

## **Chapter 7, verses 1-24**

Once again the Evangelist Mark tells us about a clash between the Lord and the Pharisees – one of those numerous clashes which gradually enflamed the anger of the Pharisees and led to the terrible outcome. One does not feel in the reproaches of the scribes, who rebuked the disciples of the Lord for not observing the traditions of the elders, simple misunderstanding or only annoyed, petty self-love, afraid to lose its influence. The roots of the collision lie much deeper. What we see here is two completely different worldviews, two views on religion, and two understandings of man's attitude toward God.

It is clear that the Pharisees mainly valued external behavior and ritualistic piety expressed in careful and persistent performance of rituals, numerous traditions, and religious customs. On the contrary, the Lord requires internal attitudes from a person – a loving, pure heart, a soul reverently devoted to God, and behavior completely subordinate to this spirit of love for one's neighbor and devotion to God. All this is possible when the sole center of life for man is God, and the sole goal of one's life aspirations is union with Him. However, we already know that these aspirations can easily be replaced by other aspirations which have only the appearance of being religious, and God can be replaced by various idols. Oddly enough, such an idol replacing God can be an external religious cult, magnificent, festive worship, or even an ascetic feat. All of this can carry a person away to such a degree that the idea completely is lost that all of these things are no more than a means of religious education which have no value outside of it.

The means become a self-sufficient goal, and the very thought of God grows dim and weakens in this fascination with appearance. For clarification, we should give the following comparison. The goal of exercise is to strengthen a person's health and most people exercise just for this. But one may not have this goal in mind and may exercise for the sake of exercise, in order to learn how to do different tricks more skillfully or set a new record in some sport. This is what acrobats, wrestlers, and professional athletes do. The main goal – strengthening of the health – becomes completely forgotten, while excessive exercise is even harmful.

Ascetic feats strengthen spiritual health and this is their only purpose. There are sincerely religious people who are believers, for whom the very word "feat" and the idea of imitating ancient saints in their severity of life have power leading to action, and they are ready to take on any feat for the sake of the feat, completely ignoring whether it will bring them closer or further from the main goal of Christian life – unity with God, since excessive feats can even be spiritually harmful. For these people, the feat becomes an idol replacing God. For the Pharisees, such an idol, which overshadowed for them the idea of pure worship of God and obligatory submission to the single will of God, was the tradition of the elders and rituals. After completely moving in this direction and blindly following their beloved traditions, they often noticed that this false zeal led them to violate

the true will of God clearly expressed in the Law of Moses. We will not discuss here how and for what reasons this wrong shift in the religious worldview occurred. Answering the zealots of traditions, the Lord mentioned one particular thing in which all the nonsense of their immoderate zeal became particularly vivid. We shall dwell on these words. *And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. For Moses said, Honor thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death. But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free. And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother; Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye* (verses 9-13). The Lord clearly and definitively points out the contradiction to the law which the Pharisees were caught in, the dead end which they entered due to replacing the will of God with their traditions.

The most common fault of vain religion and hypocritical piety is excessive use of external ritualism; the Pharisaism with which the Lord tirelessly fought, consisted precisely of this. A man covers his sins with this mask; such is the conceit of these false hypocrites that they sacrifice God's holy law for the sake of the miserable ritualism of their pious imagination. The Pharisee, by virtue of a vow, devoted all his surplus to the Temple for buying sacrifices, salt, and firewood, and left his father or mother to starve to death. The Law of Moses required complete obedience and respect for parents, and along with this children were certainly entrusted with care for supporting their subsistence. But if the son felt that this duty was burdensome and wanted to be rid of it, it was enough for him to say about the means he spent on supporting his parents: "Corban," that is, "dedicated to God," and he was freed from his filial duty.

Violation of the Mosaic Law and the will of God expressed in it was obvious here and it became clear to each of the listeners how wrong the Pharisees were in their ritualistic fanaticism. Condemning the Pharisees, the Lord at the same time emphasized the need to obey the Old Testament commandments including the importance of the Fifth Commandment of the Law of Moses on honoring one's parents, which apparently suffered very much at that time due to the general coarsening of morals. This commandment was given in the Old Testament, but here the Lord unconditionally confirmed its binding authority to His followers: Christians of all times. From this point of view, the words of God assume a particularly disturbing and compelling meaning for us, because the relationship of children to their parents is a sore point in our time. It seems that the Fifth Commandment of the Decalogue has never been so neglected, and parents have never suffered so much from their children as they presently do. *Honour thy father and thy mother, that it may be well*

*with thee, and that thou mayest live long on the good land...* (Ex. 20:12),<sup>1</sup> thus the Lord commanded through Moses. *Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well-pleasing unto the Lord* (Col. 3:20), the Apostle Paul testified in the Epistle to the Colossians, and in the Epistle to the Ephesians confirmed this with renewed vigor: *Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth* (Eph. 6:1-3). The wise son of Sirach says: *Hear me your father, O children, and do thereafter, that ye may be safe. For the Lord hath given the father honour over the children, and hath confirmed the authority of the mother over the sons. Whoso honoureth his father maketh an atonement for his sins: and he that honoureth his mother is as one that layeth up treasure. Whoso honoureth his father shall have joy of his own children; and when he maketh his prayer, he shall be heard. He that honoureth his father shall have a long life; and he that is obedient unto the Lord shall be a comfort to his mother, and will do service unto his parents, as to his masters. Honour thy father and mother both in word and deed, that a blessing may come upon thee from them. For the blessing of the father establisheth the houses of children; but the curse of the mother rooteth out foundations. Glory not in the dishonour of thy father; for the father's dishonour is no glory unto thee. For the glory of a man is from the honour of his father; and a mother in dishonour is a reproach to the children. My son, help thy father in his age, and grieve him not as long as he liveth. And if his understanding fail, have patience with him; and despise him not when thou art in thy full strength. For the relieving of thy father shall not be forgotten: and instead of sins it shall be added to build thee up. In the day of thine affliction it shall be remembered; thy sins also shall melt away, as the ice in the fair warm weather. He that forsaketh his father is as a blasphemer; and he that angereth his mother is cursed of God.* (Sir. 3:1-16).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the duty of filial respect for one's parents is testified to clearly and decisively by the Word of God, and this duty remains the same from ancient times to the present.

