

### Chapter 9, verses 1–13

Why did the Lord find it necessary to be transfigured before His disciples and appear to them in this splendour of radiant light which shone upon Him as a reflection of the heavenly glory? What is the purpose of the transfiguration?

The Kontakion of the feast, sung by the Orthodox Church, answers this question.

“On the mountain wast Thou transfigured, O Christ God, and Thy disciples beheld Thy glory as far as they could see it; so that when they would behold Thee crucified, they would understand that Thy suffering was voluntary, and would proclaim to the world that Thou art truly the Radiance of the Father.”

Difficult days were coming, full of grief and inexpressible torment – the days of the Lord’s suffering on the Cross and death. The weak faith of His disciples was about to endure a terrible blow: they would have to see their beloved Teacher, their pride and hope, their Great Prophet whom they sincerely recognized as the mighty Messiah, on the Cross – bloodied, wounded, crucified as a villain, surrounded by shame and ridicule. Would their faith hold out? Would they manage to remain loyal to their Rabbi? Would they continue to recognize the Messiah whom they expected to see in a blaze of glory and earthly splendor in this disgraced man brought to the last degree of suffering and anguish? Would they not turn away from Him with sadness and pain because He deceived their hopes and dreams?

**It was possible.**

In order to strengthen their faith in the Victorious Messiah, in order to support them in the moments of impending trials, it was necessary to show them at least a faint reflection of the future glory awaiting their Teacher, not the glory which is the adornment of earthly reigns, glory of gilded regalia and tinsel brilliance, but the incorruptible glory of the Kingdom of God with its unfading, eternal beauty of holiness and spiritual grandeur. After experiencing the unforgettable moments of the Transfiguration, they could more confidently look on at the horror and shame of the Crucifixion and, if feeling conniving doubts swarming in their souls, they could easily suppress them with the memory of the radiant Tabor light. Inevitably, the strengthening thought would appear: “Yes, the Rabbi is dying in shame and dishonor... Yes, He is nailed to the Cross, but *we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father* (John 1:14), have seen His power and might, have heard the Heavenly voice testifying of Him, and we undoubtedly know that He could have avoided this shame and suffering if He wanted to, using His might and love so clearly revealed to Him by the Heavenly Father, but... He is suffering. It is clear that He Himself wants this. It is clear that His sufferings are voluntary.”

Faith in the Teacher, in His power and in His forthcoming victory had to remain unshakable despite the Crucifixion and death on the cross.

In addition, after the Transfiguration, the disciples could testify with all decisiveness to the whole world that their Teacher was the “Beloved Son of God,” “Light of Light,” *the brightness of...glory, and the express image* of the hypostasis of the Heavenly Father (Heb. 1:3), that He is truly the Radiance of the Father in the twilight of the earthly life darkened by sin, for they heard the testimony of Heaven about it.

Finally, the Transfiguration revealed to the disciples a part of the future Kingdom of God, that glory and bliss which awaits all true followers of the Lord. If He shall be in glory, His faithful disciples shall also enjoy this glory, for *where I am*, He promised, *there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour* (John 12:26). It is difficult for a mortal man to imagine or feel this bliss, for *eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him* (1 Cor. 2:9), but at the moment of the Transfiguration, at least three chosen disciples of the Savior undoubtedly felt, although not to the fullest extent, the bliss of the future life, a sense of Heavenly peace and breathing of God’s grace which filled their hearts with inexpressible happiness and joy. No wonder the impulsive Peter who responded to impressions more quickly than the rest, immediately testified to this joy: *Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias* (verse 5).

Having experienced this bliss at least once, the disciples, of course, would never subsequently forget, and could not forget these moments, and remembering them and anticipating the happiness of Heavenly life, they would certainly find support for their surety of the correctness of the path they had chosen and a powerful impetus to fervently and unswervingly fulfill in life the testaments of the Lord, remaining His faithful followers, to enter *into the joy of their Lord* (Matt. 25:21).

But the Transfiguration of the Lord also has the same meaning in our life. The Lord’s disciples experienced directly the bliss of this moment; we, trusting their testimony, are convinced of the undoubted reality of happiness which is the consequence and reward of life in Christ. For us as well, the Transfiguration is the token and witness to the future heavenly bliss, its bright reflection which flashes like lightning amidst the grief, despondency, and sorrows of our life. It has revealed to us the image of what a reborn, enlightened, grace-filled person will be like when he reaches the height of perfection and reflects the radiance of the Fatherly glory in himself. Without the Tabor revelation, we would never have had any idea about that enlightened state of the righteous, which can be achieved and manifested externally to a certain extent even here on earth, but which will be fully revealed in the future, when *the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father* (Matt. 13:43).

Precisely this image of the future condition was shown to us by the Lord on Tabor, when *His face did shine as the sun, and His raiment was white as the light* (Matt. 17:2).

This thought of happiness resulting from a righteous life leading people to union with God should be especially valuable and priceless for man. All people without exception strive for happiness, although they understand it differently. They frantically rush to and fro in vain searching, and finally with despair become convinced that they are chasing ghosts and still do not know where the keys to their happiness are.

As with the ancient knight at the crossroads, a person is always perplexed when facing the eternal question: where is the road to happiness?

The Transfiguration answers this question.

No matter how much people have debated about the possibility of the fact of the Transfiguration and about the nature of the Tabor light, one thing is certain: a ray of supreme happiness illuminated the hearts of the Lord's disciples at that very moment, and the reason for this was contemplation of the Divine glory.

If mere contemplation of this glory filled the disciples with bliss, what should be the happiness of a person who has achieved close and most intimate union with God to such an extent that the Lord dwells in him, permeating his entire being with rays of His unfading glory which seems to flow out from the man who is sanctified and enlightened by His presence!

This is the highest happiness: to be in union with God Who makes man a partaker of the Divine glory.

This is also the solution to the problem of universal happiness. After all, happiness is felt by each one personally, in one's own heart. Happiness is always individual. Society does not have any special organ, any collective heart capable of experiencing some special, specifically social state of happiness. Therefore, the problem of social happiness cannot be posed in the way it is often mistakenly posed: make society happy, and each of its members will also be happy. There have been many experiments in implementing such a program posed in this way, and all of them have failed. Here it is necessary to make a completely opposite shift: if each individual member of society is happy, then the society's life will also be happy. Universal happiness, like a coral island of sea anemones, grows out of the components of individual happiness. A happy society is the sum of happy people.

What a personal experience of happiness is we already know from the Gospel account of the Transfiguration. The road to universal happiness passes through the same stage, the key to which is still the same: union with God.

This conclusion is valuable for us, especially in the present bleak, dark time when it seems that not a single ray of happiness, neither personal nor public, shines among the gloomy, thickened clouds of hatred and despondency.

Yet, in order to achieve the bliss of union with God, each of us needs to become spiritually reborn, to be transfigured, for *God is light, and in him is no darkness at all* (1 John 1:5); light cannot have communion with darkness, and our dark soul in its present state cannot receive God.

Therefore, personal rebirth, personal transfiguration is needed for universal happiness. To change, to improve life, we need to transfigure ourselves.

Many people often complain about life now. There are almost no satisfied people. But one is always tempted to ask an involuntary question in response to these complaints and sighs: "What have you done to improve your life?" Despondency, complaints, and complete passivity will not help the matter. We are all waiting for ready-made happiness: somebody will come, somebody will arrange everything, somebody will organize our life. We only have to accept this care and enjoy the well-being created outside of us. We must understand that this attitude towards life is fundamentally wrong. No matter who takes on the task of organizing our life and no matter how much talent he has for this, we will inevitably ruin such a life if we do not change ourselves and do not work on our spiritual perfection. Bad material will always produce a bad building. Therefore, each of us has a duty to develop and improve his spiritual nature, and this work on ourselves cannot be hindered by any external conditions of existence.

Spiritual transfiguration is necessary for each of us as a prerequisite for personal and social happiness.

What then is needed for this?

First of all, one must surrender oneself completely to God. This is the first point.

