

Chapter 4, verses 1-20

The Lord Himself explained the meaning of the Parable of the Sower in sufficient detail. We can add to the Gospels' explanation that the Sower is the Lord; the seed is the Word of God; the field is all of mankind, the whole world receiving the miraculous seed of the Gospels' Word in its depths. Like a seed, the Gospels' Word carries the beginning of life, true, spiritual life, for what is true life otherwise? *This is life eternal*, says the Lord in His High Priestly Prayer, *that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent* (Jn. 17:3). The Gospels' Word provides this knowledge of the true God and therefore it is a wondrous seed of salvation and life. Thrown into a human heart, under favorable conditions, it grows and bears fruit – good deeds and a holy life. Like a seed, it eternally carries this living power within itself.

Nowadays, just like nineteen centuries ago, it equally excites and is moving, brings joy and comforts, judges and humbles, touching the innermost strings of the human heart.

Philosophical systems die; political theories become forgotten; flowers of poetry fade, but *the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart* (Heb. 4:12). The eternally living truth is hidden in it.

But, always possessing this hidden living power to the same degree, the Word of God does not always produce the same harvest. It depends upon the soil on which it falls, and here the parable acquires a particularly intense, lively, personal interest for us, for this soil is our heart. We all, listeners and readers of the Word of God, receive our share of the holy seeds; we all would probably like for our heart to have fertile soil which brings a hundredfold harvest, and the question of why this does not happen and why the sprouts are so stunted, miserable, and mixed with weeds – this question, of course, is far from being unimportant for us.

Let us reflect more carefully on the parable in order to discover the laws of soul agronomy in the parable's marvelous images and symbols, which are important to us and which the Lord Jesus Christ points out.

In order to successfully cultivate a field and apply rational agricultural methods to it, it is necessary first of all to study the soil and know its composition. Sandy soil requires one fertilizer, loam – another, black soil – yet another; processing methods are also not the same on different soils. It is similar in the spiritual life. In order to know the reasons behind the fruitlessness of the Word of God for a person and at the same time to find the right methods to cultivate and educate the soul, which could increase the harvest of the holy seed, as well as strengthen the influence and effect of the Gospel's Word on a person, it is necessary to study the soil of our heart and find out what exactly in the heart prevents the successful growth of the seed. In accordance with the cause, we will be able to take specific measures.

Speaking about the destiny of the seed in His parable, the Lord depicts four kinds of conditions in which the seed falls during sowing and which affect its growth in different ways. These are four different types of the human psyche, four types of the constitution of the soul.

When the Sower was sowing, *some (seeds) fell by the wayside, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up* (verse 4).

This is the first type. The heart is like a public road, and the seed falling on it does not even penetrate the soil, but remains on the surface and becomes an easy prey for birds.

Which people are of this type?

First of all, it includes people of crude, purely animal constitution. This is the worst type among people, and unfortunately at this time there are especially many of these. They live a pure life of the belly: eat good food, drink good drinks, sleep a lot, dress well – they know nothing beyond that. A trough, feed, and slop – this exhausts all of their content. Their worldview is exclusively materialistic. Spiritual issues do not exist for them. People of the “public road” type relate with cynical mockery and outright contempt to the ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty, to all that mankind has worshipped as the greatest sacred things, which has attracted and fascinated heroes, ascetic champions, and the best figures of history, to which they have devoted wholeheartedly their energy and their life. “Gain” is the word that defines their activities. For them, the belly is god, and the Gospel, the Word of God meets a blind wall of blunt indifference in them. It bounces off them like peas bounce off a wall¹, not even breaking through the outer crust of egoism and not penetrating inside into the heart. If it sometimes remains on the surface of their memory, it is only until the moment when the first impulse of debauchery, pleasure-seeking, or greed for profit swoops down like a bird and swallows everything without a trace, but the crude heart still remains firm and impenetrable.

Second of all, the same category includes very light-minded people who live only on the basis of superficial impressions. The essence of their psyche is idle curiosity which is easily aroused, but does not at all strive to connect the impressions received with deep foundations in the life of the soul. Such curiosity does not bring any benefit; it is aimless and pointless. Impressions are valued solely by their influence on the nervous system. Everything that tickles the nerves equally attracts people of this type. Therefore, for them it is all the same, listening to a good preacher or a fashionable tenor singer, watching a religious procession or English boxing, attending a solemn, inspiring divine service or roaring with laughter while watching a funny musical comedy. They view the whole world as if it was created exclusively for their entertainment, and they approach every phenomenon in their life according to the same standards.

¹ A Russian idiom, similar to “hitting a brick wall.”

If they listen to an inspired preacher speaking the truth of the Gospels, about the radiant world of purity and holiness, about the Great Loving God, they will only say one thing in praise, “Oh, he speaks well and beautifully!” or “He has an elaborated and elegant speaking manner!” This is the most humiliating praise for a preacher, reducing him to the role of a schoolboy demonstrating his literary and reciting talents before his examiners. Even if the sermon reveals laments and genuine tears of suffering love, the groan of a tormented heart, bitterness and resentment at the sight of violated truth, they will not find other words of appreciation except for the vulgar phrase, “Oh, he does have dramatic talent!” It is as if a performing actor who acts solely for entertaining and tickling their frayed nerves, is before their eyes.

