

1. JESUS IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD WITHIN

SERVANT PREPARATION:

VERSE & REFERENCES:

Verse: “Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21).

References: The Orthodox Study Bible and the Orthodox Bible Study Commentaries by Fr. Lawrence R. Farley (Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke).

LESSON PREPARATION

OBJECTIVES: The objectives of this lesson is to understand what the Kingdom of God is, who is the King in the Kingdom, and where and what does the Bible say about the Kingdom of God. Our focus in this lesson is on the Kingdom of God within the heart.

INTRODUCTION:

According to a legend, God once said to His angels, I want to play a game of hide-and-seek with humankind. Where you do think I should hide?" One angel suggested the deepest ocean, another the top of the highest mountain. Others the far side of the moon or a distant star. Finally, one angel came up with the answer that God accepted. He said, “Hide in the human heart. That's the last place they will think of."

In the New Testament, Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God nearly everywhere in the Gospels, especially in the parables. He talks about them repeatedly because He is the only one qualified to do so, for He Himself is the King of the Kingdom. Jesus Himself declares that He is King to Pilate at His trial: “Pilate therefore said to Him, “Are You a king then?” Jesus answered, “You say *rightly* that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:37).

In Baptism, we received the Holy Spirit, God, and therefore the Kingdom of God is already within us. This is exactly what Jesus says in Luke 17:21 when He says, “The Kingdom of God is within you!” Thus, Jesus already dwells in our heart and it is now up to us to establish the rule of the Kingdom within our heart, that is, establish an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ so that our heart is ruled by the Kingdom and we live as heirs and sons of the King, Jesus Christ. Jesus says, “seek first the Kingdom of God and all of these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

Someone once said, says, *“In the kingdom of God, I have found something far superior to personal fulfillment. I have found the heart of God. I have found my reason for being here. The kingdom’s sheer immensity removes all limits on what God can do through us.”*

What does it mean that *“the kingdom’s sheer immensity removes all limits on what God can do through us”*? That means that God’s kingdom has absolutely no boundaries. That means that the kingdom of God is big and broad and beyond our wildest imaginations. Its fullness can never be attained. Its resources are never depleted. Its season is never over. When you are living in the kingdom of God, you never get the feeling you’ve seen all this before.

That’s what we need to experience, because knowing what truly ignites the heart of God is something we desperately need to understand, yet we have such a hard time defining it. God’s kingdom finds growth in the hearts of those who are tired and spent. The Bible is filled with examples of men and women God met at their thirstiest – and led them to streams of living water.

Please also see the many references on the Kingdom of God, including 1 Kings 8:41–43, Isa 61:11, Dan 7:14, Obad 21, Zech 14:9, Matt 3:2, 4:17, 5:3, 6:33, 12:2, 13:11, 44, 19:24, 24:14, Mark 14:25, Luke 4:43, 8:1, 10:9–11, Acts 1:3, 19:8, James 2:5, Rev 11:15, 12:10.

LESSON BODY:

1. Why is the Kingdom of God Important?

The kingdom is the theme of the New Testament. The first sermon in the New Testament was from John the Baptist, *“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near”* (Matthew 3:2).

The beginning of the ministry of Jesus was characterized by preaching this message. *“From then on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!’”* (Matthew 4:17). And it ended the same way. *“After He had suffered, He also presented Himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God”* (Acts 1:3).

St. Paul continued this emphasis, *“And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God”* (Acts 19:8).

St. James said, *“Listen, my dear brothers: Didn’t God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him?”* (James 2:5).

St. John spoke of it in the Gospel and concluded Revelation with this emphasis, *“The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!”* (Revelation 11:15). Also, in Revelation 12:10, we read, *“Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, ‘Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ*

have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.”

This was the central theme of the ministry of the Lord Jesus:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matthew 6:33).

We can find a lot more verses on how Jesus taught about the kingdom of God:

“If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you’ ” (Matthew 12:28).

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24).

“The secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given for you to know, but it has not been given to them” (Matthew 13:11).

“Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:25).

“but He said to them, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent” (Luke 4:43).

“And heal the sick there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But whatever city you enter, and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, ‘The very dust of your city which clings to us, we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near you’” (Luke 10:9-11).

And it’s not just the New Testament. The kingdom of God is also the central teaching of the Old Testament.

“And the LORD shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be— “The LORD is one,”
(Zechariah 14:9).

“Then saviors shall come to Mount Zion To judge the mountains of Esau, And the kingdom shall be the LORD’s” (Obadiah 1:21).

“Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion *is* an everlasting dominion, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom *the one* Which shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:14).

And there are many more verses. As God established Israel as a nation and as He called them back to a relationship with Him, His concern was His kingdom.

So, what is the kingdom of God and how do we understand it?

2. Understanding the kingdom of God

If we are subjects in the kingdom of God, then God is the ruler of our lives – He is our King and the kingdom of God is in the world now. If we are to understand the kingdom of God, we must know what the kingdom of God is. Here are a few statements that tell us what the kingdom of God is.

It has already come and it is coming again. It is shown today in our hearts and in the life of the church and will be perfectly expressed and experienced in the second coming of Christ when He establishes His kingdom forever and forever in the heavenly Jerusalem.

It describes obedience to the will of God in the individual and in the corporate body of the church.

a) It is a reality, when obedience to God’s Word and will, is a reality. In the Lord’s prayer, we say “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done.” In other words, God’s kingdom comes and rules our hearts, when we do His will in our life.

- b) It is the opposite of selfishness, arrogance, and human manipulation.
- c) It is seen when the revelation of God through His Word is obeyed and the presence of God through the Holy Spirit is realized.
- d) We are to be instruments God can use to extend His kingdom everywhere and all the time.
- e) Simply put, a kingdom enterprise is where the power of God is evident, the presence of God is experienced, and the purposes of God are realized.

But the best thing about all of this is: The kingdom of God is God's gift to us.

For us and everyone else, to have to receive the most necessary thing in life as a gift is humbling. Think about it, we would rather secure our own lives by building our own little kingdoms. The things that are important to us, more than anything else are our friends, our hobbies, our careers, our homes, our families, our comfort. Then we discover the thing we need most is the reign of God and that we can only sit back as helpless recipients while He gives it to us. That's why the Gospel Message is so offensive to people. They don't want to be put under the reign of a King. They want to see life in their own ways and approach life on their own terms. And if God won't have things their way, then they don't want anything to do with a God like that.

But, at the doorstep of glory stands the pleading figure of all the ages, the Lord Jesus Christ. In His hands is His kingdom, which He is handing out as a gift. He, and He alone, offers His kingdom as a gift. It is our only hope for living with meaning. That's what the kingdom of God is all about. It's about Jesus, giving us His kingdom as a gift so that we can live a life that has true meaning, a life that makes a difference, a life that works for the King to spread the Good News of what Jesus has done for us.

3. Communicating the Kingdom of God.

a) This kingdom must be communicated - Jesus spent a lot of time proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and teaching his disciples to do the same. Telling

others about the kingdom of God was very important to Him. In Luke 8:1, we read “Now it came to pass, afterward, that He went through every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with Him”. When Jesus began His ministry, that’s what He did. He took over from John the Baptist and began to preach.

In Matthew 4:17, Jesus said “Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” Jesus began His ministry proclaiming the kingdom of God and ended His ministry proclaiming the kingdom of God. Jesus knew the importance of communicating the kingdom and if we want to have our hearts ignited by the same thing that ignites the heart of God, then we, too, will want to communicate the kingdom to others. And we would want to make the kingdom of God as important in our lives as it is to Jesus. In Matthew 24:14, we read “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come”.

In what way do we communicate the kingdom to others? Do people around us know that we are a Kingdom person?

b) God’s Kingdom requires commitment, obedience and preparation.

Jesus tells a parable of the ten bridesmaids. They all went out with their lamps to wait for the groom. But He tells us that five of the bridesmaids were foolish and five of them were wise (Matthew 25:1-13). The five that were wise were well prepared, they brought extra oil so that they would not run out. The foolish ones didn’t. When the groom was delayed, the foolish bridesmaids had to go out and buy some more oil because their lamps were going out and it was the middle of the night. But the wise bridesmaids were ready and when the groom showed up, only the ones that were prepared for Him, went with Him.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is like this. All of us need to be wise and prepared for God’s kingdom. We need to be telling others about the kingdom of God, and that requires commitment, obedience and preparation.

The kingdom is reserved for those who hear and prepare and commit. The kingdom as God’s gift to us must not make us in any sense passive. The greatness of the gift calls for a life of the most strenuous vigilance, effort, and radical

obedience. It is the ultimate gift given to us, and so, we must give the ultimate allegiance to God's kingdom.

Are we prepared to obey God's command to proclaim the kingdom of God to the world? Are we totally committed to the kingdom of God?

c) The Kingdom of God is costly.

Christ tells in the parable of the Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:44) and the Parable of Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 13:45-46) that the Kingdom of God is costly in two ways. First, it is costly in the sense that it is like a treasure, it should be the most valued thing of our life. Second, it is costly in that it requires sacrifice, obedience, and being different from the ways of the world. Every Godly thing has a cost.

In Matthew 13:44, we read "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." Jesus tells us here that the kingdom of heaven is like treasure, buried in a field. And there was this man, that found this treasure and then reburied it. Then with all joy and excitement, he went and sold everything that he had to buy that field. What an investment he made. He was willing to sell everything that he had in order to get a treasure worth more than anything else. Do we view the kingdom of God this way? When you received Jesus into our heart at Baptism, and made Him Lord of our life, did we give up everything to serve Him? What do we you spend our time and money on the most? Do you spend all of our time at work or on our cell phone so that we come home totally exhausted and put all kingdom ministry work on the back burner? Is doing kingdom activities way lower on our list of things to do, and they're only done if we are not too tired or we have the time. We have to ask ourselves, "What is most important to me? What do I spend most of my money on and most of my time on?" and see where the kingdom of God is in all of this. Is Jesus truly the Lord of our life and are we really a kingdom person? Are we ready to pay the cost of what it means to be a kingdom person, because if we are, God will bless us greatly, and give us more than we ever dreamed.

God's kingdom is the only kingdom that will last forever. We can't stop it from growing and we can't make it grow. It is God's kingdom, and it *will* grow. Everything that God has done – all the things that we learned in the Bible, all the blessings that God has bestowed on His people, everything that God has blessed us with – is intended to have a global and eternal impact. But it does mean that we have to change the way we think about what is truly important.

d) The Kingdom is Often talked about in Parables

Parables are stories in word pictures, revealing spiritual truth. The Gospels are filled with parables – images drawn from daily life in the world to represent and communicate the deep things of God. Parables are like riddles that Jesus uses to get us to think deeply about Him and the Kingdom. Jesus said 39 parables and most of these parables talk about the Kingdom of God. Most of the parables are found in the Gospels of St. Matthew or Luke. Very few are found in the Gospel of St. Mark, and none are found in the Gospel of St. John. Parables give us glimpses of Him whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9).

The truth communicated by Jesus's parables, however, is not evident to all who hear them. The listener must have spiritual ears to hear, and even then, not all have the same degree of understanding. Thus, Jesus's statement that "to those who are outside, all things come in parables" (Mark 4:11) may be translated as "... all things come in riddles..." Jesus's quotation of Isaiah 6:9-10 (Matthew 13:14-15) does not mean He used parables to blind the people or lead them to punishment. On the contrary, it demonstrates that the people are responsible for their own lack of receptivity: having grown dull and insensitive, they are unwilling to accept the message of the parables. As the mission of Isaiah in the Old Testament was to open to the eyes of Israel to see the acts of God, so the parables of Jesus are intended to open the eyes of His hearers to the truth and lead them to produce the fruit of righteousness.

Parables challenge the hearer and call for faith to perceive the mysteries of the Kingdom. Insights into God's Kingdom does not come simply through an

intellectual understanding of the parables. Spiritual enlightenment is essentially a communication of faith in the Person, words, and deeds of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The use of parables was known in Jewish culture long before Jesus (2 Samuel 12:1-4, Isaiah 5:1-7). Jesus, however, brought the art of parables to perfection, relating aspects of the Kingdom and speaking of God Himself through vivid stories. His purpose was not only to reveal truth to those whose hearts prepared, He wished to draw responsive hearts past the entrance and into the very reality of God's Kingdom which He proclaimed and inaugurated.

Among the familiar parables read on Sundays throughout the Coptic church year are those of the Sower (Luke 8:5-15), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the Rich Man and His Crops (Luke 12:16-21), The Great Supper (Luke 14:16-24), the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30), the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:10-14), and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).

In opening the door to the Kingdom of heaven, the parables help us to love God and know Him, to understand and believe His grace, mercy, and forgiveness, and to order our lives according to His Holy Word.

The parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price discussed earlier are two great parables illustrating the Kingdom of God in the heart. The parable of the hidden treasure illustrates those who unintentionally stumble unto Christ and His Church, yet receive Him with great eagerness. The parable of the pearl of great price illustrates those who have been searching in their hearts for Him and finally find Him and His Church. The other pearls represent all the various teachings and philosophies of the world. These treasures are hidden in that they are neither recognized nor valued by those immersed in wordliness. In both parables, receiving the treasure requires that everything else be sold, that is, a person must surrender all things in order to receive Christ.

CONCLUSION: For anyone to be accepted in a kingdom, they must accept the commandments and rules of the king. If we are to accept the Kingdom of God, we must accept Christ as King and keep His commandments and be obedient to His will. We must develop a personal relationship with Him by reading the Bible, prayer, going to church and

partaking of the sacraments. We must be role models and ambassadors fore Him in the world.

The Kingdom of God comes at a high price as we read in the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price. We must hold the Kingdom in very high regard and we must also make sacrifices in this world in order to obtain the Kingdom. We cannot have the ways of the world and the ways of God ruling in the same heart. It has to be one or the other, and we must make this choice. One way by which the kingdom of God becomes a reality in us is by doing God's will. Jesus told us so in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come: Thy will be done!" Jesus is telling us here that the kingdom of God comes when we do His will. Kingdom of God and will of God are tied together. The one does not come without the other. One makes the other possible. "Thy kingdom come!" How? It comes when God's will is done: "Thy will be done."

When Christ comes to rule as King in our heart, He will govern our heart so that we may love only what He loves. He will govern our mind so that no unholy thought be allowed to take root within us. He will govern the books we read, the TV shows we watch, the companionships and the friendships we form, the way we use the internet and our phones, our work and the methods of our business, our money, the way in which we spend our leisure - all will be under the governance of His Kingdom. For He will not be king unless He is king of all!

VERSE TO REMEMBER: "Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' (Matthew 25:34-36).

2. REPENTANCE IS THE COMING BACK TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

SERVANT PREPARATION:

VERSE & REFERENCES:

Verse: “Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand” (Matthew 4:17).

References: The Orthodox Study Bible and the Orthodox Bible Study Commentaries by Fr. Lawrence R. Farley (Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke).