It is necessary to find the strength and desire to come to God and say: "Lord! Here I am wholly before Thee! I want to be Thine! My thoughts, my talents, my strength – everything, everything should belong only to Thee! I shall give and devote all of myself completely, unreservedly to Thee in service! I shall not leave anything for myself... To love Thee, to serve Thee, to live by Thee, for Thee, and in Thee – this is all I need and what I beg Thee for!"

This does not mean, of course, that you will immediately be able to implement in your life this holy inner urge, this petition: the struggle which lies ahead will be long and persistent, but you need to sincerely make the greatest decision in life and consecrate yourself irrevocably to a new life, a life of obedience and service to God, no matter how great the upcoming difficulties might be.

It seems that the present time is especially favorable for such a decision. Until recently, life seemed pleasing and irresistibly attracted you, shimmering with all colors of seductive, albeit

deceptive, lights. The brilliance of external culture, convenience and comfort, whims of dazzling luxury, intoxicating fun and wit, gracefulness of the very forms which cover up sin, captivating upswings of art, variety and availability of intellectual pleasures, the exciting elegance of life – all this beckoned, intoxicated, and enchanted. It was difficult to hold one's ground in this stream of colorful impressions.

But now...? What is life from this external perspective now? Thank God, there is no trace of this intoxicating dizziness of the recent past. Everything is boring, gray, and colorless. There is neither brilliance of culture, nor inspirations of the arts, nor depth of scientific thought! Complete gray wretchedness. Worldly life is now like an old Maenad with peeling rouge on her cheeks. Until recently, she seemed provocatively seductive, but now we see only a shabby beggar in dirty rags. Why have regrets? Is it really difficult to give up this impending wretchedness?

We all clearly feel that there is neither light nor joy in such a life. Why not try to fill it with new content? Why not give it new direction and new meaning? Why not look for new, spiritual joys...?

Our problem is inertness, spiritual immobility.

We have become too intimately linked with certain conditions of life. Certain habits have emerged not only in our external behavior, but also in our attitude towards life, our entire worldview, moods, tastes – everything has been molded into specific forms adapted to the existing life situation. Everything was so well adjusted, so cleverly adapted to the surrounding circumstances; everything was in its place and felt so cozy and calm! There were no doubts in the soul, and not the slightest disturbing ripple of a disquieted thought ran across the smooth surface of our petty psychology. And all this needs to be changed, and to be changed radically! Of course, this is difficult.

Breaking old, enrooted habits takes resolve and spiritual energy. But this is what is lacking. Truly, the shift which has occurred in recent years in the external circumstances of life is so great, the changes are so radical, that the old worldview feels extremely awkward and is decisively unadapted to new conditions. Willingly or not, yielding to necessity, one is forced to make changes based upon the new requirements of life. Yet unfortunately, in the vast majority of cases, these changes have been made in the direction of least resistance by adapting to lowered moral standards of living. The general worldview has been sinking and becoming vulgar along with the putrefactive process which has engulfed life. Instead of strengthening one's moral foundations, the rules of behavior and principles of life which existed only by force of habit, which were not based on conscious convictions and therefore were easily shattered by the mutinous whirlwinds of recent events, these were simply thrown overboard as unnecessary

fragments of the past, and therefore the unprincipled wretchedness of life has become even more grievous, and its collapse has become even more inevitable and strong.

To halt this collapse, one needs to bring into one's life the current of the Gospels' worldview and Christian morality. Only the apostolic endeavour of sincere Christians, who constitute the *salt of the earth*, can stop the process of the decay of life.

One needs to remember the amazing, joyful and exciting life in the first centuries of Christianity, which constituted a continuous endeavour of deep faith, unreserved love, and selfless service to people, and build one's personal and social life upon these principles of the distant but great past.

As a rule, two main obstacles stand on this path of the renewal of one's life. The first one is our egoism which prevents us from surrendering ourselves entirely to God. This explains our indecision and the incompleteness of our good inclinations. We are often ready to give much to God, but there is always a reserved corner in our souls where our "self" reigns, and which we keep for ourselves. For a long time, we do not dare to part with this corner, allow anyone into it, and give away the cherished key to it, and a great danger lies in this, because egoism, which is not completely broken and hides in at least one corner of the soul, sooner or later grows again like weeds and drowns out good seedlings. *A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways* (James 1:8). One cannot serve two masters – yourself and God – at the same time, for there can be only one center in a person's life, and it is absolutely impossible for a long time to keep one's balance on the slippery line which separates egoism and self-denial, self-love and service to God. If a person does not make an effort to ultimately and irrevocably lean towards goodness and self-denial, sooner or later he will definitely fall into the abyss of sin and service to his egoism. We already know that.

Another obstacle on the path of rebirth is made by our inertia and laziness, which constantly whisper a cunning thought to us: "Why change our habits, tastes, views, the entire direction of our life? It is so hard and requires almost unthinkable efforts. And what for? Can't we manage without this? After all, we used to live well, were untroubled and prosperous, and didn't need to do anything for it... No efforts, no changes in our inner life. Perhaps now again we can manage without this. Perhaps even now nothing will be required of us, and life on its own will return to the way it was and will slide again easily and calmly, like a Russian sleigh on a smooth, well-trodden winter road...! Alas! This is only the sophistry of a cunning thought. A life in obedience to God and His commandments, a life full of inner struggle, moral efforts of will and spiritual work on ourselves has always been required, and if we did not lead such a life and yet did not experience the storm of God's wrath upon us, it was only an act of divine longsuffering, ready to pardon the most entrenched sinners in hopes of their correction. But God's longsuffering also has

limits and it becomes replaced by God's wrath, if people stubbornly refuse to part with their sinful lives.

Have you ever seen a high, steep river bank during the spring flood? Day and night, waves beat against it and splash on it, eroding it more and more and carrying away sand, pieces of clay, and small stones with them. And now ominous boulders hang over the water ready to fall in, but for some time they still hold their ground due to the former strength of their adherence. However, the waves unceasingly continue their destructive work, and at last there comes the moment when the eroded bank collapses with a crash, raising up splashes and sediment, and the greedy stream soon smoothens out all traces of the collapsed river bank.

The same thing has happened with our life. Waves of sin and evil for a long time have been eroding its foundations, but by the strength of old habits and traditions, it still held on somehow, and it seemed that there was no danger of collapse, that for many years we could still live with the same carelessness. We did not properly assess the ominous threat, and a disaster occurred: our usual way of life collapsed, and collapsed irrevocably. It is no longer possible to console ourselves with the thought that without any efforts on our part everything can return to the way it was and our former lazy, careless life will begin again: history does not go backwards. Thus a tree, a forest giant with a rotten core, once it collapses under the onslaught of a thunderstorm, can no longer rise and be green again.

In order to rebuild our life and erect a new building on the place of the ruins, one needs to do enormous, constructive work. Now it is impossible to remain an apathetic and indifferent spectator with the expectation that everything will work out on its own. At this moment, life requires efforts and labor from each of us, and above all, efforts to strengthen those moral and religious foundations in our personal and social life, which are all that it can hold on to.

The third common obstacle to changing the previous path of life is fear that if we turn to God, it will require too much from us, and an unbearable burden will fall upon our shoulders: we will have to give up all joys in life and take on heavy burdens of trials and ascetic feats. Frequent fasts, long prayers, endless prostrations, kneeling, austere simplicity of clothing, etc. – this is how a truly Christian life usually appears to one's fearful imagination which has been brought up in unbridledness and the constant habit of indulging one's passions. But this fear is unfounded. In it hides an insulting distrust of God. This fear is from the evil one who tries with such thoughts to keep a person from turning to God. In fact, the Christian life is not at all a life of hopeless, gloomy asceticism and unbearable feats. The Lord who looks down on our infirmities guides each new convert with such wise gradualism, with such tender care and love, especially in the beginning, that the difficulty of the new path is hardly noticed. At first, a person finds and experiences much more joy and happiness than grief from failures and fatigue from labours. He

flies, as the Holy Fathers say, on the wings of grace. Trials and difficulties usually begin later and increase as our moral, spiritual strength grows, never, however, exceeding the measure of our patience and our fervour. In the same way, the ascetic discipline of the Christian life never requires from a person deeds beyond his ability, and experienced elder-mentors try in the beginning, on the contrary, to moderate the thirst for feats and ardent zeal of impetuous neophytes by deliberately making for them the yoke of the new path as easy as possible.

