

Chapter 8, verses 1-10

The Evangelist tells us again about the great and extraordinary miracle of feeding several thousand people with a few loaves of bread – a situation almost parallel to the one described in the sixth chapter of the same Gospel. The slight difference is only in numbers: formerly there were five thousand who were fed, here – four thousand; formerly they were fed with five loaves, here – with seven. Yet the essence of the miracle is the same: both there and here we see the manifestation of the marvelous, divine, omnipotent power of the Lord.

As with the first time, now again the Lord called on His disciples to participate in the miracle: they again had to undertake the task of distributing the loaves which were blessed to the people; they again were the mediators between Christ and His listeners, and again, through them, His grace-filled power performed the great miracle.

This is no coincidence. If all words and deeds of the Lord were never a random play of moods, but always had inner, deep meaning, the same action repeated twice suggests even more that there was some definite purpose. Repetition under the same conditions is almost a system.

What is this purpose?

In the period of the described event, the Lord more and more often moved from public preaching to the more private work of educating only a select few in the spirit of His teaching. He more and more often closed Himself in the narrow circle of His disciples and mainly entrusted to them the words of eternal life. They needed to continue His work and in order to be reliable followers and worthy disciples of their Great Teacher, they still had to learn many things. That is why He paid so much attention to them, educating them for future service with love and patient perseverance.

Twice calling His disciples to practical participation in the work of love performed by Him in the form of a miracle, the Lord undoubtedly had in mind the same educational objectives. The distribution of bread to the hungry people is an episode in the history of educating the Apostles; it was a pedagogical method used by the Lord to evoke certain feelings, thoughts, and dispositions in them.

The nature of these feelings which the Savior wanted to instill in the hearts of His disciples is partly clarified further, in verses 17-21 of the same chapter.

When the disciples thought the words about leaven were a reproach for forgetfulness and negligence (for they forgot to take bread on the road) and felt involuntary shame, the Lord hastened to dispel their error: *And when Jesus knew it, he saith unto them, Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your heart yet hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember? When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up?*

They say unto him, Twelve. And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? And they said, Seven. And he said unto them, How is it that ye do not understand?

The meaning of the Lord's words is absolutely clear, and it is quite clear what He wanted to say by referring to His two miracles of feeding the multitude. It is also clear to which conclusion from these miracles He wanted to direct the thought of His disciples.

The inner meaning of His reproaches is the following:

“Oh, ye of little faith!... People with petrified hearts! How little do the lessons of Divine omnipotence that I have given you affect you, and how do you not see the care with which I have surrounded you in the clearest and most striking events! Why are you arguing that you have no bread? Cannot I, your Teacher who fed thousands with several loaves of bread, do the same for you and feed you even if you did not bring any bread with you at all? What little trust you have in Me, in My power, and how weak your heart is in your vain concerns and constant thoughts about everyday things...!”

More trust in God, more trust in His Fatherly Providence and care, and less attachment to everyday things, less concern for the daily piece of bread, for the means of sustaining life – this is what the Lord requires from His disciples and followers.

The two striking events of the miraculous feedings were intended to serve as a real basis for such feelings and beliefs. For the viewers and participants, it was a lesson in faith and trust in God, a lesson to face the threatening dangers and constraint of life without fear and unease, and rely on the Lord in everything, Who takes care of His children.

Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things (Matt. 6: 31-32). Through the miracle of feeding the multitude, the Lord showed His disciples in deed that they should and most certainly can follow this rule, taught by Him even earlier, without hesitation and doubts.

Cast *all your care upon him; for he careth for you*, confirms one of the closest disciples of the Lord, the Apostle Peter, who verified the lessons of his Divine Teacher by his laborious life (1 Pet. 5:7).

However, this is far from the entire lesson which the Lord wanted to instill in His disciples.

By entrusting them to feed those who were hungry, He introduced them to the very spirit of their Apostolic work which first and foremost should consist in serving people. For the first time, under direct guidance of their Teacher and Lord, they learned how to serve in a practical way and take care of the flock which was about to be entrusted to their pastoral care.

They faced enormous tasks: to build up the Church of Christ, to bring the pagan, corrupted world to the feet of the Savior, to revive sinful mankind spiritually and sanctify it, which was rude, vicious, had forgotten about its Heavenly Fatherland, and was mired down in the filthy mud of earthly passions and concerns. They were “like sheep among wolves,” but they needed enormous power to defeat these wolves and subjugate them to Christ.

Where could one get power for this tremendous social work?

The Lord now made His disciples understand and feel what their future power of influence on others should consist of, since it also depended on them, in addition to the power of God’s grace working in them.

The deeds of the Apostles were certainly accomplished by divine power. The Apostles were only its instruments. Yet the instruments must be specially adapted for the power to show its full effectiveness through them. This adaptation, which allowed the power of God to merge with the personalities of the Apostles so fully and closely that it became, so to say, as if inseparable from them, can be considered their own power.

What did it consist of?

This question is extremely important, since each of us to a certain extent has a duty of apostolic ministry – the obligation to take care of the moral revival and Christian education of people around us. We are called by the Lord not only to personal salvation, but also to assisting in the salvation of our brothers. This is the duty of Christian love.

“I cannot believe,” says St. John Chrysostom, “that one who does not care for the salvation of his neighbor will receive salvation.” Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk loved to quote these words of the Ecumenical teacher and would add from himself: “No one can love Christ more than the one who seeks the salvation of his neighbor.” St. Dimitry of Rostov explained the same idea in some more detail: “According to God’s commandment, a Christian should love his neighbor as himself. And if he has to love him like himself, he must desire and seek salvation as for himself. The one who does not care about the salvation of his neighbor, does not love that person as himself, nor does he have true love for God. And some may say, ‘I have to take care of myself and not of another person, to take heed of my own salvation, and not care about the salvation of other people.’ St. John Chrysostom replies to such a person, saying, ‘If one improves everything, but does not care about his neighbor, he will not enter the Kingdom. Not a single improvement can be great if it does not bring benefit to others; it is not fit for a virtuous man to improve himself for salvation if it does not give benefit to others or improve them.’ Again, to those who say, ‘I am not a teacher, nor priest, nor spiritual father, nor shepherd of souls; it is not proper for me to teach,’ St. Theophylact gives an answer: ‘Do not say “I am not a shepherd, nor teacher; I should not teach or correct other people.” You are lying, since teachers are not able to

instruct every single person; God wants each to instruct and edify the other (1 Thess. 5:11, 14).’ But even in the Old Testament, does not Holy David who was the king, show concern for the benefit of his neighbors? ‘I will teach,’ he says, ‘transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee’ (Ps. 51:13)... How much more must we who are of the new grace, do this!”

If therefore we are obliged not only to think about our own salvation, but also to influence others, making them feel the warmth and light of the Gospel, and pulling them toward God, the inevitable question is: how can we do this? How can we conquer unbelieving minds and wicked hearts, and what does true influence on people depend on? Mistakes are possible here; inept methods may only push a person away instead of conversion, and cause in him aversion to Christ and His Gospels instead of love, and this is terrible. We know that empty, annoying, pedantic-Pharisaic preaching has often brought about only negative results.

Voltaire, one of the most stinging opponents of Christianity, was educated in a religious Jesuit school.

In what lies the real Christian power of influencing people? The Lord reveals the secret of pastorship to His disciples, entrusting them with distributing the bread blessed by Him to the hungry people.

This power is ministry.

In the worldly sense, a person who has all means of external coercion at his disposal is considered strong: a sovereign who relies on a powerful army and a numerous staff of administrative and police officers; a rich man who can buy the will of the people he needs and clear all obstacles in his path with those people’s hands; a talented orator or clever businessman who subjugates others by the power of his mind, eloquence, or intrigues. However, this is external, seeming power. In this way, one can force people to obey the orders of the sovereign, force them to do what one needs, but it is impossible to renew them.

This is power only over the body of a person, over his external actions, but not over his soul. The intimate thoughts of a person, his feelings, sympathies and antipathies, even the direction of his will, ultimately do not depend on this power and are not subordinated to it, and if the mightiest ruler does not try to influence human hearts by moral and spiritual methods, he will achieve nothing using only means of coercion. Fines and punishments cannot make a person be a saint. It is difficult to say what would have happened to Christianity and how great its success would have been if attempts were made to spread it by means of violence. Such a method, which disagrees with the very spirit of Christianity, would put it in internal contradiction with itself and in this manner causing its weakness, would have doomed all attempts to spread it to complete failure. At least wherever the unreasonable zeal of the worst representatives of Christianity, who did not understand the spirit of their faith, resorted to such methods, this invariably led not only

to failures, but to the most shameful defeats, which for a long time added weeds to soil used for the successful spread of Christ's faith by better methods. This may be the reason why Islam, which from the very beginning clashed with Christianity on the battlefield, forever remained so closed and so inaccessible to Christian influence. The Spanish propaganda of Christianity in Mexico among the native tribes using the methods of the Inquisition, that is, tortures and executions, aroused only terrible hatred and disgust for it among the natives. When a Spanish missionary monk persuaded one of them to convert to Christianity, promising freedom from torture and the threat of being burned at the stake, and in the future paradise with its bliss, the native first of all asked if there were Spaniards in that paradise.

“Yes,” answered the monk, “But only the good ones!”

“The best of them,” objected the Indian, “are no good... I don't want to meet them, and I don't need your paradise... It would be better to burn me!”

These are the deplorable results of spreading the faith of Christ by fire and sword.

Even negative results, when, for example, some try to corrupt society or an individual person by external, coercive means, are not fully achieved.

It is impossible not to admit that being strong in the ordinary, worldly sense is very tempting for an inexperienced Christian: to have power over other people, make them work for you, do nothing on your own, be surrounded by a crowd of servants or slaves ready to obey a movement of the hand; to order, command – all of this is so flattering to our pride, our vainglory, our laziness. It is no wonder that even the best disciples of the Lord could not immediately get rid of these tempting inclinations. Assuming that their Teacher would someday become the great, mighty ruler of the Earth as, in their opinion, the Messiah should be, the sons of Zebedee already asked in advance to receive the best places in this kingdom of power, glory, and splendor (Mk. 10:35-37).

But the Savior came not to build such a kingdom, and He wanted to give His disciples not that kind of authority. He needs the person's soul and love, and the way to this is ministry.

As opposed to a worldly understanding, to be strong in the Christian sense means to forget yourself for the sake of others, to be a servant to everyone, to give your energy and abilities for the common good and prevail not by violence, but by humble service. The world says: you must make others serve you. This is life's wisdom.

Christianity teaches: you need to serve others. Power and happiness of life lie in this. This is exactly the tremendous power which renewed and revived the ancient, corrupted world and forced it to bow down to the feet of Christ.

Don't be lords, but be examples, according to the words of the Apostle Peter (1 Pet. 5: 3), not dominating, but serving – this is the rule that no Christian should forget if he hopes to influence other people.

We then that are strong, writes the Apostle Paul, ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself (Rom. 15:1-3)

The Lord left this commandment of ministry for His disciples and followers in the touching moments of the last, farewell supper, when He revealed to them everything which was especially important and needed for their work. With what unforgettable power this lesson was given: *Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. And supper being ended... He riseth...and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded... So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you (Jn. 13:1-2, 4-5, 12-15).*

After giving this rule to His disciples, the Lord Himself remained faithful to it all his life. His life was a continuous serving of people. *The Son of man, He says, came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45).*

In this marvelous life, perhaps even its most marvelous feature, is its complete dedication to others. The Lord Jesus Christ did not have a personal life, separate and independent from serving people.

We know many outstanding people of extraordinary moral height and purity who gave their lives to serving others. Yet none of them could completely forget themselves and their own needs for the sake of this ministry. There were always two directions in their activities: one for others; the other for themselves. The latter kind of activity might take the most insignificant place in their life, but even the Apostles could not entirely renounce it.

Yet there was nothing like this in the life of the Lord. Throughout the Gospels, we cannot find a single event, a single phrase, which would reveal the Savior's concern for His personal needs and requirements. The wholeness of His life, which was completely imbued with the idea of ministry, is amazing. It is as if all of it was carved from one piece of the purest crystal, where there was not the slightest stain of selfish thoughts.

However, this feat of ministry reached its highest expression on the Cross, in a terrible, painful death, and by this the Lord Jesus Christ conquered the world.

The Apostles also fulfilled the covenant of their Teacher holily and with complete selflessness, giving their lives to the cause of the ministry commanded by Him. And it was precisely through this path, the path of humble ministry, that the Apostles brought the pagans to the obedience of faith and spread the Church of Christ. Here are some quotes from the Epistles of Apostle Paul, clarifying the attitude and nature of this victorious ministry.

We are made as the filth of the world, the Apostle writes to the Corinthians, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day (1 Cor. 4:13).