The Lord confirmed this commandment; He himself sacredly fulfilled it in His life. We should recall that He performed His first miracle in Cana of Galilee where He turned water into wine, at the request of His Most Holy Mother. We have little information about the childhood of the Savior, but St. Luke nevertheless preserved one distinctive and valuable remark that He was a good child and was obedient to His parents (Lk. 2:51). In the moments of His last agony, hanging on the Cross, when the shadow of death hovered over His head, He noticed His weeping Mother at the foot of the Cross, and lovingly rested His gaze on Her. When He saw *the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home* (Jn. 19:26-27). At the last moments of

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<sup>1</sup> Here the Septuagint translation is used, as it is closer to the Russian Synodal version of the Bible quoted in the text.

<sup>2</sup> The Wisdom of the Son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus, is one of the books of the Apocrypha included in the Russian Bible.

His life, leaving aside His unbearable sufferings, He thus shows His filial tender care for the future of His Mother, entrusting her to the guardianship of His disciple. The ancient Jews kept the commandment to honor their parents very strictly, like all the commandments of the Mosaic Law. People were sentenced to death for beating or insulting their parents (Lev. 20:9). The guilty person would be taken outside of camp or outside the town, and would be stoned there, and the whole community of the village or town would take part in it. As St. John Chrysostom explains, this was done so that each participant in the execution, subsequently looking at his right hand which threw the stone, would remember his duties to his parents. The whole village participated in this, since the responsibility for a crime against the law was on everyone.

Family relations of the ancient patriarchs are completely imbued with this spirit of filial devotion and humility, and Biblical history provides many touching examples of deep love for parents. Take Isaac, the son of Abraham. When Abraham received the command from God to sacrifice his son, he *rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son.* Isaac unquestionably obeyed. They walked for three days until finally the Lord showed Abraham the mountain on which the sacrifice was to take place. *And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.* Isaac follows his father with confidence and complete readiness. *And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son* (Gen. 22). Even at this moment, under the knife of his father, Isaac does not show any resistance to protect himself, and only the Angel of the Lord stopping Abraham's hand, saves Isaac's life.

Take Joseph, the son of another patriarch, Jacob. He reached the highest position in Egypt, at the court of the Pharaoh. He was rich and powerful. But when he found out that his elderly father, a simple shepherd by occupation, was coming to him and was already nearby, he forgot everything – his magnificent court, his high rank, and his enormous power – in his eagerness to see his father as soon as possible; he *made ready his chariot, and went up to meet Israel his father, to Goshen, and presented himself unto him; and he fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while* (Gen. 46:29).

Take Solomon, the illustrious king of Israel, whose fame for wealth and wisdom resounded far in the East, and take his attitude to his mother. *Bathsheba* (the mother of Solomon)...*went unto king Solomon...And the king rose up to meet her, and bowed himself unto her, and sat down on his throne, and caused a seat to be set for the king's mother; and she sat on his right hand* (1 Kgs. 2:19). In the entire history of Christianity, we can see many examples of similar relationships to one's parents.

Respect for them, complete obedience, selfless love, and continuous care – all this was an indispensable feature of life in an ancient Christian family. We will take only a few of countless examples. St. Gregory the Theologian – in his youth, one of the best students of the Athenian school – had every chance for a most brilliant career. For his knowledge and talents, he was offered the best places in Athens. Life smiled at him, beckoning with fame, wealth, and honor. He refused everything and settled in the poor town of Nazianzus, since his parents who needed his support lived there. His cherished dream was always monasticism, asceticism, and a quiet life in the desert. During his school years, he often talked about this with his friend St. Basil the Great, who was filled with the same aspirations. The friends dreamed about it, made plans full of bright hopes and pure, youthful enthusiasm. And yet, for the sake of his parents, St. Gregory abandoned his cherished dream and these plans, and when St. Basil reminded him of them and invited him to live together in the desert, he replied with a letter, “I have to break this promise, but this is not my fault, for the duty of friendship must give way to the law of filial love.” And he explained the motives for his refusal in a fervent prayer to God, “Serving my parents, I thought to fulfill what is pleasing to you, My King, O Christ, for you give children to mortals so they have help for themselves and through them support their trembling members as if with a staff.”

Our Russian ascetic, St. Sergius of Radonezh, also strove for monasticism and a secluded life still in his youth, but for the sake of his father and mother he postponed the fulfillment of these desires. “My son,” his parents, the elderly Cyril and Maria, would say to him, “Remain with us until our death. Do not leave us! Close our eyes and then act according to the desire of your heart, as the Lord will show you!” And the humble son reverently fulfilled the request of his parents: he remained with them until their death, protecting and supporting their old age, and only after burying them did he become a monk and go into the wilderness.

Another great ascetic, St. Savva, Archbishop of Serbia, performed all endeavors and prayers of the ascetic life for his old father who could no longer perform them due to his infirmity, thus undertaking a double burden of asceticism – for himself and for his father.

Why is the Fifth Commandment important and why did the saints so strictly observe it?

We know that all the commandments were given by the Lord for the benefit of people. They represent those spiritual foundations of life, based on which a person can create happiness and a solid future for himself.

*I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt, says the Lord through the Prophet, and brought them into the wilderness. And I gave them my statutes, and showed them my judgments, which if a man do, he shall...live in them (Ezek. 20:10-11).* The same should be also said about the Fifth Commandment: it is primarily needed for ourselves. First of all, this is the best school of obedience. Nothing can be simpler, easier, and more natural than learning how to obey in a family

setting, in submission to your parents. This is the easiest obedience life knows. Even if it is combined with exactingness and certain severity among strict parents, which makes it sometimes difficult to tolerate, this feeling of hardness and unpleasant coercion is softened by parental love and caring. It is easier to obey parents than a stranger simply because they are parents, the closest people, because we owe them everything, because even internally disagreeing with their requirements, we still know that these demands are always for our benefit, no matter how parental love understands them.