However, after we have overcome all the above obstacles and have firmly resolved to embark on a new path, we are then faced with the question of how to fight the old man, with his vices and passions in the most expedient way. In other words, we are faced with the question of the method and means of rebirth.

There is a fairly widespread opinion that it is impossible to fight all the passions at once, that it is better to beat the enemies in parts, that is, to exterminate sinful inclinations and habits from the soul one after another like weeds in a field, so that at every moment, the struggle is only with one predominant passion. But the problem is that human life is short, whereas the name of sin is legion, and the person undoubtedly will die before he will be able to overcome the last passion. It should not be forgotten that engrained vices are eradicated very slowly and with great difficulty. In addition, according to the expression of one spiritual writer, the types of sin pushed aside in one place, accumulate and break through in another place, that is, the sinful energy of the defeated passion sometimes, in an incomprehensible way, turns into a new passion or goes to reinforce old, comparatively weaker vices. Finally, the struggle cannot be waged in negative ways alone. It is useless to pick off yellowed dry leaves from a tree with rotten roots and expect its healing from this. It is necessary to treat the root.

The first condition for this is that one must to the least degree possible rely on one's own efforts and on one's own activities. A person who imagines that he can overcome sin and be reborn by his own efforts is like a drowning man who tries to pull himself out of the water by his hair. It is clear that success is impossible in this case. For breaking out of the quagmire of vice, one needs to have a foothold, and only God can be this!

**Not just one prayerful appeal to God for help is needed for this.**

**The Apostle Paul describes the very essence of the process of rebirth in these words:**

***But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18)<sup>1</sup>.***

What does this mean? How can one become transfigured into the image of the divine glory of the Lord Jesus Christ?

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<sup>1</sup> In the Russian Bible: "beholding as in a looking-glass."



In the language of the Holy Scripture, the expression “the glory of the Lord” usually means “divine properties.” “Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory,” that is, heaven and earth reflect the properties of God: greatness, wisdom, omnipotence, etc. To be transfigured into the image of the Lord from glory to glory means therefore to gradually become imbued with divine properties and embody them in oneself, as far as is possible for a weak and sinful human soul.

The human soul is a wonderful mirror which not only reflects objects of the external world, but also photographs them, that is, retains them in itself.

The circumstances of life, its external events always leave their mark on the soul. This is why it is often possible to guess a person’s past or determine the environment in which his upbringing took place from these footprint-marks. The content of the soul is usually, for the most part, nothing other than a series of impressions and images experienced, received from the outside. Knowing this law, it is possible to rear a person and influence his soul by a specific selection of those images and impressions which he will experience and perceive. The discipline of upbringing is based precisely on this.

Impressions received from a living person have the most powerful effect on the soul and are the most enduring. Living things from other living things – this is a law of biology. These impressions dwell for years, often remain for one’s entire life, and affect a person so strongly that they often completely transform his soul: he begins to imitate those people who made a particularly strong impression on his senses and imagination, and little by little becomes similar to them. He becomes transfigured into the same image. We know what a tremendous influence the English poet Lord Byron had on Russian society at one time, and how under this influence enthusiastic readers copied the characters from his literary works, sometimes quite unsuccessfully.

It is unlikely that we duly assess the influence which our beloved characters of literary works had on the disposition of our psychology, on our tastes, aspirations, on our entire worldview. Our problem is that there are few positive characters worthy of imitation in Russian literature. This is especially bad for youth, who are always inclined to be carried away by literary characters and for whom over half of their upbringing is imitation. Indeed, here we have a gallery of literary characters: Onegin, Pechorin, Rudin, Chichikov, etc.<sup>2</sup> Which of them can serve as a role model? Meanwhile, in the absence of positive examples, youth have copied even these spiritually mutilated people at some time in their lives. Subsequently, the very concept of an ideal moral type in Russian society has become very vague, and rarely can someone say about himself that he has a clear idea about the ideal image of man, which he would like to embody in himself.

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<sup>2</sup> Characters from famous pieces of Russian literature: A. S. Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*; M.Y. Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*; I. S. Turgenev, *Rudin*; N. V. Gogol, *Dead Souls*.

Yet, there is one great image eternally shining with radiant light for all of us, to the height of which human creativity has never risen: the Gospel image of the Lord Jesus Christ. You can always have it in front of your mind's eye and try to reflect it in your life. A person will never find a more ideal, more perfect image. And of course, no other image can so completely capture the soul, so subjugate it to its charm, and transform it into its likeness.

Therefore, if you dream of spiritual rebirth, behold the glory of the Lord and become transfigured into the same image from glory to glory, that is, always have the image of the Lord in front of your mental gaze, more often communicate with Him in prayer, in thoughts, in feelings, in doing good, and the influence of this wondrous image will not hesitate being reflected in your soul. You will take on His qualities; you will be like Him under the law of psychological influence. A morally strong personality always subjugates a weaker soul and is reflected in it through imitation. It was not for nothing that the disciples and Apostles of the Lord stood out so strongly among the surrounding crowd, for the influence of the Savior made a special imprint on them. Christ's disciples were recognized immediately.

"They were with Him," people would say about them, for the seal of closeness and communication with the Lord was on them.

It is true that there is no Lord Incarnate on the earth now, but what affects a person in His image is spiritual and therefore eternal. Thousands of faithful worshippers of the Lord have experienced this influence by being reborn into the same image. If we strive for rebirth, we must put ourselves on the path of being influenced by the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When an astronomer wants to photograph some star, he aims his telescope at it and sets the mechanism that starts to move it so the device will follow the star, reflecting it all the time at the same focal point. The star is photographed on its own.

It is the same in our life: do not take your spiritual eyes off the Lord, seek constant union with Him in prayer, in reading the Gospels, in reflection, in communion with the Holy Mysteries, and *Christ will be formed in you!* (Gal. 4:19).

Direct closeness to the Lord and communication with Him is the only and main basis for the rebirth of man.

Once a girl who struck everyone who knew her with the extraordinary beauty and purity of her soul died. A medallion with the inscribed words: "I love the One Whom I have never seen" was found on her chest. She was transfigured into the image of the One Whom she loved. So let us be with the Lord more frequently. Let Him be the constant companion of our life. His image will be reflected in our soul and will regenerate it. If we are reborn, our life will also be reborn, becoming imbued with the spirit of His Divine holiness, for the ocean of life is made up of the drops of individual persons.

This is the only way to transfigure life, for life is not something external, separate from us. It is made up of us.

### **Chapter 9, verses 14–29**

When the Lord descended from Mount Tabor after His glorious Transfiguration, He saw the disciples whom He left in great confusion. They were surrounded by a huge crowd, a passionate, noisy crowd of the East, shouting loudly, gesturing animatedly, excited by some event. Amidst this noise, the mocking and indignant voices of the scribes debating with the disciples stood out acutely...

When the Lord asked the scribes about the cause of the excitement, it turned out that one of the common people brought his son, possessed by a dumb spirit, to the disciples, and asked them to heal him. The poor young man had suffered for a long time in a cruel way: in fits of madness, he would fall to the ground emitting foam, gnashing his teeth, and pining away; he would often cast himself into the fire, and into the waters. The unfortunate father of the boy now had his only hope in the Great Prophet of Galilee, who cast out unclean spirits with a word, and in His disciples who did the same in His name.

But this time the usual power of healings, received by the disciples even earlier from the Lord, betrayed them. Despite their best efforts, they could not cast out the demon.

It was this helplessness and powerlessness of the disciples regarding the demon-possessed youth which caused the excitement of the crowd found by the Lord at the foot of the mountain.

Grieved, disturbed, heartbroken, the father rushed to the Savior:

*Master!...If thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief (verses 17, 22-24).*

The situation in which all this took place really could do little to stimulate and strengthen anyone's faith. The failure of the disciples, their disconcerted, troubled faces, the sarcastic mockery and gloating of the scribes, the skeptical, perplexed, disappointed crowd – all of this could shake even strong faith.