Though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more (1 Cor. 9:19).

That which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.¹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not? (2 Cor. 11: 28-29).

And the extraordinary power of influence on people was achieved precisely by this subjugation of oneself to everyone. *As unknown, he continues, and yet well known... as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things (2 Cor. 6: 9-10).*

People go voluntarily only under the yoke of love. This is the law of psychology, and the fight against the evil which has penetrated the human heart is possible only on the basis of service.

Therefore, the same Apostle bequeaths his followers: *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service (Rom. 12:1).*

Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21).

The Christians of the first centuries, faithful to this covenant, always tried to overcome evil with good, and the formerly rampant pagan world was forced to yield to the power of the good of Christian life. In the eyes of the pagans, this high life, a life of selfless serving was always the strongest argument in favor of Christianity. “Look how Christians live,” they would say when converting people to the faith of Christ. Even Julian the Apostate, one of the fiercest persecutors of Christ, was compelled to acknowledge the height and selfless charity of the Christian life. “We are ashamed,” he wrote in one rescript, “that these Galileans care not only about their own people, but also help our poor and hungry, while we leave those in neglect.” The spread of Christianity and its rapid successes occurred precisely because the first Christians spread it not with weapons, but with the love and care of selfless serving.

¹ The Russian Synodal version of the Bible reads: I have a daily convergence of people, the care of all the churches.

Here is a typical story of that time from the life of Saint Pimen. In his youth, he was a pagan and served in the imperial army. He had to endure many labors and dangers. The life during campaigns with its endless marching on difficult roads was especially exhausting, since at that time there were no supplementary supply trains with the army and all ammunition needed for battles and sieges was loaded onto the soldiers. The fatigue was increased by poor nutrition and restless nights in hastily set up camps. Soldiers were reluctant to stay in the villages, since the pagan population treated the troops almost with hostility, knowing that military quartering was always associated with requisitions and coercion.

Once, after a long, tedious march along hot roads under the scorching rays of the southern sun, the troops entered a village where they had to stop for a rest, and the soldiers were struck by an unusual phenomenon.

Usually in all the villages where stops were planned the same thing would occur: as soon as the front ranks of the soldiers showed up on the outskirts, life on the streets froze; windows were slammed shut; doors were bolted, and everyone would try to hide somewhere to avoid having the soldiers stay in their houses and sharing their meager supplies with them.

The troops were long accustomed to such a greeting; everyone expected this and even were no longer annoyed by it. But the village which the legion now entered was in some way extraordinary.

When the detachment reached the central square and stopped, it was surrounded by villagers vying with each other to offer their services: men and women dragged large baskets of bread and fruits; young girls with sweet smiles held out earthenware jugs full of crystal cold water; even children trustingly ran up to the stern soldiers covered with dust and sweat, and treated them with juicy figs.

“Our legionnaires must have many relatives here!” mentioned the young soldier observing this picture.

“Relatives? No...” objected a gray-haired centurion who spent half of his life on campaigns. “They are Christians! Their God commands them to love people and serve everyone...”

“What a good God!” thought the young man. “Our Jupiter does not order this...! What a good faith! I shall find out more about it... When the campaign ends...”

The young man later became a great lamp of Christianity. This was Saint Pimen.

In this way Christians won over the rough hearts of the pagans. It was hard to resist the charm of love. And wherever more difficult and complex tasks arose, where a person had to be renewed and his wicked heart re-educated, wherever a bad person had to be made good, an evil

person needed to become kind, an unbeliever had to become a true Christian, only the method of serving was applied and worked successfully.

Saint Serapion the Sindonite once sold himself into slavery to a heretic Manichean in order to save him and convert him to Christianity.

The conditions of slaves were terrible at that time, but the saint courageously carried the heavy cross of humiliation, beatings, backbreaking labor, inspired by his great goal. Always diligent, always ready to serve, always friendly and joyful, he attracted the attention of his master, little by little winning his respect, love, and trust and, using his moral influence, finally persuaded him to abandon the Manichean heresy.

The endeavour of serving as a means of reviving a human person has not lost its importance at the present time. If we do not know any cases of a person's correction under the influence of coercion, there are many examples of the deep, beneficial, and reviving influence of the endeavour of serving.

Not so long ago, there was a well-known shelter for the homeless, founded by Barbara Alexandrovna Shklyarevich or Sister Barbara as she was usually called, who gave her life to serving the very last dregs of society, the homeless, and blacklisted criminals.

Sister Barbara was a devout Christian woman with a loving, empathic heart. Once, she met a group of strange people outside the city: in worn-out footwear on bare feet, dressed in tattered rags despite the harsh autumn wind, with faces blue from the cold, with red, gnarled hands which they tried in vain to warm, thrusting them into their narrow sleeves, morose, miserable...

They began to talk.

It turned out that these were "former" people who were blacklisted for various misdeeds, with "transit certificates," which deprived them of the right to stay in one place for a long time or acquire a settled life status, and doomed them to a permanent wandering existence. Sister Barbara was shocked.

"How miserable and unfortunate they were...!" she would say later. "They were shaking, wrapping themselves in their rags! Hungry, half-naked, many were sick... But somebody had to have mercy on them too! After all, they also have souls! After all, Christ died for them too!"

Sister Barbara knew how to be merciful. She organized a refectory for her "bandits," as she called them, where they could at least have some rest, satisfy their hunger, warm up, and dry their rags. And the great heart of this woman unfolded and blossomed here, in the scanty furnishing of this refectory, among homeless and fallen people, sliding-down beginners and hardened criminals, the miserable and depraved. Her love, friendliness, ability to take pity and understand, irresistibly acted on the tattered, dirty clients of her refectory... And often, under the

influence of her caress and sympathy, a tormented, wild tramp would pray in front of a large wooden crucifix standing there and cry with hot, cleansing tears, resolving to begin a new life.

However, not all ministry may achieve such results. In order to have a beneficial effect on the human heart, the endeavour of ministry must satisfy certain necessary conditions which impart inner spiritual strength to it.

First, this endeavour must be combined with love; an indifferent ministry which is only external, without inner participation, is unlikely to produce a beneficial impression and may not even be appreciated, as we do not value the paid services of hired servants or services of officials in public institutions.

Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity,² it profiteth me nothing, says the Apostle (1 Cor. 13:3).

“All offerings and charity to the poor,” wrote Father John of Kronstadt, “will not replace love for our neighbour, if there is no love in the heart; therefore, in bestowing charity, we must be careful that it should be bestowed lovingly, from a sincere heart, willingly, and not with a feeling of vexation against the poor. The very word *charity*³ shows that it should be an act or an offering of the heart, and should be bestowed with feeling or pity for the unfortunate condition of the poor person.”⁴

If love is needed in the deeds of mercy, it is especially needed in the matter of spiritual service for people, for above all love constitutes a renewing force in this service. Whoever has visited our ascetic elders knows the influence of this love. It manifests itself in them as “a kind of grace-filled capacity for ‘adopting’ every neighbor to himself, to his own heart, which is given to a Christian who has attained the highest gift of Christian love, and makes him similar to the Chief Shepherd, about Whom the prophet and then the Evangelist said: *Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses* (Matt. 8:17). By virtue of this grace-filled adoption, every soul sick with sins, or despondency, or unbelief, feels that it is not alien to the elder, that his spirit embraces this soul with love and compassion and, as if communicates to it his own life, his own strength, not even his own, personal, but some higher strength, inherent in him, and says not in words, but in directly transmitted feelings: *Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me* (1 Cor. 4:16). These feelings are similar to those experienced by a completely exhausted traveler when a good-hearted strong man who meets him, takes him by the hand and in a friendly manner begins to urge him towards the end the path, pointing to warm shelter seen in the distance... Of course, this spiritual uplifting which occurs in a sinner or in a denier is not yet his complete

² The Russian Synodal version of the Bible reads: and have not love.

³ In Russian *milostynya*, which contains the root: kindness.

⁴ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, trans. E.E. Goulaeff, Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, 1984, pp. 323-4.

conversion, but it now returns to him the full possibility of the latter” (Archbishop Anthony Khrapovitsky).

The power of influence made by this heartfelt love is enormous and affects even outwardly.

Once an unbelieving nobleman came to Optina Pustyn Monastery, famous for its spiritual elders. At that time, the spiritual father of the monastery was Father Ambrose, who was well known to Russian Orthodox people for his ascetic life and humble love for everyone.

“It is enough to approach Father Ambrose to feel how much he loves you,” people who knew him would say about him. But the nobleman who came to seek advice and some support in his doubts, at first did not want to turn to him. Something held him back; he felt some kind of inner resistance. With great difficulty, Father Ambrose’s cell attendant managed to persuade him to overcome himself and come to the “shack” where the old monk would receive people. With a heavy heart the nobleman did this, but could not overcome some strange, inner anger towards Father Ambrose, which arose in his heart despite his efforts. When the door of the old monk’s cell opened and Father Ambrose went out to the people who were waiting for him, the nobleman moved to a corner of the room with disgusted irritation.

Father Ambrose looked over everyone and went straight to him. Without a word, he put his hand on the nobleman’s head and looked into his eyes with his loving gaze.

“I don’t understand, I cannot explain what happened to me then,” the nobleman later said, “but I only know one thing, that I dropped to my knees...”

It was not the power of hypnotism. It was the power of love.

This charm of a loving soul was recognized in Father Ambrose even by such a skeptic and enemy of Orthodox monasticism as the Count Lev Tolstoy. After one meeting and conversation with the humble old monk, he could not help but notice: “This Father Ambrose is an absolutely holy man. I talked to him, and I felt lightness in my soul... You feel the closeness of God...”

The second condition for fruitfulness in the endeavour of ministry is humility. Even love cannot revive a human heart without humility. Proud love, love full of self-conceit, is usually despotic and demanding, and can rather torment the person who has become its victim. The result is often mutual bitterness.

Humility in the endeavour of ministry is not so much that a person undertakes the lowest and dirtiest work, but mainly in complete selflessness and absence of selfish motives for love. We all know that one can love either for one’s own benefit, or for the other, the beloved person. Fleshly love, infatuation, love of the groom for his bride – these are typical examples of love for one’s own benefit. The person here is pursuing first of all his own happiness, his delight, and his

benefits. The thought about the happiness of the other person, the beloved one, is usually secondary here only as a condition of one's own happiness, while the presence of this selfishness in love is most clearly manifested in this case in the feeling of jealousy with its malice and vindictiveness. But one can love forgetting oneself, love for the sake of the other, without expecting anything at all for oneself and thinking only about the happiness of the beloved one, even if one has to sacrifice personal happiness for this and condemn oneself to hopeless grief and suffering. This humble love which seeks not its own (1 Cor. 13:5) is precisely the great and irresistible power of serving. In his novel *David Copperfield*, Dickens gave an amazing example of such humble, truly Christian love in the person of the simple, outwardly uncultivated fisherman Mr. Peggotty.

In his small, shabby house, he raised an orphan, his niece Emmy, to whom he was attached with all his heart. But a terrible grief befell him. Emmy was infatuated with a young student of Oxford University, Steerforth, with whom she quietly left her home for abroad, although there was little hope that Steerforth's proud mother, a wealthy aristocrat, would ever allow her son to marry a poor fisherman's niece.

Here is the scene when Mr. Peggotty learned about the flight of his niece from her letter: "Never could I forget the change that came upon [his face]..." the protagonist of the story says. "I remember a great wail and cry, and the women hanging about him, and we all standing in the room; I with a paper in my hand... Mr. Peggotty, with his vest torn open, his hair wild, his face and lips quite white, and blood trickling down his bosom (it had sprung from his mouth, I think), looking fixedly at me.

'Read it, sir,' he said, in a low shivering voice. 'Slow, please. I don't know as I can understand.'

In the midst of the silence of death I read thus, from a blotted letter...Mr. Peggotty...moved no more, until he seemed to wake again, all at once, and pulled down his rough coat from its peg in a corner.

'Bear a hand with this!...' he said, impatiently."

They got him the coat. He hurriedly threw it on and walked to the door.

"Ham [his nephew] asked him whither he was going....

'No one stop me...I'm a going to seek my niece through the wureld. I'm a going to find my poor niece in her shame, and bring her back...'

'Where?' cried Ham, interposing himself before the door.

'Anywhere!'" answered the old man and again moved to the door...

He first went to the Steerforths' mansion to ask the mother of the abductor to bless her son to marry Emmy and arrange their happiness. He was admitted into the guestroom of the aristocrat woman.