Where can you find such a school? And you may ask why do we need to learn obedience? Is it really necessary for a person and for his happiness? Yes, indeed! Even if we simply take everyday relationships, it is easy to observe that they represent a continuous chain of subordination to different degrees and in different forms. A teacher, head of household, boss, power, law, or state – all require obedience. All of life is built on this and you cannot hide from life anywhere. That is why the life of people who are undisciplined from childhood and who are not used to obedience in their parents' family is so difficult and hard: life either severely breaks them in its own way, or simply throws them away like worthless garbage. But this is far from the most important thing. It is much more important that Christian life should be nothing other than total obedience to God. Life is not a game. It is an ongoing process of building the Kingdom of God, which is being built under God's direction. We are all called to this work and each of us has his own role to play in this matter. For the work to proceed orderly and harmoniously, it is necessary for each of us with conscious submission to accept his role from the hands of God and work wherever the Lord has placed him. Of course, we are free and we may either refuse this work altogether, or conduct it as we like. But in the former case, we cannot reach the Kingdom of God if we do not work on building it, while in the latter case we will inevitably make a lot of mistakes and false steps which may lead into the abyss; or in order to put us back on the right track and bring our activities in line with the laws of construction, the Lord will have to take very severe measures, and this is difficult and painful. Therefore, the more complete obedience to God is, the more correctly our Christian work goes and the easier life is according to our inner feeling, even if outwardly it is full of setbacks and calamities. The school of obedience to one's parents is the best path to obedience to God. This is why it is so needed. To say more: the very strictness of parents' discipline is useful for children and desirable. Why? Severe trials are needed for spiritual perfection, like fire cleansing metal. Here we will not dwell on the psychological causes of this phenomenon, but this is the law of spiritual life. *Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life* (Mt. 7:14). But if we do not pass this school of sorrow and trials in childhood in the family of one's parents, the Lord will have no choice but to put us to the trials of life and this is much more difficult, especially without preliminary preparation in the parents' home. However, if we go through this mournful course of spiritual upbringing in the form of parents' punishments and

a certain severity of relationships with the submission of a child in our own home, further trials often turn out to be unnecessary, at least the most acute and painful of them. Therefore, life subsequently will go relatively smoothly in fulfillment of the promise of God: *that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest live long on the good land*. Strictness is also useful in another respect as a first preparation for fighting against self-pleasure, lust, and the passions. Waging this struggle and controlling oneself, not yielding to passionate impulses, requires so-called spiritual wakefulness, that is, a certain, constant tension in the spirit. But in the beginning this tension is best achieved when someone's strict authority is felt close by. It is true that in this case it will be forced, but first of all, all initial steps of the spiritual life are forced in nature, and second of all, it does not lose its importance from this. In supporting such intense attention of the spirit, parents' strictness gradually creates a habit for it, and this feeling of a restraining authority hovering over you, being brought up in your parents' family, remains for the rest of your life. Subsequently, it easily passes into the feeling of the All-Seeing eye of God, when parental authority in one's consciousness gives way to the authority of God as the highest guiding principle in life.

This is why parents' strictness is good for children. That is why the wise son of Sirach teaches: *He that loveth his son causeth him oft to feel the rod, that he may have joy of him in the end....He that maketh too much of his son shall bind up his wounds; and his bowels will be troubled at every cry....Give him not liberty in youth, [and do not indulge his errors. Bow down his neck in his youth, and]<sup>3</sup> beat his sides while he is still young, lest becoming stubborn, he disobey thee* (Sir. 30:1, 7, 11, 12).

Attitudes towards one's parents in the spirit of the Fifth Commandment also represent the best school of love toward one's neighbors. It is relatively easy to love one's neighbor abstractly, in theory, to love only in word or in thought. But to love him in practice, to love him not as a poetic dream, but as a reality of life, often dirty and unattractive, to love precisely the neighbor who is near you and not in distant dreams, is immeasurably more difficult. And yet it is exactly such love which is required in Christianity, *let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth*, says the Apostle (1 Jn. 3: 18). And it is most natural for parents to be the first object of such practical, active love. Only theorists who have little understanding of the spiritual life may say that love for parents is only a special kind of love for yourself, a new form of personal self-love (Leo Tolstoy) and therefore, disregarding this love, one must strive to love all of humanity. It is easy to say, but love does not know such leaps. In fact, the heart learns to love only by gradually expanding the circle of those who are loved, starting with the closest and ending with distant people, strangers, outsiders. Therefore, the natural course of expanding love is approximately the following: first, love for parents, then for brothers and sisters, relatives, friends, acquaintances, fellow citizens, then for

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<sup>3</sup> Added to the Septuagint version, to match the Russian Synodal version of the Bible

compatriots and, finally, as the summit of everything – for all of humanity. It is hardly possible to avoid the need to go through all these steps sequentially, and apparently, one who does not know how to love his neighbors can never have love for the whole world and for all people, no matter how ardently he talks about it.

It is true that the development of love in the Christian life is dominated by spiritual motives rather than physical intimacy. But this applies already to the conscious age, to the period of spiritual maturity. For a child and for early youth the first school of love which is real and not fanciful is still the relationship with their parents.

This also makes it clear how important it is to cultivate this attitude in the strict spirit of the Fifth Commandment of God.

Disrespect of children for parents is a terrible ingratitude on their part. Just think, how much a mother suffers from her children! First, the pangs of childbirth, then an endless series of concerns and worries; everything troubles her: sickness of the child, need for care, concern about external evil influences, setbacks in school, children's problems, constant thought about their future. When children grow up, there are new thoughts: about a suitable partner for marriage, about career choice, the first disappointments in life, etc. The mother often takes these to heart more acutely than her children. And what if a dear, beloved child goes on a misguided, slippery path and is perishing in the abyss of vice and debauchery, and there is no power to save him, to help him? How much grief and tears then! Who will understand and appreciate this mother's Golgotha! And as a reward for all this, children usually abandon their parents. Woeful separation is always inevitable.

From the point of view of public benefit, correct relationships of children to parents, that is, relationships full of love and submission are equally necessary. No wonder the family is called the basis of society. The whole society is built from these family units, and the spirit of family relations is inevitably passed onto it. Where these relations morally deteriorate, the family begins to decompose, and at the same time society begins to rot, losing the strength of internal ties. In the end, all the so-called social virtues are initially cultivated in the main unit – the family which represents a miniature model of society. If the family is imbued with the spirit of egoism and personal self-love, it also releases egoists from its bosom, who become only the elements of decomposition and decay in public life.