Apparently, even the disciples did not show great faith at this moment, which explains their failure. At least, when they were alone with the Lord, they asked Him a direct question: *Why could not we cast him out?* The Lord unwaveringly answered: *Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed...nothing shall be impossible unto you.* This is what the Evangelist Matthew says (Matt. 17:19-20).

Thus, an atmosphere of mistrust and evil mockery reigned when the Lord approached the crowd. The poor father of the boy needed to gather all of his strength, all grains of his shaken, disintegrating faith in order to receive the great mercy of the healing of his son from the Lord, for without this, the miracle could not take place. How understandable this desperate cry becomes: *Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief!*

Obviously, with the help of the Lord, the boy's father was able to make the effort and exert his faith to the required degree, for the Lord healed the boy.

The lesson for us **is** clear.

In order to receive grace-filled help from God in all our spiritual and material needs, first of all, faith is needed: faith in God, in His omnipotence and goodness, faith that He can fulfill our petition and truly will fulfill it if we have perseverance, a firm desire for it, and filial love for the Creator.

*All things are possible to him that believeth*, and conversely, nothing is possible for an unbeliever, for a petition without faith is an insult to God. A person then cannot expect to receive either help, or fortification, or spiritual strength from God, and his spiritual life will inevitably be paralyzed.

Faith is necessary for the spiritual life, for without it there is no connection with the only source of life and spiritual strength – with God.

We will not discuss now why this is so. In practical terms, something else is important for us here: how to strengthen our faith?

After all, we often find ourselves in the position of the unfortunate father of the Gospels' youth: we recognize the need for faith; we know that without it we cannot take a step on the path of spiritual life and at the same time we feel only the coldness of doubt and skepticism inside. We feel that our dull, sluggish, lifeless faith is unable to strengthen us and bring us closer to God, and the words involuntarily come to our lips: *Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief* (verse 24).

Of course, this direct appeal to God for help, following the example of the father of the possessed youth, is the first means of strengthening faith. The Lord is the only source of all good things. In the spiritual life this is felt constantly, and every success here, every movement forward, is determined by His will and depends upon it. The saying "Without God, you can't get anywhere" is especially true in relation to the spiritual life.

Prayer not only strengthens faith, as we see in this Gospel account, but it also saves us from unbelief in the most dangerous moments of life, when the evil spirit tempts a person with doubts about the very existence of God. We can see what power prayer for the strengthening of faith has from the life of St. Niphon, Bishop of Cyprus.

Saint Niphon was born and raised in the Christian faith.

But when he was still a youth, he joined a depraved crowd of young people and, yielding to their influence, began to lead a dissolute, drunken life. His friend, Basil, a man of a strict, pious life, pitied him and would often say to him:

“What has happened to you? You are alive in your body, but your soul is dead... Only your shadow walks among people! Repent! Turn back!”

“My fate has been decided,” Niphon would answer sadly, “There is no repentance for me!”

He tried to pray and could not, and there was a dismal emptiness in his soul. His nerves, shattered by carousing and revelry, made themselves known more and more... Once he came to his other friend, Nicodemus, and was struck by his involuntary exclamation.

“What is the matter with you?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “Your face is completely black, like an Ethiopian!” With deep shame, Niphon left his friend. He wanted to hide from people so no one could see the obvious traces of unbridled passions and vice-filled life on his changed face.

He thought: “How will I appear at the Last Judgment, when here on earth, where all my deeds have not yet been revealed, I already seem so black...” His soul again longed for prayer, but a tempting voice sounded in his ears: “If you start to pray, you will go crazy, and people will laugh at you!” However, one night he forced himself to get out of bed and pray... And suddenly he saw himself surrounded by thick darkness; involuntary horror crept into his soul, and in fear he went back to bed. In the morning he went to church where he had not been for a long time, and with a groan fell before the icon of the Mother of God “Surety of sinners.” “Have mercy on me, O Intercessor of Christians,” he prayed, “Lift me up, the Confidence and Hope of those who repent...” And a miracle occurred: the face of the Mother of God brightened and came to life; her eyes looked at him joyfully, and a heavenly smile illuminated her face...

This is how Niphon’s conversion took place. He became a monk and a stern ascetic. He spent time in hard labor and repentance; as a punishment for past sins, he scourged himself so his body fell off in pieces, and often tormented himself with hunger; in a word, he did not spare himself in his penitential endeavor. But the Lord allowed for him perhaps an even more difficult temptation. For almost four years he was tormented by so-called mental warfare. He suddenly began to feel that God did not exist, that he was counting on the happiness of unity with Him in vain, that everything he believed in and worshipped was nothing else but a fantasy, the play of his imagination, and that his endeavour had no sense. He was everywhere pursued by the tempting voice: “There is no God!” “No,” objected Niphon in despair, “I will never deny Christ, even if I fall into fornication, or if I kill someone, or commit an even viler crime...!” “What are you saying?” whispered the same mocking voice of the tempter. “There is no Christ!” At those moments Niphon would begin to pray to drive away the terrible doubts. “O God, my God!” he

would say with inexpressible longing. “Why hast **T**hou forsaken me? Let me know that Thou art God and that there is no other besides Thee!”

And the Lord heeded his fervent prayer. The face of the Lord on the icon, before which the ascetic prayed, began to shine like the sun and it came to life; a wondrous fragrance flowed from the image. Again a miracle occurred to strengthen the failing faith of Saint Niphon. From that moment on, it was as if his soul was tempered: doubts disappeared, and undisturbed silence and calmness of faith descended into his tormented soul.

Thus, prayer and a direct appeal to God turned out to be a mighty means for strengthening faith.

But how can one pray if one has no faith?

Just as Saint Niphon prayed: first, by forcing oneself, as if we already have faith. Just as the unfortunate father of the possessed youth prayed, while not yet having real faith.

*Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.*

The example of others is another means for strengthening our faith.

As the saying says, “A man becomes likened to the company he keeps.” An example is always contagious, and deep, sincere faith combined with endeavour and a high Christian life involuntarily inspires respect and arouses imitation. Therefore, for strengthening your faith, look for good examples and focus on them more often. In the first centuries, Christianity mainly spread because of the example of the holy martyrs whose firm faith, attested to by suffering, aroused general amazement and attracted thousands of followers to Christ. The Christian Church was raised on the blood of the martyrs.

This is one of the many examples of this phenomenon, taken from the life of the holy martyr Boniface.

Boniface, who was young and handsome, in his youth was the beloved slave of a rich, corrupt Roman woman named Aglaida. Despite their dissolute life, the seeds of goodness had not yet died out in their souls, and both of them were known far and wide for their mercy and charity. Perhaps it was for this kindness of their soul that the Lord called them on the true path.

Christians were persecuted in the East at that time, and many of them died as martyrs. The believers treated the bodies of the martyrs with great reverence and would buy them from the pagans for great money. It was the cherished desire of every zealous Christian to have the relics of a martyr in his home, because they were looked upon as sacred objects. Following the example of others, Aglaida also decided to acquire relics and for this purpose she sent Boniface to Cilicia, where the persecutions were taking place.

When she said goodbye to him, she said:

“Try to find the relics of a martyr... We will keep them with reverence; we will build a church, and this saint will be our patron, protector, and intercessor before God.”

Boniface replied with a joke:

“What if I do not find a martyr, and they bring you my body tortured for Christ. Will you accept it with honour?”

Aglaida stopped him reproachfully:

“It is not the time to joke now... You are going for a holy cause and are preparing to serve holy relics which we are unworthy to even look at.”