These are people of a shallow soul, and life for them is not something serious, full of deep meaning, but simply a farce. People of this kind listen to the Gospels’ Word as if it does not apply to them: they do not apprehend it.

The third variety of people of this kind include those of a distracted nature with scattered thoughts. There is nothing fundamental, permanent in them, which would serve as the center of their life. These are people, as they are called, without a core, that is, they do not have a predominant inclination or attachment to one particular business or occupation which defines the direction of their life. What do these people live by? You cannot immediately answer: everything is so fluid, so inconstant, so unsteady. One thing today, another thing tomorrow, a third thing the day after tomorrow... One thought replaces another as in a kaleidoscope, without any order or system. Infatuation with one thing is displaced by another; one plan follows another plan, like on a public road where carriages are driving, passerby are walking, one replacing another, with wandering cattle milling around under foot. They start everything; try everything, and finish nothing. They have no goal in life. They are the slaves of a momentary whim, a reed swaying in the wind. Their interests are fragile, unreliable, short-lived. With the ease of a moth they flutter from one subject to another. Any new thing attracts and captures them, but only for a short time. “What the latest book says is what will lie on the top of their heart.” It is almost useless to teach them something serious, to preach the Word of God to them. It means writing on water, sowing by the wayside: passerby will tread on it; birds will pick at it – that is, the world with its constantly changing new things and the devil with his temptations and enticements. Since in these people impressions and thoughts constantly change, none of them penetrate deep into the heart, and the heart gradually loses its responsiveness and capacity to take them seriously at all, becomes dry, indifferent, and hard like a road compacted by the feet of passerby and driven on by the wheels of countless carriages.

These are the three categories of people belonging to the type of the public road. What they all have in common is that the seed of the Word of God does not penetrate their souls at all,

does not concern them, does not please them, does not excite them, but remains on the surface, that is, only in their memory, in the consciousness of their head, and without bearing any harvest soon dies.

The following two kinds of soil which were described by the Lord Jesus Christ in His parable are a shade better.

Another seed *fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away* (verses 5-6).

Explaining these words, the Lord adds: *and these are they...which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended* (verses 16-17).

This type is widespread and familiar enough to us. Such people have an undoubted desire and love for goodness, and the Word of God finds a lively and quick response in them. Yet the Word of God does not capture them to such an extent that for the sake of implementing it in their lives they would find enough strength and determination to work on themselves, fight obstacles, and defeat hostile currents. After hearing the Gospels' sermon on truth, love, selflessness, they immediately light up like a Swedish match, but go out as quickly. Sometimes these flashes of passing fascinations are very strong like flashes of magnesium, and at that moment these people are capable of even a feat, but after a moment passes – it is over, and, just like with magnesium, there is only smoke and soot – frustration at their cowardice and laxity or on the contrary, regret over their fascination. These people are incapable of harsh, persistent, long-term work, and the law of entry into the Kingdom of God given by the Lord represents an insurmountable barrier for them: *from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force* (Mt. 11:12).

Only low grass can grow on stony soil, and these people under ordinary conditions of a quiet life can only do very small things which do not require real efforts. They cannot be denied a certain sensitivity: you may sometimes see them in church praying with tears of compunction in their eyes; they are uplifted by good singing; they are emotionally affected by the sayings and exclamations of the divine service, full of exalted meaning; they repeat with feeling, along with the others: "Let us love one another ...,"² "Let us embrace one another. Let us say: Brethren!"³ But when the time comes for them to move beyond good words to action, you will immediately see that the tearful compunction and religious enthusiasm have not softened their cold soul, that

² Exclamation from the Orthodox Liturgy.

³ From the Paschal Stichera of the Orthodox Church.

it was only a phosphoric luminescence which does not give warmth, simple sentimentality or false sensitivity, and not a real feeling. They sometimes like to read the lives of the saints, just as children love to read scary tales and touching stories, but in this case as well, it does not go beyond sighs and verbal elation. They are not against dreaming about the ascetic life and imagining themselves as ascetics and martyrs for the truth, but the efforts of will required for this frighten them. They have nothing against virtue, morality, asceticism, even would like to get into the Kingdom of Heaven, but under the condition that they would not need to undergo any privations for this and that it could be done with complete comfort and with all amenities. They want to enter the Heavenly Kingdom on a first-class rail car.

What prevents these people from undividedly surrendering themselves to Christ and bearing full harvest? That stony layer which lies beneath the outer layer of good soil and does not allow the roots of the plant to penetrate deeper.

This stony layer in the human soul is self-love. Usually it is only slightly covered on top with a thin coating of sensitivity and good impulses. But when one needs to deepen these good impulses and fulfill them in life, that is, to do a good deed which is the fruit of good impulses, self-love and the resulting self-pity invariably rebel against it. Imagine, you are asked to give some help. You are ready to do this and donate something to the needy, but you immediately hear the voice of self-love, "But what will I be left with? I also need money: I have so little!" Your good impulse runs into a cold, stony wall of egoism and fades like a flower bud which does not bloom.