Finally, parents are tools of the Creator for the continuation of the human race. This is why they need to be honored as tools which the Lord wishes to use for His purposes. The prayer of parents and their blessing have great power in the eyes of God, as if the Lord Himself recognizes their special rights over children. How many times has a mother's prayer saved her children from death, especially from moral death. Let us recall Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, who prayed for years that her misguided son be brought to his senses, and finally obtained his salvation through



weeping. Let us recall the Holy Martyr Mirax who first betrayed Christianity and then returned to the path of confession of the faith by the prayers of his parents. And what power parental blessing has, even accidental or taken by cunning! In this way, Jacob received the blessing from his father Isaac, which was actually intended for his older brother Esau.

*Therefore God give thee*, Isaac told him, laying his blessing hand on him, *of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine: Let people serve thee....and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee* (Gen. 27:28-29). And these words of blessing were literally fulfilled in Jacob and his offspring. As we see, the blessing of Noah given to Japheth and Shem, and especially the blessing by the elderly patriarch Jacob who precisely determined the destiny of all his descendants (Gen. 49) turned out to also be the same. The blessing of Jacob placed his younger grandson Ephraim higher than his older grandson Manasseh.

There is an old story of the power of a mother's involuntary blessing. One meek, quiet boy had a very ill-tempered mother. She did not love her son, and the poor boy had to endure many beatings and abuses from her. But he always remained an obedient and respectful son, never complained, and merely cried secretly. When he grew older, his life became unbearable: he felt unneeded and unwanted in his own house. Then reluctantly, he decided to go somewhere to look for work and happiness. His mother eagerly allowed this: she was glad to get rid of her unloved son.

"Bless me, mother!" said the son bidding farewell.

The angry woman did not relent even at that moment. She grabbed a piece of firewood from under the stove and threw it to him.

"This is my blessing to you!" she screamed.

The boy bowed low, picked up the wood and carefully wrapped it in his caftan.

"Thank you, my dear mother!" He said. "Goodbye!"

Even a piece of wood was precious to him as a blessing of his mother and the only memory of her. He cut a board from the wood and gave it to an icon-painting workshop where, on his order, the image of the Savior was painted on it. He never parted with this icon: it was all he received from his mother. And the Lord visibly blessed him for this respect for his mother and for respect for her blessing. Whatever he started, success always accompanied him. His new master, a childless widower who hired him to work in his office, liked him very much and took care of him with all his heart; when the boy grew up and became skilled at his job, he made the boy his partner and, dying, appointed him as heir to a significant fortune.

*Honour thy father and thy mother, that it may be well with thee* (Ex. 20:12), says the Lord.

On the contrary, the curse of parents always results in terrible consequences.

I remember a story about a terrible event which happened in one of the southern provinces . A small child – a girl – was cursed by her unwise mother at the very moment of her birth. Her mother

wanted and expected a boy, but a girl was born instead. This made her angry. “May you be cursed!” she cried out angrily, looking at the tiny, crying creature that was brought to be shown to her. The exhortations of the priest and relatives did not bring her to reason. Hidden hatred of the innocent baby persisted for a long time and more than once it broke forth with new curses. This had an immediate impact on the child. The girl grew up wild, unsociable, like a hunted animal. Soon signs of insanity appeared. She responded to her mother’s hatred with her own hatred and often scratched and bit her. From the age of twelve, they began to have real battles, and the daughter would grab anything in sight and rush at her mother with incredible fury. The ending was tragic. Once, when they quarreled over something near the stove, the mother pushed the mad girl in the chest. The girl grabbed an ax lying under the stove bench, and killed her mother with one blow. Such is the power of a parental blessing and of a parental curse!

Giving such power to parents, the Lord thereby reminds us of the duties of children toward them. These duties according to the Orthodox Christian doctrine are as follows:

- 1) respect for parents,
- 2) obedience to them,
- 3) providing food for them in their old age or when they are generally unable to work,
- 4) constant prayer for them throughout their whole life,
- 5) commemoration after death.

Your respect for your parents is usually rewarded through your own children. *Whoso honoureth his father shall have joy of his own children*, says the wise son of Sirach (Sir. 3:5). On the contrary, disrespect for your parents brings the same consequences upon your children. It is natural. One African tribe had a cruel custom: old people who were incapable of hunting and procuring food for themselves because of their infirmity were taken somewhere to the depths of the forest or a ravine, and were abandoned to the mercy of fate, left to die either of hunger or from predatory animals. A person becomes weak and useless; therefore, it is not worth feeding him.

Once, Sambo, a young healthy African, took his old father who could not move from old age, laid him on a large piece of bark and dragged him into the forest. His little son ran after him. They reached a deep ravine. With cold indifference Sambo pulled his father on the piece of bark to the very bottom of a ravine, turned, and headed for home. His son remained indecisive at the edge of the ravine.

“Father!” he shouted. “Wait!”

Sambo turned.

“What do you want?”

“Wait, I’ll get the bark...”

“Leave it! What for?”

“But you will also get old?”

“Yes!”

“Then what will I carry you on?”

Sambo stood, thought, scratched his head with its kinky hair. Then he went down into the ravine, put his father on the piece of bark, tied him tight so he would not slip, and dragged him back home.

### **Chapter 7, verses 25-37**

When the Lord Jesus Christ came to the lands of Tyre and Sidon, *a certain woman, whose young daughter had an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell at his feet: The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by nation* (verses 25, 26). She was an unhappy woman. Her beloved daughter suffered from demonic possession. All means were tried in an attempt to cure her; all was in vain. The poor mother was ready to despair, when suddenly she heard that a Great Prophet had appeared in her country, strong in spirit, powerful, merciful, who healed the most serious ailments with one word, one glance, and one touch. Again hope was kindled in her tormented heart. One last hope! If it fails now, all is finished! The woman went to the Saviour. She had no choice! Either she would beg for healing of her daughter here, or nowhere! She fell at the feet of the Lord and wept with the scalding tears of her last hope. Oh, these tears of love, suffering due to the suffering of loved ones! But the Lord was silent. Weeping over the suffering of others, He now was unaffected and motionless. Maddened by disappointment, the woman doubled her petitions, putting all the bitterness of her sore heart into them, all the power of her suffering. And suddenly the answer came: *Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs* (verse 27). Such an awful answer! Looking for mercy and receiving such an answer is the same as getting the blow of a whip on exposed nerves. It is unlikely that many could have endured such an answer and probably they would have immediately left with anger or the bitterness of resentment, or, in any case, with a feeling of complete disappointment. But the woman did not leave. Even this answer did not make her leave. She was ready to endure all humiliation, if only the health of her dear daughter was restored. Faith flamed up in her with renewed vigor, and with humble perseverance she continued to ask: *Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs* (verse 28).