Remembering these words of his lady and feeling all the filth of his soul, Boniface began on the way to actively prepare for worthily fulfilling the task entrusted to him: he fasted a great deal and bitterly repented of his previous, vice-filled life. Arriving in Tarsus, where the persecution was raging, he hastened to the square where the Christians were being tortured. A great crowd of people gathered to watch the terrible sight. The Christians, whose only fault was that they believed in God and led a pious life, were subjected to the most brutal tortures: they were hanged, burned with fire, tied to four pillars and then torn to pieces, sawn in half, and impaled; their eyes were gouged out, their bones were broken, their arms and legs were cut off. The martyrs endured their suffering with great patience, but what was most surprising, was that not pain and anguish were reflected on their faces, but quiet joy and bliss, as if a shining, happy future was already opening before their eyes in uniting with the One Whom they loved more than life.

Struck by their courage, Boniface looked at these joyful, bright faces and became inflamed with fervour for God... And suddenly he was seized by an irresistible desire to openly confess Christ as these martyrs did. He went out into the middle of the square and exclaimed loudly:

“Great is the Christian God who helps His servants and strengthens them in such torments!”

With great love, he kissed the mutilated bodies of the martyrs, their gaping wounds, and prayed for only one thing: to become worthy of the martyr’s crown. He was noticed, captured, and brought to the Hegemon. The trial was swift and merciless: Boniface was taken out of the city and beheaded. But five hundred fifty people from the crowd of spectators became Christians that day, caught up by his example.

Meanwhile Aglaida impatiently awaited the return of those sent; she fasted and prayed, preparing to meet the holy relics; and finally, an Angel appeared to her in a dream with the following words: “Accept the one who was once your servant, and now is our co-server....” In the morning, Aglaida went out onto the road and stood for a long time looking in the direction which she expected the messengers to arrive from. A caravan appeared in the distance. She recognized her servants, but Boniface was not among them. A reliquary, evidently containing the

holy relics, swayed between the saddles of two strong mules... Aglaida quietly went to meet them and reverently knelt...

“What is the name of the martyr?” She asked.

“Boniface...!” was the answer.

“And where is my steward?”

“In the reliquary...”

Aglaida raised a questioning gaze.

“Lady, we are carrying the relics of your former slave, the Martyr Boniface, who received a crown in the city of Tarsus.”

Aglaida with honor placed the holy relics in the church which she built, distributed all her possessions to the poor, and spent the rest of her life – eighteen years – at this church in strict endeavours of repentance and prayer.

So strong is the influence of an example on the soul of a person! Under the influence of the example of the holy martyrs, Boniface turned into a fearless confessor full of ardent faith and love for Christ from a reveler and pleasure-seeker. And following his example, another five hundred fifty pagans converted to Christianity.

Therefore, seek a community of believers which can strengthen your faith. Especially useful is communication and acquaintance with people distinguished by a high spiritual disposition: with elders, ascetics, holy fools. The allure of their pure, kind, and wise soul, filled with faith, is always beneficial and can serve as a pillar in difficult moments of doubt.

On the other hand, by all means, one should avoid the society of unbelievers and deniers of all kinds, so as not to suffer from their pernicious influence. *Be not deceived*, warns the Apostle Paul, *evil communications corrupt good manners* (1 Cor. 15:33). “Do not walk in the way of the ungodly, and do not sit in the council of transgressors” (cf. Septuagint Ps. 1:1, 25:4), says the great sage of ancient times. This must be especially remembered at the present time, when the corrupting influence of atheism is so strong and infectious, and when the enemies of Christianity are trying to destroy faith using all means possible.

How many so-called lecturers travel now from place to place, and claiming to speak in the name of science, attempt to sow the seeds of doubt and shake the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. Of course, these low-level scientists have nothing to do with science, and those two or three lectures which they offer everywhere for the public and which make up all of their scientific baggage are merely a repetition of someone else’s opinion, but they are not looking for scholarly laurels. Their only goal is to generate doubts among the people, who know little, and to our shame, who little understand and value their own faith. The negative arguments and proofs of these gentlemen are extremely weak and can easily be refuted, but the disdainful tone in



which they speak about the most sacred truths of religion is infectious. The mere fact that the sacred things of Christianity are being pulled onto the stage and are being waved brusquely in front of the crowd, deprives even people who have strong faith of the opportunity to address these great issues with the proper reverence and seriousness, and can completely confuse those hearts which lack faith. It seems that these lecturers themselves attach little importance to their “learned” argumentation, but rely more on the impression produced by their blunt brashness and the entire blasphemous tone of their lectures. Ironic words, vile puns, sometimes blasphemy, and obscene language – all of this often sinks into the soul and sticks like a tenacious burr, which is difficult to get rid of even for a believer... And all of this is sometimes recalled later and emerges in the consciousness regardless of our will, sometimes even during the most sacred moments – moments of prayer, disturbing the peace of the believer’s soul with rude blasphemy and cynicism. That is why it is best to avoid such lectures, since there is no serious discussion with religious issues being considered scientifically and impartially, but simply an agitation technique designed to confuse the conscience of believers.

Faith must be protected from this rot and filth; it should be kept clean and intact, for it is holy. After all, you will not go to a typhoid barrack, where it is easy to get infected, without real need; you will not go wearing white dress to a coal warehouse or a chemical plant, where acid is produced and where it can be soiled... Just try to remove the stains later! Likewise, the soul should be protected from filth, and one should not attend those meetings where faith is offended or moral requirements are violated. “Do not walk in the way of the ungodly, and do not sit in the council of transgressors.”

Finally, one of the most effective means of strengthening faith is to test it using personal experience. Nothing can replace personal experience: neither someone else’s example, nor proofs, nor the **persuasions from (было convictions of)** other people. The things that a person has personally experienced are the most reliable for him. Faith is far from **being** just a collection of speculative truths and is least of all based on rational data, although this is how its opponents see it. But this is their main mistake. It seems to them that once they have logically analyzed and refuted those theoretical truths which they take for the essence of faith, everything will be accomplished: faith will crumble on its own. Meanwhile, life refutes these considerations, and despite constant, intensified bombardment with the heaviest “scientific” shells, the strongholds of faith remain unshakable.

If faith really was only a collection of theoretical, abstract truths and had an exclusively rational and “cerebral” character, of course, it could not be strong and stable, and it would be easy to shake it. It would be enough to oppose its theoretical foundations with statements which deny them, and reason could easily abandon faith and move in a different direction. Suppose you

hear a description of tropical countries, their inhabitants, luxurious forests, extraordinary animals which inhabit them, etc. from some traveler. You can easily imagine these things, but since this knowledge of yours is not confirmed by your personal experience, all of this will remain purely abstract for you, taken by reason on faith and therefore will be unstable. If another traveler appears and tells you that your ideas are completely wrong, that in fact there is nothing similar to what your imagination has painted for you, and he sketches a completely different picture for you, your mind can just as easily abandon the old concepts as it can accept the new ones. But in the field of religious faith, we usually do not observe this, or we observe this in those cases when faith has not yet become strong and has not emerged from this initial phase of purely intellectual concepts. The reason for this is that real faith is not simple theoretical consciousness which can be easily modified at will. Faith is primarily a direct sense of the living, omnipotent force acting in your life apart from your will, a sense based on experience.

In the holy books of the New Testament, we can find three examples showing the generation of true faith, and in all these three examples, the cause of faith was personal experience.

When the Lord appeared to the disciples after His resurrection, and when they told this to the Apostle Thomas who was not with them at the time of His appearance, he did not believe at first. The second time, the Lord appeared to the disciples already with Thomas and, turning to him, said: *Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side; and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God* (John 20:27-28). Thomas believed, for he himself felt the wounds of the Lord and became convinced that it was not a ghost or hallucination. He believed his own experience.

The Apostle Paul, who was at first a zealous persecutor of the Church of Christ, also came to believe in Christ through personal experience. *And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city...And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink* (Acts 9:3-6, 8-9). This miracle, experienced by the Apostle Paul, was the beginning of his conversion.

The third case of conversion to faith told by the Evangelists is the conversion of a man born blind who was healed by the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Jesus saw a man which was blind from his birth....he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And said unto him, Go, wash*

*in the pool of Siloam...He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing (John 9:1, 6-7). Jesus...said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God? He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him? And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee. And he said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him (John 9: 35-38).*

Thus, here, too, the experience of healing, that is, personal experience, aroused in the former blind man faith in the Son of God and in His mighty, grace-filled power.