Mr. Peggotty said that they are simple people and think that marriage without a parents' blessing will not be a happy one... "“Since you oblige me to speak more plainly...” said Mrs. Steerforth, “her humble connexions would render such a thing impossible, if nothing else did.” ‘Hark to this, ma’am,’ he returned, slowly and quietly. ‘You know what it is to love your child. So do I. If she was a hundred times my child, I couldn't love her more....All the heaps of riches in the wureld would be nowt to me (if they was mine) to buy her back!...Not one of us that she's growed up among, not one of us that's lived along with her and had her for their all in all, these many year, will ever look upon her pritty face again. We'll be content to let her be; we'll be content to think of her, far off, as if she was underneath another sun and sky; we'll be content to... bide the time when all of us shall be alike in quality afore our God!’”

Mrs. Steerforth was apparently moved by the fisherman's unsophisticated speech. “I am sorry to repeat, it is impossible.”

She got up to leave the room.

“Doen't fear me being any hindrance to you...’ he remarked, as he moved towards the door, ‘I come heer with no hope, and I take away no hope....’

We departed... We had, on our way out, to cross a paved hall, with glass sides and roof, over which a vine was trained. Its leaves and shoots were green then, and the day being sunny...

When I joined Mr. Peggotty, he was walking slowly and thoughtfully down the hill” from the top of which the aristocratic house of the Steerforths looked proudly down on us. “He told me...he meant ‘to set out on his travels...’

I asked him where he meant to go? He only answered, ‘I’m a going, sir, to seek my niece...Goodbye...Mas’r Davy!...If any hurt should come to me, remember that the last words I left for her was, “My unchanged love is with my darling child, and I forgive her!’”

...He turned, alone, at the corner of our shady street, into a glow of light, in which we lost him.”

Not a word of anger or irritation! Not a word about his disappointed hopes! Not a word of complaint about betrayal and ingratitude.

This is truly humble love, great in its selflessness.

Finally, the third prerequisite for the power of Christian ministry is that it must be done in God. This means, first, that its initial beginning should be the Commandment of God, and the main motive should be obedience to the will of God. “I serve my neighbor, because the Lord wants and demands it” – this is the thought which should form the initial basis of serving. Only

in this case is it stable, constant, and becomes independent of the whims of changeable moods and personal fluctuating sympathies and antipathies.

Second, this means that the essence of the feeling which impels one to service should be love for one's neighbor in God, that is, love for that immortal, ineffaceable image of God which is in every soul and which can only fade, but cannot disappear altogether. "I love my neighbor because he is God's creation and bears the image of God in himself" – this is the formulation of this feeling.

If our ministry is determined by how pleasant or unpleasant this or that person is to us, those people who are in the most need of this service, that is, people who are depraved and ill-natured, will depart the realm of the influence of Christian ministry because they usually produce an unpleasant impression. In the serving of the saints based on the love for the image of God in man, one may always observe the opposite to this egoistic choice. Saint Seraphim treated the most rude, incorrigible sinners with particular love and affection, and the worse a person was morally, the more sympathy and favour he would find in the saint. And, of course, this is the right path, for *they that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick*, and the Lord *came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance* (Mk. 2:17).

Serving in God finally means that its ultimate goal should be the spiritual salvation of man, bringing him to God. *My little children*, writes Apostle Paul to the Galatians, *of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you* (Gal. 4:19). This imprint of the image of the Lord in the human heart has always been the goal of the apostolic ministry.

If we adopt this point of view, we will understand that the material benefits which Christian ministry sometimes brings to people, cannot be a goal in itself, but only an auxiliary means for directing the person to moral perfection and for achieving it. We should also understand that serving cannot consist of indulgence or sentimental pandering to people, for this is usually death for the soul, but it allows for severe measures if the main goal of getting closer to God requires it.

That is why, despite his great love for the newly converted flock, the Apostle Paul considered it possible to use drastic measures. *But I beseech you*, he writes to the Corinthians, *that I may not be bold when I am present with that confidence, wherewith I think to be bold against some* (2 Cor. 10:2).⁵ *What will ye? Shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?* (1 Cor. 4:21). But, of course, severity is permissible only when it is accompanied by sincere love.

⁵ The Russian Synodal version of the Bible reads: I beseech you, that when I come I will not have to use that hard boldness, which I think to use against some.

Chapter 8, verses 11-21

The spiritual leaders of the Jewish people, the Pharisees and Sadducees, always watched very carefully the currents of thought and phenomena of the spiritual life of the people. This was necessary in order to maintain their influence and keep all phenomena of this kind under control, not allowing anyone to wrest the dominance over people's minds from them. It is clear that they could not ignore the Lord and His preaching. Yet, while observing His activities and teaching, they inevitably had to experience a strange ambivalence, some kind of inner confusion. On the one hand, the miracles of the Lord and extraordinary influence of His preaching testified with irresistible obviousness that this was not a simple person and that Divine power acted in Him.

Manifestations of this power were so clear, and the charm of the Lord's personality and holiness of His life were so amazing that many not only of the common people, but probably also of the Pharisees, were ready to recognize Him as the Messiah. Yet, on the other hand, His life, methods of His activities, and main principles of His teaching – all this radically contradicted the Jewish ideas about the Messiah which had developed over the centuries.

We already know that in the coming Messiah, the Jews expected to meet a powerful political figure, a formidable conqueror, a brilliant king, someone similar to Solomon or David, who would free his people from the hated Roman yoke and bring back the glory of the previous reigns. However, it was difficult to see anything even remotely reminiscent of this illustrious image, created by the imagination of Israel, in the person of the Lord with His humility and meekness, with His all-forgiveness and love, in the conditions of His wandering life full of hardships and self-denial. The question emerged involuntarily and persistently: who was this person?

It was absolutely impossible to leave this question without an answer or simply wave it aside. The Pharisees watched every prophet and every more or less outstanding person in the religious field. They had to somehow define their attitude to such a major phenomenon as the preaching of the Lord and the religious uplift it kindled among the people, especially since their friends and followers undoubtedly demanded their opinion on this subject. Who was this? Friend or foe? Should He be supported or should He and His influence be opposed by dissipating the impression He made among the people?

How should they relate to Him? Follow Him? But He requires complete self-denial; He requires His followers to surrender to Him entirely and abandon everything. And this means leaving a calm, comfortable life, the honor with which the Pharisees were spoiled, significant incomes received from admiration by men and women, dinners, treats, honorary receptions, magnificent clothes – in a word, everything that gave them the position of recognized teachers and leaders. And to exchange all of this for the poor, half-starving existence of eternal wanderers

who do not have shelter? In the name of what? For the sake of what? What would they receive as a reward for this endeavour and these privations? Would the reward be great enough to make it worthwhile condemning oneself to poverty and giving up the comforts of life?

Not to go...? To remain in their previous positions and contemplate rapidly unfolding events and the growing enthusiasm of the crowd in lofty solitude from the heights of their legalistic truth and traditions of their elders...?

But what if this really was the Messiah?! What a shame for them, the leaders of the people, to not recognize the fervently desired and long-awaited Redeemer, to not join Him or remain at the rear of the emerging movement, and cede the top places to which they had all rights with their knowledge, piety, and erudition to the miserable ignoramuses and Galilean fishermen near Him! Not to have a prominent place in the brilliant court of the Messiah and in the glory of His future kingdom was even terrible to think about!

But on the other hand, what a risk! You can lose everything and gain nothing... By all means, they needed to know for sure who this was: the Messiah or not, in order to act for certain and not make mistakes in their calculations. They should force Him to break that mysterious silence with which He surrounded His personality and His work, without proclaiming Himself openly as the Messiah, and at the same time showing such power which cannot be assumed to be in an ordinary person. And if this was really the Messiah, they had to know it for certain.

The Pharisees were experiencing something like a stock market rush with the excitement of a game of chance and anxious nervous anticipation: winning or losing. The impatience with which they demanded signs from the Lord, which would definitively resolve their bewilderment, becomes understandable. *How long dost thou make us to doubt?* they asked Him once, *If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly* (Jn. 10:24).

But were there no such signs? Did not Lord's miracles speak of Him eloquently and convincingly? He Himself regarded them as a testimony: *the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me* (Jn. 10:25).

But the Pharisees demanded a sign from Heaven, an extraordinary sign, perhaps, like the one given by the prophet Isaiah to King Hezekiah by forcing the sun to return ten degrees backward (2 Kings 20:11). The healings of various diseases, which were ordinary miracles in the Lord's work, were not convincing enough for them. After all, they risked so much and needed the undoubted guarantee of a future reward for which they probably would not mind to suffer a little, if, of course, as a reward they would receive more than they would lose.

It is clear why the Lord rejected their demands and refused to give a sign. These petty tradesmen in the business of salvation, who did not at all understand the spirit of His teaching,

could never be His sincere followers. He never promised His disciples earthly blessings, and one had to follow Him not for the sake of material gains.

The happiness of unity with God, love for the Redeemer, holiness and purity of the soul as the fruit of a virtuous life in accordance with His commandments – these are the motives which should act in a Christian, determining his decisions. These were alien to the callous, selfish souls of the Pharisees. Christianity should be accepted and loved for its own sake and not for the sake of extraneous rewards and external benefits. In itself it represents that pearl of great price from the parable, for the sake of which everything needs to be sacrificed (Matt. 13:46).

The Pharisees could not do that, and all the signs from heaven were powerless to force them to accept such a view and surrender to the spirit of the teaching of Christ.

Yet are only the Pharisees like that?

There are many people whose very constitution of the soul prevents them from being true, sincere disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ and becoming imbued with the above motives, which are indispensable for success in the Christian life. The soul often meets underwater reefs and shoals on which the most winged ships of Christian hope are shattered. The constitution of the heart often requires fundamental changes, and one must work hard for them in order to make the soul receptive to the breathing of the spirit and to the voice of Christian truth.

We need to know these shoals. We need to know what clogs up the channel of Christian life, making it completely impossible to move forward. Only then will we learn how to pass by the shoals and protect the soul from clogging.

Where do the most dangerous reefs of the dispositions of the soul hide?

In the same passage of the Gospels (Mk. 8:11-21), the Lord points out the types of people who are unsuitable for the Kingdom of God according to their spiritual disposition.

Take heed, He said to His disciples, *beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod*. And the Evangelist Matthew added: *and of the Sadducees* (Matt. 16:6).

Here are three different worldviews, or, rather, three types of mental disposition which are unable to perceive the words of eternal life and are doomed to an everlasting break with Christ: the Herodians, Sadducees, and Pharisees.

Who are these people? And what prevents them from taking the good yoke and light burden of Christ upon themselves?

The Herodians are the people who joined the party of Herod the ruler and supported him despite his foreign origin. Many of them were courtiers of the king, who achieved their position by flattery, servility, and various clandestine services. They greatly appreciated that position and were very afraid of losing it. Career, high position, the comfort and luxury of life – these were everything for them. They did not care about anything else. The requirements of religion,

interests of public life, or suffering of their own people were of very little concern for them. These were opportunists in the worst sense of the word. They were ready to sacrifice everything for their personal, sated, carefree existence. Love for others was not a requirement of their beliefs.

The spring of activity and main background of their lives was a most coarse, unadorned, animal egoism. The rules of the highest morality, doctrines on the need for self-sacrifice for the benefit of others, all ideal aspirations of the soul trying to get off the ground for Heaven could only bring a smile to their lips. These subtleties were not for them.

What could the teaching of Christ give them and with what could it attract them? Suffering, deprivation, voluntary poverty and a constrained life, the constant cross of forbearance, service to others, reaching the point of complete forgetfulness of one's own interests, everything with which the Christian life was inextricably linked – all this was plainly opposite to what they wanted and what they strived for.

How could they – pampered courtiers who loved only luxury and the splendor of life – understand and appreciate the joy of a poor, homeless existence, rich only in spiritual freedom and purity of religious experiences?

They could probably not even find a common language with the followers of the Lord, could not understand them or unite with them either intellectually or spiritually, just as oil cannot unite with water. They were people of two different universes in life and completely opposite worldviews; the poor Galileans with their incomprehensible asceticism should have seemed to the illustrious courtiers to be simply madmen, deserving only contempt.

If they joined the ranks of the enemies of the Lord, it was mainly because they regarded His work as a dangerous political phenomenon, given His influence on the masses and shared prejudices common among the Jews about the Messiah as the conqueror and liberator from the Roman yoke. They were certainly invested in maintaining Roman power and generally the entire system of government which provided them with an idle, sated life.

Thus, egoism and personal self-love, which permeated their nature and life, insurmountably pushed them away from Christ.

To this day, this human self-love represents one of the most dangerous pitfalls of the Christian life. If you do not break it down and remove it, it is impossible to follow Christ. It is also impossible to ever connect with Him.

If any man come to me, and hate not...his own life... he cannot be my disciple... Whosoever...forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple (Lk. 14:26, 33).

In order to be worthy of the Lord, one must forget and lose himself, and renounce everything. A person who values his comfort and does not want to sacrifice anything for his neighbors cannot enter the Kingdom of God.