The woman's faith, humility, and love overcame all obstacles which were supposed to push her away from the Saviour and which the Lord deliberately placed before her. *For this saying go thy way, He told her, the devil is gone out of thy daughter* (verse 29).

The harshness of the first answer is not at all in keeping with the gentle countenance of the Lord. Did He usually speak this way with the unfortunate people who came to Him for help? Did He

ever relate to human grief like that? Never. It is clear that the refusal of the request and harsh answer were given by Him intentionally with some purpose. For what?

For testing the humility of the woman, strengthening her faith which became reinforced by its victories over obstacles, and provoking her love to a new, persistent petition.

All of this is needed for the upbringing of a person. All of this strengthens a person spiritually.

The Lord took every opportunity presented to Him to give a person not only the external benefits this person asked for, but also to exalt his soul, evoking the best feelings and dispositions in it, and thus give it the grace of spiritual gifts. Strengthening the faith of the woman, He tried at the same time to evoke increased perseverance and persistence of supplication in her.

This is a lesson for us. A lesson on the need for persistent, prolonged prayer which does not despair and does not cease from the fact that it is not immediately heard, but continues to strive for its goal without losing hope. We see that the persistent request of the woman was finally granted. *Ask, and it shall be given you, says the Lord, seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened* (Mt. 7:7, 8). He confirms the same thought with two parables in the Gospel of Luke. Suppose, teaches one parable, *one of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee. I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth. And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you* (Lk. 11:5-9).

*And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint; Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily* (Lk. 18:1-8). Therefore, the Holy Orthodox Church also tries to accustom people to persistent prayer, offering its lengthy divine services which many people complain to be tiresome. Thus, as the parable says, one must cry out to the Lord day and night. Do not despair if the Lord is slow to fulfill our request.

“When asking for that which is worthy of God,” writes St. Basil the Great, “do not cease asking until you receive it. Drawing our thoughts to this, the Lord related the parable about the man

who obtained bread at midnight from a friend by his persistence. Regardless of whether a month or year, or three years, or a great number of years pass, do not back down, but ask in faith, constantly doing good.” “Let it be our everlasting occupation,” instructs another great Hierarch John Chrysostom, “to be diligent with prayers and not lose heart when hearing is slow, but patiently show complacency. Let us accustom ourselves to cling to prayer and pray day and night, especially at night, when nobody bothers you with chores, when your thoughts calm down, when everything around is silent and the mind has complete freedom to ascend to the Doctor of souls. Every place and every time is suitable for such activity. If you have a mind cleansed of ungodly passions, whether you are at the market or on the road, or at home, or in the courtroom, or in a monastery, or at sea, or wherever you are, everywhere you can receive what you ask for after calling upon God.”<sup>4</sup> Father A. Kolokolov, a well-known spiritual father from Saint Petersburg, would tell his spiritual children: “Are you looking for the help of the Mother of God? Then go to the Kazan Cathedral and say, standing in front of the icon: ‘Oh Mother of God, help! I will not back down, but I will ask and beg for as long as I have strength. I will also come to thee tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and for many years I will ask and pray until I receive what I ask for!’”

The prayer of Father John of Kronstadt, a great man of prayer of the Russian Church, always gave the impression of extraordinary perseverance. According to eyewitnesses, when he was praying, it was as if he would take hold of the vestments of Christ and not let them go, attempting through thick and thin to receive what he asked for.

He told the following about the first steps of his pastoral prayer: “The children Paul and Olga, by the infinite mercy of the Lord, in accordance with mine unworthy prayer, have been cured of the spirit of infirmity by which they were attacked. In the case of the child Paul, his malady passed away through sleep, and the child Olga became quiet in spirit, and her little face grew bright instead of dark and troubled. Nine times I went to pray with bold trust, hoping my trust might not be shamed; that to him that knocketh it would be opened; that even on account of my importunity, God would fulfil my requests; that if the unjust judge at last satisfied the woman who troubled him, then still more the Judge of all, the most righteous Judge, would satisfy my sinful prayer for the innocent children; that He would consider my labour, my intercession, my prayerful words, my kneeling, my boldness, my trust in Him. And the Lord did so; He did not cover me, a sinner, with shame. I came for the tenth time to their home, and the children were well. I gave thanks unto the Lord and to our most speedy Mediatrix.”<sup>5</sup><sup>6</sup> But why do we need prolonged, persistent prayers? Does prayerful work and long standing in prayer really have any value in the eyes of God and does the Lord not hear

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<sup>4</sup> The above quotes are from St. Theophan the Recluse’s Collection *The Holy Fathers on Prayer and Soberness*.

<sup>5</sup> Mediatrix means intercessor, referring to Mary, the Mother of God

<sup>6</sup> Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, trans. E.E. Goulaeff, Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, 1984, p. 202-203.

short, but sincere, fervent prayers? Indeed, sometimes an instant prayer brought from a pure heart is heard by God. The same passage of the Gospels that we just read tells us about another case of healing a deaf and tongue-tied person whom people brought to the Lord, asking Him to lay His hands on him. Without any delay and without waiting for the request to be repeated, the Lord *took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue; And looking up to heaven, he sighed, and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened. And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain* (verses 33–35). Here the prayer of those who asked was heard immediately.

Nevertheless, prolonged prayer is needed; it is needed primarily, as Father John of Kronstadt says, “That by prolonged, fervent prayer we may warm our cold hearts, hardened in prolonged vanity. For it is strange to think, and still more so to require, that the heart, hardened in worldly vanity, could be speedily penetrated during prayer by the warmth of faith and the love of God. No; labour and labour, time and time are needed to attain this. *The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force* (Mt. 11:12). The Kingdom of Heaven does not soon come into the heart when men themselves so assiduously flee from it. The Lord Himself expresses His will that our prayers should not be short, by giving us for an example the importunate widow who often came to the judge and troubled him with her requests. Our Lord, our Heavenly Father knows, even before we ask him, what things we have need of (Mt. 6:8), what we want; but we do not know Him as we ought, for we give ourselves up to worldly vanity, instead of committing ourselves into the hands of our Heavenly Father. Therefore in His wisdom and mercy He turns our needs into a pretext for our turning to Him. ‘Turn ye, My wandering children, even now unto Me, to your Father, with your whole hearts. If before you were far from Me, even now, at least, warm by faith and love to Me your hearts which were formerly cold.’”<sup>7</sup>