Self-love does not tolerate privations, even imaginary ones.

This happens in the spiritual struggle on the level of ideas. People often wear Christian beliefs like a decent suit which gives them the appearance of decency and of a gentleman, as long as it does not constrain them and does not oblige them to anything. But when one has to pay for these beliefs with sufferings and hardships, self-pity immediately whispers insidiously: "Is it worth it to suffer like this? Is not the price too high? After all, one can do just fine without convictions!"

The result is betrayal and apostasy.

The last type of people, in whose soul the Word of God remains barren, is described by the Lord in the following words: *And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit....And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful* (verses 7, 18-19).

These are the people who want to work simultaneously for God and mammon. Desiring to live according to the Laws of God, they at the same time do not want to abandon worldly

cares and usually end up with this whirlpool of worldly concerns, preoccupations, and attachments absorbing them utterly and pushing everything bright, idea-driven, and sublime out of the soul. If a person does not fight earthly attachments in the name of the Gospels' truth, he inevitably becomes their captive, and only hearing the Word of God does not save him. The attempts to establish a balance in life between tribute to God, and tribute to mammon and this world have never been successful, because the soul is a simple creature and cannot be divided into two. *No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon* (Mt. 6:24). These people are also unfit for the Kingdom of God. So many seeds of the Word of God disappear to no avail!

Out of four categories, only one brings forth fruit: other seeds *fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased, and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some a hundred....And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred* (verses 8, 20).

These are people of integrity who practice what they preach and who, when listening to and apprehending the Word of God, try to fulfill it and live according to its instructions. But even in these people, whose responsive and sincere heart represents good soil, submission to the Gospels' Word does not happen to be equally complete and perfect in everyone, for one brings thirty, another sixty, and another a hundred. This means that one is able to fulfill one third of what the highest ideal of Christian perfection requires of him; another – almost two-thirds, and only a few manage to fulfill everything completely and perfectly. These are the chosen ones. These are the people whom the Lord speaks about: *I have found...a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will* (Acts 13:22).

Such people are not numerous. But how brightly they shine against the dull background of a lukewarm attitude toward the Gospels on the part of most of our contemporaries, who are sluggish, flaccid, and weak in goodness, and how much the Word of God to which they have surrendered wholeheartedly and which they have fulfilled to the end, has exalted and enlightened their souls!

Take St. Anthony the Great. Two Gospel sayings made a decisive turning point in his soul and directed him on the path which led to the highest degrees of holiness. Once, shortly after the death of his parents, as a young man of 18-20 years of age, in the church, he heard the words of the Lord: *If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor...and come and follow me* (Mt. 19:21). He took these words as advice addressed directly to him, and fulfilled it literally by distributing his possessions to the poor. Another time, when he heard the

Savior's words: *take...no thought for the morrow* (Mt. 6:34), he perceived them as a powerful call which he obeyed without questioning: he left his home and went into the wilderness, in order to, having freed himself from all concerns, give himself to Him, Whose will became the highest law for him, in the exploits of an ascetic life. The word brought fruit a hundredfold in him.

Take the Holy Nun and Martyr Eudocia, initially a great sinner, cleansed and transformed by the Word of God like that burning coal which the six-winged Seraphim took with the tongs from the altar of the Lord to touch the mouth of the Prophet (Is. 6:6-7).

In the worldly life, her name was Mary. She was wondrously beautiful, and that was her misfortune. Success, flattery, universal worship swelled her head. Mary led an earthly, frivolous social life, elegant and splendid on the outside, but empty and vulgar in its essence. Feasts, entertainments of every kind filled all her time not allowing her to come to her senses, to recover. But under the exterior of a woman of the world, inside her was hiding a kind heart and compassionate soul. This saved her.

Once, two old monks stopped in indecision near the hotel where Maria was feasting, surrounded by a crowd of admirers. It was evident that they had come from afar. Their feet and clothes were covered with dust; battered, shabby shoes spoke of a long journey. They were tired and wanted to have a rest in the hotel, but the sounds of music and cheerful society intimidated them. Finally they decided to enter. Next to the banquet hall they were given a room separated only by a thin partition.

The noisy orgy continued. Shameless speeches were heard. Mary, who was drunk, danced a seductive, lustful dance.

Someone remembered about the elders. "Let's go see what they are doing. They must have prayed their heads off!"

"Leave them alone," said Mary with a smile.

But already several dissolute revelers crowded together at the partition, listening to what was being done behind it.

"Shh ... Hush! They are reading something! Let's listen!"

The noise ceased. In the ensuing silence, the voice of the elder reading aloud was heard slightly dampened by the wall.

He was reading: *And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment* (Lk. 7:37-38).

"What a place for such reading!" exclaimed one of the young revelers. "Hey, you there...!"

“Leave them alone!” cried out Mary. Her face was becoming more and more serious as the wonderful Gospel story of the forgiven sinner unfolded. She did not understand what was happening to her.

The elder’s voice continued:

“*Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much*” (Lk. 7: 47).