LESSON PREPARATION

OBJECTIVES: The main objectives of this lesson is to understand the connections between repentance and the Kingdom of God. Repentance in our life is a necessary process to return to the Kingdom. It is a way of life for the Orthodox Christian, and Confession and Repentance is one of the seven sacraments of the Orthodox Church. We will examine how were return to the Kingdom through repentance by looking at several examples in the Bible, namely the parable of the prodigal son, the Samaritan woman, and the parable of the sower.

INTRODUCTION:

The first words that both Jesus and John the Baptist uttered when they began their ministry is “Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand (Matthew 4:17). Confession and Repentance is one of the seven sacraments of the Orthodox Church. It is a mystery that results in a cleansing of the soul that is made pure in front of God. It plays a fundamental and critical role in the life of the Orthodox Christian.

According to a legend, God once said to His angels, I want to play a game of hide-and-seek with humankind. Where you do think I should hide?" One angel

suggested the deepest ocean, another, the top of the highest mountain. Others said the far side of the moon or a distant star. Finally, one angel came up with the answer that God accepted. He said, "Hide in the human heart. That's the last place they will think of." Not only is the kingdom of God at hand, but Jesus also said "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 7:21). For the kingdom of God to become a reality for us we must first repent.

St. Paul says, "For godly sorrow produces repentance *leading* to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). Repentance is thus Godly sorrow for the sins we have committed. Godly sorrow is not like the worldly sorrow which leads to despair, depression, and even suicide. Godly sorrow leads to repentance, repentance leads to forgiveness, forgiveness leads to salvation, and salvation establishes the kingdom of God, the rule of God, in our hearts. Where there is no repentance, no Godly sorrow for our sins, the kingdom of God will never come. For we cannot have the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil ruling in the same heart.

One way by which the kingdom of God becomes a reality in us is by doing God's will. Jesus told us so in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come: Thy will be done!" Jesus is telling us here that the kingdom of God comes when we do His will. Kingdom of God and will of God are tied together. The one does not come without the other. One makes the other possible. "Thy kingdom come!" How? It comes when God's will is done: "Thy will be done."

LESSON BODY:

There are many, many stories in the Bible about repentance. Here, we will focus on three such stories. They are the parables of the sower, the parable of the prodigal son, and the story of the Samaritan woman. The parable of the sower is read in the beginning of the Coptic year in the period of Nayrouz. The parable of the prodigal son and the story of the Samaritan women have deep messages of repentance and are read during the Great Lent, which is the period of repentance

in our church. Here, we discuss these three stories with the common theme of coming back to the Kingdom.

1. Parable of the Prodigal Son

Entire books have been written about this parable. It is probably the deepest story of confession and repentance in the entire Bible. The Gospel reading for the third Sunday of Lent is the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. This is a very spiritually rich parable with so many lessons. It is a parable and thus not an actual event that occurred. The Gospel of Luke contains most of the parables of Jesus. The parable of the prodigal son is only found in the Gospel of St. Luke. This Gospel reading tells us many things:

a) **Confession and Repentance** - The prodigal son “comes to himself” (Luke 15:17) and realizes his sins and wrong ways. The only way we can repent is to “come to ourself” and realize how good we had in our fathers house and care. The prodigal son was living miserably away from his father. He had no food, no job, and he was living like a pig, literally. When we live away from Christ, our life will be like living among pigs. As a result of realizing all this, the son repents and returns home to his father after having lived an immoral life. He comes back to his father, that is, he comes back to the Kingdom of God. The father in this parable is God (Christ).

b) **Arrogance and Humility** - The prodigal son leaves his father's house an arrogant person, who demanded his inheritance (Luke 15:11), and he returns home a humble person only wanting to be a servant in his fathers house (Luke 15:19). We have to humble ourselves to come back to the Kingdom.

c) **The Loving father** - This parable also tells about about a loving father who accepts his son unconditionally without any questions or reservations. He sees him from afar, immediately accepts him, gives him the best of what he has, and prepares a big celebration for him. The father also deals with the elder son in a very loving way.

d) **The Sins of the Tongue** - The elder son criticizes and maligns his younger brother to his father, and he is jealous of him. We see here the importance of the

sins of the tongue, and the sins of jealousy and hypocrisy. The Catholic Epistle reading for the third Sunday of Lent is James 3:1-12, which talks about the sins of the tongue. The elder son was full of pride and hatred. He who is full of himself cannot enter the Kingdom.

2. The Samaritan Woman

The Gospel reading for the fourth Sunday of Lent is the story of the Samaritan Woman in John 4:1-42. It is a story of repentance in which Jesus has a one on one personal encounter with a person whose life changes as a result of this encounter. This story is only found in the Gospel of John. This Gospel reading tells us many things:

a) **Repentance** - the Samaritan woman, who was a liar, an adulterer, and a person who had lived an immoral life having five husbands, repents and preaches Christ to her own people. Repentance results in freedom from the slavery of sin, and the Samaritan woman demonstrates her freedom by eagerly telling her own people about Christ, as if she had just been freed from jail.

b) **The love of Christ** - the way Jesus deals with this woman was critical in her repentance.

Jesus is patient, He does not condemn or accuse, but rather He uplifts and encourages. Jesus was a Jew and Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus shows us that He is here to break the barriers of communication in order to win our hearts back into the Kingdom. It is Jesus who initiates the conversation and our relationship with Him.

c) **Jesus slowly reveals Himself to those who are ready and able to accept Him** - He does not tell the Samaritan woman that He is Christ until she is spiritually ready. He gradually builds up to it, educating and teaching her in His loving way until she is prepared to accept Him as the Christ. In verses 1-9, Jesus initiates dialogue, in verses 10-15, He tries to gently teach and educate and the Samaritan woman is still hostile towards Him. In verses 15-21, Christ's loving ways begin to have an impact on her, as the woman begins to take a hard look at herself and

examine herself. In verses 22-26, Christ teaches her about Christianity and she accepts it, and in verse 26, Christ reveals Himself to her.

e) **The Living Water** - In John 4:10, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." Jesus also said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."

Today, the world the world encourages drinking from the water that makes us thirst again. This is why we live in an age of materialism and worldly pleasures and addiction. We live to acquire and to achieve things. We live for the food that perishes. We see how Jesus converts this woman from desiring the water of the world to desiring the living water of Christ.

The Gospel of John is a gospel of personal encounters. These personal encounters are very serious and very intense. Jesus first encounters Nicodemus in Chapter 3, then the encounter with the Samaritan woman in Chapter 4, then the man at the pool of Bethesda in Chapter 5, then man born blind in Chapter 9, and even Pilate in Chapter 18. In each of these personal encounters, one has to make a choice: either to choose the light or to choose darkness. This is the choice the Samaritan woman had to make: to continue living with someone and to live a life of sin or to choose the light.

3. The Parable of the Sower

The Gospel reading for the first two Sundays of Hatoor is the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-15 and Matthew 13:1-9). It is aligned during the season of the harvest in Egypt.

Gospel Reading in Luke 8:4-15

“And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from every city, He spoke by a parable: A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold.” When He had said these things He cried, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” Then His disciples asked Him, saying, “What does this parable mean?” And He said, “To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’

“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.”

In this parable, Jesus compares the truth, which is His word, to a seed. The word of God is the seed: His parables, His healings, His miracles, and Jesus Himself who was cast as a seed into the ground and buried to be raised to new life.

The Soils - The emphasis in this parable is not on the seed or the sower but rather on the soil which is the final determining factor as to whether or not the seed bears fruit. Jesus tells us that there are basically four types of soil from which seeds can grow. Therefore, it is perhaps more appropriate to call this parable the Parable of the Soils. We read that the seed falls on four types of soil, and three out of four reject it. If we have experienced any kind of crop failure in our life, it is perhaps because God's word is preached but we don't accept it. Thus, this

parable has 3 main characters: the sower who is Christ, the seed which is His word and the church, and the soil (ground) which is us.

Let us briefly examine the four types of soil that Jesus talks about in this parable.

a) **The Seeds by the Wayside** - We have all heard of hardening of the arteries, but a far more deadly disease is the hardening of the heart toward God. Hardening of the arteries stops the flow of blood causing physical death, while a hardening of the heart prevents us from receiving the Bread of Life causing the death of the soul. Nothing stops the word of God but a closed heart! It stops it completely, it doesn't penetrate it at all. It is of these hearts that Jesus said, "Neither will they be persuaded, though one rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31). But when we hear this, we object, saying "this cannot be true of me. There is no way that my heart is hard." We should think again!

How are Hearts Hardened? - First, some are hardened by pride. We sometimes think that we have the answer to every question. We think that because we have grown older, that we are wiser and smarter. This is perhaps why Jesus urges us to be like little children. Secondly, since we were born into Christianity, we take the truths of our faith for granted. Our church beliefs make no impression on us anymore. We just take them for granted never pondering what they really mean or imply. Thirdly, the heart can also become hardened to the word of God through lack of cultivation. Just as no water hardens the soil, so no prayer, no church, no sacraments, no relationship with Christ, hardens the soul. If only once - just once - the word of God could get through, what a transformation it would bring. If only we could accept the seed, what hope, faith, love, and power it would bring. But we remain hard!

b) **Some Fell on Rock** - These are precisely the people who admire the word of God: "What a lovely liturgy," "What a great verse," "What a moving Bible

passage," or "What a great Bible study," and then that's the end of it. They "receive it with joy," but that's as far as it goes because they have "no roots in themselves."

As strange as it seems, one of the ways of rejecting the word of God is by admiring it. Let us illustrate this point. A church father once told a make-believe story about a flock of geese that milled around in a filthy barnyard imprisoned by a high wooden fence. One day a preaching goose stepped onto an old crate and began to preach. He criticized the geese for being satisfied to live in that filthy barnyard when God had given them wings with which to fly into the sky. He spoke of the goodness of God in giving the geese wings. He urged them to use their wings to fly out of the barnyard to better surroundings. This pleased the geese. They nodded their heads in approval and commented on what a great preacher the goose was. They marveled at what he had said and applauded his eloquence. All this they did. But one thing they never did. They did not use their wings to leave the barnyard. They went right back to their old ways!

We can apply this story to ourselves. When we attend a liturgy or read a nice verse in the Bible, or attend a nice Bible study, we are deeply moved. But then what? Most of us go back to our old ways. We hear the truth and admire it, but we do not accept it. And so we continue to live with our hatreds, prejudices, our pride, our envy, and our wars.

c) **Some Fell Among Thorns** - Most of us probably fall in this category. This is probably the saddest part of this parable. The soil that could of produced greatness produces a jungle. A soil that produces weeds has great potential. It must be good soil, otherwise weeds would not grow there. Good soil has so much potential that weeds can actually burst through asphalt and concrete. But as Jesus says, the thorns grow quick and fast, and they soon choke the seed. There are a lot of good people represented here in this type of soil. They receive the word of God and they really want to serve God, but they become involved in so many

other interests that God is gradually choked out. It is not that the things that we are busy with that are necessarily bad, they actually may be good things, but they drain our energies and turn our hearts away from Christ. So many activities that are good clutter up our lives that they become the enemy of Christ. Jesus poses a question to each one of us: what thorns are we permitting to grow in our own life that choke out our loyalty to God?

Example 1: Judas Iscariot. He was a disciple, he was well educated, he held the money box, but gradually the love of the world choked his spiritual life.

Example 2: The rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) - God gave him great resources, put him in a great position to serve the poor, and his riches completely choked him!

Example 3: The priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) - God placed them in positions of authority with great potential to make a difference in people's lives, and they became choked up with their own importance and self-righteousness!

Worry and anxiety also choke us up, not only riches and possessions. Recall what Jesus said to Martha: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42).

d) **Some Fell on Good Soil** - good soil represents those of us who receive the word of God and it becomes a permanent part of us. We keep it in our heart and bring forth fruit with patience. It grows and slowly takes possession of our desires, our emotions, our thoughts and our actions. Little by little, our lives become fruitful and God-like. The good soil is precisely the kingdom of God. We become the good soil when we repent. We must admit that there are times when we are any one of the three poor types of soil or perhaps we are a strange combination of all of

them. The point that Jesus is making here is that our soil can always be improved through repentance. Hard soil can be plowed; rocks and thorns can be removed. By care and cultivation through daily repentance and confession, our hearts can become fertile and productive, like the "good soil" that produces a hundredfold.

The person that has the good soil is the person who is balanced in their life. The devil loves extremes, and hates balance, because balance and order is the way of God, it is the way to the Kingdom.

e) **"He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear"** - One of the key ways to improve our soil is to improve our hearing. We need to become sensitive to God's voice as a sleeping mother is to a cry of her infant. Listening is a great virtue, really. We pay the highest respect to someone when we sincerely listen to them. In our culture, we have the habit of talking too much and listening too little. We go to social gatherings and everyone is talking at the same time and no one is listening. A church father once said that we always have the wrong switch on: the switch of the mouth is always open and the switch of the ears is always closed.

A woman once went to a social gathering and wanted to test how well her friends listened to her, so as soon as she got to the gathering, she told her friends, "I just shot my husband today." And then her friends said, "very nice, good for you dear." They were not listening to anything she said. We have to learn to listen to the word of God, and to each other. We have to listen to the guidance from our parents, our teachers, our spiritual fathers, and the elders. At the Transfiguration of Jesus, we read "While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" (Matthew 17:5). Here we see the importance that God places on being a good hearer and listener. We must examine ourselves and see what kind of soil we have and how our hearing is related to that soil. May we always be hearers to the word of God and have the good soil that Christ is looking for. Consider this great verse from the Gospels: "If

anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (John 14:23).

The Six Steps to Repentance:

There are six main steps to repentance.

1. Feel Godly Sorrow for Our Sins

a) The first step of repentance is to recognize that you've committed a sin against God's commandments. For I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin" (Psalm 38:18).

b) Feel true sorrow for what you've done and for disobeying our Heavenly Father.

c) Feel sorrow for any pain you may have caused toward other people.

d) Examples of Godly sorrow are St. Peter and David the prophet. An example of worldly sorrow is Judas Iscariot.

2. Confess Our Sins

a) Confession involves three steps. We first confess our sins to ourselves, admitting to ourselves that we have done something wrong, then we confess it to God, then we confess our sins to our Father of confession and receive absolution from him. We read, "So David said to Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said to David, The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Samuel 2:13).

b) Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5).

c) If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us

from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

d) Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16).

3. Ask for Forgiveness

a) Pray to God for His forgiveness.

b) Forgive others who have hurt you.

c) Forgive yourself and know that God loves you, even though you've sinned.

d) We say in the Lord's Prayer: forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

e) We must also learn to forgive others. We read, "Thus you shall say to Joseph: I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you. Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father. And Joseph wept when they spoke to him" (Genesis 50:17).

f) "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:26).

g) "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:3).

4. Accept Responsibility and Correct the Problems Caused by the Sin

a) Make sure to fix any problems caused by your sin. Do whatever you can to fix things caused by your sin.

b) Problems caused by sin include physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual damage.

c) If you can't rectify the problem, then sincerely ask forgiveness of those you have wronged and try to find another way to show your change of heart.

d) An example of correcting one's sins include Zacchaeus. We read, "Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold" (Luke 19:8).