There is an old, pious legend.

An abbot of high ascetic life once lived in one of the monasteries. He incessantly prayed for the brethren and persistently, with great zeal and tears, asked God that all the monks of his monastery be deemed worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven. Once, all the brethren were invited to a holiday in a nearby monastery. The abbot was detained by some business and promised to come later. The monks departed without him. On the way, they came across a traveler bitten by wild animals. The poor old man could no longer move from severe blood loss and lay near the forest path. The brethren approached him, talked to him, asked what happened, expressed their sympathy and...went on, leaving him lying in the forest. The monastery where they were going was far away, but they wanted to get there for the service and especially for dinner. Being invited to a festive dinner was a pleasure which so rarely happened to them. They had to hurry and did not have time to stay on the road to bandage the wounded man and carry him somewhere to a quiet shelter. An hour later, the abbot went along the same path. The bitten old man was still lying motionless by the road, and it seemed that life had almost left him. Only occasionally did he softly groan. The abbot approached him and his heart sank with compassion. He bent down to the unfortunate man, bandaged his wounds as best as he could, and lifted him off the ground trying to put him on his feet. He simply could not leave the dying man in the forest.

“Can you walk somehow?” he asked.

The old man only groaned indistinctly.

“Lean on me,” continued the abbot, “We will move together, bit by bit... I know a house nearby...”

The abbot embraced the old man with his decrepit hand and tried to make him walk. It was all in vain: the old man could not stand on his feet and hung on the abbot’s arm like a bag of old hay. Then the abbot knelt down, laid the wounded wanderer upon his old shoulders, got up slowly, and started to drag his load, groaning, stumbling, and barely stepping with his weak legs; the weight was beyond his capacities because of his advanced age.

He hardly hoped to carry the man all the way. But his heart was breaking with pity, and he could not leave the poor man without help either. And a strange thing happened: as he moved forward, the weight on his shoulders became lighter and lighter, and finally the feeling of it ceased completely.

The abbot looked back and was dumbfounded. There was no one on his shoulders! The old man had disappeared!!! And only a quiet voice came from afar: “It is impossible to fulfill

your prayer, for the deeds of your brethren are different from yours... Force them to follow in your steps, otherwise they will not enter the Kingdom of God...!”

Thus, the hardening of heart and indifference to one’s neighbor is a decisive obstacle to union with Christ. Above all, in its practical implementation, Christianity is serving others.

The Lord came *to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many* (Mk. 10:45). And since He requires His disciples to follow Him, that is, imitate the example of His life, it is clear that the duty of serving lies on all Christians and should be the main goal of their actions. *Whosoever will come after me, He says, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me* (Mk. 8:34). *He that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me* (Matt. 10:38). In other words, whoever does not imitate the Lord in serving others even to the degree of being ready to lay down his life for them as the Savior did, is not worthy of Him.

But egoism or self-love pushes a person away from serving others, and this lack of ministry, callousness, and indifference to one’s neighbor is a common, external manifestation of egoism.

In one’s consciousness, this vice manifests itself as an openly impudent or hypocritically disguised rule of life: “Let things be good for me, and I won’t bother about other people...!”

This is Herod’s leaven, a kind of vice in the heart. In the intellectual realm, in the realm of thought, one often encounters another vice which makes a person unfit for the Kingdom of God, a vice which the Lord calls “the Sadducees’ leaven.”

The exact origin of the word “Sadducee” has not been established. It comes either from the name of the High Priest Zadok, or from the Hebrew word “uedakah” which means “rightful.” At the time of John Hyrcanus, this name seems to have primarily meant a party consisting mostly of priests and, contrary to the excesses of the Pharisees, content with justice in the form in which the text of the law required it. These were the positive minds of their time. Being devoted to sensuality and imbued with materialism and doubts, they did not believe in the existence of the other world. The thought of the afterlife seemed insane to them. They did not particularly appreciate the prophets and accepted the law in a narrow sense, as wise regulations concerning material benefits and earthly objects. They claimed that nothing in the law proved immortality and therefore they denied the resurrection of the dead. As narrow-minded people, they found the teachings which were alien to their wisdom based on the letter of the law absurd. They can be called skeptics, because they related to many issues and phenomena of the spiritual world and spiritual life negatively or with great doubt. Only sensible, tangible phenomena were beyond doubt for them. They simply denied anything inaccessible to their understanding or beyond their sensory experience and their bookish learning. In this respect they resembled the worst kind of realists or positivists of our time.

Consisting mainly of priests and people of great, albeit false erudition, the Sadducees were accustomed to perceiving themselves as leaders of the intellectual life of the people, whom, I must say, they treated with great contempt for their ignorance and lack of education.

They would have never conceded their position of intellectual leaders to anyone and therefore with extraordinary fanaticism and intolerance did they treat all opinions and teachings which did not come out of their party and did not agree with their views. They were generally distinguished by intellectual arrogance and liked to resort to mean ridicule.

Thus, their basic disposition and their main vice can be defined as intellectual pride. If, in general, hidden pride is the greatest weakness and ineradicable vice in people, perhaps the most dangerous kind is pride of the mind. Its essence is when a person, admiring himself and especially his intellectual capacities to the degree of self-adoration, begins to consider himself to be the only infallible authority in resolving all problems. As a result such a person rejects everything which he does not understand because in his self-deification he does not allow for even a single thought that there may be things exceeding his understanding. In people of the Sadducees' disposition, this inevitably leads to materialism, skepticism, and disbelief, since in the realm of faith one needs to recognize the limitations of the human mind, humbly bow down before the mystery surrounding a person from all sides, and accept many explanations of this mystery without personal rationalistic verification, since in many aspects of faith such a test is absolutely impossible. However, intellectually proud people do not want and cannot allow for such limitation of their willfully captured rights of the mind. In their consciousness it is formulated as follows: "I can understand everything. If I do not understand something and they tell me that such understanding is even impossible for me, it is clear that it is nonsense, a fairy tale, a fable!" Thus, a negative attitude towards the spiritual world, which is inaccessible to the human mind, inevitably emerges.

There can be no simplicity and integrity of faith in such people, for faith requires the capacity for completely abandoning your own reasoning and, not trusting the power of your mind, to seek truth only in God with full readiness to accept this truth without any doubt, in whatever form it is given to human consciousness by God. Intellectual pride prevents this, and doubts arising from the contradiction between these truths and one's own reasoning are inevitable here. Meanwhile, as the Apostle James says, *he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways* (Jm. 1:6-8).

The bitter irony and tragic danger in the position of these proud, clever people is that unwilling to humbly bow down under the yoke of God's simple faith and self-confidently attempting to be the masters and owners of their intellectual life, in fact they usually become

weak-willed slaves of the devil and a miserable toy in his hands, following all his crafty suggestions which they take for their own. This sad, constantly repeating story is centuries old and originates from the fall of the first progenitors. We should recall that the essence of this fall was precisely in that people turned out to be only a laughing stock and deceived victim of the serpent-tempter after abandoning in an outburst of false pride their childlike trust in God, and trying to acquire the Divine knowledge of good and evil by their own efforts. He who does not want to be a slave of God will inevitably become a slave of the devil. This eternal law is as immutable in the intellectual area as in all other areas.

Psychologically, this can be explained easily.

We, ordinary people without much spiritual experience, almost never realize that the thoughts which originate in our head are inspired by some kind of extraneous force. They always seem to be our own, and by virtue of this circumstance alone they are decisive for the direction of our activities. “I will fulfill this because it is my desire” – this is a usual suggestion of self-willed self-love, but humble people who do not trust their reason too much, by examining the moral unsoundness of their thoughts, can relatively easily admit that these are the fruit of the devil’s whispering and nip them in the bud. An intellectually proud person is another matter. He simply cannot admit that the devil owns him, and his reasoning, conscious or unconscious, in this case is approximately the following: “This is my thought... It originated in a brilliant head, came out of my ‘self,’ and should be good, for my ‘self’ is awesome. And if the thought is good, how can it be recognized as the fruit of a suggestion of the Devil?! Rather, it was given by God acting through me, as the highest inspiration of the spirit. At the very least, it is my own thought, and if it is mine, it means that it is good!” And one’s consciousness, clouded by self-adoration, ceases to even distinguish between truly bad things and good things: everything is good that is mine, that comes from me – this is the entire moral criterion. The devil skillfully uses this and, by suggesting bad thoughts and desires which the proud person takes for his own, makes him do whatever the tempter wants with slavish obedience, although the person is always sure that he is doing only his own will, and achieves its fulfillment often with perseverance and fanaticism. These blind people who do not understand that they are being led as puppets are the devil’s best servants.

This is what makes the Sadducees’ leaven of intellectual pride especially dangerous. It is difficult to reason with these people, it is difficult to open their eyes to their true position, convince them that the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God (1 Cor. 1:20) and that with all the imaginary superiority of their minds, they are no more than blind, misguided fools. It is impossible for them to admit this because pride prevents it.

There exists a good Turkish fable. An old gardener, Ibrahim, once lived in one of the wilayahs of the Ottoman Empire. He knew his business well and was a good seller of vegetables. The only bad thing was that he considered himself to be the smartest person in the wilayah and maybe in the entire Sultanate. He was especially convinced of his wisdom when he talked or consulted with his wife Fatima. Her words were so much more foolish than his thoughts that he involuntarily admired his own intellectual superiority. Therefore, he even had a rule: “In a difficult moment of life, ask your wife for advice and do just the opposite.”

Once a neighbor started a lawsuit with him, and Ibrahim was summoned to the kadi for questioning.

It is known that justice in all countries shining with the faith of the prophet Muhammad has a crack in it, and before you can trust it, you need to fill in this crack.

The wise Ibrahim knew this well.

“Wife,” he said, “What should I bring to the kadi? He is calling me for interrogation, may Allah prolong his days!”

“A cart of ripe watermelons,” answered Fatima. “Kadi loves them.” “How foolish is she!” Ibrahim thought. “To bring watermelons because of such a trifle! Cucumbers will do!”

He put cucumbers in a basket choosing the worse, yellower ones, and went off.

At the gate of the kadi’s house, he was stopped by a large guard.

“To the kadi?” he asked. “Where is your pass?”

Ibrahim showed him the basket.

The guard looked, slowly selected the most yellow overripe cucumber from the basket, sniffed it and threw it at Ibrahim’s shaved head with all his might. The cucumber cracked loudly and covered the whole face of the “wise” gardener with juicy pulp. The first cucumber was followed by a second, third, and so on, until the entire basket was empty. And while the guard was doing this and squashing the cucumbers one by one on the wise head of Ibrahim, the gardener stood and thought: “How smart I am! And it’s good that I didn’t follow the advice of my wife!... Cucumbers can still be tolerated; what if my head were bombarded with watermelons!”

The fable adds: “The most undoubted fool is the one who considers himself to be the smartest.”

If pride of the mind is the greatest vice which prevents a person from entering the Kingdom of God in the realm of thought, we may find another defect, no less harmful, in the realm of will, which the Lord calls “the leaven of the Pharisees” and defines it as hypocrisy: *Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy* (Lk. 12:1).

In Chapter 23 of the Gospel of Matthew, the Lord clarifies the psychological essence of hypocrisy in great detail in His formidable castigating speech against the Pharisees, reproaching them that they *say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do for to be seen of men; they devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer; they pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: they strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel* (Matt. 23:3-5, 14, 23-24). All this results in the type of hypocritical religiosity of the Pharisee, who outwardly appears *righteous unto men, but within is full of hypocrisy and iniquity like a whited sepulchre, which indeed appears beautiful outward, but is within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness* (Matt. 23:27-28).

How does hypocrisy originate in the soul?

Sometimes it results from perversion of the disposition of the soul when the main center of life for the person is not God, but earthly benefits and advantages, and when religion serves only as a means for achieving these goals, losing its true nature of pure service to God. Undoubtedly, people of this kind were among the Pharisees, since the Lord says about them that they *receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that cometh from God only* (Jn. 5:44), and in their demanding of a sign from the Lord they too clearly revealed their attachment to the matters of earthly well-being. However, there are comparatively few such hardened hypocrites who would immediately begin their religious life and activities with deliberate deception, hiding their real, base worldly goals in their souls.

More often, hypocrisy is a product of spiritual laziness. The fact is that sincere service to God and arrangement of one's salvation requires constant work on oneself and continuous straining of the spirit. This always presents great difficulty, and therefore it is not surprising that for people who are spiritually careless or lazy, it gradually begins to be replaced by purely external fulfillment of religious duties without internal spiritual participation, which is incomparably easier. Like a cunning hired servant, the person begins to deceive God, bringing him as gifts the ostentatious tinsel of bodily exploits and ritual service instead of the gold of emotional dispositions and love. He also deceives God in prayer by absolute lack of entering into the words of prayer with his soul and often not even thinking about their meaning. Little by little, this external, ritualistic service to God turns into a habit, and then the soil for hypocrisy is easily created.