“Well, you certainly would not care about that!” whispered the youngest of the guests to Mary.

A loud cry was her answer to him. Everyone flinched. Mary stood with her whole body trembling. Mortal pallor covered her face. Her dark eyes burned with flame.

“Get away from me! Leave me alone...!”

These wondrous words about forgiveness, about salvation, about the mercy of God burned in her heart. In such a way dried soil eagerly swallows the waters of spring rain.

The disconcerted guests began to leave. Mary rushed behind the partition to the astonished elders. Their first amazement gave way to indignation.

“Go away from us!” said one of them sternly. “Or is there no shame in you?!”

“Fathers, do not reject me! I am a sinner, but the Lord did not reject the harlot...!”

She held her lips to the dusty feet of the elders: the sinner Mary became Saint Eudocia. The word of God brought a hundredfold harvest.

What lessons should we learn from all that has been said? If we really want the Gospels’ seed to give abundant harvest in us and intend to seriously work on this, we must study the soil of our heart and find out exactly what hinders the growth of the Word of God. Think about what type you belong to. Does your heart represent a public road or stony soil, or are the seeds of the Word of God perishing in it, smothered by the thorns of worldly cares?

It should be borne in mind that these types rarely appear in their pure form. Usually there is a bit of everything in the human heart, and the specific type can be determined only by the predominance of one or another trait.

After establishing the features of the soil, one may identify and apply special methods of processing in accordance with each kind of soil. Of course, it is always necessary to remember here that *neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase* (1 Cor. 3:7), Who alone can make the most barren soil fruitful and conversely turn a fertile field into a desert, and therefore, our prayers and petitions for the success of the labor should be primarily addressed to Him. But with this hope in God as the main condition for success, we nevertheless are not relieved of the obligation to work on ourselves, for *to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin* (Jm. 4:17).

So what can we do then?

One can hardly speak of the first variety of the first type, because the psyche of people of this kind does not even contain a desire to become morally better and purer. Maybe only some disaster sent by the beneficial Providence of God may lead them out of stupid animal complacency. You can only pray for them, but it is useless to give any advice to them, since under normal circumstances they would not want to follow any advice. The two other varieties, as we have seen, are turned into a public road with a multitude of varied, motley impressions which, passing through their consciousness like an endless string of carriages and passerby, compact the soil, that is, make the soul rigid, insensitive and unreceptive to the Word of God. It is clear that our first concern in such a case is to set up fences so nobody would drive and walk on that road. In simple terms, this means to hamper or completely stop the flow of incoherent perceptions of everyday life, which intrusively crowd in the brain, cluttering it with all sorts of junk.

Just think how much rubbish every day passes through the head of an average, so-called cultured person! Take a morning newspaper alone! There is a false main feature covering events the way the editorial office needs it; there is a satirical article full of ribald mockery; there is a section of top stories transmitting all kinds of cheap news; there is also the notice of a missing dog and of a doctor who can radically cure sexual impotence. After reading all this “useful” information, you feel the urge to walk outdoors for at least two hours in order to get some fresh air. Next, you come to work and immediately find out more news: whose wife ran away, which of the colleagues was caught stealing, who received a promotion and reward, etc. When you return home, your wife is sitting with a friend – a hardcore gossip who dumps on you a bunch of the most recent, freshly minted news. In the evening you go to the theater and again, there is a new string of events, speeches, monologues, various persons, spectators, actors, familiar and unfamiliar people, old and young, well-dressed and poorly dressed – all this rolling, noisy, ever-changing crowd filling the entertainment venues. Add to this a final chord of a restaurant dinner with impressions of electric light, dolled up women, cheap orchestra, etc. and you will realize that after living a month in this boiling cauldron of outward diversity, fleeting impressions, and inner emptiness, you may become hard-hearted and lose your mind. Success and influence of the Word of God on the soul in such an environment is out of the question. Yet, set up barriers, give up this clamor and vain rushing around, limit this influx of impressions with all available means, live a more secluded life, be sure to provide yourself with hours of deep thoughtfulness and silence, and you will see that the soil of your heart will start to constantly change and more deeply receive the sprouts of God’s Word.

In people of the second category, the stony layer of self-love serves as an obstacle to the growth of the Gospels' seed. This is precisely where one's efforts should be turned. This layer must be split open and removed. In Finland fields are cultivated in this way. In order to prepare the soil for sowing, first, the mass of huge boulders and stone debris cluttering the field must be removed. These stones are either blasted or rooted out of the ground by pushing long thick logs under them. And one should see this work! Setting one end of a log under a huge stone, the whole family of peasants – owners or tenants of the field – sits on its free end and begins to swing it. They swing it persistently, methodically; they swing it in the morning and in the evening, they swing it one day, another day... And finally, the massive boulder starts to tremble slightly and bit by bit comes up out of the ground. It is difficult and boring work, but there is no other way: the field needs to be cleared. Hard work is in store with self-love as well. There is no way to uproot it and remove it immediately, but it can be broken off in pieces. You should only not pity yourself.