“Prolonged prayer,” writes one of our theologians Archbishop Anthony (Khrapovitsky), “is needed not for God, but for ourselves – who are unfocused and sluggish. It warms a person’s heart and influences the gradual emergence of a religious mood in him. Not all at once is religious feeling kindled in a person who is engaged in everyday affairs; it requires prolonged focus on prayerful thoughts and other means. Anyone who is constantly ready for prayerful, heartfelt supplications and shedding of tears of contrition does not need to pray for a long time in order to warm his heart, but rather in order to attain greater and greater spiritual perfection. The unrighteous judge and stingy friend yielded only to prolonged petitions, but the Heavenly Father will hear those *which cry day and night unto Him* (Lk. 18:7). *Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation* (Mt. 26:41). The Lord Himself *continued all night in prayer* (Lk. 6:12). The Apostle Paul also commanded us to pray

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 345-6.

without ceasing and spoke of himself: praying exceedingly day and night (1 Thess. 3:10). Cornelius pleased God by giving alms and constantly praying (Acts 10).”

Prolonged prayer is useful even in the sense that it accustoms us to constant remembrance of God. As we know, God should be the center of our inner life, and psychologically this is expressed in the point that the thought of God should be constantly and inextricably linked with our consciousness. This is achieved when a person first forcibly makes himself linger on the thought of God for as long as possible. Prolonged prayer, during which thoughts continuously ascend to God and to Heaven, is one such spiritual exercise. It gradually turns into constant prayer and in the hearts of experienced and hardworking ascetics becomes an inexhaustible and unceasing spring of prayerful feelings and sighs, flowing spontaneously even during the hours of sleep. According to ascetic writers, the heart itself begins to stream forth prayer.

Finally, there is no better means for strengthening the will in spiritual work than prolonged prayer. Satan never attacks a man as fiercely as during prayer. “When we are praying,” testifies St. John Chrysostom, “then the devil, with malice towards us, attacks us the most. He sees the greatest benefit for us from prayer, and this is why he contrives in every way to make us depart from prayer empty-handed. He knows and knows well, that if those who come to church approach God with sober prayer, confess their sins, and wholeheartedly lament in their soul about them, then they will depart from there receiving full forgiveness: for God is the lover of mankind. This is why he prevents this by diverting them from prayer with some things so they will not receive anything. And he does this not by force, but by distracting the mind with pleasant dreams and thereby inducing laziness in prayer. We ourselves are to blame for willingly surrendering to his nets and therefore depriving ourselves of the blessings of prayer. We have no excuse for this. Diligent prayer is the light of the mind and heart, light which is unquenchable and unceasing. That is why the enemy blows countless thoughts, like clouds of dust, into our minds, and even things that we have never thought about, he gathers and pours into our souls during prayer. As sometimes a gust of wind, attacking the kindled light of a lamp, extinguishes it, so the devil, after seeing the flame of prayer kindled in the soul, hurries to blow there countless, preoccupied thoughts from here and there, and does not stop doing this until he succeeds in extinguishing the kindled light. In this case, let us act in the same way as those who light their lamps. What do they do? When they notice the onset of a strong gust of wind, they block the hole in the lamp with their finger and thereby do not give the wind access to the inside, because, sweeping in, it will immediately extinguish the fire. The same is with us. As long as thoughts come from the outside, we can still resist them; when we open the doors of the heart and let the enemy in, we will not be able to resist them at all. The enemy, after extinguishing any good memory and holy thought in us, makes a smoking lamp out of us: then in prayer the mouth only utters empty words.”

What the great Hierarch describes so vividly was undoubtedly experienced by every Christian who walked on the spiritual path. The fiercest struggle with evil thoughts has to be endured precisely during prayer; much effort is needed to drive away intrusive, unnecessary thoughts and to focus prayerfully on God. But this struggle with thoughts like any struggle strengthens the will if it is conducted seriously, persistently, and therefore successfully. The ability to fix or focus our attention on one subject, which is developed by this struggle through prolonged prayer, is a sign of a spiritually strong will, and the greater the duration of such concentration can be achieved, the stronger the person is spiritually. In the language of mystical concepts, the more often and more decisively a Christian defeats the spirits of darkness who try to distract him from prayer, the stronger he becomes.

In prolonged prayer a religious feeling, especially the feeling of gratitude to God, also develops. Usually we do not value much what we have received too easily, and we rarely give thanks for the things we have from the Lord without any labor on our part. Yet, we keep and cherish things achieved by hard, painstaking work as the greatest value. Therefore, we especially appreciate all gifts and benefits of God which we have obtained from persistent, long prayer, and do not treat them with the usual disrespectful light-mindedness as we do things which we have received for free. Such a reverent and attentive attitude toward the gifts of God, especially toward spiritual gifts, is needed for their fruitful use in life. On the other hand, the more vividly we recognize the great value of what the Lord grants us, the more our heart is filled with a feeling of gratitude.

However, speaking about the benefits and even necessity of prolonged prayer, three extremely important reservations should be made. There are well-known prerequisites which make such prayer fruitful and in violation of which more harm is done than good.

First, prayer – its thoughts and its words – should capture the attention of the person who prays, and this is only possible if the intensity and duration of prayer corresponds with the person's strength. "Be moderate in all religious works," says Father John of Kronstadt, "for moderation, even in virtue, correspondingly to your powers, according to circumstances of time, place, and preceding labour, is prudent and wise. It is well, for instance, to pray with a pure heart, but as soon as there is no correspondence between the prayer and your powers (energy), with the various circumstances of place and time, with your preceding labours, then it ceases to be a virtue. Therefore the apostle Peter says, *Add...to virtue, knowledge* (that is, do not be carried away by the heart only); *and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience* (2 Pet. 1:5-6)."<sup>8</sup>

The spiritual strength of a person develops and grows gradually. Therefore, one who has just begun to live a spiritual life cannot immediately take on too large a prayer rule. From this can result

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<sup>8</sup> Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, trans. E.E. Goulaeff, Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, 1984, p. 552.



boredom or fatigue. The advice of an experienced spiritual mentor who could indicate an appropriate size for the prayer rule is very important in this case. But, starting with a relatively small rule, one must strive to learn how to pray for a long time and gradually lengthen the prayers as one's spiritual strength develops.