The entire doctrine of the Apostles is based on personal experience, or, as the Apostle John says, *that which...we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life... declare we unto you (1 John 1: 1-3).*

If therefore personal experience is the most reliable foundation of religious faith, obviously, it is necessary to use all means to attempt to experience it in your life in order to strengthen your faith. How can this be done?

This question is answered by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself in the Gospel of John: *My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself (John 7:16-17).*

This is a simple answer which contains deep meaning. If doubts swarm within you and you want to know for certain whether the Gospel teaching which encompasses the foundations of our faith has been given from God, attempt to fulfill its precepts in life, obey its rules, absorb its spirit, and then you will become convinced by experience that it is from God, that the will of God is expressed in it, for you will immediately feel its absolute truth and bottomless wisdom inaccessible to man. You will immediately understand that a human could not create teaching such as this, because he does not have such omniscience, such unlimited knowledge of the subtlest twists of the human psyche and its laws, often hidden in the subconscious, which is evident in almost every line of the Holy Scripture.

One can test the Gospels certainly not by reasoning, not by fruitless logical constructions and debates, for it is the Book of Life and not a textbook of philosophy and not an arithmetic problem. The only accurate test here is experience. If you are advised a well-known method of cultivating fields, are given a recipe for preparing some meal, are prescribed medicine or are offered a course of treatment, of course, you can take this advice on faith, but in order to have undoubted confidence in it, you need to fulfill it in practice. Only then can you reliably determine whether the advice given was correct.

Yet, on the other hand, once one has tested through experience these recipes or advice and has proven their undoubted correctness, any further reasoning or disputation becomes useless, because no words, no tricks of mind can refute a fact experienced by a person himself. The entire Jewish Synedrion could not convince the man born blind who was healed by the Lord, that he

who healed him was a sinful man and that God did not listen to him. Professors around the world could not shake the Apostle Paul in his faith in Christ after his miraculous conversion.

The same should be said about our faith. If you want to be convinced of it and strengthen it, test it by experience, live according to the Gospels. The Gospels are not only to be read but also to be fulfilled.

One holy scribe, lost in thought, missed some words in the book of the Holy Scripture, which he was copying.

One of the brethren noticed this.

“Abba! There are gaps...!”

“Go, fulfill first what is written,” answered the saint. “Then I will add what is missing!”

This should be your attitude when reading the Gospels: a desire and readiness to fulfill it in life.

“As a result of keeping the commandments,” says St. Isaac the Syrian, “the mind is endowed with the grace of mysterious contemplation and revelations of spiritual knowledge.”

The same is confirmed by St. Simeon the New Theologian: “The door of knowledge is opened for us through the virtues and the commandments. It is impossible to achieve this any other way.”

Thus, a life according to the Gospels, a virtuous life, fulfilling the commandments of God, is the best way to strengthen one’s religious faith.

### **Chapter 9, verses 30–42**

At the time which the account of this Gospel passage refers to, the disciples of the Lord were still far from **being** at the height of moral Christian perfection. Taken from among the common people, from the mass of Jews, they apparently could not immediately grasp the lofty spirit of Christ’s teaching and renounce their national shortcomings and prejudices. Undoubtedly, like all pious Jews, they treated the Law of Moses with reverence and strictly observed its precepts, but even with the strictest fulfillment, the Old Law could not raise a person to the level of Christianity. It is possible that its imperfection in comparison with the Christian teaching was reflected most noticeably in one respect: it mostly did not struggle with the self-love of man, with his pride, love of fame, and vainglory – in a word, with that enemy of human salvation, which in Christianity is recognized as the most serious and most dangerous. The Old Testament mainly determined the rules of external behavior; Christianity predominantly requires a struggle with the inner man, with his egoistic “self.” The disciples of the Lord, at least at first, still did not realize the necessity of this struggle; it was not yet entirely clear to them that the essence of Christian morality and, at the same time, its height was precisely in the endeavour of self-denial

and in the breaking of personal and national self-love. It is true that in following Christ they abandoned all comforts of life, but they apparently thought to reward themselves for this with earthly blessings of a future messianic kingdom and they did not lose their former self-love in all of its shades. They still had to be **cultivated (было taught)** in this regard.

In this Gospel passage, we can find three lessons given by the Lord to His disciples with the specific purpose of showing them the futility of human self-love and its incompatibility with the principles of the new teaching.

*And they departed thence, and passed through Galilee; and he would not that any man should know it. For he taught his disciples, and said unto them, The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day. But they understood not that saying, and were afraid to ask him (verses 30-32).*

It was, of course, not difficult to understand the simple, literal meaning of the Lord's words, and the disciples certainly understood what it meant to be betrayed and killed. But they could not comprehend this simple meaning. It seemed to them that the Lord was speaking here in parables, allegorically, and actually wanted to say something else... What exactly – they could not guess, but His words in their literal understanding seemed so monstrous to them and agreed so little with what they expected from their Teacher and Messiah that it was impossible to accept them with this meaning.

They probably already did not like the secrecy of their journey through Galilee, on which the Lord insisted. They wanted to walk openly, attracting everyone's attention; they wanted ever increasing crowds of people to come running from all sides to their Teacher, so their journey would turn into a triumphal procession worthy of the Messiah. And then... Then they already imagined the prospects of future glory, loud victories, overthrowing of the hated Roman yoke, royal honors, greatness and might of power, tumultuous applause... And in the center of all this splendor would be their Rabbi and they, themselves, who were the first to recognize the Great Messiah in Him, who went everywhere and were always with Him, also surrounded by the rays of His glory as His closest associates.

Of course, these prospects teased their love of glory, not yet tamed by suffering and true understanding of the meaning of Christ's teaching. Undoubtedly, they were looking forward to this glory and desired it for themselves.

**And suddenly, all these words about death, about betrayal... What does this mean? Or are all their dreams just a figment of their imagination?**

Meanwhile, the Lord deliberately destroyed their illusions. He deliberately surrounded His journey with such secrecy that it resembled the flight of a persecuted criminal rather than the calm and dignified movement of a popular rabbi. He deliberately spoke of His suffering and

death which were near in order to check the upsurge of the glory-loving imagination of His disciples and make them understand that their vain dreams were not needed for His work and were meaningless, that not earthly glory, but shame and suffering awaited Him and together with Him His faithful followers, that the endeavour to which He called them lay in this suffering and humiliation.

This is what the disciples could not comprehend.

The second lesson immediately followed the first. When they arrived at Capernaum, Jesus asked them: *What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest. And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all* (verses 33-35).

The pride of the disciples was manifested here in a naive debate: which of them was greater or better? Undoubtedly, this childish boasting was associated with another question: which of them would occupy the top place in the future kingdom of the Messiah? They still could not give up their prejudices. Again the Lord had to teach His disciples a lesson in humility.

He pointed out to them that love of power in His Kingdom was the same vice as love of glory, that ordinary notions of greatness had to be radically changed and replaced by completely opposite ones, and that moral height and spiritual closeness to Him did not depend on the importance of the external position held by the person, but on the readiness to humbly bow down before everyone and serve everyone. This is the ideal of a Christian, completely opposite to the haughty type of pagan or Pharisaic soul.

Finally, in His third lesson, the Lord eradicated the self-love of the disciples where it was most dangerous: in the very work of their future apostolic ministry which had to be selfless and stand outside of any influence of personal self-love which could bring irreparable harm.

*John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us; and we forbade him, because he followeth not us. But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part* (verses 38-40).

The disciples forbade the person unknown to them to cast out demons in the name of the Lord only because he did not belong to their close circle. They did not say that he was an unbeliever or that he was leading a shameful, unworthy life. They were not halted by the fact that demons obeyed him and he could drive them out in the name of Christ, which clearly testified to his faith and high morality, for otherwise he would not have had such power. But they were indignant that he used the name of their Teacher when not His disciple, and thus, it was as if he

claimed their rights. They would prefer that the honor of spreading the work of Christ belong only to them, and they looked at the unexpected stranger as an annoying competitor.

Thus, the same self-love manifested itself in a new form, that of ambition, in this impatient prohibition.