Suppose you are asked to do a favor. You do not want to because it is associated with loss of time and other inconveniences for you. Your self-love protests and grumbles. Do not listen to this voice, overcome yourself, and having defeated your unwillingness and self-pity this time, a piece of self-love is broken off. Continue this work persistently, steadfastly, and as constantly as Finnish peasants work, and little by little your self-love will begin to soften, weaken, and disappear, giving way to better feelings of self-sacrifice and care for others. Then the roots of the Word of God will penetrate deeper into your heart and will not perish from the onset of bad weather.

Finally, people of the third category, in whom thorns choke the sprouts of the Gospels' sowing, need to remember that you cannot serve mammon and God simultaneously, that you need to choose one of them, and once you chose serving God, thorns and weeds of vain desires and worldly attachments must be weeded out carefully. Otherwise they will grow and choke the Word of God. It is useful to remember that the sooner this work is done, the better. While thorns are only in the bud, it is easy to weed them out.

As long as sinful desires exist only in thought and not yet in deed, it is easier to overcome them. But once they become rooted, when they are carried out in action, the struggle with them becomes more difficult.

When the soil is prepared to some extent in this way, the cultivation of the soul, which contributes to successful growth of the Word of God, is carried out according to the old ascetic rule: plow it with the plow of repentance, fertilize it with prayer, irrigate it with tears of contrition, and constantly weed out the evil grass of the passions.

Chapter 4, verses 21-41

After the Lord told and explained the Parable of the Sower, the question naturally arose: what should be done with the seed of the Word of God which is accepted by listeners and readers of the Gospels? Is it enough to limit oneself only to preparing the soil for its growing and after that stop all care?

The Lord answers this question using a different parable image.

Is a candle brought to be put under a bushel, or under a bed? and not to be set on a candlestick? (verse 21).

The word of God, which Jesus has called seed, is compared here to a candle in its effect on the human soul.

Yes, it is a candle in our dark life; it is a source of light – bright, shining, piercing the surrounding darkness with its rays. You, listeners to the Gospels, you have received that candle. What are you planning to do with it...? Nothing? Not derive any benefit from it? Leave it without any use? Isn't that strange? Is that not placing your candle under a vessel or under the bed so its light would not bring any benefit to you or to anyone else sitting "in the shadow of death"? Was the candle brought for this purpose? Was it not brought to be put on a candlestick to shine to everyone in the house?

This is the answer of the Lord to the question posed above. After receiving the seed of the Gospels, after receiving the candle of the Word of God, one cannot relate to this great gift indifferently and half-heartedly. It should be used in one's life.

How?

The Word of God is, says the Apostle Paul, ...sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:12-13).

This is the first attribute of God's Word. It judges, evaluates, determines the moral value of our thoughts and intentions. The most subtle twists of thoughts, the innermost feelings lurking in the dark depths of our souls, the most intimate desires which we do not dare to admit to ourselves, are assessed by the Word of God according to their moral value. The Word penetrates to the very bottom of the soul and passes an unmistakable sentence on everything that is good and that is bad. Everything is open before Him.

For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad (verse 22).

Sin is afraid of light. It hides in the dark alleys of the soul, and the devil – the originator of sin – exerts every effort to prevent a single ray of light from entering these rank corners, so his dark deeds, his deceit and cunning would not be revealed. Under the influence of the evil will of the devil, corrupt people cannot bear when anyone looks into their soul and do not like to do it themselves. This is why the soul often seems to be a dark closet with lots of junk where you cannot sort out anything: dust, dirt, garbage, evil thoughts, dirty desires, hidden passions... All the corners are filled with things. But often we do not even notice this in ourselves, for consciousness which is not enlightened by the Gospels' light cannot determine what is good and what is bad. Often, a certain sin slightly covered by a seeming nobleness of motives or sophism which is clumsily built on a sacred text, is taken for virtue, and unfortunately this is a large-scale phenomenon. It is not without reason that this ridiculous, perverted terminology, presenting such pearls as "noble pride," "holy hatred," etc. has appeared in our literature. Strangely enough, a huge mass of people who have lived a Christian life for almost two millennia still do not know what sin is and where the line is, separating the morally permissible from what is wrong. Rarely does the public morality of our time rise above the level of the criminal code, and knowing neither moral principles nor the Gospels' criterion, people who are definitely morally deficient, sincerely consider themselves to be wonderful people and feel completely safe for their eternal future, of course, provided that they think about it. "When I analyze my actions, I see that I am a good person!", "I am better than many others!", "Why be modest: in my soul I do not find moral ugliness!" Have you heard such testimonies? And this is said by people who simply have not committed crimes punishable by imprisonment. Indeed, I have not committed any crime, I have not killed anyone, I have not robbed anyone, I have not stolen anything! What else is required? And a person feels safe. It seems to him that everything is fine in the unlit closet of his soul. The outlines of vice and passions fade in the dark, and sin becomes invisible.