If a Christian takes upon himself excessive work in prayer which does not conform to his own strength, this usually results either in despondency or complete laxness, and then even the easiest rule seems incredibly difficult and is not fulfilled, or, conversely, results in fanaticism, spiritual pride, and its worst expression – so-called demonic deception, that is, spiritual self-seduction, subjugating an excessively zealous ascetic to the spirit of frenzied self-conceit and power of the enemy.

How can one distinguish “demonic deception” from the spirit of sincere, ardent zeal for God? What signs can show its emergence in the soul and what means can one use to fight it?

This is a very important question, because here is always concealed a great danger for zealous beginners. Many have perished in this temptation which the devil skillfully uses, capturing predominantly talented, ardent, enthusiastic natures in this net.

Holy ascetic writers in their treatises indicate the following manifestations of spiritual deception.

1. An ascetic who is in spiritual deception, after fervent prayer or enthusiastic reading of the Word of God, or a sermon, or a good deed, instead of the expected quietude and inner peace, feels an odd anxiety and doubts which are unclear to him, or irritation, or judgment of others, or general internal disturbance, not accompanied, however, by the spirit of self-reproach and repentance.

2. He who is in spiritual deception often takes such feats upon himself, which, while satisfying his personal taste, cause only grief to his neighbors and incite anger and quarrels in them, and then in him. Such, for example, are sharp denunciations of other people starting with the very first steps of the spiritual life, immoderate fasting producing irritability, family quarrels, etc.

3. He who is in spiritual deception is usually delighted not with the content of prayer, but only with its duration, regarding it as a proof of the strength of his will and looking at prayer as a merit before God, contrary to the words of Christ.

4. He who is in spiritual deception considers himself to be above Church regulations and proudly invents his own willful exploits and his own rules for prayer. As it is known, when the evil enemy seduces zealous novices, he does this precisely through suggesting large, but arbitrary prayer rules on them instead of those assigned by the spiritual adviser. It happens that special, unparalleled zeal for such feats appears, but it is supported not by a clear conscience, but by a subtle thought of pride.

These are the main signs of “demonic deception.”

In order not to fall into this temptation and perish completely, one needs to strictly match the duration of prayer and intensity of spiritual endeavours with one's strength; try your best not to stand out from your other spiritual brothers and sisters in your external mode of life (it goes without saying that it is absolutely unnecessary to measure your life according to the life of this world: being different here is inevitable); perform your particular endeavours, if any, in deep secrecy, and finally and most importantly, by all means cultivate the spirit of humility in yourself.

We will talk about the way in which humility develops in the soul elsewhere. It is only necessary to mention here that humility is the second prerequisite for the fruitfulness of any prayer. At prayer, as St. Isaac the Syrian teaches, be like a creeping ant, like a baby who has learned to make his first sounds. Let us not forget that *God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble* (1 Pet. 5:5). The most striking thing in the prayer of the Syrophoenician woman was her extraordinary humility. There was no anger or annoyance in her response. Only a deep awareness of her unworthiness can be heard, when, not taking offense at the words of the Lord, she equated herself with dogs and asked only for the crumbs of divine mercy. Undoubtedly, this amazing humility and surrendering to the mercy of the Lord ensured the success of her petition. *A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise* (Ps. 50:19).<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the third prerequisite for fruitfulness of prayer is a worthy subject of petition. "This is the way of prayer pleasing to God!" says St. John Chrysostom. "Approaching God with a sober mind, with a contrite soul and streams of tears, do not ask for anything worldly; seek for the future, pray for spiritual things!"

However, this advice of the saint is often forgotten. Unfortunately, very many Christians do not regard prayer as the greatest happiness of uniting and conversing with God, but view it simply as a means to get something they need, and resort to it only in misfortune and difficult circumstances. They look at God almost as a hired worker, often asking for vain, worldly, and sometimes spiritually harmful things. Of course, while praying we can express all our desires, even ones that are petty and unimportant for our spiritual prosperity, for the Lord will listen to everything as a loving Father. But we cannot insist on fulfilling our desires for the simple reason that *we know not what we should pray for as we ought* (Rom. 8:26), and it is often unreasonable to ask for something which could cause us only harm. The Lord sometimes fulfills even such prayers for our instruction if they are made persistently, but at the same time, nothing good usually comes out of our perseverance.

The magazine *Historical Herald* contains the story of the mother of Kondraty Ryleyev – one of the Decembrists, who suffered during the Uprising of 1825. The story presents an interesting example of persistent prayer which was fulfilled, but did not lead to good results.

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 51:17 in the King James version.

“Once in childhood,” tells Mrs. Ryleyeva, “Kanechka (that is, Kondraty) fell dangerously ill. I don’t know what happened to him, but he lay with a terrible fever, with his eyes closed, with sore, flushed cheeks, breathing heavily. There was little hope of recovery. The doctors did not promise anything good.

Who will describe my grief, the grief of a mother who was about to lose her beloved son? I cried and prayed. I spent long, sleepless nights at the bed of my dear boy, pouring tears on his bed and calling to God for help. The possible death of Kanechka seemed to me such a tremendous misfortune, such incredible cruelty that I tirelessly and continuously asked the Lord to perform a miracle – to heal the child. It seemed to be the greatest mercy, which I needed more than life.

Once during ardent, persistent prayer, I fell asleep kneeling in front of the child’s bed. My eyes closed; my head fell on the child’s bed, and I had a strange dream.

Someone’s voice was heard:

‘Mad woman! Do you know what you are asking for? Do you know what awaits this child if he survives? Let him better die now...’

‘No, no way!’ I exclaimed. ‘Anything, only let him live... for me, for his mother... My happiness, my only joy! Can I give him up?’

‘Then see!’ said the same voice.

And a series of pictures began to unfold before my eyes. They were so vivid, so real. I remember them all. Kanechka’s whole life passed before me.

Here he is in bed. He is recovering. A little tired, still weak, but cheerful, joyful, with smiling eyes. The suspicious, feverish blush on his cheeks is gone. He stretches his little arms to me and laughs...

Next, there is a picture of his childhood. His games and mischievous tricks... The corner of the nursery piled with toys. Kanechka is riding a wooden horse and brandishing a tin sabre... Merry romping and he runs away, with mom chasing after him...

