decorative ceiling! Are you aware that your botched work will have to be repainted, and your own job will have to be done by another person?

That is why one needs to surrender himself entirely to the will of God, abandon personal desires when choosing one's life path, and undertake the work which the Lord calls you to do.

Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass...Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him (Ps. 37:5, 7).

When a person manages to accomplish this and says: "This is my life before Thee, O Lord! Thou hast given it to me; may Thou take it and do with it whatever Thou desireth, O Lord!" then a new, amazing life begins for him, full of miracles and deep meaning. A person begins to clearly see the guiding hand of God in life, supporting, strengthening, protecting, and saving. And these obvious miracles of the intervention of Divine Providence give rise to the firm conviction that life is not a dream, not an accident, not a joke, but serious systematic work in which he has finally found his place and can work under the guidance of the Great Architect, not doubting that the results of the common work will sooner or later be achieved. And there is great peace and great power in this confidence.