But bring the Gospels' light into this dark closet, and the picture dramatically changes. All dirt, all soot, all debris accumulated over the years appear immediately before one's eyes and cause involuntary disgust. The inside of the soul submerged in gray twilight and thus seeming decent, suddenly opens up in all its ugliness, illuminated by the relentless radiance of the Gospels' ideal. What previously seemed morally decent and even virtuous turns out to be completely corrupt. The enlightened conscience clearly sees all stains of sin in its imaginary virtue. Moreover, long-forgotten pictures, scenes, and incidents which were never given any importance from a moral point of view and which therefore dozed peacefully on the bottom of the soul without disturbing the conscience, rise from the depths of the memory. Now they appear in a completely new light: all the dirt, all the baseness, all animal egoism with which they were completely saturated come up to the surface and painfully hurt the eyes. It is as if a bandage

covering a festering wound was removed and a disgusting gangrenous ulcer emitting an unbearable stench has appeared before the eyes. Total reassessment of one's values begins, and the proud self-conceit of a self-satisfied person gives way to excruciating shame and repentance.

This is the first consequence of illumination of the soul with the Gospels' light: increasing the moral ideal, enlightening and sharpening one's moral feeling, lowering prideful self-esteem, giving a more correct and humble view of one's own moral condition, and awakening of the conscience. When reading or listening to the Word of God, one must first and foremost use the knowledge acquired to achieve these results. The best way is as follows: on the basis of studying the words of the Lord and the whole Gospel story, you need to put together and clearly draw out for yourself the so-called Gospels' moral ideal, that is, the image of that spiritual perfection or holiness which was most clearly and fully embodied in the person of the Lord. After making at least an approximate, initial concept of what your life should be according to the Gospels – a life full of lofty holiness and purity, we must compare it with our dirty, corrupted life step by step, fact after fact, every little thing after every little thing.

The Gospels demand meekness and humility. *Blessed are the meek...Blessed are the poor in spirit* (Mt. 5:5, 3), says the Lord, who Himself was the first to give the amazing example of meekness. He carried the heavy cross of His wandering life without complaint, went up to Calvary without complaint, endured all insults and torments without complaint, and even prayed for those who crucified Him.

Do we live like this...? Do not pride and self-conceit fill our souls? Are our souls free from irritability, anger, impatience?

The Gospels demand purity. Even one who looks at a woman with unclean desire is called an adulterer there (Mt. 5:28). But we not only do not struggle with dirty desires, not only do not drive thoughts and images which excite from ourselves, but deliberately inflame ourselves and look only for an opportunity to satisfy our lust.

The Gospels demand unconditional truthfulness. *Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay* (Mt. 5:37), the Lord has taught us and in His own person He gave us an example of such truthfulness: in the most difficult, critical moments, not only did He not lie, but also he did not soften the sharp truthfulness of His words to please people, no matter how He was threatened with danger. Try to calculate how many times we tell lies in the space of a day for the most insignificant reasons, and you will be amazed to see how infinitely far we are from this height of the Gospels' demands...

If we continue such comparisons further, persistently and consistently, the rainbow colors with which our spiritual life appeared before our eyes will gradually fade, and we will see its flaws and deficiencies in all their undisguised ugliness.

This is unpleasant, of course, but this is what we need to do. In order to start treating the disease, one needs to get the correct diagnosis. When discovered, a disease is not so terrible and dangerous, because one can always find ways to heal it. It is terrible when a person does not suspect a disease in himself and does not even try to find out whether he is sick or healthy. A dangerous situation can then become hopeless. And we should use the light of the Gospels not only for ourselves, but also for our neighbors who do not know and do not read the Gospels; we are obliged to help them to figure out what is happening in their souls and point out where sin is and where truth is, for when people light a candle, they put it *on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house* (Mt. 5:15).

Establishing a diagnosis, however, is not all. Subsequently, treatment is necessary, that is, correction of sinful habits and making efforts to lead the Gospels' life.

The Lord speaks about these efforts of will, which are a necessary condition for spiritual development, in a few mysterious words: *And he said unto them, Take heed what ye hear. With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you; and unto you that hear shall more be given. For he that hath, to him shall be given; and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath* (verses 24–25). The last verse seems especially strange.

He that hath, to him shall be given. Is that fair? *He that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath.* How can that be? How can one take something away from someone who does not have?

However, the meaning of these words becomes more understandable for us if we recall that in the Gospel of Matthew they are associated with the parable of the talents, representing its moral conclusion (Mt. 25:29).

This parable tells the story of a lord who, leaving for a foreign land, entrusted his estate to slaves and gave five talents to one of them, two talents to another, and one talent to a third slave. The first two slaves used the talents they received for business and gained as much profit from them as the amount they started with, while the third slave buried his talent in the ground, where it lay without any use. When the lord returned and listened to the reports of his slaves, he awarded the first two, and addressed the third slave who buried the talent, with dreadful words: *Thou wicked and slothful servant...Thou oughtest...to have given my silver to the traders, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with profit⁴. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath* (Mt. 25:26–29).

⁴ The KJV reads: "Thou oughtest...to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury." The words here are adjusted to correspond to the Russian translation of the Bible quoted in the text.