At first, reproaches of the conscience arise, since the person still feels inside that his service is impure and insincere. Then cunning reason comes to the rescue and begins to calm the agitated soul with its sophisms, like things are not yet so bad, that perfect holiness is impossible,

that God is merciful and He will forgive, that finally, a careful performance of external duties is a kind of virtuous life which can still deliver salvation. The person begins to calm and deceive himself.

Yet, despite all sophisms, since external service to God does not give spiritual satisfaction, the poor hypocrite, whether he likes it or not, has to replace this absence of the highest joy which the Lord sends only as a reward for sincere love for Him and conscientious presence before Him, with something else; otherwise, his service becomes simple nonsense in its absurdity. Such a person finds this compensation in worldly fame and everyday benefits which he receives from people as a tribute to his seeming holiness. From that moment on, the hypocrite has only one concern in the foreground: to appear good before people, and he begins to fulfill diligently even the external duties assigned to him by religion, only when others look at him. He begins to deceive people and turns into a whited sepulchre.

Thus, pharisaism or religious hypocrisy is complete deception, since a person here lies to God, to himself, and to people. This is where the main danger of this vice is, which makes it difficult for correction. It is easier to turn an open, even hardened sinner on the path of righteousness, for on the inside he still realizes that his deeds are bad. But it is almost impossible to convince a habitual hypocrite that he is on the wrong path. He is so used to lying to himself and to people, so intoxicated by his own deception, so many different sophisms are at his disposal for justification, that the sense of truth has become dull in him if it has not completely disappeared, and the path of true life for him is hopelessly lost in the labyrinth of dialectical tricks.

Here are the spiritual dispositions – those basic vices which the Lord calls “leaven” and against which He especially warns His followers, pointing to this leaven as the most dangerous shoals threatening the ship of our salvation with destruction: Herod’s leaven is a vice of the heart, egoism and its outward manifestations: apathy and indifference to others. The Sadducee’s leaven is a vice of the mind, mental pride and its outward manifestations: lack of faith and unbelief. The Pharisee’s leaven is a vice of the will, spiritual laziness, and hypocrisy born of it.

Chapter 8, verses 22-26

When you read the Gospel accounts of the miracles of healing performed by the Lord, you involuntarily pay attention to the description of the ways these healings were made. The Lord rarely healed with just a word or only a prayer. Usually, healing was preceded by some kind of tactile gesture or touch, and the methods used by the Savior were extremely varied, almost never repeated and were always adapted to the specific circumstances of each case. Either He took the patient by the hand and helped him to stand (Mk. 1:31; 5:41; 9:27), or He put His

fingers into the ears of the deaf (Mk. 7:33), or He put His hands upon the eyes of the blind (Mk. 8:25), or He touched the purulent ulcers of the leper with the words: *be thou clean!* (Mk. 1:41). Sometimes He asked the sick to make some kind of movement (Mk. 2:11; 3:5). In turn, people seeking help from the Lord Jesus Christ, first of all, tried to touch Him or His garments (Mk. 3:10; 5:27-28; 6:56).

Of course, this can be partly explained by the grace-filled, healing power emanating from Him (Mk. 5:30), acting on the sick through this touch, but, on the other hand, one cannot fail to see that in using various methods of healing, the Lord also had His own special goals in mind.

We already know that faith in the Savior was an indispensable condition for the sick to be healed. *According to your faith be it unto you* (Matt. 9:29), He usually said, and in order to make the sick person be receptive to the grace-filled power of healing, He first of all tried to awaken this faith in him. The gesture or touch which He used while doing so served the same purpose.

It is incomparably easier for a person to believe in the possibility of recovery when he feels someone touch the tender spot. A simple word or glance cannot produce an action of equal power. In some cases, as for example with the deaf person, this was almost the only way to let the patient understand and convince him that the Lord wanted to heal him. In any case, in the realm of faith, a tactile action or real fact personally felt or experienced by the person, is incomparably more convincing than words. When the Lord would touch a sick person, that person saw and felt that he was being healed. The double-strong assurance of sight and touch joined the testimony of hearing, and weak faith was strengthened with this support.

“Faith only from hearing” is much weaker than faith from experienced facts in which the person is an active or passive participant.

At the same time, touching a wound or the affected organ spoke much more clearly and eloquently about the Lord’s love and sympathy for the suffering person than words could express. Love always requires great, tactile intimacy, and a doctor who examines his patient from afar, fearing to touch him, will never be able to earn great trust and affection, not to mention that it is absolutely impossible to feel and believe in the sincerity of his participation, but rather one may assume only disgust and aversion in him. Accordingly, various feelings arise in the patient’s soul, since the soul involuntarily responds to love with love, to indifference and aversion with hostility. The Savior’s touch, serving as an expression of His compassion for suffering people and evoking a reciprocal feeling in their souls, undoubtedly consolidated the mutual love of the Divine Healer and His patients.

In the realm of love, real facts also matter more than words.

This law of the formation and strengthening of faith and love must be borne in mind, for it helps us to find a means of healing those mental ailments which will be discussed.

Physical blindness which the Lord healed was difficult. A vast world of visual images and colors constituting almost a half of the total sum of external impressions which the soul lives by is completely closed for a blind man. The bright sun, pink dawn, azure sky, or play of colors in the rainbow do not exist for him. No pictures of joyful awakening and the rise of the sun, when the first shafts of jubilant rays burst from the horizon, gilding the tops of mountains, trees and crosses of churches, or a pensive, quiet sunset when the reddening sun slowly sinks into blue clouds, dressing the whole sky in crimson and purple, are available to him. The beauties of nature with dark greenery of forests, golden fields, endless varieties of flowers, sometimes colored brightly and sometimes subtly, or many-hued butterflies and insects are inaccessible to him. All the wondrous, enchanting beauty of God's world, as it pours out in floral symphonies and scales of music, is closed to him. He also does not see dear people, beloved faces, and favorite things.

It is hard for a blind person!

Yet even worse, even more dangerous for a person, is the state of so-called spiritual blindness which usually manifests itself in two forms: blindness of faith and blindness of love. Physical blindness gives a person much inconvenience and grief, but the soul in its highest manifestations suffers relatively little from it. The lack of external impressions often contributes to a wealth of inner feelings which develops in their place, while the life of the spirit even wins over in many ways thanks to concentration and depth. *The Lord openeth the eyes of the blind* (Ps. 146:8), says the Word of God. The lack of vision is rewarded with acuity of other feelings, power of attention and thought, and depth of self-awareness.

Spiritual blindness affects the soul, cripples it by forcing it to live an incomplete, half-hearted life, completely stops its spiritual development, and leads to destruction and decay.

The first form of spiritual blindness – blindness of faith – is that the spiritual world, that is, the world of spiritual beings and spiritual experiences in communicating with them becomes completely closed and incomprehensible to a person. The person does not know it, does not see it, and does not feel it, because he does not believe and does not know how to believe.

Of course, relative blindness is inevitable for believers, since the spiritual world is inaccessible directly for our external senses; much is unclear in it; much is completely closed for knowing. Full knowledge is possible for us only in the future when the partition between us and that world will be destroyed and when we will move into its realm. *For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known*, says the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 13:12). From the unknown realm of the other world, the Lord has revealed and reveals to us only what is necessary for our salvation. Or, as St. John of Damascus says, God “knows all things and provides for each in accordance with his needs, He

has revealed to us what it was expedient for us to know, whereas that which we were unable to bear He has withheld.”⁶

Nevertheless, this partial knowledge is still given to the believer to the extent required, and the path of life and its ultimate goal are still clear to him, although perhaps he does not see all details and zigzags on the path of life. Someone compared the path of faith to a misty road. Distant expanses covered with misty haze are not visible here; the road is lost in the darkness, and its turns are not visible, just as those obstacles that may be on it. Yet you can clearly discern the area of the next steps; the wall of mist seems to part in front of you, and you can walk confidently enough not to stumble. You also see the sun whose ball of fire shines through the mist; by it you can determine your general direction and can judge how well the road on which you are walking leads to the goal. After all, you are not blind and are not lost in impenetrable darkness. But there are many people suffering from unconditional and obstinate blindness, who are unable to discern anything at all in the realm of faith.

Once a little boy, Kolya, lost his ball which rolled under the wardrobe. He looked and could not see anything.

He tried to close one eye – he saw nothing.

“Look with your hand!” advised his father.

Kolya fumbled under the closet for a minute.

“Dad!” he said. “My hand does not see anything either...!”

Likewise, many people see nothing in the spiritual world. As the hand does not have the organ of sight, they do not have the eyes of faith. They are unconditionally blind.

You would in vain explain to a mole which has burrowed itself into its hole that there is a sun in the sky and that the world is far from being limited to its underground burrow. You will not convince the mole, nor make it believe you.

People are sometimes the same.

Take for example the Pharisees. They carefully watched the Lord; they knew His every step. All His extraordinary miracles were performed in front of them. And yet they did not believe.

His Nativity was accompanied by amazing signs which caused a stir among astronomers throughout the East. The pagan scholars – the wise men – came from afar to worship the Divine Child, found His cave, manger, and believed. The Pharisees did not believe.

They were well aware of the prophecies in the books of the Old Testament. They clearly saw that these prophecies were fulfilled in the person of the Lord. They could not fail to see this,

⁶ *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, I, 1; Saint John of Damascus, *Writings*, transl. F.H. Chase, Fathers of the Church 37, New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958, p. 166.

for the Lord Himself constantly makes note of all these ancient prophecies which were fulfilled in Him. And yet they did not believe.

Crowds of people followed Christ. The sick rushed to Him just to touch Him, for His touch alone led to healing. His power was such that it was impossible to consider Him an ordinary man. The Pharisees did not believe.

The Lord tamed the storm by a single word, walked on the waves as if on dry land. Waves, wind, sea – all elements of the world were subject to Him. He resurrected the son of the widow of Nain, the daughter of Jairus, his friend Lazarus who had already begun to decompose after a four-day period in the tomb. The impression was enormous. All the people were ready to recognize the Lord as their Messiah. Only the Pharisees did not believe.

They demanded new proofs and signs from Heaven. But we can say with complete confidence that they would not have believed any sign. When a person has decided not to believe anything, it is impossible to convince him. The most obvious, striking facts do not affect him.

It is not for nothing that the Lord called them *blind guides* (Matt. 23:24), who led the blind and were ready to *fall into the ditch* (Matt. 15:14).

This is spiritual blindness of faith, speaking of which the Lord Jesus Christ explained that those afflicted by it, *seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive* (Matt. 13:13-14).

When the great hierarch of the Constantinople See, John Chrysostom, made bold, denunciatory speeches against the Empress Eudoxia, the enraged Empress obtained a decree for his exile. But on the same night, there was a strong earthquake in the capital of Byzantium. The earthquake's shaking was especially strong near the Imperial palace and in the palace. In the middle of the night, the Empress Eudoxia ran to the Emperor in horror and in tears. "We exiled a righteous person," she exclaimed, "and the Lord is punishing us for it. We must return him immediately; otherwise we will all perish." John was returned, but not for long. The lesson was soon forgotten, and the former blindness again took possession of the Empress. It seemed to her that she had succumbed to fear in vain, that it was not God's voice which sounded angrily in the roar of the earthquake. Intrigues began again, and again the saint was condemned to exile. And on the same night, a fire broke out in Hagia Sophia Cathedral, destroying the church, the Senate building, rich houses which surrounded the square, and threatening the Imperial palace. The sign of God's wrath was obvious, but blindness had already tightly closed the spiritual eyes of the Empress and the ruling spheres. They did not want to see anything, and the holy hierarch remained in exile.

When a person does not want to believe, he is blind to the most obvious facts and proofs.

There is an old story about a priest who tried to convince a disbeliever of the possibility of miracles.

“Imagine,” he said, “you fell from the bell tower and survived... I know such a fact. Is this not a miracle?”

“No, it is a coincidence!” objected the disbeliever.

“Well, that is conceivable... But if the same thing happened a second time, and you survived again. Would you again not recognize it as a miracle?”

“No, it is luck!” said the unbeliever.

“But now you fall for a third time – and again without any harm. What would you say then?”

“I’ll say that it is...a habit!” figured the unbeliever.

It was easier for him to admit that a person can get used to flying from a bell tower than to acknowledge the possibility of a miracle. Such are all modern rationalists, especially those who are engaged in altering the Gospel history: L. Tolstoy, Renan, Strauss, etc. After they have accepted in advance as a self-evident and indisputable truth that miracles do not exist and cannot exist, they either delete all passages from the Gospels which speak about the miracles of the Savior, or rework them in their own way in order to eradicate all elements of the miraculous.