5. Forsake Sin

a) We are to run away from and do whatever we can to stop sinning.

b) Some people say, "I'll try" to stop sinning and others say "I'll do my best." People that say that are not serious enough about stopping their sins. These phrases mean that they will not do anything about their condition. But there are those who say "I'll do whatever it takes to stop my sins." God wants this type of seriousness.

b) A good example of running away to forsake sin is Joseph, who ran away from Potiphar's wife.

c) "He who covers his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy" (Proverbs 28:13).

d) "And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire" (Matthew 18:9). The verse does not literally mean that we are to pluck out our eyes, but rather we are to do whatever means necessary to stop sinning.

e) Make a promise to yourself and to God that you will never repeat the sin.

f) Recommit yourself to obeying God's commandments.

g) Continue to repent if you sin again.

6. Receive Forgiveness

a) The Lord will forgive you when you truly repent with a sincere heart.

b) Allow His forgiveness and peace to come upon you.

c) When you feel at peace with yourself, you can know you are forgiven.

d) Don't hold onto your sin and the sorrow you've felt. Let it go by truly forgiving yourself, just as the Lord has forgiven you.

e) "The Lord says, `Do not remember the former things, Nor consider the things of old, Behold, I will do a new thing, Now it shall spring forth, Shall you not know it?'" (Isaiah 43:18-19).

f) "No one, having put his hand on the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

g) "But one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead" (Philippians 3:13). St. Paul is telling us here to use the past wisely. To learn from our mistakes, but to never, never let the past hold us back. He is telling us to claim God's forgiveness and move forward.

h) "He will again have compassion on us, And will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins Into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19).

CONCLUSION: The Kingdom of God becomes a reality in our life when we repent. When we stray from a life with Christ, we stray from the Kingdom. A return to the Kingdom of God can only come through repentance. Repentance is a way of life and a lifelong process for the Christian. We are viewed as perfect in the eyes of God when we repent.

As Jesus says in Matthew 5:48 “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

When Christ comes to rule as King in our heart, He will govern our heart so that we may love only what He loves. He will govern our mind so that no unholy thought be allowed to take root within us. He will govern the books we read, the TV shows we watch, the companionships and the friendships we form, our work and the methods of our business, our money, the way in which we spend our leisure - all will be under the governance of His Kingdom. For He will not be king unless He is king of all!

VERSE TO REMEMBER: “Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father’s who sent Me” (John 14:23-24).

3. THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD – PART I

SERVANT PREPARATION:

VERSE & REFERENCES:

Verse: “When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

References: The Orthodox Study Bible and the Orthodox Bible Study Commentaries by Fr. Lawrence R. Farley (Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke).
Sacramental Rites

in the Coptic Orthodox Church, 2nd Edition, by His Grace Bishop Mettaous, Abbot of El-Syrian Monastery.

LESSON PREPARATION

OBJECTIVES: The objectives of this lesson is understand the role of the Holy Spirit for us in our lives and for preparing us for the Kingdom of God. In addition to being our speaker, witness, and agent, the Holy Spirit is primarily revealed to us through the Sacraments of the Orthodox Church. The Church Sacraments are essential for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us, in our relationship to Christ, and for entering into the Kingdom of God.

INTRODUCTION:

Who is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is one of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. He is not a thing but a Person. He is God. In the Gospel of St. John, we read that the Holy Spirit proceeds and emanates from the Father. In this emanation, the Holy Spirit carries energy and movement to the entire creation. His course through the world is characterized by precision and order.

The Holy Spirit brings to man in particular a spiritual creative power derived from man's being created in the image of God. This power consists of freedom, understanding, and wisdom. It is conveyed to man in various ways:

a) First, the power of the Holy Spirit is conveyed directly in a mystical manner. Here, the essence of the power is not perceived or understood by the recipient, but received as a gift from God.

b) Secondly, it is conveyed through the sacraments of the church and the intermediary of the priest, through prayer and faith. This is also considered a mystical conveyance of the power, however, it is not conveyed directly as in the first case.

c) Finally, this power may be conveyed through the word as we understand the acts of the Spirit through the mind, the will, and faith.

LESSON BODY:

1. What Does the Holy Spirit Give to Man?

a) It is through the Holy Spirit which we receive all gifts of God. Without the Holy Spirit's mediation, we could receive nothing from God.

b) It is also through the Holy Spirit that we present our acts of worship to God. Without the Spirit's outpouring of grace upon us, all of our works would be worthless: "So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only what was our duty'" (Luke 17:10).

c) The Holy Spirit sanctifies our works, purifying them from the element of the flesh, as we call upon Him to complete these works by His grace. It is in this way that man finds grace from God: "God is Spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

d) The Holy Spirit carries the word from God to the spirit of man: "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak ... He will take what is Mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13 14).

e) The Holy Spirit also gives to man the special grace of revelation and inspiration. Man is enabled to directly pronounce the word of God which the Spirit of God has spoken to him silently. This revelation can be one of joy and happiness as is the case in many of the Psalms which are poetic verses and hymns of praise: "David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declared" (Mark 12:36). The revelation may

also be born out of sorrow and difficulty as is the case with Jeremiah: "O Lord, You have deceived me, and I was deceived; You are stronger than I, and You have prevailed ... For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, 'I will not mention Him, or speak any more in His name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (Jeremiah 20:7-9).

f) It is also possible for the Holy Spirit to speak the word of God directly through the tongue of men: "And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11).

g) The Spirit is also able to speak the word of God through man in a language that is not understood by the speaker. The inspiration which the apostles received at Pentecost reached this level. Each one was speaking in a strange language - a language which he had not studied previously. Miraculously, the Spirit became the carrier of the word as well as the speaker of it!

These are just some of the means by which man has received and recorded the word of God. It is apparent that the Holy Spirit is an essential element whenever the word of God is received by men.

2. Man's Limitations with the Written Word of God

Man's position in dealing with the written word of God is distinct from what has been discussed previously. Man stands before the word incapable of understanding its message. The enlightenment of the Holy Spirit is necessary to make the message of the word clear. The human mind is unable to penetrate the mystery of the word by its own abilities.

a) The word of God is a printed message carrying within it the incomparable truth which is exalted high above the mind of man. It expresses the unchangeable will

of God. The Holy Spirit thus grants to mankind the grace of enlightenment: "Then He opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

b) When the human mind enters into grace through the Holy Spirit, he discovers divine truth. This truth is found in the word (Bible) and in the mystical communication with its source - God. The word proceeds from God, borne by the Holy Spirit who speaks it mystically by inspiring the spirit of a prophet or an apostle. With the written word of God, the Holy Spirit takes the initiative to open our minds to understand the word. The reader accepts the mystery contained in God's word and thus extends his spirit to commune with the Spirit of God - the source of the word. Hence, it is evident that the Holy Spirit never forsakes the word. He bears it from God to us just as He enlightens our mind to understand it in order that we may commune with God.

c) The Holy Spirit liberates man's works from the element of self and makes them acceptable and pleasing to God. Thus man obtains grace from God through these works: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little..." (Matthew 25:21).

d) The Holy Spirit also works within man as he studies the word of God in submission and intercession. The mind is liberated from the flesh such that the word becomes the domain of liberty. The mind of man is thus enabled to launch out, carried by the grace of the Holy Spirit - to apprehend "even the depths of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10). Without this grace from the Holy Spirit, it would be impossible for the mysteries of the word of God to be revealed to the mind of man. Without it, man is a self-contained entity. He is bound by his own opinion - prisoner to preset intellectual boundaries and a self-made prison of his own ideas and desires!

3. "The Words I Have Spoken to You are Spirit and Life" (John 6:63)

a) Jesus says in John 6:63, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life." Notice that Christ places "spirit" before "life" in this verse. This is not done by accident. The "word" is a foundational spiritual truth. It is the expression of the perfect and infinite will - the will of God. For this reason, it is rightly called "spirit," because it is the agent which carries out the will of God. This perfect will of God is an inner reality of the soul and the only means of communicating this inner reality is through the spirit.

b) We are to accept the word, first of all, as "spirit" expressing the perfect will of God. Then, we receive it as "life." That is to say, we take it with us into the sphere of our everyday lives. We apply the word to our own behavior since the word as spirit is the expression of the living and active will of God. So then, the word, as Christ stated, is spirit and life! In reality, it is the union of spirit and flesh or the joining of the will of God with the reality of human life. The necessary result of such a union is that man is raised from beneath the yoke of the world and is transformed into a spiritual man. He becomes the spiritual creation of God, liberated from the dominion of physical and material things.

c) The objective of the Holy Spirit, to which end He labors tirelessly, is to replace our fleshly concerns with spiritual concerns. This work is carried out by means of the word of God. Its ultimate objective is to glorify God in us through the word and the continual witness of the Holy Spirit.

4. The Holy Spirit is Our Witness

a) We read "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit acts within the conscience, where He puts His liberating power to work to free man's spirit from all that hinders his progress or obscures his vision. As the effective will of God, the word (Bible) gives man a liberating power which is both active and capable of conquering. By means of the word and through the aid of the Spirit, man is able to break the shackles of lust,

habit, environment, personal gain, and reputation as well as all the fetters of false gods!

b) The Holy Spirit bears continual witness against the world in the heart of man. He points out the deceptions that the world has put around man's neck making him its prisoner. When man grasps this truth he starts a bitter struggle with the world using all his energies to break its hold on him.

c) One of the most important roles of the Holy Spirit is to "convince the world concerning sin" (John 16:8). He brings about this conviction through Godly believers who cling to the word of God despite the world's attractions: "They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Revelation 12:11). As the world is convicted of its own evil through the testimony of man, man himself then becomes prey to demonic resistance and the threat of death.

d) The testimony of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the faithful has put them at war with the world. It is an eternal confrontation: "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Exodus 17:16). However, victory belongs to the Holy Spirit as He liberates man from the world: "For they loved not their lives even unto death." This is the miracle of Christ: "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

e) By means of the word, the Holy Spirit establishes in man (the man who sincerely seeks through the word) a new level of spiritual awareness which is far beyond the principles of the world. It is superior to these principles, not because it disdains them pridefully or refuses to acknowledge them. Rather, it raises them up to an eternal level in a glorious transformation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1).

5. The Truth Will Make You Free

a) The ultimate objective of the Holy Spirit is not simply to give us knowledge of "the whole truth" (John 16:13). Rather, He seeks to lead us into the freedom from sins which is the final result of truth: "And you will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). The freedom spoken of here is freedom from slavery to the flesh and the world.

b) The Holy Spirit is the "Spirit of Truth" (John 16:13). He is the essence and power of true freedom: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). He is establishing a coming kingdom built by truth and freedom, not as intellectual proposals, but as life and action in the real world. Through His work, the soul receives its final preparation for its being joined to God in eternity.

c) The Holy Spirit continually struggles to accomplish man's spiritual freedom from the world system. The Holy Spirit stands against the world's lethal methods of enslaving mankind in the slavery of death. This emancipation - man's spiritual freedom - is not accomplished by isolation from the world, nor is it accomplished by feelings of hatred towards the world: "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one" (John 17:5).

d) The real emancipation from the world comes through our victory over it. Our life continues to be in the world, but not of it: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:16). We are not implying here that we should deny our bodily presence in the world or disdain our duties to the world. However, we are to derive our power and inspiration from God, not the world. Our knowledge of the truth comes through the divine word such that we rise above the world's surface without drowning in its currents. We need not surrender to its false demands.

e) By knowledge of the truth, we are enabled to serve without being defeated. By the Spirit, we live in the midst of the world while remaining liberated from it. When the Spirit brings about this liberation, it changes man's entire being. The spirit is not separated from the body. Man is not isolated from life or life from the

world. He lives as one entity, entirely liberated. Though he lives in the flesh, he lives victoriously over the flesh. Man performs the duties of life while being victorious over this life. Though he lives in the world he conquers the world: "I stood on the pinnacle of the world when I sensed within myself that I feared nothing and desired nothing" (St. Gregory the Great). If one has attained to this kind of freedom, he is living to God. It doesn't matter whether he lives in a big or small city, or living in tranquility of a mountain retreat or a monastery.

6. For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking

St. Paul says in Romans 14:17, "for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." St. Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 8:8, "But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse." St. Paul is telling the Romans and Corinthians to not be enslaved by the ways of the world but rather be free through the righteousness of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is He who makes us free from worldly thoughts, desires, and imprisonments. The Holy Spirit gives joy and peace to our hearts and makes us feel that the things of the world that grip us. These things are generally denoted by "eating and drinking." In the end, they should not be a priority for us nor are they important for our salvation and the Kingdom.

The Seven Sacraments of the Church:

The word Sacrament means mystery. It is a mystery because it is a miracle. We cannot comprehend logically how a Sacrament is fulfilled. For example, we cannot comprehend how a man and women become one flesh in Holy matrimony. It is a mystery. We cannot logically comprehend how the Holy Spirit dwells in us at Baptism and Chrismation. It is a mystery.

The seven Sacraments of the Church are

1- Sacrament of Baptism.

- 2- Sacrament of Confirmation
- 3- Sacrament of Confession
- 4- Sacrament of Eucharist
- 5- Sacrament of Unction of Sick
- 6- Sacrament of Matrimony
- 7- Sacrament of Priesthood.

The Lord Christ instituted all these Sacraments, and the Holy Bible mentions them in detail.

1- Sacrament of Baptism

Instituted by the Lord Jesus by His Baptism in the River Jordan and by His words to Nicodemus saying: “Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:3-5), and by saying to our fathers the Apostles, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

2- Sacrament of Chrismation (Confirmation)

Instituted by Lord Jesus when He said: “If anyone thirsts let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. But this He spoke concerning the Spirit whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:37-39). About the Sacrament of Confirmation, in the Book of Acts it is mentioned : “Now when the Apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the Word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of

them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14-17).

The Holy Spirit was received by the laying of hands, but when the number of believers increased, the Apostles were unable to keep track of each individual to lay upon them their hands in order to receive the Holy Spirit. So they made the Myron out of certain oils mixed with spices; the same spices which were brought to the tomb to embalm the shrouded Christ. It was approved for the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, and allowed the priests to anoint the newly baptized by the Myron to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, to dwell in them, in order to become temples of the Holy Spirit.

3- Sacrament of Repentance and Confession

Instituted by the Lord Jesus when He said to His pure disciples: “Assuredly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew: 18:18), and after the Resurrection He said, “As the Father has sent me, I also send you and when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20: 21-22).

4- Sacrament of The Eucharist (Thanksgiving)

Instituted by the Lord Jesus in the upper room in Zion, on the night of His passion when He took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to His disciples saying, “Take eat, this is My Body. Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it and He said to them ‘This is My Blood of the new covenant which is shed for many’” (Mark 14: 22-24).