The meaning of the parable is clear: the lord is the Lord; the slaves are all of us; the talents are powers and abilities granted to us by God; the marketplace where talents are multiplied is the whole world. The Lord demands that we must use the abilities given to us for the salvation of our souls and for the benefit of our neighbors, put them into circulation on the market of the world, and then they will develop and increase, or, as the Gospels say, *he that hath, to him shall be given...and unto you that hear shall more be given* (verses 25, 24); moreover, the more efforts and diligence we put into this business, the greater this increase and more successful its development.

He who invested five talents, also received five talents of gain; he who put into circulation two talents, acquired only two talents of gain from them. *With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again* (Mt. 7:2), says the Lord.

But he who does not use his abilities for the purposes indicated by the Lord, loses them entirely. The slave who buried his talent in the ground, lost it. It was in this sense that it was said: *he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath* (verse 25).

Thus, the above words of the Lord reveal the common law of all organic life – the law of growth and development, a law also acting with inexorable obligation as applied to the spiritual life. This law can be formulated as follows: all strength and ability not only in a human being, but in every living creature develops when used and exercised and dies without use, or as they say becomes atrophied.

The impact of this law can be observed everywhere and always. If you want to develop physical strength in yourself, you must exercise with weights, do gymnastics. This will make your muscles increase in volume and acquire strength and elasticity. If you want to develop memory, you must practice memorizing by heart, reproducing what you have heard, and recollecting the past. Porters on the railways amaze us with an incredible memory for people's faces, developed through constant exercise. They remember all passengers who turn to them, easily find those whom they need in a crowd of a thousand people, and even after a long time they can describe the appearance of their customers from memory, tell how much luggage was with them and what their point of destination was. If you want to learn to read quickly, write beautifully, and easily solve arithmetic problems, you must do exercises in order to develop these abilities. And thus it is with everything.

On the contrary, if you stop your exercises, you will lose what you have gained. Thus people who once went to school and knew how to read and write well, while living in a village would often completely forget these skills. These so-called relapses of illiteracy are caused precisely by a lack of exercise and practice. Quit physical work and exercises, and your muscles will become flabby and weak.

Once a Hindu fakir who walked all the time with his arm raised above his head, attracted people's attention on the streets of Paris. It turned out that for several years, by a conscious effort of will, he forced himself to hold his arm in this unnatural, stretched position. As a result, it ended up that the muscles bending the arm lost their strength from long lack of use; the arm became stiff and stopped bending and moving.

There have been cases when Europeans thrown in a shipwreck onto an uninhabited island and forced to stay there for 15–20 years, almost forgot how to speak, since due to the lack of companions they were doomed to silence throughout this entire period. When an accidentally passing ship noticed them and removed them from the island, they were often unable to tell their story, since they had almost forgotten their native language and had to learn it again.

The very organ of speech – the muscles of the tongue and vocal cords – may atrophy from non-use. There have been cases when people who were in solitary confinement for a long time and were silent all the time, at the end of the imprisonment had to start with exercises in pronouncing articulate sounds, the habit of which was completely lost.

They say that there are species of fish, lizards, and frogs which live in the underground lakes of the Mammoth Cave in America. In their external structure they are no different from the kinds living on the surface of the earth, but they have one special feature: they have no eyes at all. In some, you can still see faint traces of eye sockets, while others do not have even this. The organ of vision atrophied without a trace. Why did this happen? Maybe it is simply a special underground blind breed of fish and amphibians? Scientists do not think so and explain this phenomenon differently. Once the ancestors of these animals, belonging to a normal terrestrial breed, accidentally got into underground lakes, which had all conditions for existence, yet not a single ray of the sun penetrated the cave and eternal darkness reigned there. In the absence of light, the organ of vision – the eye – became completely unnecessary. In the new environment, hearing, and the senses of smell and touch were necessary for life, but the eyes were left unused and in accordance with a general law, vision began to weaken. This process of gradual weakening of the organ of vision continued in a number of subsequent generations of animals, and as a result, after many years, even the eye socket was not left from the eye. It atrophied from lack of use.

The same law also applies to the spiritual life. From lack of use, a person may lose his will, memory, mental abilities – all spiritual capacities. And of course, the most terrible thing for a person is stagnation of the spiritual life. This happens very often. Look at so-called business people who are entirely engaged in trade, profits, and commercial operations. They are so absorbed in all this that they have no time for the spiritual life, and they do not grow spiritually, eternally remaining spiritual dwarfs. Little by little the thought of God, of moral law is lost; love

of truth, aversion to sin, and heartfelt sensitivity to moral issues is forfeited. In a word, going this way, it is easy to reach the state which the Prophet Isaiah described as follows: *Ye shall hear indeed, but ye shall not understand; and ye shall see indeed, but ye shall not perceive. For the heart of this people has become gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them* (Is. 6: 9–10).⁵ We usually consider only those who sin openly to be sinners. But whoever does not use the abilities given to him for the glory of God, for the benefit of his neighbors, for his salvation, for the development of spiritual life is also a sinner before God, and at the Last Judgment of Christ he will hear a dreadful sentence: *cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth* (Mt. 25:30).