And nothing – neither the authority of the Apostles, nor the testimony of eyewitnesses, nor carefully preserved church tradition – nothing can convince them otherwise and dispel their blindness.

Where does this blindness come from?

In the testimony of the Prophet Isaiah (Isa. 6, 9-10), to which the Lord Jesus Christ referred, as we have seen above, He indicates the reason for this phenomenon: *For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them* (Matt. 13:15).

So, the Lord mentions two reasons for blindness of faith:

1. Coarseness, depravity of the heart.
2. Conscious unwillingness to turn to God for help.

Indeed, people usually do not believe not because they consider the foundations of faith insufficient and unconvincing, but because they close their eyes, so *their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed*, in other words, they simply do not want to see the truth. And they do not want to know the truth of Christ, because it interferes with their passionate, depraved life by demanding purity and holiness from them, and exposing their hardened heart stained by sin. Such a heart will always repel and hate the truth which exposes things, as the Empress

Eudoxia hated and persecuted Saint John Chrysostom and as the Pharisees hated the Lord. Pushing the truth away from itself, the hardened heart at the same time pushes itself away from the source of all truth – God, and cannot and does not want to turn to Him.

At the same time, the Lord cannot open himself to such a person in his depraved heart and dark, corrupted soul, from which the light of faith has been expelled, for there are no necessary conditions for this. *God is light, and in him is no darkness at all* (1 Jn. 1:5). And if so, how can He reveal Himself to a dark, depraved heart, for *what communion hath light with darkness* (2 Cor. 6:14)? Only *the pure in heart... shall see God* (Matt. 5:8). In addition, the Lord never violates the will of a person and extends a helping hand to meet the person's strivings only if the person desires it.

What should a person suffering from blindness of faith do? Where can he find healing?

In the same place where the blind from the Gospel story found it: in the grace-filled touch of the Lord. Yet, in order to experience this healing touch, one has to come to Christ in the same way as the blind man came to Him asking for help (Mk. 8:22). One needs to turn to God. This is the first thing. Warm prayer, heartfelt hope in God's help, inner contemplation of the humble image of Christ full of love – these are the first steps which, according to Saint Macarius of Egypt, clarify the faith, that is, help the person to recover his sight.

A second thing is clear from the above considerations: it is necessary to care for cleansing the heart, and this is facilitated by life according to the commandments of God, or possibly, completely renunciation of the world and forcing oneself to do all that is good.

It is necessary to begin to live as the Gospels demand.

“But come on,” people may say, “both turning to God and living according to His commandments already presuppose faith, and the problem is precisely that we don't have it. The whole problem is how to kindle it. And since I do not believe in God, how can I turn to Him and recognize His will as the law of my life? Your advice is self-contradictory.”

This is not so, I have to disagree. It is possible to live as faith requires, not having faith in the beginning.

Do you remember the law about the formation and strengthening of faith which we deduced? Facts and actions are more important for developing faith than words. So one needs to immerse into the realm of facts and personal experiences as soon as possible and as decisively as possible instead of wasting time on pointless and fruitless philosophizing and arguing. Personal life experience spent in good conscience will give you infinitely more than all theoretical reasoning and empty talk can ever do. Even without faith, but living according to its instructions, you will soon feel the truth of the laws of this life, and this truth, experienced and tested by you personally, will be most likely to convince you. See which means the Lord used to awaken faith

in those people who turned to Him for help. Before they received real healing from Him, and before they became convinced that it was truly being performed on them, He required them to make some gesture or movement as if the healing had already taken place and they were completely healthy. From the withered, He demanded stretching out the withered hand as if it were healthy (Mk. 3:5); He said to the paralytic: *Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house* (Mk. 2:11); he made the blind look up (Mk. 8:25).

Everywhere the patient first performs an action according to faith and at the same time faith itself emerges causing the real consequence – healing. This consequence, as an immutable, obvious fact which justifies faith, strengthens it in the consciousness of the person, giving it the power of a lasting, doubtless conviction.

It is the same in our life. Act according to faith, doing the will of God, and you will see that the consequences caused by your actions will justify your faith and prove the divine origin of its laws.

My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, says Jesus Christ, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God (Jn. 7:16-17).

Thus, here is advice to people suffering from blindness of faith: if you do not have faith, live according to faith.

The other kind of blindness – blindness of love – is no less dangerous for the spiritual life. It is when a person does not seem to notice his neighbors. He is completely absorbed in himself, thinks only about himself, about his own benefits, about his personal interests. He is not interested in other people's lives. He is indifferent to someone else's grief; he passes by someone else's need not noticing it; the suffering of his neighbors does not concern him. He is totally encapsulated in his egoism, in self-loving thoughts.

I see men as trees, walking (Mk. 8:24), said the blind man when the Lord laid hands on him. Blind egoism looks at all people exactly the same way. For him, people have no more moral value than trees. Nowadays people say: "A man is a log to another man." A self-contained egoist does not feel the sorrow of his neighbors; he is not touched by their misfortunes, and he does not at all care about their moral or material well-being. The neighbor as a feeling, thinking, and suffering being does not exist for him. He simply does not care about other people.

If we turn from these blind egoists to people of high spiritual life, we will immediately see that concern for others, especially for their spiritual success, was always the main, basic feature in their psychology. Out of numerous examples of this kind, let us cite here a touching story from the life of Saint Abramius the Recluse, artistically told by the Holy Monk Ephraim the Syrian in his works.

The Blessed Abramius, says the Holy Monk Ephraim, “only had one brother after whose death an orphan girl remained. Her friends took her and brought her to her uncle when she was seven years old. Abramius told her to live in the outer cell since he shut himself in the inner cell. There was a window between the cells through which he taught her the Psalter and other Scriptures. She would spend time in prayer at night and singing psalms with him; he maintained abstinence and so did she. Diligently succeeding in asceticism, she tried to accomplish all the virtues. The blessed monk repeatedly begged God for her so her mind would be fixed on Him and not be bound by concern for earthly things, because her father left her a large estate, and Abramius ordered to immediately distribute it to the poor.

And she pleaded daily with her uncle saying: “I beg you, father, your holiness, and I implore your reverence, pray for me so I would be delivered from unchaste and evil thoughts, and from all intrigues of the enemy and from various nets of the devil.” And so she zealously carried out her endeavours, observing her ascetic rule, and the blessed monk rejoiced seeing her beautiful life, diligence, meekness, and love for God. She spent twenty years with him in ascetic endeavours like a beautiful lamb and undefiled dove.

However, at the end of the twentieth year, the serpent, cunning in deception and seeing how she was inspired by the virtues of monastic life and was wholly preoccupied with heavenly things, plotted to trap her in his net...and found a vessel prepared for destruction.

There was someone who bore the name of a monk, and he would very diligently visit the blessed monk under the pretense of talking to him. Seeing the blessed virgin through the window and being darkened in his mind, that unfortunate person wished to converse with her. And for a long time, about a year, he lay in wait for her until he found an opportunity and deprived her of her blessed stay in this truly genuine paradise. For, already deceived by the serpent, she opened the door of the cell and went out, by the deception of the evil serpent, losing the greatness of God-pleasing and undefiled virginity.

And as the eyes of our forefather and foremother who ate the fruit were opened, and they knew that they were naked, so did she, after committing the sin, was horrified in her mind, fell into despair, tore her hair shirt, beat herself in the face, and wanted to strangle herself. With weeping she said to herself: “I have died now, have ruined my days, have ruined the fruit of my endeavour and abstinence, have ruined the labor of tears, angered God; I have killed myself; I have plunged my holy uncle into the most bitter sorrow and become the laughing stock of the devil. For what should I, O miserable one, live after this? What have I done? What have I been subjected to? From where have I fallen! How did my mind become darkened? How did I give myself over to deception of the evil one? I do not understand how I fell; I cannot comprehend how I slipped; I do not understand how I could have become defiled. What cloud covered my

heart, and I did not see what I was doing? Where can I hide? Where can I go? Where are the instructions of my holy uncle?... I dare no longer look to heaven because I have died for God and for people; I can no longer look at this window. For how can I, a sinner, speak again with this holy man...? It is much better for me to go where no one knows me, because there is no longer any hope of salvation for me.”

Getting up, she immediately left for another town and, changing her clothes, she stopped at a hotel. When this happened to her, the holy monk in a vision during sleep saw a great, terribly hissing serpent of awful appearance, which came out of its place, crawled to his cell, and finding a dove, devoured it, and then returned again to its place. After waking from sleep, the blessed monk was greatly grieved and began to weep, saying: “Is Satan raising a persecution against the Holy Church and will turn many away from the faith? Will there be a schism and heresy in the Church of God?” And after praying to God, he said: “O Thou who art man-loving and foreknow everything, Thou alone know what this great vision means.” Two days later, he again saw how this serpent came out of its place, entered his cell, put its head at the feet of the blessed monk and split open, and the dove turned out to be alive, having no filth on itself. And suddenly, awakening from sleep, he called to Mary once or twice, saying: “Get up, why have you been too lazy for two days to open your mouth to give praise to God?” Since she did not give an answer, and for the second day he hadn’t heard her singing psalms according to their custom, he realized that the vision he had had was about Mary, and sighing, he wept loudly and said: “The wicked wolf has abducted my lamb, and my child has been captured.” Raising his voice, he said again: “O Christ, the Savior of the world, return Thy lamb Mary to the fence of life, so I, of old age, would not descend with sorrow into hell. Do not despise my prayer, O Lord!”

The two days in which he had the vision meant two years which his niece spent outside. Night and day he did not cease to beg God for her. Two years later, a rumor reached him about where she lived and how she lived, and he called an acquaintance and sent him there to inquire about her exactly, find out about the place, and how she was spending her life. The messenger went, found out everything in detail, saw her in person and after returning, informed the blessed monk about it, describing everything to him, both the place and behavior. The blessed monk, convinced that it was definitely her, ordered to bring military clothing and a horse. Opening the door of his cell, he went out, clothed himself in the military garment with a high hood on his head, covering his face, took one coin with him and, mounting a horse, set off on his journey. Just as a person sent to spy on a town or country wears the clothes of those living there in order to be disguised from the dwellers, so the blessed Abramius traveled wearing a borrowed garment to overcome the enemy.

Arriving at the place, he entered the hotel, stopped there and looked around to see Mary. Then, when enough time had passed and he had not yet seen her, he said to the owner of the hotel with a smile: "I hear, my friend, that you have a beautiful girl; it would give me pleasure to have a look at her." Seeing his gray hair and advanced years, the owner judged him, then said in response: "Yes, and very beautiful." Mary was incredibly beautiful. The blessed monk asked him: "What is her name?" The owner answered: "Mary." Then, with a bright face, the monk told him: "Call her for me to have fun with her today, because from the rumors I have become very fond of her." Mary, who was summoned, came to him, and as soon as Abramius saw her wearing that outfit and looking like a harlot, his whole body and his entire composition came near to tears; but through the love of wisdom and abstinence, he fastened himself in his heart as an inaccessible stronghold, so Mary would not recognize him and run away.

While they were sitting and drinking, the blessed monk began to talk to her like a man who was enflamed with an inextinguishable fire of love for her. So bravely this blessed monk fought against the devil and taking the captive, returned her to the bridal chamber of Christ! When the blessed monk was talking with her, she got up, embraced him, and kissed his neck; when kissing him, she felt the smell on his skin of his angelic life and immediately remembered her asceticism and, sighing, she said: "Woe to me alone!" The innkeeper said to her with surprise: "You have been living here for two years, Mary, and I have never heard your sigh or such words. What happened to you now?" She replied: "Oh, if only I could have died three years ago! Then I would have been blessed." And immediately the blessed monk, so as not to give suspicion about himself, sternly said to her: "She began to remember her sins in my presence!" And, pulling out the coin, he gave it to the owner of the hotel and said to him: "Make us a wonderful supper; we will have fun today with this girl, because I came from afar for her."

This is wisdom in God in the true sense! This is spiritual knowledge! What a cunning ploy against the devil! He who did not eat bread during his fifty-year endeavour, eats meat in order to save the soul captured by the devil!

When they had enjoyed their supper, the girl said, "Let us get up, sir, and go to sleep." He replied: "Let's go." And they went into the bedchamber. The venerable monk saw a high, prepared bed, readily entered the chamber, and sat on the bed.

I don't know what to call you, this perfect man of Christ! Sleeping only on a mat for fifty years in your ascetic feat, with what readiness you sat down on the bed! You did all this for the glory of Christ: you went alone, ate meat, drank wine, and stayed in a hotel to save a lost soul. While we, of little soul, come to untimely fastidiousness when we only need to say a helpful word to our neighbor.