If the disciples were completely and exclusively devoted to the work of the Lord, of course, they would have rejoiced that this work had found more new workers who would help it to the best of their ability, just as the Apostle Paul rejoiced when he heard that others continued his work: *notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice* (Phil. 1:18).

When all is said and done, a sincere, committed worker is completely indifferent to whether he will be promoted and whether he will be given due share for his work; for him only one thing is important and needed: that the work to which he has devoted himself, his work, flourish. The disciples did not yet reach this height. Ambition was still too strong in them, and they did not want to share their laurels and expected honor of the future reign with anyone.

**The Lord immediately stopped this upsurge of ambition, which took the form of impatient irritability, and made it clear that ambition was unacceptable in serving His cause.**

*Forbid him not, He says, for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part* (verses 39-40). It does not matter that this person does not follow you and does not belong to your circle. If he works miracles in My name, he does the same thing as you: strengthens faith in Me. He is your ally, and forbidding him his activities the way you do is to harm the cause for the sake of personal ambition.

By this, the Lord touched upon an extremely important practical issue: how to relate to people who are so-called dissidents, to those who do not belong to our Church or to the organization of our community. **The question is important for us in view of the large number of people currently standing outside of the enclosure of the Church, with whom we have to deal in one way or another in life. Failure to introduce a correct Christian view into relations with them often leads to mutual enmity and unnecessary bitterness.**

First of all, it is clear from the Lord's answer to the disciples that in no case should these relationships be mixed with self-love or ambition which often prevent people even from understanding each other. This is usually the cause of Church discord and divisions.

Indeed, what causes this endless fragmentation of Christians into Catholics, **Orthodox**, Protestants, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and so on and so forth? Where do countless sects come from? After all, the truth of Christ is one, and therefore there should be *one fold and one Shepherd* (John 10:16). However, this is not the case.

The main reason for this fragmentation is the fact that human self-love has become mingled with the pure truth of Christ, and a carnal element has been introduced into the organization of the one Church of Christ. When some theological opinion which did not agree with the generally accepted opinion of the Church emerged, its supporters by all means wanted to achieve predominance for it, as we see in the history of heresies; sometimes political ambition and desire for power were mixed with this as was the case during the separation of the Western Church from the Eastern Church; sometimes pride, self-conceit, puffed-up arrogance of mind too confident in itself and imagining itself to be above others interfered with reconciliation of theological currents and calming of the Church disease. **But in all these divisions, there was one fundamental sin: the commandment of love was forgotten.**

As a result, something inconceivable occurred: where division began and self-centered jealousy was born, enmity began – enmity in the name of the Gospels, **hatred of “dissidents” for the sake of observing the pure teachings of Christ Who taught about love and gave His life in the name of love.** Enmity turned into terrible bitterness. Streams of blood flowed... It was some kind of monstrous, hellish irony which perverted Christianity.

Nation turned against nation. Catholic Spain against Protestant England. Believers against believers. Catholics against Protestants. In France, the persecution of the Huguenots broke out and flared up. In Germany, the religious Thirty Years’ War wiped off the entire core of the population, leaving only one tenth alive. In Spain and the Netherlands the Inquisition raged, burning heretics at the stake *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, that is, for the greater glory of God. **In Russia, schismatic-Old Believers were persecuted and their leaders were sent into exile, into confinement.** It is absolutely incredible how in the name of God people shed so much blood and so fiercely and passionately hated each other, not knowing boundaries in their bitterness and cruelty.

**Of course, now the conditions of the struggle have changed. There are no more religious wars; the fires of the Inquisition have been extinguished; no human blood is shed *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. Religious strife has assumed the more cultural form of disputations and theological debates. But even now the demon of vainglory and self-love makes his cruel joke on the defenders of Christ’s truth, and these disputations often end in mutual curses and bitterness. Schisms and sects are not destroyed or even diminish in number, but the gap between the different shades of Christian denominations becomes deeper and more impassable. These disputations also do not lead to any results because they constantly revolve in the field of theoretical or doctrinal questions, while the roots of division are not here, but in the mutual antipathies of religious societies caused by different historical circumstances. Therefore, not theoretical disputations, but only love can bring people of different faiths closer together.**



Disputations with a desire for victory only evoke the so-called *odium theologicum*, that is, theological hatred – undoubtedly, the worst of all existing heresies. Religion then serves only as a mask for deception, for *If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? (1 John 4:20).*

Great missionaries of all ages acted precisely in this spirit of love and conquered all obstacles with this love.

In about 1050, Bishop Leontius preached the Word of God in the Rostov lands which at that time were inhabited by semi-savage and cruel pagans. Having expelled two bishops before Leontius with beatings and tortures, these barbarians met him also in an unfriendly way. They began to insult and revile the new bishop and preacher of Christianity in every possible way, and finally drove him away too. But Leontius did not lose heart and was not offended by this; he knew and saw that even these barbarians had a spark of divine fire hidden in the depths of their souls, which just had to be carefully opened and ignited.

#### People advised Leontius to leave the savages.

“Look what stubborn pagans they are,” people would tell him.

“I will not depart from these pagans,” Leontius would answer, “They do us evil, but we will look for good in them, and with this good we will soon defeat the evil.”

And despite the danger which threatened him, he began to live near Rostov, beside a stream. First, pagan children would visit him out of curiosity, and then adults. Leontius received them warmly and lovingly, and gave them gifts of whatever he had, and, taking a moment, would tell his guests about God Who created everything and exercises His providence over everything, Who loves all people, especially those who are kind and peaceful; he would tell them about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came into the world to teach people to love God and one another. Such a meek, gentle sermon soon attracted many pagans to him, and they began to come to him in thousands. The most avid and inveterate pagans learned about this. Led by their priests, they came to the saint with wooden staves and bows to kill him. But Leontius fearlessly went out to meet them and began to praise their zeal with which they defended their faith.

“This is what I love you for,” said the saint, “And I pray to God for you that He will soon enlighten you with the light of true faith.”

Seeing such meekness and gentleness, the enraged pagans soon calmed down and also began to listen to the preacher. Since then, the influence of St. Leontius became more and more irresistible. And by the end of the saint’s life (ca. 1073), this region was already considered to be among the lands enlightened by the light of Christ's teaching.

The Orthodox Church definitely prescribes this love and meekness in relation to dissenters in Canon 66 (77) of the Council of Carthage, which issued the following decree regarding the schism of the Donatists: “Then when all things had been considered and treated of which seem to conduce to the advantage of the church, the Spirit of God suggesting and admonishing us, we determined to act **leniently and pacifically** with the before-mentioned men, although they were cut off from the unity of the Lord's body by an unruly dissent...that perchance, as the Apostle says, when we have corrected them **with gentleness**, God should grant them repentance for the acknowledging of the truth, and that they might be snatched out of the snares of the devil, who are led captive of him at his will (2 Tim. 2:25-26).”

This is the loving voice of the Orthodox Church.

So, let us not forget the main and fundamental point in the law of Christ: let us not forget love even in relation to dissenters.

Once three brothers came to a great elder of the desert and began to talk about their exploits.

“I have memorized the entire New Testament by heart,” said one.

“You have filled the air with words,” the old man objected.

“And I have copied all the books of the Old and New Testaments on parchment,” interrupted another.

“You have covered the windows with skins,” came the reply.

“And I never eat boiled food and do not light a fire,” the third one boasted, “Grass has grown on my hearth...”

“It won't do any good for you as well,” the elder remarked. “All of you have forgotten care for strangers... Have love for your neighbors – this is the most important thing! Nothing has benefit without love...”

And this is true. Even religious zeal without love cannot be considered a virtue, while religious zeal combined with hatred is an outright sin.