5- Sacrament of the Unction Of The Sick

Instituted by the Lord Jesus when He said to His disciples, “Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers” (Matthew 10:8), and, “Whatever city you enter, heal the sick who are there” (Luke 10:8). The Apostles then put the Lord’s words into practice: “They anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them” (Mark 6:13). Our

teacher St. James the Apostle advised believers to practice it, by saying, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14-15).

6- Sacrament of Holy Matrimony

Instituted by the Lord Jesus who blessed the Sacrament of Matrimony by attending the wedding of Cana of Galilee, where, "He manifested His glory and His disciples believed in Him" (John 2: 1-11). Also, St. Paul says, "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Churches" (Ephesians 5:32). This means that the physical union between a man and his wife is a sign and symbol of a greater spiritual matter, that is, of the unity of heart and soul, resembling the unity of Christ and the Church.

7- Sacrament of Priesthood

Instituted by the Lord Jesus when He chose His twelve disciples among many of His followers, and called them Apostles. The selection was accomplished after a whole night of prayer, when the Lord Jesus went out to the mountain to pray (Luke 6: 12-13), and then sent them to preach saying, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matthew 10:7). The Lord said to them, "I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain" (John 15:16). He gave them the authority saying, "Assuredly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). After the resurrection, the Lord, "Breathed on them and said to them: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained'" (John 2:23), and to them only, He said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matthew: 28:19-20). He gave the mystery of His Holy Body and Blood only to them saying, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19).

Definition of a Church Sacrament

The Church Sacrament is an invisible grace we receive by practicing a visible rite, and a visible sign or substance performed by a priest.

1- In Baptism, the substance is water by which we receive the second birth from Water and Spirit.

2- In Confirmation, the substance is the oil of Myron, by which the Holy Spirit dwells in us.

3- The sign of the Sacrament of Confession and Repentance is the confessing person, who accepts the prayer of absolution at the end of Confession to gain forgiveness of sins.

4- The substance of the Sacrament of Communion is the bread and wine, by which we eat the Holy Body and Precious Blood of Emmanuel our God.

5- The substance of the Sacrament of Unction of sick is oil, by which we receive physical and psychological remedy.

6- The sign of the Sacrament of Matrimony is the bride and groom who receive the prayers, so the Holy Spirit dwells upon them and unites them in body and spirit.

7- The sign of the Sacrament of Priesthood is the ordained person, who accepts the prayers of the Sacrament of Priesthood and the laying of hands for a certain priestly rank, to gain the grace for starting church services - whether Sacraments or authority for various church matters and management.

Redemptive and Non-Redemptive Sacraments

There are four redemptive Sacraments out of the Seven Sacraments. They are necessary for eternal salvation, and every believer should practice them in order to gain eternal salvation. These are: 1) Baptism, 2) Confirmation, 3) Confession, and 4) Communion.

The other three Sacraments are non-redemptive and unnecessary for eternal salvation.

5) **Sacrament of Unction of the Sick:** Given for the remedy of those who are physically or psychologically unwell only.

6) **Sacrament of Matrimony:** For those who want to marry for the purpose of sharing lives and bearing children. However, there are many monks and nuns, and those who live celibate lives who gain eternal life with merit.

7- **Sacrament of Priesthood:** Reserved only for those who are ordained as a deacon, priest or bishop. However, the majority of the Congregation has no priestly ranks, but is called for redemption and eternal life.

Physical Medicine and Spiritual Medicine:

Physical medicine has three classes of medicine:-

a) **Preventive Medicine:** like vaccination given to children against smallpox, paralysis and others, to protect them against these diseases.

b) **Curative Medicine:** prescribed for a person after having had the doctor diagnose the reason for illness.

c) **Supplementary Medicine:** various vitamins, prescribed by the doctor to strengthen the human body, giving energy and immunity against a disease once more.

The same applies to the soul in that resembles the body; it is prone to spiritual diseases like sin, satanic warfare and other problems.

Our great physician, the Lord Jesus, made the church our spiritual hospital, and the priest as its spiritual physician, as St. John Chrysostom once said, "Are you a sinner? Go to the Church which is a hospital not a court." In the church you will find the spiritual physician who is the priest. Tell him your sins, as he accurately examines everything and prescribes the appropriate cure.

The spiritual medicines are the Seven Sacraments of the Church, which are preventive, curative and supplementary.

1) Preventive

Sacrament of Myron: by which the Holy Spirit dwells to fortify against sin and evil, helps to overcome sin and provides victory in spiritual struggle.

Sacrament of Matrimony: protects the couple from falling into the sin of adultery.

2) Curative

Sacrament of Baptism: provides the cure from the original sin for children, and from the committed sins of those older.

Sacrament of Confession and Repentance: for those who repent and confess, this sacrament provides the cure and forgiveness of their sins.

Sacrament of Unction of the Sick: provides cure for those who are physically and psychologically ill, caused by sin.

3) Supplementary

Sacrament of Communion: after receiving the Holy Body and precious Blood of the Lord Jesus, we gain power to help us in overcoming the evil one.

Sacrament of Priesthood: Priesthood gives the priest grace and power in his struggle as he strives to be our example in attitude, and not be a stumbling block, but rather to keep him pure from sin, and accept the great rank of priesthood in reverence. He should remember what our teacher St. Paul said: "We have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men" (1 Corinthians 4:9).

An Imperishable Feature

Certain Church Sacraments are performed with an imperishable feature, so must not be repeated again at any time. By Baptism we are made children of God our Father, and this is imperishable. By Chrismation, we are made soldiers of our great King, and this is imperishable. By Priesthood we are made servants and priests of the great High Priest, and this is imperishable. But the rest of the Sacraments are performed repeatedly as needed.

Conditions To Accomplish The Seven Sacraments

For every Sacrament of the seven, there are three essential and necessary conditions in order to administer them:

- a) An adequate substance for the Sacrament like water for Baptism, bread and wine for the Sacrament of Communion, oil for the Unction of the Sick, and so on.
- b) An ordained priest by the laying on of the apostolic hand.
- c) Invocation of the Holy Spirit by the priest, by praying certain prayers for the dwelling of the Holy Spirit and sanctification of the Sacrament.

That is why the Sacraments must be administered in a correct official way according to the order given by God, as our Good Savior instituted and organized them, placing the adequate substance and specific prayers for every Sacrament, placed by the fathers guided by the Holy Spirit. The Sacrament is not true and effective for the believers unless it is administered correctly according to God's will, and the placement of the fathers guided by the Holy Spirit, and handed over by the Church and Holy Councils.

CONCLUSION:

The Holy Spirit plays a vital role in our life for attaining the Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit is most clearly revealed to us in the Church Sacraments. The Holy Spirit is also revealed in our way of life, our thinking, our priorities, our speech, and our actions. When the Holy Spirit is active in us, He enlightens our minds to get a better

understanding of spiritual things, to better understand the Bible, and to develop a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit also acts in our life as speaker, witness, and agent for us. He gives us the right words to speak at work, in school, in difficult circumstances, in times of sorrow, in times of tribulation and fear. He acts as a witness on our behalf to reveal the Truth to us in Jesus Christ, to reveal the deceptions and ways of the world, and the truth of spiritual matters concerning God. The Holy Spirit also acts as our agent, our representative in front of others to defend, reveal, protect, convict, and admonish. The kingdom of God cannot be obtained without the Holy Spirit being alive and active in our life.

VERSE TO REMEMBER: “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17)

4. THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD – PART II

SERVANT PREPARATION:

VERSE & REFERENCES:

Verse: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:22)

References: The Orthodox Study Bible and the Orthodox Bible Study Commentaries by Fr. Lawrence R. Farley (Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke).

LESSON PREPARATION

OBJECTIVES: The objectives of this lesson is understand the fruits of the Holy Spirit for us in our lives as discussed by St. Paul in Galatians 5:22-23. We also connect the fruits of the Spirits with parables given by Christ.

INTRODUCTION: These fruits of the Holy Spirit discussed in Galatians 5:22-23 are not free gifts from God but rather they come as a direct result from our relationship with Christ. The deeper the relationship we have with Christ, the more and deeper the fruits. There is a difference between gifts of the Holy Spirit and fruits of the Holy Spirit. Gifts of the Holy Spirit include talents and capabilities that God has given us, for free, to carry out His work. The type of talents are many and quite diverse, such as talents for music, writing, speaking, sports, leadership, speech, science, mathematics, etc... These are just a few examples of the free gifts (talents) of God that are given to us and they do not directly depend on our relationship with Christ. They are free unconditional gifts. This is not the case with the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are a direct result of our relationship with Christ. Either we will have fruits in life or we won't. The growth and the ripening of these fruits depends on our relationship with Christ.

We know that the fruits we eat grow on a tree. Sometimes fruits don't grow at all, sometimes they taste bitter, some become rotten, while others ripen and are very good to eat. Our relationship with Christ is like that. It is like a fruit. It has many forms, shapes, and sizes. If our relationship with Christ is non-existent, we will have no fruits from the Holy Spirit. If our relationship is weak, the fruit will be small, and may not taste good in God's view. It needs to grow. If our relationship with Christ is strong, the fruit will be ripe and taste good in God eyes.

Thus, one way to evaluate our relationship with Christ is to see if we bear fruit, that is, to assess whether we have the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our life. We need to assess which fruits of the Holy Spirit are evident in our lives, which ones need work, which are lacking, and which are strong and ripe. Having the fruits of the Holy Spirit are an absolute necessity for entering the Kingdom of God. This is exactly what St. Paul talks about in Galatians 5:22-23.

Lesson Body:

The Fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

To be technically correct, St. Paul actually calls it “fruit of the Spirit” and not “fruits of the Spirit.” This is because it is one united fruit that has 9 parts. They are not 9 distinct fruits. The 9 parts are very interrelated and unite, and thus it is one fruit with 9 parts.

The fruits of the Holy Spirit can therefore be used as a guide to evaluate our spiritual condition. In the same way that the doctor puts us through a battery of tests to diagnose potential physical problems, God has given us a process of evaluating spiritual problems in our lives:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

Each of these 9 parts of the fruit is a characteristic of the Holy Spirit’s active presence in our daily activities. Let’s look at each one and ask some diagnostic questions to make sure we’re healthy.

1. Love. This word for love doesn’t refer to warm feelings but to a deliberate attitude of good will and devotion to others. Love gives freely without looking at whether the other person deserves it, and it gives without expecting anything back.

Question: Am I motivated to do for others as Christ has done for me, or am I giving in order to receive something in return?

2. Joy. Unlike happiness, joy is gladness that is completely independent of the good or bad things that happen in the course of the day. In fact, joy denotes a supernatural gladness given by God's Spirit that actually seems to show up best during hard times. This is a product of fixing your focus on God's purposes for the events in your life rather than on the circumstances.

Question: Am I experiencing a joy of life on a regular basis, or is my happiness dependent on things going smoothly in my day?

3. Peace. It's not the absence of turmoil, but the presence of tranquility even while in a place of chaos. It is a sense of wholeness and completeness that is content knowing that God controls the events of the day.

Question: Do I find myself frazzled by the crashing waves of turmoil in my life, or am I experiencing "the peace that passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:6-7)?

4. Patience. Other words that describe this fruit are lenience, long-suffering, forbearance, perseverance, and steadfastness. It is the ability to endure ill treatment from life or at the hands of others without lashing out or paying back.

Question: Am I easily set off when things go wrong or people irritate me, or am I able to keep a godly perspective in the face of life's irritations?

5. Kindness. When kindness is at work in a person's life, he or she looks for ways to adapt to meet the needs of others. It is moral goodness that overflows. It's also the absence of malice.

Question: Is it my goal to serve others with kindness, or am I too focused on my own needs, desires or problems to let the goodness of God overflow to others?

6. Goodness. While kindness is the soft side of good, goodness reflects the character of God. Goodness in you desires to see goodness in others and is not beyond confronting or even rebuking (as Jesus did with the money changers in the temple) for that to happen.

Question: Does my life reflect the holiness of God, and do I desire to see others experience God at a deep level in their own lives?

7. Faithfulness. A faithful person is one with real integrity. He or she is someone others can look to as an example, and someone who is truly devoted to others and to Christ. Our natural self always wants to be in charge, but Spirit-controlled

faithfulness is evident in the life of a person who seeks good for others and glory for God.

Question: Are there areas of hypocrisy and indifference toward others in my life, or is my life characterized by faith in Christ and faithfulness to those around me?

8. Gentleness. Meekness is not weakness. Gentleness is not without power, it just chooses to defer to others. It forgives others, corrects with kindness, and lives in tranquility.

Question: Do I come across to others as brash and headstrong, or am I allowing the grace of God to flow through me to others?

9. Self-control. Our fleshly desires, Scripture tells us, are continually at odds with God's Spirit and always want to be in charge. Self-control is literally releasing our grip on the fleshly desires, choosing instead to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. It is power focused in the right place.

Question: Are my fleshly desires controlling my life, or am I allowing the Spirit to direct me to the things that please God and serve others?

10. Walk by the Spirit. While not a fruit of the Spirit, the final item on the checkup produces all nine qualities listed above. When we follow the Spirit's lead instead of being led by our self-focused desires, He produces the fruit.

But even when we don't walk by the Spirit, He is the very one who convicts us that things are not in proper order in our lives.

God promises that if we are willing to admit that we have been walking our own way and ask for His forgiveness and cleansing, He will empower us through His Spirit to live above ourselves and live the abundant life for which He has created us.

Question: Am I actively depending on the Holy Spirit to guide me in God's ways so I don't get wrapped up in myself? If not, am I willing to confess to God that His ways are better than mine, and that I need the Spirit's guidance to live above the fray?

There are many parables, stories, and verses in the Bible that talk about the importance of bearing fruits for Christ in our life. Let us discuss just a few of these.

1. The Parable of the Strong Man (Matthew 12:29-30).

The parable of the Strong Man is found in three of the four Gospels. In Matthew 12:29-30, Jesus says “Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad.” The strong man in the parable is Satan and the stronger man is Christ. Satan has influence over the fallen human race. It is the work of Christ to gather the children of God while those who scatter are in direct opposition to God. Those who work in opposition to Christ are different from those who work in good faith towards His purpose and are not yet united to the church. However, only good deeds done for Christ's sake bring forth fruits from the Holy Spirit, and thus deeds done for any other purpose, even if they are good deeds, are deeds that scatter abroad. Thus, in the end, Christ the stronger man came to gather us from the stranglehold of Satan to do good deeds for Him and to bear spiritual fruits, which are the fruits of the Spirit.

There are many other parables that talk about the consequences of not bearing fruit in our spiritual lives. Some excellent parables include the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), and the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21).

2. The Unfruitful Fig Tree (Mark 11:12-14)

The primary theme of the Monday of Holy Week concerns the unfruitful tree that Jesus cursed on His way to Bethany with His disciples. A related event is the overturning of the tables of merchants who were selling goods in the temple. The reading for this occurs in Mark 11:12-14, and this corresponds to the reading of the first hour of Monday morning of the Holy Week.