School-age years. Books, classes in school... His curly head bent over textbooks. Smearred blots of ink on notebooks... The first failures and first disappointments in school life.

Youth... Fascinating, vibrant. Friends and peers... Fun outings and serious, naive conversations...

Youthful disputes and wild songs... My boy still loves me, but it is as if he is moving away. He already has his own inner life. He more and more often leaves me alone and is often silent for a long time in my presence.

The beginning of life as a young adult. Kanechka is dressed in a military uniform. His face is more serious. He is often pensive. He has many friends. Some secret gatherings. I clearly see a large table covered with green cloth and piled up with some maps and plans. A whole row of young and

old faces gathers around him... I remember them all so distinctly! Leaning over the table, they are looking at something and examining something... Then they argue heatedly for a long time with a serious and excited look. Kanechka is among them, but for some reason he is sad...

‘Stop!’ suddenly the same voice spoke and it sounded dreadful, ‘Do not be curious further! Another picture – and if you see it, your request will be fulfilled... But know that you will regret it!’

‘No, no!’ I screamed. ‘I want it, I want the boy to be alive... I ask you, I beg you...!’

‘Then look!’

It was if a heavy, soft carpet unfolded, which had covered one of the walls of the room before. A black, empty space opened behind it. At first I could not see anything. Then it was as if a faint light appeared, and in the depths I saw...

Gallows!!!

Do I need to tell the rest? Everything happened further as I saw in this prophetic dream.

When I woke up, the boy was sleeping deeply and calmly. His breath was even and normal. His cheeks were not blushed with the same fire. The high fever was subsiding.

He began to recover quickly. And then the scenes seen in the dream began to repeat before me in real life. I even recognized the faces. In the faces surrounding Kanechka, I recalled old acquaintances...

The terrible tragic end was also known to me in advance... The dream did not deceive here either.”

Kondraty Ryleyev really was hanged.

When reading this story, you involuntarily think: was it worth it to pray so stubbornly, with such passionate persistence only in order to experience even more difficult, more terrible grief and lead your son to such a desolate, terrible end?

But in moments of grief, people do not take into consideration their short-term vision, their ignorance of the future. They do not think about it and stubbornly stand their ground, demanding fulfillment of their desires.

Precisely “demanding”... Sometimes there are prayers when dry eyes which have no tears, with a sort of cruelty, almost hatred, stare at the icon, when words fly out of a constrained chest like jerky words of command, angry and stubborn, when hands are clenched into fists and when the person looks not like a humble and submissive petitioner, but like an insolent, annoying beggar bent on getting his handout by all means possible. And if this prayer is not fulfilled, discontent and blasphemy begin...

A similar story was told by the spiritual writer Eugeny Poselyanin.

The young son of one rich, aristocratic woman fell dangerously ill in Saint Petersburg. His mother was in despair. As always, in the moment of grief she remembered God. The poor woman

spent a terrible night in the bedroom of her young son. She prayed, but it was that passionate, impatient, and stubborn prayer of people who rarely pray, when they do not ask God, but demand without humility. However, the prayer was heard. The boy survived, but the disease left a terrible mark on him: something happened to the brain of the poor child, and for the rest of his life he remained an imbecile semi-idiot. It turned out to be impossible to raise him or give him an education. The parents were embarrassed to keep him in Saint Petersburg in full view of the aristocratic society to which they belonged. The boy was sent to a country estate, to a remote village, to hide him there from the eyes of their Saint Petersburg acquaintances. But in the village, when he grew up and became a young man, he became interested in his maid – an old, pockmarked woman whom he married. What a blow for the proud, aristocrat mother! To make it worse, the pockmarked wife taught her semi-idiot husband to drink alcohol. He soon became a hopeless alcoholic and died of alcoholism.

And one unwittingly thinks: would it not have been better for the boy to die in infancy – pure, innocent, and untarnished by the filth of life? Would it not have been better to obediently surrender to the will of God instead of stubbornly demanding its abolition and pray for the fulfillment of one's own unreasonable human desires? The Lord Himself, asking in the Gethsemane prayer that the cup of suffering pass away from Him, added: *nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt....thy will be done* (Mt. 26:39, 42).

This is a lesson and model of prayer for us. You can make persistent requests, but not about everything. Discernment is needed in choosing the subject of prayer.

Of course you may pray persistently and unceasingly, for purity of thoughts, for moral correction of life; for the Lord to send peace to your troubled, irritated, and restless heart; for Him to draw to Him and save those members of your family and friends, who have deviated onto the path of injustice; for your own salvation: “by the judgments which Thou knowest, whether I will it or not, save me”;<sup>10</sup> in general about everything which brings spiritual benefit.

But should we pray for wealth if poverty is good for us? Should we ask for the reciprocity of a woman's love, if it is useful for us to languish with longing for unrequited affection? Should we sigh in prayer for comfort and the conveniences of life?

Of course not. It is *vanity of vanities; all is vanity* (Eccl. 1:2).

Such requests could only anger the Lord. “From the Great King,” says one holy writer, “you should ask for great and useful things, and if you ask for a little mud, you only insult Him.”

If we are not absolutely sure of the spiritual benefit of what we are asking for, it is best to leave the fulfillment of the request to the will of God.

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<sup>10</sup> A reference to a prayer from the Midnight Office.

“If you ask for something from your God,” writes St. Ephraim the Syrian, “ask not in a way to certainly receive it from Him, but leave it up to Him and His will. For example, bad thoughts often oppress you, and you grieve over them and want to entreat God to free you from this warfare. But it often serves you, my brother, for the better. For I say that this often happens to you so you would not become proud, but would have humbleness of mind. Also, if you are stricken with some sorrow or affliction, do not ask to remove them by all means, because they are often useful. And also, if you ask for something, do not ask to receive it by all means. For I say that you as a human often consider something to be useful which in fact is useless for you.

Listen to what the Apostle says, *for we know not what we should pray for* (Rom. 8:26). Thus, God Himself knows what is useful and instructive for each of us; therefore, leave it up to Him. I am saying this not to prevent you from addressing God with your petitions; on the contrary, I implore you to ask Him for everything, great and small. Stand firmly in your petition (pray with all zeal and persistence), but, revealing your needs to Him, say: if it is, O Lord, Thy will that this happen, accomplish it and make it successful; but if it is not Thy will, do not let it happen, my God! Only strengthen and keep my soul, so I will be able to bear it.”