So he was sitting on the bed. Mary said to him: "Let me, sir, take off your shoes." But the blessed monk said to her: "Lock the door and then come and take them off." She wanted first to remove his shoes, but he did not allow this. Then she locked the door and came to him, and the blessed monk said to her: "Come closer to me, my dear Mary." And when she came closer, Abramius held her so that she could not run away from him, took off the klobuk from his head and bursting with tears began to say to her: "Do you not recognize me, my child Mary? Am I not your father, Abramius? Did not I raise you? What happened to you, my child? Where is the angelic image that you had on you, my child? Where are your tears? Where is your prayer at night together with mourning of the soul? How from the heights of heaven have you fallen into the abyss of destruction! Why did you leave and lead me into unbearable sorrow?" She, overcome with horror, grew numb, could not lift her face up and struck like a stone remained in his hands, overcome by shame and fear. And the blessed monk with tears continued to say to her: "Do you not answer me, my child Mary? Did not I come here with sorrow for you?! Your sin is on me, child. I will answer God for you on the day of the judgment. I will bring repentance for this sin of yours." So he begged and persuaded her until midnight. Taking some courage, she said to him: "I cannot turn my face to you out of shame. How can I call upon the most pure name of my Christ? I am defiled by muddy filth." The blessed monk said to her: "Your sin is upon me, my child; God will demand for your sin from me; just listen to me, let's go, let's return to our place. I beg you, child: have mercy on my old age, have pity on my gray hair. I beg you, my beloved child: get up, follow me." And she said to him: "If God accepts my repentance, then I will go; but I fall down before you and I beg your reverence, I kiss your holy footprints, because you had so much mercy on me and came here to take me out of the devil's net." And laying her head at his feet, she wept all night, saying: "How can I repay you, sir, for all this?" When morning came, the blessed monk said to her: "Get up, my child, let's leave here." She answered him: "I have some gold and dresses here; what will you order to do with them?" The blessed monk said: "Leave them here, for all of it belongs to the evil one." And, getting up, they left immediately. He sat her on his horse and walked ahead, rejoicing. And as a shepherd, when he finds a lost sheep, lays it on his shoulders, so the blessed monk walked with joyful heart. And when they came to their place, he shut her up in the inner cell, while he stayed in the outer cell. Wearing sackcloth, with humility and many tears, in vigilance and abstinence, she steadily and diligently achieved the goal of repentance, fearlessly falling down before God and praying to Him.

Such is the love of the saints. Such is their concern for their neighbors, for their salvation and moral success. Oh, if only we had the slightest knowledge and desire to imitate them! Life would have been infinitely happier if we remembered the Savior's commandment given at the

Last Supper: *love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another* (Jn. 13:34-35).

Self-contained egoism with its disdain for one's neighbors is dangerous precisely because it is the main obstacle to the fulfillment of this basic commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The thing is that the seed of natural love is planted in the nature of every person created in the image and likeness of God, along with other godlike qualities. Yet in its original, undeveloped form, this germ represents only an indefinite unconscious need to love and does not go beyond this need. This germ develops only when it takes concrete form, in other words, when this need to love finds a living object for itself, that is, when a person driven by this need applies his feeling to another person: first, of course, to a closer person, such as his mother, father, and so on. Little by little, other, more distant people begin to enter this circle outlined by love. The number of beloved people gradually grows, and simultaneously the ingrained seed of love grows, turning finally into great, all-embracing love.

If, at the same time, this love does not remain only an indefinite, inactive feeling, but the person actively manifests it in good deeds in relation to his neighbors, in caring for them, in attention to them, it becomes more intense, more ardent, and more enduring.

This is the law of the heart, the law of the development of love.

If a person lives the life of a narrow-minded self-lover, does not want and does not consider it necessary to apply the natural feeling of love to anyone and develop it in practical ways by deeds of kindness and mercy, this Divine gift of love given to a person inevitably atrophies and disappears. A small germ requires care and attention; it withers and dries up without it, and the person becomes gradually seized by dark, spiritual blindness – blindness of love, when he completely ceases to notice and understand his neighbors.

Chapter 8, verses 27-38

With patience and great love, continuing the work of educating His disciples, the Lord begins to gradually reveal to them true concepts of Himself, the purpose of His mission, and methods of its implementation. The time had come when the disciples had to and could be entrusted with this mystery, and first and foremost, discover exactly and definitely who their Teacher was. Like most of their compatriots, they envisioned the coming Messiah in the form of a glorious, conquering king who would restore the earthly kingdom of Israel and perhaps would subjugate the entire world to Israel. This flattered their national pride, and without expressing it directly, the disciples believed in their hearts that they had found the promised Messiah in the person of their beloved Teacher and were preparing with secret joy and pride to share in His worldly glory. This preconception had to be eradicated at all costs; otherwise, they would have

faced heavy disappointment in unfulfilled illusions, which would have inevitably shaken and destroyed their faith in the Lord. It was necessary to show them the true face of the Redeemer-Messiah – in His humility, shame, humiliation, in order, first, to protect them from these bitter disappointments, and second, to show them what the true greatness, power, and moral beauty of the Kingdom of God consisted of and how all this was far from their understanding, and, third, to find out what was required of them as the followers of the Messiah and successors of His work.

The Lord approached this task with caution. The preconception was tenacious, and ahead of them stood a persistent and prolonged struggle with it. *Whom do men say that I am?* He asked. *John the Baptist:* the disciples responded, *but some say, Elias; and others, One of the prophets. And he saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?*

And for the first time, expressing aloud the hidden thought of the entire, small circle of the closest Apostles, Peter answered for everyone: *Thou art the Christ.*

The word was spoken. The Lord did not deny it, but forbade talking about it not to awaken false hopes in the crowd of people, and, taking this opportunity, began to explain to the disciples what the earthly fate of the Messiah, Christ, should be. What speeches! How little this resembled the hidden hope of the disciples, which they entertained in the depths of their hearts! Suffering, shame, and death! Who would have thought that! The Messiah, not a victorious and triumphant king, but a rejected, unrecognized sufferer, condemned to death! But why was this necessary? And was it not in the power of the Messiah to change this sad fate? After all, His omnipotence was unlimited! Why could He not choose the bright path of a triumphant leader? Why not use His power to avoid sufferings and grief?

The ardent Apostle Peter, who was easily carried away, could not bear it. He called the Lord aside and began to argue with Him: *Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee* (Matt. 16:22). The Lord had been tempted in this way more than once. At the very beginning of His ministry, even when He was fasting among the silent mountains of the Galilean desert, Satan also tempted Him trying to distract Him from the path of the Cross, suffering, and sorrow, and offering other ways to carry out His mission, more convenient and pleasant, not requiring a sacrificial feat... We already know that the Lord rejected the insidious proposals of the seducer. And now, He was hearing the same, familiar, tempting voice from the lips of his own beloved disciple, and despite the fact that these words were coming from a simple, loving heart, they were the same, insidious words in their meaning, counting on human weakness. No wonder the Savior's response was harsh.

Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou savorest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men (verse 33).

This means: “Your words are a demonic suggestion! You are offering me to avoid suffering and death, because human weakness is afraid of this! You think only about the body and its earthly well-being, and therefore you pity Me! But you do not think that My work is God’s work, and if the path of suffering and the cross leads to this goal, it must be taken, for God’s work is above everything else and when doing the will of God, which guides a person to His goals, you need to forget about yourself, because thinking about your comfort while doing it is wrongful!”

The harsh tone of the answer may reveal how often and how deeply this temptation disturbed the Lord and what tension of spiritual power was required of Him in order to resist this subtle and dangerous enticement.

And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (verses 34-37).

The Lord came to the earth not to enjoy the comforts and delights of the earthly life, but to save people. There was only one means for this: to become an atoning sacrifice for human sin, to suffer and die. It was necessary that He *bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness* and by His wounds be healed (1 Pet. 2:24). This was the will of God the Father *that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all* (Rom. 8:32). The Savior invented and chose this path not on His own, not as a man, but it was given to Him by the will of the Father. Therefore, the Lord said that *the Son of man must suffer many things* (verse 31). It was so decided in the Supreme Council, and not a personal choice of path depended on the Son of Man, but only voluntary submission to the eternal decision of God.

And He took this cross of voluntary submission upon Himself.

I came down from heaven, He says, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me (Jn. 6:38).

He now calls His followers to this – voluntarily, abandoning their personal desires, to take up the cross which God has laid on each of us and follow the same sorrowful path of patience and self-sacrifice which He, our Savior, walked on.

The guarantee of our salvation is also in this voluntary submission, for one who has denied himself and has completely surrendered himself to the guidance of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Gospels, will probably not get lost in the labyrinth of life and will safely reach the flowering shores of the eternal abodes; one who pities himself, tries to preserve himself and find the way on his own, will inevitably cripple his soul or destroy it entirely. Self-love and one’s

own choices will inevitably lead the person on the path of worldly joys. This is where the tremendous danger lies, for no benefits of worldly life will be a reward for the death of the soul.

Life with its shaky soil, with constant danger of moral failures, with its temptations and vices pulling into its depths like a quagmire, resembles a swamp.

Imagine you come to this swamp, which blocks your path. One way or another you have to cross it. But how? It is impossible to avoid it or go around it. It stretches in all directions as far as the eye can see. You have to go straight. There are no paths to be seen: hummocks, reeds, bright green moss; water gleams in some places warning about the danger. You do not know which direction to go in. You only know that death may threaten you at every step: it is easy either to get stuck in the mud, or fall into the quagmire, alluring with its velvet cover of fresh, tender greenery, but from which there is no way out. Once you end up there, the swamp will suck you in and pull you into its insidious, cold abyss.

This is life.

People who are careless or frivolous, who make up the vast majority of people, walk through this swamp without thinking much: from hummock to hummock, wherever it is drier, more comfortable and where the path seems to go, and do not think where it will lead them... Usually they come to a quagmire from which there is no escape...

People who get carried away, with an unquenchable thirst for pleasure, run after wandering swamp lights which seem to tease them, dancing in the air and flying further and further like sparkling moths, luring the unfortunate madmen into the depths of the swamp and suddenly disappearing at the very moment when their insatiable, outstretched hand is about to grab the deceptive phantom. Such is the passionate pursuit of earthly happiness, the joys and pleasures of life...

Still others try to find the true path on their own. They enter the swamp arrogantly and self-confidently. "Oh, we will conquer life," they say, "We will build our happiness with our own hands! We will find or pave the way to a bright, wonderful future on our own! We do not need guides, and we do not need a pointer! Man is the architect of his own happiness: for this he has a proud and inquisitive mind!" And they valiantly walk through the swamp calling others to follow them and pretending that they know the way to firm, calm shores. These arrogant people with their stubborn self-conceit usually end up getting into the most impassable abyss with the flock of their followers, where they find their death.

No one knows his paths in life and no one can say what the coming day is preparing for him... Therefore, a wise person will inevitably seek guidance. The simplest, most natural, and most reasonable judgment here can only be: the swamp is unfamiliar to me. I do not know the

path... I have to go, but going at random is certain death. By all means, I need to find someone who knows the way. Otherwise I will perish...

This is the reasoning of every rational person in life. Fearing to get hopelessly entangled in the labyrinth of intertwining and scattering paths of life, which disappear in the mysterious fog of the future, he always feels the need for experienced guidance, and where can he find more faithful, more reliable and more benevolent guidance than in the Lord, Who knows everything and before Whom everything is clear and open? Once Thomas asked the Lord: *Lord...how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me* (Jn. 14: 5-6).

It cannot be otherwise. A person, who is weak, limited, with his mind clouded by passions, will never find the true path of life on his own.

One thing remains for him: to take up his cross and obediently follow the Lord. Otherwise, the danger of going astray in life and perishing spiritually is inevitable for him.

It is true that the road by which the Lord leads a person through the swamp of life is difficult and sometimes seems dangerous. The quagmire is often deep; there are sinkholes; it sometimes seems that you are about to be bogged down in the swamp, and the cold abyss will swallow you and close over your head. Yet even at these moments, do not let go of the hand of the Lord, leading and supporting you, and He will again lead you to a flat, dry place. Be that as it may, this is the only way to pass safely the quagmire of life, for only He knows the way. *I am the way... no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.* There is no other way.

No matter how hard the trials are which meet us on this path, we can be quite confident that the Lord will not give us temptations beyond our strength, but along with trials, He will also send consolation to encourage us, strengthen us, and give us strength to endure the hardships of life's journey.

But to do this, one must completely surrender to God, submit to His guidance and abandon one's own will. Trials are always more serious and difficult when it is necessary to break our stubbornness and suppress our self-will which rises and murmurs against the cross which the Lord has placed upon our shoulders. However, if the Lord meets complete obedience on the part of the person and if he accepts all trials with a feeling of sincere gratitude, firmly believing that all of this is sent for his benefit, temptations become softened, and the Lord leads the person with such a gentle, loving, and benevolent hand that the weight of the cross becomes almost imperceptible: the difficulty of the endeavour given to the person exactly matches his strength, and so this difficulty increases imperceptibly, with wise steadiness, as the spiritual strength of a person develops.