The unfruitful fig tree is a symbol of the Jewish nation (Israel), which has now rejected Christ. Christ refers to this rejection in the third hour reading

of Monday evening, when Jesus laments, "O Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wing, but you were not willing." (Luke 13:31-35). Christ here tells us the importance of being fruitful in our spiritual lives.

One of the worst attributes a person can have in their spiritual life is mediocrity, although they may strive very high in everything else. That is, we become content with mediocrity in our spiritual life and do not achieve our potential in Christ. When we do this, it is a rejection of Christ Himself. Christ tells us here in this story that this is unacceptable and will result in ultimate rejection and condemnation by Him as the fig tree was condemned and it withered. We also read about not achieving one's potential in Christ in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), and the Rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), both of whom were condemned. So Christ will not accept mediocrity. On the contrary, Christ calls on us to be perfect. He says in Matthew 5:48, "be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."

Thus, an important lesson we learn from the unfruitful fig tree is that we must achieve our potential in Christ and be fruitful. Christ tells the disciples how to do this. When St. Peter on the next day points out that the fig tree had withered, Christ answered and said, "Have faith in God." So Christ tells us here that the way to bear fruit is through faith and repentance.

The consequences of bearing fruits are obvious: We draw closer to Christ, lead others to Christ, and ultimately be lead to eternal life. We bear fruits by faith, prayer, and repentance. The consequences of not bearing fruit are also obvious. When one lives a spiritually mediocre life, they take shortcuts in their fruit bearing by having an outward appearance of bearing fruits, like the Pharisees. The Pharisees outwardly appeared to bear fruits but inwardly they were withered. We read about this in the ninth hour reading of Monday evening of holy Week when Jesus dines at the Pharisee's house and there he curses them for their outward appearance. People who live in spiritual mediocrity typically live an outwardly "religious" life, but their religion has in reality gone sour internally! St. Paul says, "They have a form of religion, but they deny the power thereof." (1 Timothy 3:5). Christ here wants to draw our attention to this point: that the bearing of fruits is internal, and He curses the external appearance of bearing of fruits. Christ

curses the person who is caught up in external appearances and neglects the weightier matters of the law, "justice, mercy, and faith". (Matthew 23:23)

Another consequence of the lack of bearing fruit is a deeper life of sin. A life that turns the church into a business or a social ground like the merchants did in the Bible when they sold in the temple (Mark 11:15-16). It is a life that uses the church for worldly gain. Christ makes it clear here that such behavior will be overturned. The merchants selling in the temple is further evidence of the rejection of Christ to those who refuse to bear spiritual fruits.

As a result of Israel's rejection of Christ, that is, the fig tree not bearing fruit, Christ Himself rejects the Jewish nation by making the fig tree wither. Thus, Christ's curse is a symbol of the judgment of Israel. As a result, Christ opens his Kingdom to everyone. He mentions this in the first hour of the Monday evening Holy Week when He says "They will come from the East and the West, and the North and the South and sit down in the Kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29). Christ makes sure that His disciples see this and that they need to understand here that Israel is being rejected and now the Kingdom is open for everyone, Jews and gentiles alike.

The last point we make here is that Christ warns us to watch and be alert, for we do not know when our time will come to depart from this earth. These readings occur in the 1st, 6th, and 11th hour on Monday evening of Holy Week. Christ here makes it clear that the time for repentance is limited, that our time to bear fruits is limited, and we never know when He will call us to give an account of our fruit-bearing. He says, "take heed of ourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly" (Luke 21:34). That day came unexpectedly for the fig tree, as Jesus called upon it and it had no fruits to show.

It is interesting to note here that Jesus visited the fig tree out of season, that is He visited it at an unexpected time. This is a symbol for the unexpected arrival of Christ in our life, and this theme is continued in the Pascha Tuesday Gospel readings. Thus Jesus makes it clear to us here in the beginning of the Holy Week to be alert and to watch, and to repent so that

the cares of this life do not overtake us, like they did the merchants and the Pharisees, and the rich farmer in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) . Our time here is very limited and the time to repent and bear fruits is now, and not tomorrow.

This is what St. Paul says, “I say then, walk in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16). He says this as if this was a very urgent matter!

3. Some Great Verses from Christ on Bearing Fruits

- “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you” (John 15:16)
- “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” (John 15:1-2)

Conclusion: As we read from the stories, verses, and parables above, the time to bear fruit is now! We must bear fruit if we are to receive the Kingdom, and these fruits are an outpouring of the Holy Spirit based on our relationship with Christ. St. Paul speaks with an urgency in receiving the Spirit. It is an urgent matter. We don't know what tomorrow hold and we don't know when our life will end, so the time is now. Christ will check up on us “out of season” to see if we are fruitless or have ripe fruits. We use the fruits of the Holy Spirit as a measuring stick to assess our spiritual life. When we read about bearing fruits, please remember the parable of the strong man, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the parable of

the talents, and the parable of the rich fool. We must also read carefully the story of the unfruitful fig tree.

Verse to Remember: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you” (John 15:16)

5. TEMPATATIONS IN STRIVING FOR THE KINGDOM – PART I

SERVANT PREPARATION:

VERSE & REFERENCES:

Verse: “But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, ¹⁰ and have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (Colossians 3:8-10)

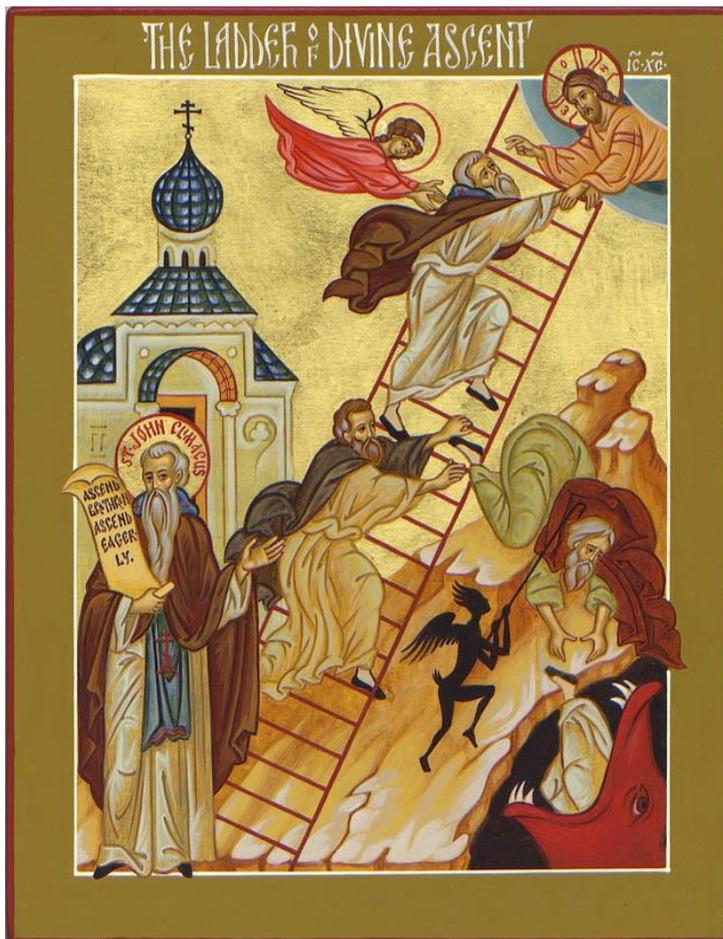
References: The Orthodox Study Bible, the book titled “The Ladder of Divine Ascent,” by St. John Climacus, and the Orthodox Bible Study Commentaries by Fr. Lawrence R. Farley (Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke).

LESSON PREPARATION

OBJECTIVES: The objectives of this lesson is to understand the temptations and “vices” that can prevent us from getting into the

Kingdom of God. Thus, we will study Steps 8-23 in St. John Climacus's book titled The Ladder of Divine Ascent.

INTRODUCTION: St. John Climacus was a 6th and 7th century Orthodox monk in a monastery on Mount Sinai. The monastery is known today as St. Catherine's monastery. He was born in Syria and died in Egypt in 606 AD. He is also known as St. John of the Ladder because he wrote a great spiritual book in the 6th century called the Ladder of Divine Ascent. The book describes the 30 steps that one must climb on the ladder to get to heaven. It has become a classic book, and it used and read in monasteries during the period of the Great Lent. Very little is known about the life other than the book he wrote and the monastery where he lived.





St. John Climacus describes in his book the 30 steps one must climb to get to heaven.

Each sequence of steps has a theme. The thirty steps are

- **Theme of Steps 1–3: Renunciation of the world**
 - 1. Renunciation of the world
 - 2 Detachment
 - 3. Exile

- **Theme of Steps 4-7: The Practice of the Virtues (“Active Life”)**

- 4. Obedience
- 5. Penitence
- 6. Remembrance of Death
- 7. Sorrow

- **Theme of Steps 8–23: The Struggle Against the Passions**

(a) Passions (Vices) that are Pre-dominantly non-physical

- 8. Anger
- 9. Malice
- 10. Slander
- 11. Talkativeness
- 12. Falsehood
- 13. Despondency

(b) Physical and Material Passions

- 14. Gluttony
- 15. Lust
- 16. Avarice (love of money)
- 17. Poverty

(c) Non- Physical Passions (continued)

- 18. Insensitivity
- 19. Sleep, prayer, and singing Psalms
- 20. Alertness
- 21. Fear
- 22. Vainglory
- 23. Pride

- **Theme of Steps 24-26: The Higher Virtues of the Active Life**

- 24. Simplicity

- 25. Humility
- 26. Discernment

- **Theme of Steps 27-30: Union with God**
 - 27. Stillness
 - 28. Prayer
 - 29. Dispassion (not influenced by the things of the world)
 - 30. Love

Lesson Body:

Steps 8-23 are the vices that we will concentrate on in the next two lessons. These are physical and non-physical passions

Step 8: Anger

Handling anger is an important life skill. Christian counselors report that 50 percent of people who come in for counseling have problems dealing with anger. Anger can shatter communication and tear apart relationships, and it ruins both the joy and health of many. Sadly, people tend to justify their anger instead of accepting responsibility for it. Everyone struggles, to varying degrees, with anger. Thankfully, God's Word contains principles regarding how to handle anger in a godly manner, and how to overcome sinful anger.

Anger is not always sin. There is a type of anger of which the Bible approves, often called "righteous indignation." God is angry (Psalm 7:11; Mark 3:5), and believers are commanded to be angry (Ephesians 4:26). St. Paul says in Ephesians 4:26, "Be angry and do not sin." Two Greek words in the New Testament are translated as "anger." One means "passion, energy" and the other means "agitated, boiling." Biblically, anger is God-given energy intended to help us solve problems. Examples

of biblical anger include David's being upset over hearing Nathan the prophet sharing an injustice (2 Samuel 12) and Jesus' anger over how some of the Jews had defiled worship at God's temple in Jerusalem (John 2:13-18). Notice that neither of these examples of anger involved self-defense, but a defense of others or of a principle.

That being said, it is important to recognize that anger at an injustice inflicted against oneself is also appropriate. Anger has been said to be a warning flag—it alerts us to those times when others are attempting to or have violated our boundaries. God cares for each individual. Sadly, we do not always stand up for one another, meaning that sometimes we must stand up for ourselves. This is especially important when considering the anger that victims often feel. Victims of abuse, violent crime, or the like have been violated in some way. Often while experiencing the trauma, they do not experience anger. Later, in working through the trauma, anger will emerge. For a victim to reach a place of true health and forgiveness, he or she must first accept the trauma for what it was. In order to fully accept that an act was unjust, one must sometimes experience anger. Because of the complexities of trauma recovery, this anger is often not short-lived, particularly for victims of abuse. Victims should process through their anger and come to a place of acceptance, even forgiveness. This is often a long journey. As God heals the victim, the victim's emotions, including anger, will follow. Allowing the process to occur does not mean the person is living in sin.

Anger can become sinful when it is motivated by pride (James 1:20), when it is unproductive and thus distorts God's purposes (1 Corinthians 10:31), or when anger is allowed to linger (Ephesians 4:26-27). One obvious sign that anger has turned to sin is when, instead of attacking the problem at hand, we attack the wrongdoer. Ephesians 4:15-19 says we are to speak the truth in love and use our words to build others up, not allow rotten or destructive words to pour from our lips. Unfortunately, this poisonous speech is a common characteristic of fallen man (Romans 3:13-14). Anger becomes sin when it is allowed to boil over without restraint, resulting in a scenario in which hurt is multiplied (Proverbs 29:11), leaving devastation in its wake. Often, the

consequences of out-of-control anger are irreparable. Anger also becomes sin when the angry one refuses to be pacified, holds a grudge, or keeps it all inside (Ephesians 4:26-27). This can cause depression and irritability over little things, which are often unrelated to the underlying problem.

Step 9: Malice

Malice is the desire to inflict injury, harm, or suffering on another, either because of a hostile impulse or out of deep-seated meanness. Joseph's brothers had malice in their hearts towards Joseph. The Pharisees had malice towards Jesus. Cain had malice towards Abel. The feelings of malice often come from jealousy and envy.

Malice comes from the heart and Christians must avoid it by walking by the Spirit and putting on the full armor of God. You must go to war with every malicious thought. Never dwell on it, but ask God for help immediately. How do you fight it you ask? Get alone with God and wrestle with God in prayer! Make sure you are forgiving others daily and make sure you put the past behind you. Malice will hinder your spiritual growth. Anything in your life that could be contributing to malice must be removed. It could be secular music, TV, bad influences, etc. You must think of and surround yourself with godly and righteous things. The Holy Spirit must be active in our life.

What does the Bible Say

1. "But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth" (Colossians 3:8)
2. "Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1 Peter 2:1-2).

3. Isaiah 58:9-11: “Then you’ll call, and the Lord will answer; you’ll cry for help, and he’ll respond, ‘Here I am.’ “If you do away with the yoke among you, and pointing fingers and malicious talk; if you pour yourself out for the hungry. And satisfy the needs of afflicted souls, then your light will rise in darkness, and your night will be like noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in parched places, and they will strengthen your bones; and you’ll be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.”
4. Colossians 3:6-10: “It is because of these things that the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. You used to behave like them as you lived among them. But now you must also get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene speech, and all such sins. Do not lie to one another, for you have stripped off the old nature with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new nature, which is being renewed in full knowledge, consistent with the image of the one who created it.”
5. Titus 3:2-6: “to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone. At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.”
6. Ephesians 4:30-32: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit, by whom you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, quarreling, and slander be put away from you, along with all hatred. And be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another just as God has forgiven you in the Messiah.”
7. Proverbs 26:25-26: “Though their speech is charming, do not believe them, for seven abominations fill their hearts. Their malice may be concealed by deception, but their wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.”

8. Colossians 3:5: “So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don’t be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.”