Wherever the mutual love of believers is so strong that the unity of spirit between them is not disturbed by a certain variety of opinions, the latter is quite acceptable. Already in ancient times, there were various theological schools in the Jerusalem Church differing from each other in shades of thought, but this did not in the least prevent them from keeping *the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (Eph. 3:4) and constituting one Church. The Russian Orthodox Church recently removed the condemnation from the Old Believers of the Austrian Hierarchy<sup>3</sup> which differs only in the ritual aspects of the divine service, and recognizes the so-called *Edinovertsy* with their pre-Nikon ritual as her full-fledged members. Regarding the difference of opinion, the

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<sup>3</sup> The Belokrinitskaya Hierarchy of Old Believers, founded in 1840 in the town of Belaya Krinitsa in Bukovina, in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, whose spiritual center was moved to Moscow in 1853.

Apostle Paul thus writes to the Corinthian Christians: *When ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you* (1 Cor. 11:18-19). He commands only one thing here: that all *be done decently and in order* (1 Cor. 14:40).

Yet dissent should also have its limits. Where it breaks the unity of spirit and love, and threatens with the collapse of the Church, the same Apostle Paul hastens to stop it and call his flock to single-mindedness. *Now I beseech you, brethren, he writes, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?* (1 Cor. 1, 10-13).

The Apostle John, the apostle of love, received a lesson from the Lord about an indulgent attitude towards “dissidents.” Yet later, when in Ephesus, he did not dare to enter the bathhouse where the heretic Cerinthus was washing, who taught that the Son of God is a creature, although the best of them. “Let’s flee from here,” the Apostle said to his companions, “The bathhouse can catch fire, for there is a wicked person in it.”

What does this mean? Is this not hatred? And why is there such a difference in the attitudes towards different “dissidents”?

No, this is not hatred. Love should not be blind and close its eyes to the ulcers of the human soul. Love does not require compulsory outer communication with a person from whom one can suffer spiritually without bringing the slightest benefit. Love even at a distance may manifest itself in other forms, mainly in the forms of prayer and good deeds.

The commandment of love always remains binding in relation to all those of different opinion without exception, no matter how far they have gone away from Christ’s truth. But the outer relation to them can indeed be different depending on what these people represent.

Let us return to the Gospel account.

There is no reason to suppose, as some think, that by the words *forbid him not*, the Lord permits identical freedom to all forms of dissent without exception, and keeps His disciples and followers from opposing them. This would verge on complete religious disinterest and indifference, and finally, this simply could not have been the case. Obviously, there were special features in that person whom the Lord took under His protection, and in his activities which won him the favor of the Savior. Indeed, who was this man according to the Gospel story?

First, he performed miracles in the name of the Lord; second, he did not slander the Lord, and third, he was not against the close circle of Christ's disciples.

The Savior put forward the latter two conditions as the basis for His answer. Had this man slandered and been against His disciples, that is, had he interfered with their work, the answer would have been different. The Lord would have probably agreed with the prohibition of the disciples and would have kept it in force.

From this we may draw a guiding rule: the broadest tolerance is needed towards those "dissenters" who do not revile Christ and do not go against the Orthodox Church. Wherever the opposite signs are evident, that is, slander and enmity against the Church, measures of spiritual opposition are permissible, and termination of ecclesiastical and prayerful communication is inevitable, for this is required by the canonical rules of the Ecumenical Councils of the Orthodox Church.

Using this general fundamental rule, one can easily define one's relationship to any of the currently existing sects.

We have to deal mainly with two forms of religious dissent: the Baptists and Old Believers.

The main sin of the Baptists is that by rejecting Holy Tradition, they simultaneously rejected the entire Church discipline of the religious and moral upbringing of man. Having a certain ideal of holiness given by the life and teaching of the Lord starting with the first centuries of its existence, the Church of Christ began to design a special system of upbringing which would lead a person to this ideal, facilitate his path, and protect him from inevitable mistakes and falls. Particularly much was done for this, beginning in the fourth–fifth centuries, when the Church began to enjoy freedom and could devote her best forces not to fight external obstacles and constraints, but to develop and organize her inner life. Hundreds of great ascetics, withdrawing to the desert, not distracted by anything in its majestic silence, focusing all their attention on the inner spiritual life, tested the means and methods of spiritual improvement with extraordinary conscientiousness using their personal experience. We know that many of them achieved astonishing success and such height of holiness that they even acquired the power to subdue nature.

Enormous, carefully tested experience has been gathered over the centuries. This experience has defined with all possible accuracy so-called asceticism, that is, spiritual exercises which help a person in **his (было their)** struggle with sin and the passions. This experience has formed the basis for the ascetic discipline of the Church.

Baptists reject this discipline and along with it the sacraments – those grace-filled means which the Church uses to strengthen a weakening person and whose strength we constantly experience on ourselves in life. It is not surprising that there are no people of high spiritual

perfection among the Baptists, people whose holiness would be objectively attested to by the power of miracles and of whom there were so many in the Orthodox Church, especially in the past.

But this is not enough. A spirit of enmity is clearly visible in the relationship of the Baptists toward the Orthodox Church. It suffices to attend the debates of the sectarians with the Orthodox, or to listen to the speeches of the Baptist leaders when they talk about the Orthodox Church and its priests in order to realize how much smouldering, irreconcilable hatred lurks there. What especially reveals this **implacability** in them is their constant desire to seduce precisely the Orthodox into their sect. The field of Christian work is now wide open to all. The developing atheism alone can consume all the energy of the workers in God's field. *The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few* (Luke 10:2). In this sea of spreading unbelief, one can have such a rich catch, and, besides, what can be nobler than this task – to save those who are perishing in the abyss of denial, to bring unbelievers to Christ! But the leaders of Baptism rarely go there, and all their efforts are made only to attract the most faithful of the Orthodox to them. This tactic would be completely inexplicable if they were guided only by sincere zeal for God, for the work of Christ, for expanding the circle of believers. But this is quite understandable if Baptists see the Orthodox Church as an enemy. Under such conditions, it is difficult to unite with them.

There is no lack of slander here either, and often in the delirium of unreasonable zeal, this slander directed against the beliefs of the Orthodox Church, also indirectly strikes the object of these beliefs – our Lord Jesus Christ.

We know of such a case.

One Orthodox believer passed by the house of a Baptist family whom she knew and who was seduced into sectarianism relatively recently.

The wife of the family stood on the threshold.

“Come here,” she said after exchanging greetings, “I’ll show you something...”

The passerby entered.

“Look,” continued the Baptist hostess, “I cover my milk jugs with your gods...”

A row of clay milk jugs covered with icons stood on a long bench. A new, beautifully painted icon of the Savior was especially striking. The visitor felt inexpressible pain from this calculated blasphemy, and left in silence...

Of course, not every Baptist is capable of such a stunt, but it is typical for sectarianism, though it cannot be justified by anything.

First, if you believe differently, why this insult, this deliberate mockery of what is sacred and dear for us? Why hurt a person? Does the love of Christ require this?

Second, such a stunt is an insult to God Who is depicted on the icons – the Lord Jesus Christ.

By dishonoring the image of the Savior, a person expresses contempt for the living original of the image – for the Lord. He who truly loves his Savior and reveres Him will never dare to treat His image in this way, even if he personally does not see a need for it. It is almost the same as slandering God, as we mentioned above, and which complicates the rapprochement between Orthodox believers and Baptists.

As for the Old Believers' schism, unity is more possible here, especially with the kind which is called the "Austrian Hierarchy" and from which Orthodoxy differs relatively little, in ritual aspects of liturgical rite. It is difficult to tell now in what form ecclesiastical unity is possible here, but it is likely to happen sooner or later, since the historical reasons for the division have now been eliminated. Unfortunately, at the moment, the soil for such rapprochement is not yet ripe enough. The fanaticism of the Old Believers' movement, its exclusiveness and intolerance, its unyielding attachment to the letter and external form of the ritual, and echoes of the old enmity – all this still stand between us as a barrier which is difficult to pass through. But there is every reason to hope that this barrier will gradually crumble more and more, and someday will be completely smoothed.

May God grant us this!

In any case, as much true love and patient indulgence towards one other as possible are now required from all of us – Christians in order to make mutual understanding possible and bring closer the time when *there shall be one fold and one Shepherd* (John 10:16).

It is a sin to waste energy in struggle with one another. We have a common enemy: unbelief.

*For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another* (Gal. 5: 14-15).