Neglecting spiritual gifts results in the following sad phenomena:

1. Spiritual capacities, such as faith, love, hope, prayer, patience, obedience to God and others begin to weaken, become unreliable and in a decisive, difficult moment can let a person down. In such a manner, in the forest trees decayed in their core are the first to fall from the attack of a storm.

2. We more easily succumb to temptations and more often yield to the spell of enticements, when betraying the moral law.

3. Will power and its moral stability suffer. The bottom line is that the will is nothing more than a constant choice between various urges and possible directions of our activity.

For example, you are asked to do some kind of favor. Your laziness and your egoism do not want to. But you have other motivations – motivations of the Gospels' nature and motivations of love for your neighbors, which require of you: *Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away* (Mt. 5:42). You are forced to choose between one and another decision, between “yes” and “no,” between consent and refusal. Satisfying the request requires a certain effort of will, and if you overcome yourself and make this effort, fulfilling what the Gospels teach you, you triumph over laziness and selfishness, and your will becomes somewhat strengthened morally. If you remain passive and indifferent and by obeying laziness and selfishness do not make the needed effort of will, you are conquered, and your will becomes somewhat weakened.

Another example: imagine a seductive, adulterous thought flashes through you. You can hold it in your mind and enjoy it, or, remembering the need for purity which the Lord demands, you can immediately drive it away, focusing attention on something else. Again, a choice is to be made, and because of which decision you make – to submit to the temptation without resistance

⁵ Here the Septuagint translation is used, as it is closer to the Russian translation of the Bible quoted in the text.

or to firmly push it away from you – depends on whether your will weakens and becomes loose or becomes stronger.

The exercise of moral will, the work that strengthens it, in fact consists of this constant choice which everyday life gives a person. It thus becomes clear how important work is for the development of will and how harmful passivity or indifference is here.

The main means of strengthening moral will is continuous work in the spirit of the Gospels' testaments. Without this work, without constant efforts – no matter how they manifest themselves: in prayer, charity, or ascetic endeavor – the will can atrophy completely, and then any moral act will present incredible difficulties.

4. Stagnation in the spiritual life is always accompanied by further weakening of the voice of conscience. At first, the conscience is sensitive and responsive to all moral evil, but gradually it begins to fade, if one does not pay attention to its demands. If you set an alarm clock but do not get up when it rings, you will soon get used to it and sleep soundly without waking up like church watchmen may sleep on the bell tower to the sound of bells. The same is true in the spiritual life: if a person neglects the instructions of his conscience, little by little he will cease to hear its voice and fall asleep morally. A person can get accustomed to a stench, and one can get accustomed to evil if one does not fight against it.

5. Finally, doubts, skepticism, cowardice, and spiritual apathy are inevitable in the absence of spiritual activity. There can be neither energy, nor determination.

These are the psychological consequences of spiritual laziness and inaction.

Even more important are the consequences in the mystical and grace-filled realm.

1. With inaction, we lose a grace-filled life. *Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life* (Jn. 5:40), says the Lord to the Jews. He promises this life, but for this one must go to Him. He who stands still, that is, does not make any efforts and movements, will never come to Christ – the source of life.

2. The light of life is usually acquired by us in practice, that is, by testing the Gospels with experience and active life according to its testaments.

3. If we do not make attempts to live according to the Gospels, we drive away grace-filled gifts and God's help from ourselves, since the grace of God helps a person if he makes his own efforts and it cannot save him without such efforts.

We should try to firmly remember the main conclusion from all that has been said: spiritual life is continuous activity. There is no more harmful mistake than imagining that after you have done one or several good deeds, you have already secured bliss for yourself and can rest on your laurels. Thus, in the old days, rich merchants after a life spent dissolutely sometimes

tried to redeem it by building a church or donating a thousand-pood⁶ bell. If this gift is not accompanied by sincere repentance and a decisive turning in life in the spirit of the Gospels, it cannot save the person. *But when the righteous, says the Word of God, turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked man doeth, shall he live? All his righteousness that he hath done shall not be mentioned: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die* (Ezk. 18:24).

Life is eternal movement. It never stands still.

The spiritual life also moves constantly: either upward, or downward, either towards good, or towards evil, but it cannot stand still. It is like rowing up a river in a boat. You move forward only while you row. As soon as you lay down the oars, you immediately begin to drift back.

But if you conscientiously work on yourself, trying to live according to the commandments of God, and, using the Gospels' light, if you attempt to correct your shortcomings, the Kingdom of God, that is the highest state of moral perfection when the Lord begins to reign undividedly in the soul over your thoughts, desires, and feelings, will grow imperceptibly in your soul. The person does not know how and according to which laws this seed of the Kingdom of God grows, and often does not even notice it until the result of growth is manifested and the seed turns into a full-fledged ear of wheat. But when the seed is grown, it fills the entire soul, pushing out all that is superfluous and unnecessary. *So it is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs* (verses 31–32).

The last episode of this passage of the Gospels, in the style typical of the Apostle Mark, portrays the Lord as the powerful King of the elements Whom the sea, wind, and storm obey.

⁶ A “pood” is an old Russian measure of weight, corresponding to 16.3 kg.