Advice

1. James 1:19-20: “My Christian brothers, you know everyone should listen much and speak little. He should be slow to become angry. A man’s anger does not allow him to be right with God.”
2. Ephesians 4:25-27: “So stop lying to each other. Tell the truth to your neighbor. We all belong to the same body. If you are angry, do not let it become sin. Get over your anger before the day is finished. Do not let the devil start working in your life.”
3. Mark 12:30-31: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ This is the first Law. “The second Law is this: ‘You must love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other Law is greater than these.”
4. Colossians 3:1-4 “If then you have been raised with Christ, keep looking for the good things of heaven. This is where Christ is seated on the right side of God. Keep your minds thinking about things in heaven. Do not think about things on the earth. You are dead to the things of this world. Your new life is now hidden in God through Christ. Christ is our life. When He comes again, you will also be with Him to share His shining-greatness.”

Repaying evil

1. Proverbs 20:22: “ Do not say, “I will repay evil”; wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.”

2. Matthew 5:43-44: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

3. 1 Thessalonians 5:15-16: “ See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to do good to each other and to all people. Always be joyful.”

Reminders

1. 1 Peter 2:16: “Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”

2. 1 Corinthians 14:20: “ Dear brothers and sisters, don’t be childish in your understanding of these things. Be innocent as babies when it comes to evil, but be mature in understanding matters of this kind”

Step 10: Slander

Slander is the action or crime of making a false spoken statement damaging to a person's reputation. Slander is the sin of gossip. People love to talk about other people, especially if they can say something bad: at work, at church, and especially over the telephone, etc. Many newspaper columns, magazines, and TV and radio talk shows are devoted to the latest gossip about movie stars, politicians, and other public figures. People delight in digging up dirt. If we were honest, most of us would admit we ourselves at times have a problem with speech. How many can honestly say they have never said something about someone else and then later realized they should not have said it? If we understood the Bible better, we might regret even more of our speech.

There are some many examples of slander in the Bible.

In Genesis 39, recall what Potiphar's wife said about Joseph. She claimed that Joseph wanted to lie with her against her will. We read "But it happened about this time, when Joseph went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house *was* inside, ¹² that she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. ¹³ And so it was, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and fled outside, ¹⁴ that she called to the men of her house and spoke to them, saying, "See, he has brought in to us a Hebrew to mock us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. ¹⁵ And it happened, when he heard that I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me, and fled and went outside"¹⁶. So she kept his garment with her until his master came home. ¹⁷ Then she spoke to him with words like these, saying, "The Hebrew servant whom you brought to us came in to me to mock me; ¹⁸ so it happened, as I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me and fled outside." (Genesis 39:14-19).

2. Recall the story when God told Moses to send men to search out the land of Canaan. This story is found in Numbers chapter 13 - 14:38. These men were to spy out the land, to see if the people who dwelt there were strong or weak, whether the land was good or bad, if the people dwelt in tents or strong holds. They were to see if the land was "fat or lean" and if it contained wood or not (Numbers 13:1-20). Forty days they searched out the land and then returned. They brought back proof that the land was flowing with milk and honey - much luscious fruit. But when it came to describing the men of the land, they all except Joshua and Caleb lied and greatly exaggerated their strength and stature. They said, "...ALL the people that we saw in it are men of GREAT STATURE. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight "(Numbers 13:32-33). Yes, there probably were some men of great stature, but certainly not ALL as they tried to make out. And the sons of Anak maybe were giants, but they greatly exaggerated in their "grasshopper" analogy. Gross exaggeration is a form of slander.
3. In the Story of Susanna in the Book of Daniel, two men lusted for Susanna and watched her bath every day. One day they broke into the garden, and tried to get Susanna to lie with them. She refused, and when people heard her scream,

this is how the two men covered it up: They said, “As we were walking in the garden alone, this woman entered with two servant girls, shut the garden gates and sent the servant girls away. A young man, who was hidden there, came and lay with her. When we, in a corner of the garden, saw this lawlessness, we ran toward them. We saw them lying together, but the man we could not hold, because he was stronger than we; he opened the gates and ran off. Then we seized this one and asked who the young man was, but she refused to tell us. We testify to this.”

4. Jesus was constantly slandered by the Pharisees. They called Him endless names, such as a glutton and a winebibber (Matthew 11:19). They claimed He was demon-possessed (John 8:48-52) and said he casts out demons by Beelzebub (Matthew 12:24). They also said “He stirs up the people” (Luke 23:5), that He was a blasphemer (Luke 5:21). They also claimed that Jesus is a sinner (John 9:16-17).

Gossip (slander) is like a secret craving. We say we don't like it, but when it's within reach, we almost can't resist it. We get a sudden appetite to know what we don't know... about somebody else.

Why is it so hard to stop? Proverbs 18:8 says, “The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts.”

No, you might think. *Not me.* I'm not into sharing the dirty details about a person's life just for fun. But gossip comes in many flavors, and it involves *listening* as well. Proverbs 17:4 notes: “Wrongdoers eagerly listen to gossip; liars pay close attention to slander.”

Types of Gossip and What the Bible Says

How do we know what's gossip and what's not gossip? We can find a number of bible verses about gossip, especially in Proverbs, and we can also ask God to reveal it to us. James 1:5 tells us: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

Have any of the types of gossip below been too tempting for you to resist lately?

The Bible mentions slander countless times in lists like this one: “But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (Colossians 3:8).

James 4:11 tells it straight: “Brothers, do not slander one another.”

1. Dishing

“Dishin’ the dirt” basically means sharing the “juicy info” you learned about someone. Maybe the intent isn’t to directly cause damage, but by keeping the gossip alive, it continues to spread and taint the image of the person it’s about.

Proverbs 20:19 tells us that a “gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.”

James 5:9 says, “Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!”

2. Rumors

You hear something, and it’s not good, and it’s also not confirmed as true. But you tell someone or ask someone else about it to get more info. The rumor mill turns and turns and the gossip spreads.

Proverbs 13:3 says, “He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.”

3. Backbiting

It’s a flavor of gossip that involves speaking spiteful or slanderous words about another who is not present and can do nothing in defense. It’s secretive, and the Bible actually mentions it by name in Proverbs 22:23: “The north wind brings forth rain, and a backbiting tongue, angry looks.”

Also: “Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will destroy; No one who has a haughty look and an arrogant heart will I endure” (Psalm 101:5).

4. Not-Really-Joking Jokes

Have you ever taken some part of truth and turned it into a joke about someone that makes other question their character? It also serves as a passive way to spread more gossip.

When the joking is harmful to another, it’s mockery. How can you know a mocker? It’s in the Bible. Proverbs 21:24 says, “Mockers are proud and haughty; they act with boundless arrogance.” And verse 9:8 says, “A mocker resents correction; he will not consult the wise.”

In addition, Proverbs 22:10 says, “Drive out the mocker, and out goes strife; quarrels and insults are ended.”

And Psalm 1:1 starts out: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.”

5. Planting Seeds

The Bible tells us we reap what we sow. With that in mind, this type of gossip is said in such a way to make the listener question or assume something about the character of a person.

James 3:5 tells us, “Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.”

A warning from the Bible from Proverbs 16:28: “A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends.”

6. *Whispered Innuendo*

These subtle insinuations can mislead others into thinking wrong thoughts, especially if the conclusions are based on gossipy hunches. Here's an example: *It's interesting how he was "out of town" the night she was also out of town.*

Proverbs 26:30 tells us, "For lack of wood the fire goes out, And where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down."

And a warning from the bible: "What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs" (Luke 12:3).

7. *Got-This-All-Wrong Gossip*

You admit you probably got it wrong, but spread it anyway, because it's still touching on some points that could be true. Or would sound exciting if true. Either way, it usually starts out like this: I probably got this all wrong, but apparently...

This is one of the most common types of gossip. We think we're just passing on the latest news. Could it hurt someone? Maybe. But if we don't even know the person, does it matter? James 4:17 says, "Anyone, then, who know the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

Thankfully, Jesus gave us an example to follow: "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is said whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs" (Matt 10:26-27).

Step 11: Talkativeness

The Bible warns us against talking too much or being overly talkative. In fact, the Bible says that a fool can be recognized by his many words (Ecclesiastes 5:3). Ecclesiastes 10:14 adds that a fool "multiplies words." The Bible discourages using

an abundance of words where a few would suffice. “Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues” (Proverbs 17:28). Those who feel compelled to give utterance to every thought in their heads usually end up in trouble.

Proverbs 10:8 describes the overly talkative person as a “babbling fool”, a “prating fool” or a “chattering fool” who will come to ruin. Such a person is contrasted with one who is “wise of heart” and who “will receive commandments.” The antithetical parallelism of Proverbs 10:19 warns that talking too much naturally leads to sin: “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent”.

The wise person refuses to talk too much. Rather, he fears the Lord, listens to the Lord, and obeys the Lord. He follows the example of Mary, “who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said” (Luke 10:39). When our mouths are full of our own words, we have little time or interest in God’s words. Talking too much usually means listening too little.

Modern culture offers numerous avenues through which we can express ourselves verbally. Social media, blogs, cell phones, and call-in radio all enable us to keep up a constant stream of chatter. But how much of our talking is truly edifying or important (see Ephesians 4:29)? Saying what needs to be said is important, but talking too much easily leads to saying what should not be said.

Restraining our lips is an indication of wisdom and humility. Talkative people often do not take the time between their many words to choose their words carefully. Christians should be aware that talking too much is detrimental to our witness in the world, as James reminds us, “If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless” (James 1:26). James later says that controlling the tongue is one of the hardest things to do, humanly speaking (James 3:2). In fact, “no human being can tame the tongue” (James 3:7). Fortunately, we have the Holy Spirit to help us with the task, and here is a helpful prayer: “Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalm 141:3).

The apostle Peter is often quoted in the gospels, and it seems that he was a talkative person by nature. In one instance at least, Peter’s verbosity was ill-

advised. On the mount of transfiguration, Peter says to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what to say . . .)” (Mark 9:5–6). Notice that Peter “did not know what to say,” so, of course, he *said* something! It’s just what talkative people do. God quickly silenced Peter by redirecting his focus: “A cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!’” (Mark 9:7). St. Peter’s talking had to be replaced with listening.

Just as the overly talkative person displays foolishness, the one who holds his tongue demonstrates knowledge and understanding. “He who has knowledge spares his words, and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit” (Proverbs 17:27). We can’t gain knowledge if we are constantly talking, but understanding comes from listening and using our words sparingly. “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak . . .” (James 1:19).

Conclusion: The sins of the heart are many, and we must not fall into the non-physical vices, especially the sins of the tongue. One of the main aims of Lent is to control and tame the tongue at St. James says in his epistle Chapter 3. Anger, Malice, Slander, and Talkativeness all have to do with the tongue. If we can control our tongue, we can eliminate a lot of sins in our life.

Verse to Remember: “Life and death are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21).

5. TEMPATATIONS IN STRIVING FOR THE KINGDOM – PART II

SERVANT PREPARATION:

VERSE & REFERENCES:

Verse: “And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; ²⁹ being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness,

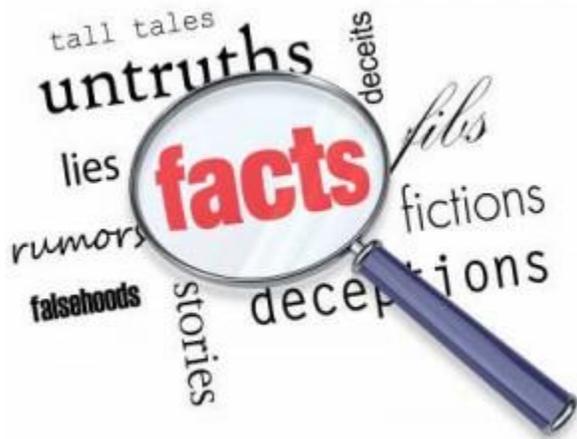
maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are whisperers*” (Romans 1:28-29).

References: The Orthodox Study Bible, the book titled “The Ladder of Divine Ascent,” by St. John Climacus, and the Orthodox Bible Study Commentaries by Fr. Lawrence R. Farley (Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke).

LESSON PREPARATION

OBJECTIVES: The objective of this lesson is to carefully discuss and examine steps 12-15 in St. John Climacus’s book, and to see how we can use these steps to improve our spiritual life.

INTRODUCTION: Steps 12-15 in St. John Climacus’s book are Falsehood, Despondency, Gluttony, and Lust. Falsehood and Despondency are non-physical sins, and Gluttony and Lust correspond to physical sins. Step 12 is falsehood. Falsehood basically refers to the sin of lying and untruthfulness. Step 13 is despondency. Despondency refers to loss of hope in our spiritual life, and in particular, loss of hope in Jesus Christ. Step 14 is gluttony. Gluttony refers to over excessiveness in eating and the general lack of control of the body through food and drink. Step 15 is lust of the flesh. This consists of the sins of sexual acts before marriage, adultery, unnatural sexual sins within marriage or outside of marriage. Thus, lust covers sexual sins within the context of marriage as well as outside of marriage, including the unmarried.



LESSON BODY:

Step 12: Falsehood:

Lying is probably the most common sin, by far, that we all commit. Many books have been written about the sin of lying and here we only summarize a few points on the topic. Lying is a most serious and habitual sin. Once a person starts to lie, it is very difficult to stop. It becomes a serious habit and the person starts to lie and lie even more. The sin is very destructive to the person who lies and to the people who are lied to. The first consequence of the liar is that people immediately lose trust and credibility in that person, and so even when that person tells the truth, one does not believe him. It is a very destructive sin in the home, when kids lie to their parents, or when siblings lie to each other, or when spouses lie to each other. Lying is demonic, and it really defines the devil. For Jesus Himself said that the devil is the "father of lies." Recall what Jesus said to the Pharisees in John 8:44: "You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *resources*, for he is a liar and the father of it."

The Bible is clear that lying is a sin and is displeasing to God. The first sin in this world involved a lie told to Eve. The Ten Commandments given to Moses includes "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus20:16). In the

early church, Ananias and Sapphira lied regarding a donation in order to make themselves look more generous than they really were. Peter's rebuke is stern: "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" God's judgment was sterner: the couple died as a result of their sin of lying.

Colossians 3:9 says, "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices." Lying is listed in 1 Timothy 1:9-11 as something practiced by the lawless. Furthermore, liars will be among those judged in the end (Revelation 21:8).

In contrast, God never lies (Titus 1:2). He is the source of truth. In Hebrews 6:18, we read "it is impossible for God to lie." Jesus called Himself the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), and He expects those who follow Him to be people of truth. The truth is to be expressed in love (Ephesians 4:15), offering hope to those seeking redemption from the lies of the world.

Unfortunately, habits like lying usually don't go away on their own. In fact, they often keep on growing, and eventually can destroy us. Perhaps God allows bad lying incidents to occur so we face our problem and seek His help to overcome it.

Have we ever stopped to ask ourselves why we find it necessary to lie? Often people lie for one of three reasons: to build themselves up, to get out of a jam, or to take advantage of someone (something involving money or sex, for example). While in the short term it may seem best, eventually lying destroys our reputation and only gets us into greater difficulty. The Bible wisely says, "Better to be poor than a liar" (Proverbs 19:22).