We can say that the cross of every person is made exactly according to his measure and that only our impatience, insubmission, and proneness to passions make it heavy.

Be that as it may, in whatever situation a person finds himself and whatever trials he has to endure, it is safe to say that all of them are absolutely necessary for the person for his spiritual improvement, and that the Lord always sends the person the best and most useful things, only that which is needed for him in relation to the conditions of his inner development and spiritual growth. There is no useless, pointless, unnecessary suffering, since it is not cruelty, but love which determines the punishments sent from the Lord to man. *For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.* And he chastens *for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness* (Heb. 12:6,10). Therefore, *if we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?* (Heb. 12:9).

Whoever voluntarily takes the yoke of Christ upon himself, will soon know how easy this yoke is and will soon feel how light is His burden (Matt. 11:30).

Even temptations are sometimes needed for a person and are sent for educational purposes. “For this often happens,” says Saint Ephraim the Syrian, “so that you would not be exalted, but would have humbleness of mind. Look at this pillar of the Apostles, how, for his benefit, a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet him, was given (2 Cor. 12:7). What for? To not have the sense of his own grandeur. If such a man was given this lesson so he would not be exalted, how much more should we, who are weaker but who think ourselves ‘to be something’ (Gal. 6:3) need to endure torment (the tyranny of sin) in order not to be of high mind.

Also, if some sorrow or tightness befall you, do not ask to be rid of them by all means, because even these are often useful. And one more thing: if you ask to receive something, do not ask to get it by all means. For, I am telling you that you, as a person, often consider to be useful for you what is often useless for you. But if you abandon your own will and decide to walk according to the will of God, you will be safe. Many people, after reaching what they longed for, subsequently came to repentance and often fell into great troubles. Listen to what the Apostle says: *for we know not what we should pray for as we ought* (Rom. 8:26). So, God Himself knows what is useful and edifying for each of us; therefore leave it to Him. I am saying this not to hinder you from addressing your petitions to God; on the contrary, I beg you to ask Him for everything, great and small. And this is what I am telling you: when you pray and reveal what is in your heart before Him, say to Him thus: nevertheless Thy will, not mine (Lk. 22:42). *Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass* (Ps. 37:5). Therefore, if you ask something from God, stay firm in your petition (pray relentlessly and with all diligence), but, revealing your needs before Him, say: ‘If it is, O Lord, Thy will for this to happen, let it be

done and make it successful; and if it is not Thy will for this, do not allow it to be done, my God! Only strengthen and preserve my soul so I will be able to endure this.”

A Christian can completely and unconditionally trust God, for God is the highest love and the highest goodness.

Yet unfortunately, we are often suspicious and distrustful, and the thought that the Lord works *all things together...for good* (Rom. 8:28) often eludes us: we either forget about it and do not feel the guidance of God in our life at all, or the intervention of Providence into our plans seem to us to be ill-disposed, and we try to slip away, evade it, and carry out our will, assuming that we know our best interests better. Already in the first temptation of our progenitors, the devil was able to cast this shadow of unjust suspicion concerning the will of the Creator in their eyes. The commandment which forbade the first people to eat of the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was given for their benefit. The cunning seducer explained it as envy. *God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil* (Gen. 3:5). And imagining that the tempter had opened the real path of happiness before them, which was closed by the envious ill-will of Providence, the first people rebelled against the will of God which constrained their personal, self-loving desires. We know and experience ourselves all our lives what a sad result this preference of their own will to the will of God had, which was incited by the devil, and yet we often forget this terrible lesson. As a rule, even now we consider our understanding of life and our interests to be correct and unerring, and do not want to humble ourselves *under the mighty hand of God* (1 Pet. 5:6). Our pride and our self-conceit are to blame.

But desires governed by self-conceit and self-love are always unreasonable and are often fatal.

Once upon a time, as Christian tradition tells us, a righteous ascetic named Daniel lived in the deserts of the East. He was sometimes visited by the inhabitants of a nearby village, who would bring him food, and among them he especially loved one man, the stone-cutter Eulogius. Eulogius was a very kind person, extraordinarily hardworking, sincere, and deeply religious. He would work all day long by the sweat of his brow in the quarries, splitting and trimming huge stones, and was always cheerful, calm, and joyful. No one heard any complaints or reproaches from him. Returning home, he always invited his poor neighbors or the beggars he met to dinner, and his house was always full of needy and crippled people. He divided almost all of his meager earnings among the needy, leaving himself only a little for food. Everyone knew Eulogius and everyone loved him.

“Such a man,” the Elder Daniel sometimes thought, listening to stories about him, “who does so much good despite his meager means! How much more good he would do, how many people he would make happy, if he were rich!”

And he prayed to God that the Lord would send wealth to Eulogius.

Once, after praying, the Lord appeared to him in a vision in sleep. “Your prayer will be fulfilled,” He said, “if you vouch for the soul of this man that after becoming rich, he will not perish, will not become corrupted, and will not forget God.”

Daniel vouched for him. It seemed impossible to him that wealth could spoil the virtuous life of the stonecutter and shake the Christian disposition of his soul.

When the next day after that Eulogius went to work, an extraordinary event occurred to him.

As soon as he hit the rock with a pickaxe intending to split off a large piece of stone, from the sound of the blow he heard that the rock was empty inside.

He struck another time, a third time, and punched a small hole. He looked inside and was dumbfounded with surprise.

There was a big hole in the rock, and it was all filled with gold...!

It took a matter of several minutes to punch a wide hole in the rock and remove the gold. Eulogius went home with the heavy load and locked himself in his room. For the first time in years, he did not invite anyone to dinner. He did not want the news of his precious find to spread. Eulogius became rich. He stopped going to work: there was no need for him to work anymore in order to earn mere pittance for food.

Life in the village soon started to feel boring and uninteresting to him. His wealth was almost useless there. He moved to Byzantium, to the capital.

Wealth always has a magical attraction for spoiled humanity. Those who are rich will always have many friends. In the brilliant, noisy capital, Eulogius also soon made many friends. They helped him to buy a luxurious house, introduced him to the highest Byzantine society, presented him to the Imperial court, and soon Eulogius became a prominent nobleman plunging headlong into the empty, idle life which the highest, wealthy aristocracy of Byzantium lived, a life of ostentatious brilliance and vanity.

There was no more talk of charity. Money flowed like a river on empty whims, while the poor and needy tried in vain to find access to the new nobleman to ask for help. Numerous servants in fancy outfits embroidered with gold chased them away with sticks from the gates of his magnificent, marble palace.

With horror and sadness the Elder Daniel learned about the change which had taken place in Eulogius. He realized too late how foolish his prayer was and how much better and more

useful was that poor working life which God had intended for the unfortunate quarryman in His goodness and wisdom. In addition, the Elder Daniel felt with fear that a great sin lay on his conscience and that he was threatened with severe punishment: after all, he had vouched for this soul and was responsible for it before God.

This responsibility now seemed terrible to him. He could no longer remain calm in his cell. With heavy heart, he left the desert and wandered off to Byzantium in vague hope that maybe he would somehow still be able to reason with Eulogius and save him.

But he could not speak with Eulogius. Well-dressed arrogant servants did not let the poor hermit even into the courtyard. For several days the old man stayed at the gates of the house, hungry, tired, devastated by grief in his heart, and only once he saw the former stone-cutter, when he, curled and perfumed, in magnificent courtly clothes, was mounting a litter carried by eight strong African slaves on their shoulders. Daniel rushed to him. A tall, broad-shouldered Moor pushed him roughly. The hermit called loudly to the nobleman by name, stretching his trembling old hands towards him. Eulogius looked at him with a bored, indifferent gaze and without stopping moved past. He did not recognize the old man, or did not want to recognize him, or, perhaps, did not hear his pleading cries – it was difficult to say, but Daniel felt that he would not be able to snatch Eulogius out of this corrupting and enthralling life, and that his perdition was inevitable.

With broken heart, he returned to the desert and in hopeless grief, shedding tears, prostrated himself in prayer before the Lord, asking Him to forgive his grave sin and return Eulogius to his poor working life again.

And the Lord, in His mercy, heeded his repentant tears and forgave his sin – a sin of self-conceit, for he imagined that he knew how to arrange the destiny of his neighbor better than God and thereby nearly destroyed him.

The old monk's prayer was heard again.

The former quarryman in his hubris of an arrogant arriviste did many awkward things at court, quarreled with several of the Emperor's dignitaries, and incurred royal disgrace upon himself. All his estate was confiscated to the treasury, and he was expelled from the capital. Friends could barely save him from imprisonment. This disaster had a beneficial effect on him. After losing everything, he came to his senses, realized that he was punished by God for pride and heartlessness, obediently succumbed to his fate, returned to the village, and started to do his work again. He again became a friend of the poor and deprived, and again began to share his meager earnings procured by hard labor with those in need.

A person becomes crudely deceived when he tries to determine the benefits of the living conditions around him relying on the astuteness of his reason. The meaning and causes of the

events which occur are usually hidden from our eyes, and that is why our judgments are so shortsighted and erroneous. Only later, when these events have already receded into the past, looking back, do we begin to understand their expediency, rationality, and usefulness. If these events are painful for us and bring much suffering and grief with them, our suffering “self” rebels against them and finds them unnecessary and excessively cruel. But wait, be patient, and when they pass you will almost always find justification for them. They often turn out to be only a bitter medicine necessary for our spiritual health. Quinine is a bitter and nasty thing, but an indispensable remedy against fever. Likewise, in the hands of God, suffering is a means of healing our passions and vices – most often our pride, which must be humbled. Generally, it always leads to the best. For iron to become soft and malleable, it must be heated in the fire of a forge. Likewise, a person must be brought through the kiln of suffering, so his soul would become softer and more receptive to the hammer of events with which it is processed for eternal life. Unfortunately, we always understand this truth too late. Hence our discontent, our cowardice, and our grumbling.

What I do, said the Lord to the Apostle Peter, *thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter* (Jn. 13:7). This fully applies to us. We usually do not understand what the Lord is doing to us, and realize it only later.

When a person tries to live according to his will, it brings him much grief, disappointment, and anxiety.

See how much anxiety a young man goes through when he has to choose a career or determine his own way in life. If the criterion for him in this choice is personal comfort and profit, the anguish of the soul caused by indecision or ignorance is endless. Whatever his attention focuses on, he is afraid to lose everywhere. In one place the salary seems too little to him, in another place he will not be in the spotlight and will have to wait a long time for promotion; in another place it is a boring life in a provincial backwoods, and so on endlessly. The person rushes about and throws himself in all directions, seizes everything and nowhere does he find peace of soul. It seems to him that he has chosen the most unsuccessful place or occupation, and with an envious eye he evaluates the benefits of the positions of his peers or his competitors. “The grass is always greener on the other side;” this saying was created precisely for such restless, envious people. Needless to say, there are exceedingly many disappointments due to erroneous calculations, and they always cause painful regrets and frustration with yourself for your own mistakes.

Rely in everything on the will of God, abandon self-serving calculations, and your soul will become calm and clear. You will believe that the place and occupation that fell to your lot is the best for you, for it was given by God who knows you better and knows what you are capable

of. You will realize and become convinced that you do not need to look for anything else and that you need only to calmly do your business trying to perform it as conscientiously as possible. You will believe that there are no low positions and unprofitable work in the building of the Kingdom of God, and that all activities are equally important and needed if they are done with the sole good of fulfilling the will of God. You will appreciate the precious rule which the Apostle Paul gives us in the Epistle to the Romans: *as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without dissimulation* (Rom. 12:4-9). And this realization that all occupations and positions are equally valuable in the divine economy of the Kingdom of God and that all workers in God's field are equally valuable in the eyes of God – this realization will reconcile you with your work, no matter how low or unprofitable it may seem from a worldly point of view, and the path of your life will become joyful and meaningful for you.

So, do not rush about, do not turn this way and that, do not seek what in your opinion is more profitable, but, trusting in God, *serve Him with fear, and rejoice in Him with trembling* (Ps. 2:11). You will feel that you have an indestructible support in life, on which you can joyfully and calmly rely.

Moreover, you will soon start to feel that this path of complete and unquestioning submission to God is the only correct and natural path for the soul, fully consistent with its nature. Only on this path do all powers and capacities of the soul receive full release and natural development. Wherever a person tries to control his own destiny, he will certainly hurt himself and cripple his soul in his blindness. In the same way an unreasonable, stubborn child left to himself, without fail will get into trouble, and will maim or kill himself out of his own foolishness.

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it (Mk. 8:35).