But whatever the reason, the motive for lying is strictly self-centered and sinful in the eyes of God. That's why the first step we need to take is to see our lying for what it really is — a sin that displeases God. We must turn to Christ and confess it to Him, and then commit your life (and your tongue) to Him.

We must ask God to help us overcome this habit, facing honestly the reasons behind it and putting Christ first in all we do. The Bible says, "Do not lie to each other, since you... have put on the new self" (Colossians 3:9-10).

Throughout the Bible, there are scriptures that discuss the topic of lying. Some explain how certain people lied. Others talk about the consequences of lying. Lying is perhaps one of the easiest of sins to commit. One little sentence leaves

the lips and all is well again. We all fall prey to it on occasion and it sometimes creates more chaos than we could have imagined. Other times you can get away with a little lie (here on earth; not before the throne). Lying is nothing new. In fact, it is what introduced Adam and Eve to the very first sin. So, let us start at the beginning after creation was complete.

Proverbs 6:16, 17 and 19 – There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue...a false witness who breathes out lies.

The Very First Lie

In Gen 2:16-17 God says to Adam, *“you may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat it you shall surely die.”* Quick side note, creation was not finished here because God had not made Eve yet. In Gen 2:18-23, the next passage, God then creates Eve from one of Adam’s ribs. After this, creation was then finished. In Genesis 3:1-5 we are introduced to the serpent (Satan) and his very first temptation to Eve; *now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘you shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* This is also where we are introduced to Satan’s greatest weapon, the half-truth. Satan knew that they would not die right that second, but he did know that they would die eventually and that was not part of God’s plan. Adam and Eve believed the half-truth. They indeed did not die that day, but they still died.

Are All Lies Considered Sin?

By certain events in the Bible, we would say no. How can this be? Let us look at two examples as I explain. Exodus 1:16-21 starts with the king of Egypt saying to two midwives, *“when you serve as a midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king commanded them,*

but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh (here is the lie), "because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. The fear of God is why the midwives lied. They knew that murder was wrong. They didn't lie for selfish reasons; they lied because they feared God.

Joshua 2:1-21 tells the story of Rahab the prostitute and how she lied to save two spies that Joshua had sent to check out Jericho and other local areas of the land. Her lie came from the same position as the midwives. Verse 8-9 says, *she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you (the spies) has fallen upon us. She feared the spies because they had God with them, thus this also makes her fear God. Her lie also was not for selfish gain. It was the fear of God that drove her to this decision. Anytime a person lies for the honest, true fear of God, I believe they will not be held accountable for it. It is those that lie for other reasons such as: selfishness, lust, greed and all sorts of other human endeavors that the lie becomes sin.*

When a Lie Becomes Sin

Lies become sin when any tiny hint of selfishness is there. Acts 5:1-9 is a perfect example. Ananias and Sapphira were a married couple that sold a piece of their property. They kept a portion of the money back for themselves but they wanted to look good in front of others, so they lied and said they were giving all of the profit to the church. In verses 3-5 Peter says to Ananias, *"Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."* When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. Men in the church carried him out and buried him. Later on Sapphira comes into the church knowing nothing about what happened to her husband. Verses 7-10 says, *after an interval of about three hours his (Ananias) wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." But Peter said to her, "How is it that you*

have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. Their lies were built around a false pretense to look like generous, giving people to the rest of the church. God does not accept this behavior.

Other Verses About Lying

Proverbs 6:16, 17 and 19 – *There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue...a false witness who breathes out lies.*

Leviticus 19:11-12 – *You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by My name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.*

Psalms 24:4-5 – *He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation.*

There are so many possible passages that we can find in the Bible about lying. We encourage everyone to research further into the heart of God and how lying affects us and those around us through reading His Word.

Step 13: Despondency:

Despondency is the loss of hope and confidence in Jesus Christ especially after a sin or series of sins are committed. Despondency itself is a sin since it is a loss of hope and confidence in Jesus Christ. One of the great examples in the Bible of despondency is Judas, who after betraying Jesus, had the chance to fully repent, but he became despondent and killed himself. He lost hope and confidence that Christ could forgive him. He felt sorry for himself rather than feel sorry towards Christ. He gave up on Christ and concentrated only on his own guilt and despair which led to his suicide. Contrast this with Peter who also betrayed Jesus. Peter denied Jesus not once but three times. But after Peter committed his sins, he felt a great godly sorrow for his sins. He was determined to repent. He never

despaired or lost hope. He repented and became a new man. He became one of the greatest saints who ever lived.

Psalms 73: 21-26 says something great about the sin of despondency.

“Thus my heart was grieved,
And I was vexed in my mind.

²² I *was* so foolish and ignorant;
I was *like* a beast before You.

²³ Nevertheless I *am* continually with You;
You hold *me* by my right hand.

²⁴ You will guide me with Your counsel,
And afterward receive me *to* glory.

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven *but* You?

And *there is* none upon earth *that* I desire besides You.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart fail;

But God *is* the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

Let us focus on verse 26: ““My flesh and my heart may fail” — because that’s the definition of despondency. There are three parts to that little phrase “my flesh and my heart may fail”?

"My flesh" — that means there’s a physical component to despondency. The body weakens, there’s fatigue, there’s a sense of listlessness and sluggishness.

Secondly, "and my heart" — that means there’s this emotional spiritual dimension to despondency. Our hearts are discouraged, dejected, gloomy, burned out.

Third, "fail." The word means come to an end, run out, be exhausted of resources. It’s like our life is a tank and in it is water that you need for refreshment. And somebody pulls the plug at the bottom and it just all runs out. And this word in

Hebrew means come to an end, be exhausted, be depleted of resources to handle problems and life.

Is Sin the Source of Despondency?

Now the question is, is unbelief the root of that experience of despondency? The answer is yes and no.

In other words, it's not simple. Unbelief is the root of *yielding to* despondency. Wherever despondency comes from, unbelief is at the root of making peace with it, yielding to it, giving no spiritual warfare to fight it, being negligent in putting on the armor of God and so on. We illustrate this briefly by looking at the Psalm and then looking at Jesus.

"But God..."

The Psalm 73:26 contains this truth, "My flesh and my heart may fail." Now literally it's just "fail," not "may fail." There's no "may" implied in this Hebrew verb. It's just, "My flesh and my heart are failing, I am discouraged, I am despondent, I am at my wit's end." And then comes the spiritual counter attack in the next phrase: "but God."

So here's this man David. The cork is pulled out at the bottom of his life. His heart and his flesh are just about depleted, and he says — perhaps with his last breath — "but God is the rock (or strength)" of my weak, failing life and "my portion forever."

So wherever this despondency may come from it is unbelief that **doesn't** say "but God." It is unbelief that puts up no resistance. It's unbelief that doesn't take the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit and fight. This much we can say with clarity from Scripture. "My body is shot, my heart is almost dead, and for whatever reason I will not yield. I will trust to God though my strength is gone."

In Psalm 19:7, we read "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul." The word of God is given to revive souls. The saints' souls need to be restored and revived. That means despondency comes and the Word of God is given to restore it.

Satan vs. the Son of God

Let's go to Jesus. Let us turn to Matthew 26:36. Let us for a moment be with Jesus for a few minutes in Gethsemane. Here, we've just celebrated the Lord's Supper. A few hours later Jesus is in Gethsemane and what's happening there is probably the greatest spiritual warfare in a human soul that's ever happened or ever will happen. Satan no doubt has drawn near. You remember when it said after Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, "He withdrew from him until an opportune time." When do you think that was? Right now at Gethsemane. And not only did *he* draw near. Satan gathered all of the most powerful members of his wicked army. We can be assured that the flaming darts that St. Paul mentions in Ephesians 6 were flying with volleys against the soul of the Son of God as he knelt there wrestling for his faithfulness.

Let's Look at verse 36: then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go yonder and pray." And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death."

Now what's going on here, why is Jesus so distressed and troubled and sorrowful? John 12:27 says "Now is my soul troubled. What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, but for this purpose, I have come to this hour." That text tells us what the nature of the temptation was. Satan was firing volley after volley into the mind of Jesus Christ. And thoughts came into His mind from Satan, thoughts like, "This is a dead end street. Golgotha is just a black hole. It's going to hurt like nothing has ever hurt any human being ever before, and these rascals aren't worth it, etc." These were coming out of Satan's wicked heart into the mind of the Son of God.

Satan wants to produce in Jesus a spirit of despondency that sinks unopposed in resignation and says "It won't work, there's no point in pressing on anymore." Now let us to think about this warfare for a minute and compare it to the disciples.

Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled

Jesus is sinless, and He is fully man and fully God. According to Hebrews 4:15 and 2 Corinthians 5:20, He never sinned at all, neither in thought, emotion, or deed. He was sinless. This means that the emotional turmoil that He was experiencing

at this moment was a fitting response to the kind of extraordinary temptation He was enduring. The demonic thought that Golgotha is a black hole of meaninglessness and emptiness and purposelessness is so horrendous that it ought to cause a jarring, a shock, in the soul of the Son of God as well as yours and mine.

It's like a bomb. Satan drops bombs on the peaceful sea of our lives. And if it's an atomic bomb there is, as soon as it explodes, a massive shock wave that hits before the deadly rays begin to make their way over people's lives. The shock wave of a satanic temptation that the death of the Son of God would be pointless is so powerful that it makes Him literally "sweat drops of blood".

Now the amazing thing about this is that the word used here that He was troubled is also used of the disciples. However Jesus says to the disciples, "Don't be troubled." John 14:1, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me." In John 14:27, we read, "My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, not as the world gives to you. "Let not your hearts be troubled." We read that Son of God was Himself troubled in Gethsemane and yet He tells the disciples to not be troubled." It's as though Satan drops this bomb, the same bomb, right in the experience of Jesus and the disciples.

They were about to be despondent because Jesus was going away and it looked to them like it was back to fishing. There's no Kingdom here. This is a pointless thing. Nothing good has happened and now our best friend and, we thought, Lord is gone. And Jesus says, "No, don't be troubled," and yet He Himself was troubled. Is this a contradiction? Is it okay for Jesus to be troubled and not okay for the disciples to be troubled? There is no contradiction. On the part of the disciples Jesus is saying, "When the bomb drops in your life and Satan colors the shock wave of this experience with black hopelessness, don't yield. Believe." In other words, He's telling them, "Counter attack, let not your hearts be troubled, attack, believe in God, believe also in Me." He's not saying that this first shock wave that can knock you over or pull the plug out of your life won't be there. He's saying, "Counter attack, believe, take my peace, listen to what I've said, look at the word of God. I will show you the path of life."

Now with regard to Jesus, no one knew better than the Son of God that He had to immediately counter attack the shock wave of Satan's satanic temptation. Let us

look very carefully at how Jesus responded to His troubled soul and the satanic attack on His peace with God. There are 5 steps to this fight.

Fight Unbelief Like Christ

These five steps are based on Matthew 26:37-39. As we read these 5 steps, we need to fix our your mind on what it is that threatens our tranquility most, what it is that causes despondency or disheartened feelings to rise most often in our own life. What's the shell that Satan drops most frequently into our life? And then as we mention these five steps that the Lord Jesus took when the bomb dropped in His life, we should translate them immediately into our experience, because they're all very relevant.

1. Jesus chose some close friends to be with him. Verse 37: "And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled." So he didn't withdraw. He took the inner ring, His most precious and trusted friends, and he pulled aside with them.
2. He opened His soul to them. Verse 38: "Then he said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.'" We can imagine how stunned they were. Jesus opened his soul to them.
3. He asked for their help in spiritual warfare. Verse 38, second half: "Remain here and watch with Me." Another text says "pray," and another, "Don't let yourself come into temptation; stay here and fight with me. Fight with me."
4. He poured out His heart to the Father in prayer. Verse 39: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." It's just fine to pray that the bombshell that has dropped into your life be taken away. That's just right. Whatever it is that Satan fires at you, it's just fine to say, "Take it away Father. You're stronger than he is."
5. But finally, he rested his soul in the sovereign wisdom of God. Second half of verse 39: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."

So here's the main point on despondency. When Satan drops a bombshell on the peace of our life, the initial shock waves of emotional response are not necessarily sin. What is sin is not to do what Jesus did when the bomb fell in the Garden of Gethsemane. Sin is *yielding to* depression and loss of confidence and hope in Christ. Sin is not taking the armor of God. Sin is not waging spiritual warfare.

But Jesus shows us another way. It's not painless, but it's not passive either. We must follow Him in it. In summary,

A Picture and a Plan.

1. Find your trusted friends. Who are they? Who are your inner ring?
2. Open your soul to them.
3. Ask them to fight with you, to wage war with you, to support you, to watch with you and pray with you.
4. Pour out your soul to the Father.
5. And rest in the sovereignty of His wisdom, come what may. "But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

The lesson of Jesus' life and the lesson of the Psalm 73:21-26 is this: every cave that we are in — wandering along, feeling the rocks, stumbling, stepping, bumping our head — every cave that we are in is a tunnel that opens into glory. It opens into a day like today in Heaven, with the sun shining, and the grass green, and the waters flowing — as long as we don't sit down in the cave and blow out the candle of faith.

Are we feeling down? Are our spirits low? These encouraging Bible verses could give us the inspirational lift we need.

1 Chronicles 16:11: "Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually!"

1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

1 Corinthians 15:19: "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."

1 Corinthians 15:57: "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

1 Corinthians 16:13: “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.”

1 John 4:18: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

1 John 4:4: “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”

1 John 5:14: “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”

1 John 5:14-15: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.”

1 Peter 1:3: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,”

1 Peter 4:11: “whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

1 Peter 5:7: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

1 Samuel 30:6 “And David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God.”

2 Corinthians 2:14: “Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ.”

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting

away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

2 Corinthians 4:8-9: “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”

2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

2 Corinthians 5:7: “For we live by faith, not by sight.”

2 Thessalonians 3:3: “But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.”

2 Timothy 1:7: “for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”

2 Timothy 1:7: “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.”

2 Timothy 1:7: “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

2 Timothy 4:17: “But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth.”

2 Timothy 4:18: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Colossians 3:15: “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.”

Colossians 3:15: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”

Deuteronomy 31:6: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Deuteronomy 31:8: “It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”

Deuteronomy 7:9: “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.”

Deuteronomy 7:9: “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations”

Ephesians 3:17-19: “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

Ephesians 3:20-21: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

Ephesians 6:10-11: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.”

Step 14: Gluttony

Gluttony is the first physical sin that St. John Climacus talks about in steps 8-23.

Gluttony is generally defined as "excessive eating." In the Bible, the word *glutton* and its variants are often mentioned alongside *drunkenness*. Therefore, it is clear that a glutton is someone who eats more than is healthy or eats excessively *and* that such behavior is considered sinful. Furthermore, gluttony is presented as an ongoing practice, not typically as a one-time activity.

While many would wish to ignore the Bible's teaching regarding overeating, there are seven direct references to gluttony made in Scripture, including the following:

"And they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a **glutton** and a drunkard'" (Deuteronomy 21:20).

"Be not among drunkards or among **gluttonous** eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the **glutton** will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags." (Proverbs 23:20-21).

"The one who keeps the law is a son with understanding, but a companion of **gluttons** shames his father" (Proverbs 28:7).

"The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A **glutton** and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds" (Matthew 11:19; parallel in Luke 7:34).

"One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy **gluttons**'" (Titus 1:12).

Based on these passages, we make the following general observations: First, overeating is an unhealthy practice. Second, overeating is a wasteful use of resources. Third, overeating is incompatible with following God's law; therefore, gluttony is sinful. Also, the fact that "glutton" was one of the false accusations aimed at Jesus shows that gluttony was considered a sin by the Jews. Fourth, gluttony is associated with laziness, which is not pleasing to God (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

In contrast to living a gluttonous lifestyle, God calls us to honor Him with our

bodies. In reference to sexual sin, St. Paul writes, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

God has created us in His image and calls us to use the body He has given us for His glory. Any act that does not honor the body He has given us, including regular overeating, is sinful. Though indulging in overeating may be more socially acceptable than other sinful practices, we are called to pursue God's standard, practicing self-control in all areas of life, including our food choices (Galatians 5:22-23).

Gluttony seems to be a sin that Christians like to ignore. We are often quick to label smoking and drinking as sins, but for some reason gluttony is accepted or at least tolerated. Many of the arguments used against smoking and drinking, such as health and addiction, apply equally to overeating. Many believers would not even consider having a glass of wine or smoking a cigarette but have no qualms about gorging themselves at the dinner table. This should not be!

Proverbs 23:20-21 warns us, "Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags." Proverbs 28:7 declares, "He who keeps the law is a discerning son, but a companion of gluttons disgraces his father." Proverbs 23:2 proclaims, "Put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony."

Physical appetites are an analogy of our ability to control ourselves. If we are unable to control our eating habits, we are probably also unable to control other habits, such as those of the mind (lust, covetousness, anger) and unable to keep our mouths from gossip or strife. We are not to let our appetites control us, but we are to have control over our appetites. (See Deuteronomy 21:20, Proverbs 23:2, 2 Peter 1:5-7, 2 Timothy 3:1-9, and 2 Corinthians 10:5). The ability to say "no" to anything in excess—self-control—is one of the fruits of the Spirit common to all believers (Galatians 5:22).

God has blessed us by filling the earth with foods that are delicious, nutritious, and pleasurable. We should honor God's creation by enjoying these foods and by eating them in appropriate quantities. God calls us to control our appetites,

rather than allowing them to control us.

How can I conquer gluttony?

There are a lot of reasons for obesity in our culture. It's not just that we eat a lot of bad food. We're also pretty inactive and don't do a lot of walking, running, biking, etc. Oftentimes obesity issues are connected as much to activity issues as they are to what goes into our mouths. Muscles are designed to burn food, but if they aren't being used then any amount of food is going to result in obesity.

But "gluttony" is a better word to use in this context rather than "obesity," because overeating is where the problem is, not how much you weigh. There are all kinds of reasons why a person might weight too much or too little that is not a result of gluttony.

Gluttony is having a craving for food that conquers you.

The text of Scripture that holds out the challenge on this issue is 1 Corinthians 6:12 where St. Paul says—specifically in regard to food and drink—that he will not be enslaved by anything. He is saying, "I have one master, Jesus Christ, and I don't want any other master." Then in 1 Corinthians 9:27, he talks about pummeling his body: "I pummel my body lest I be disqualified."

I think we need to recover a large appreciation for the biblical disciplines of self-denial and fasting. That is the discipline side of this issue: "I will not be enslaved by anything," "I pommel myself," and "I take up my cross daily." I think we should esteem, extol, and cherish the biblical teaching that the Christian life is one of confronting our cravings and saying no to them.

But easier said than done, right?

So how do we fight the battle? It be fought mainly not with the word "No" but with an alternative "Yes."

It is very interesting that there are so many food and taste analogies in the Bible for God himself:

- "Taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34:8)
- "Desire the sincere spiritual milk of the word." (1 Peter 2:2)
- "I am the bread of life. Come to me and you will not hunger." (John 6:35)
- "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food." (Isaiah 55:1-2).

The implication here is that if we give ourselves to being satisfied with spiritual bread, wine, and milk, then physical hunger will lose its supreme power. The main way to fight cravings that we don't want is to experience higher cravings and have them master us. Here's where the rubber meets the road. Say we are sitting down at the table, and we are very hungry. You know that if we give ourselves free reign then we will eat two or three helpings of everything, get up stuffed, gain weight, and feel guilty. Why are we tempted to do that? One very practical reason is that we are bored, and nothing is happening after supper that is more exciting than supper. Therefore staying at this table and eating feels really good, whereas leaving the table to do whatever is next on our agenda feels boring. Very practically then, we should plan something after supper that you want to do. It can certainly be something spiritual, but it can also be a type of exercise or a visit with a friend.

A lot of gluttony is born of boredom. Life is not satisfying or stimulating, relationships feel empty, and work is boring, but food is always there and tastes so good.

So we need to cultivate a range of appetites for great and good things, things like good literature, people's fellowship, reading the Bible, nature, work, etc. We need to discover these other appetites so that things other than food can satisfy us. Then we need to pray earnestly and cultivate and nurture these satisfactions.

Here are some Bible verses about gluttony:

Philippians 3:19: "Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things."

Proverbs 23:20-21: "Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags."

Proverbs 23:2: "And put a knife to your throat if you are given to appetite."

Proverbs 25:16: "If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you have your fill of it and vomit it."

1 Corinthians 3:16-17: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

Proverbs 23:21: "For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags."

Psalms 78:18: "They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved."

Philippians 3:18-19: "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things."

1 Corinthians 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Deuteronomy 21:20: "And they shall say to the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard."

Romans 13:14: "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

Proverbs 23:20: "Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat"

Galatians 5:16-26: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to

keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ...”

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 : “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

1 Corinthians 6:12: “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything.”

Matthew 11:19 : “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

Matthew 6:25-34: “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ...”

Romans 12:1: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Galatians 5:22-23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

James 4:7: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

Galatians 6:7-8: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh

reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”

1 Corinthians 6:19: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own.”

2 Corinthians 12:9: “But He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

Step 15: Lust

Lust is also a physical sin. It is the most common physical sin among young people such as teenagers. One of the Ten Commandments from God is about lust and says “Do not commit adultery.”

Use of pornography and other sexual sins are rampant in our culture and in the church. Many have concluded that such behavior or at least the lust that drives them is fundamentally an unsolvable problem, a sin that will not be defeated in the lives of God's children. But this response is unacceptable in the face of the severe and incalculable damage that lust inflicts upon lives, families, and fellowships.

If we want to overcome lust, we need to recognize what we are dealing with. A good place to start is to understand the "sexual excitement"—the electric feeling of pleasure that makes sex so enjoyable. The psychobiologic sexual buzz involves our emotions, our bodies, and our cognitive functions. God designed these feelings for good. The sexual excitement occupies an essential role as an early phase of intimacy within the sexual union of marriage. Without it, we would not become aroused and sex probably would not happen enough to keep reproduction going or marital ties binding. This sexual excitement is only appropriate inside the Orthodox marriage relationship.

When we misuse this capacity—allowing ourselves an illicit sexual excitement—it is sinful lust. Consider the following definition as a way to understand this:

Sexual lust—the illicit sexual excitement—is willfully allowing pleasurable gratification of wrongfully directed sexual desire that takes place deep inside.

Let's break that down:

1. **Willfully allowed**—It is something we choose to do. It is not forced upon us. Giving in to it may be driven by habit and undertaken without deliberation, but it is still a choice on our part.
2. **Pleasurable**—We enjoy it. The illicit sexual excitement is intensely enjoyable in a way we cannot fully understand. God designed us so that even when we are merely looking to enjoy legitimate sexual pleasure, looking to lust, or contemplating sexual activity, we are able to realize a pleasurable sexual excitement.
3. **Gratification**—We recognize when it happens because something clicks into place. We may claim that we are "doing nothing" and may be able to fool others, but we should not try to fool ourselves. God is not fooled.
4. **Wrongfully directed sexual desire**—We are focusing our attention in a way that is not right. The sexual excitement is only proper when it is grounded within an Orthodox marriage relationship. This is hard to accept when we are in bondage to lust. We look for a way to justify our waywardly pointed gratification of sexual desires—to convince ourselves that it is okay to let them roam.
5. **Taking place deep inside**—We cannot fully understand how the sexual excitement takes place. Our psychobiologic response is deep-seated and intensely personal. It occurs quickly and unmistakably, long before (and oftentimes without any) externally visible evidence.

This is, admittedly, a rather complicated definition. Jesus—the Master Wordsmith—distilled all these elements into a phrase that instantly rings true. He termed what takes place when we sin this way "adultery in the heart" (Matthew 5:28). In doing so, He included all of the above elements with an elegant, penetrating simplicity that a Christian cannot dismiss from his conscience. Thus, lust begins in the heart before it ever becomes physical. Jesus made this very clear.

Distinguishing Sexual Desire from Lust

There are a few objections that rise up immediately in some who hear this explanation for the first time, and it's best to introduce them right from the start.

The first objection is the assertion that the sexual excitement which develops in a mostly indiscriminate way is nothing more than natural sexual desire. In fact, most definitions of lust describe it as a normal desire that has gone astray, without explaining plainly when this occurs.

Unfortunately, there is a fundamental problem with using the term "desire" or "sexual desire" as the starting point when developing a suitable, practical definition of lust. The word "desire" conveys the idea of hope or wish for future fulfillment. In contrast, those who lust are not just thirsty—they are drinking from the cup as well.

We are constantly exposed to sexual stimulations, primarily visual. This is the world in which we live. It is natural to have a sexual reaction to such stimulation. This is because of sexual desire—a part of who we are.

We are not permitted, however, to take the next step in cases when this sexual attraction is misdirected. Some may argue that one cannot stop illicit gratification. But there's an easy way to prove that wrong: we routinely recoil from lust or sexualized interactions with family members such as daughters or sisters. Focusing our attention in order to obtain an illicit sexual excitement is willful and sinful. That quick gulp of sweet "stolen water" (Proverbs 9:17) is when we have crossed into sinful lust. We may want to minimize the adultery we are allowing in our hearts, but God does not.

There is nothing wrong with sexual desire—as long as it is not followed up with lust. It is a finely tuned and powerful God-given capacity, and we should not expect it to go away or find any fault with it.

As Uncle Screwtape, the demon tutor wrote to his pupil, Wormwood, in *The Screwtape Letters* (C. S. Lewis):

“He [God] made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our enemy has produced, at times, or in ways or in degrees, which He has forbidden.”

The issue is whether we will use our desires to engage in sin. Ramped up sexual desires are only permitted as we share and enjoy them within the marriage relationship. The sin of lust occurs when we allow ourselves illicit sexual pleasure by misusing sexual desire.

Do not believe the lie that you cannot deny yourself illicit gratification when tempted. We can—and must—whenever we are tempted to sin.

Sexual Thoughts

Another objection to describing lust as an illicit sexual excitement is based on the assertion that we cannot eliminate sexual thoughts. But this is not the goal for which we are striving. Certainly, taking charge of our thought lives is a critical front in the battle against lust for a Christian—“*Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts*” (Isaiah 55:7).

However, having sexual thoughts is not the same as committing lust. It is only when we improperly dwell on such thoughts to develop the recognizable experience of an illicit sexual excitement that we have sinned. In this way, the sin of lust is comparable to other sins to which we are susceptible. At times, we all face situations that provoke us to anger, but if we improperly dwell on that anger, we slip into sins such as rage, bitterness, and unforgiveness.

We all face hardship or problems at times, but if we improperly dwell on such hardships and problems, we slip into the sin of worrying. At times, it seems like others are doing better than us, but if we improperly dwell on such thoughts, we

slip into the sins of envy or selfishness. Other examples like this could be cited. As we gain victory over lust, our desires and thoughts no longer drive us to sin.

Focusing on the Real Problem

Recognizing that sexual desires and thoughts—by themselves—are not necessarily bound up with lust provides the key to overcoming it. Many attempt to eliminate their sexual desires and thoughts because they have habitually harnessed these in order to realize an illicit sexual excitement.

This approach is called "thought suppression." Thought suppression has been studied extensively and is best illustrated by the experiment of trying to stop oneself from thinking about a pink elephant. Unfortunately, this strategy has never proven to be effective. Instead, we need to accept that we will at times give rise to bad thoughts, and will also continue to feel sexual desire in ways that we do not choose. Instead of suppressing our wayward thoughts and desires, we need to "bring them into captivity" (2 Corinthians 10:15) by denying them access to our hearts. The temptation to "go with it" must be resisted.

Let's be clear about this. We cannot shut down our desires and thoughts, nor should we seek to. They are not the real problem. We must also recognize and repent whenever we misuse our desires or thoughts to accommodate sin and to develop practical strategies for gaining victory if we find ourselves being dominated by this sin.

Many wrongly believe that sexual desires and sexual thoughts are parts of us that have special power. They feel that they have no choice when subjected to temptation but to allow these desires and thoughts to generate an illicit sexual excitement. It has become an automatic response because they have crossed the line on a regular basis.

However, our desires and thoughts do not force us to sin. Instead of slipping into sin, we need to act with the knowledge and confidence that God is faithful to provide "the way of escape" (1 Corinthians 10:13) whenever we are tempted.

Entering that "way" necessarily means that we refuse to commit adultery within our hearts. Our focus needs to be on denying actual sin, growing to maturity as believers, and learning to please God. Our desires become evil when we act upon them by committing adultery in our hearts. By first putting to death our evil passions and desires, we are in a position to put on the new person and effectively abide in Christ.

Bible Verses About Lust

Numbers 15:39: "And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after."

Proverbs 6:25: "Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes"

Romans 1:26: "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature"

Galatians 5:16: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."

1 Thessalonians 4:3-5: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God."

1 Peter 1:14: "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance."

1 John 2:16: "For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world."

1 Corinthians 6:18: "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body."

Galatians 5:19-21: “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Colossians 3:5: “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”

Hebrews 13:4: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”

Bible Verses To Help Us Overcome Lust

Job 31:1: “I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?”

1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

2 Corinthians 10:5: “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.”

James 1:12-16: “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.”

1 Peter 2:11: “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”

CONCLUSION: The four vices of falsehood, despondency, gluttony, and lust are very serious ones that we all need to control and work on. Every sin starts in the heart and when it matures in the heart, it manifests itself physically and externally. We must keep watch of our heart, and put on the armor of God to protect it. We put on the armor of God through prayer, reading the Bible, confronting our weaknesses and how to overcome them by reading the Bible and other spiritual resources, through Christian fellowship, through confession and repentance, partaking of the Church Sacraments, through advice from our father of confession, priests, parents and church elders, and so many other means. The Church has given set a substantial number of means and tools for confronting and overcoming sin, and controlling our heart spiritually.

VERSE TO REMEMBER: “Blessed *is* the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. ¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. ¹⁴ But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (James 1:12-15).