



Diocese of South-West America
Sunday School

9th Grade

Teach Us, O Lord



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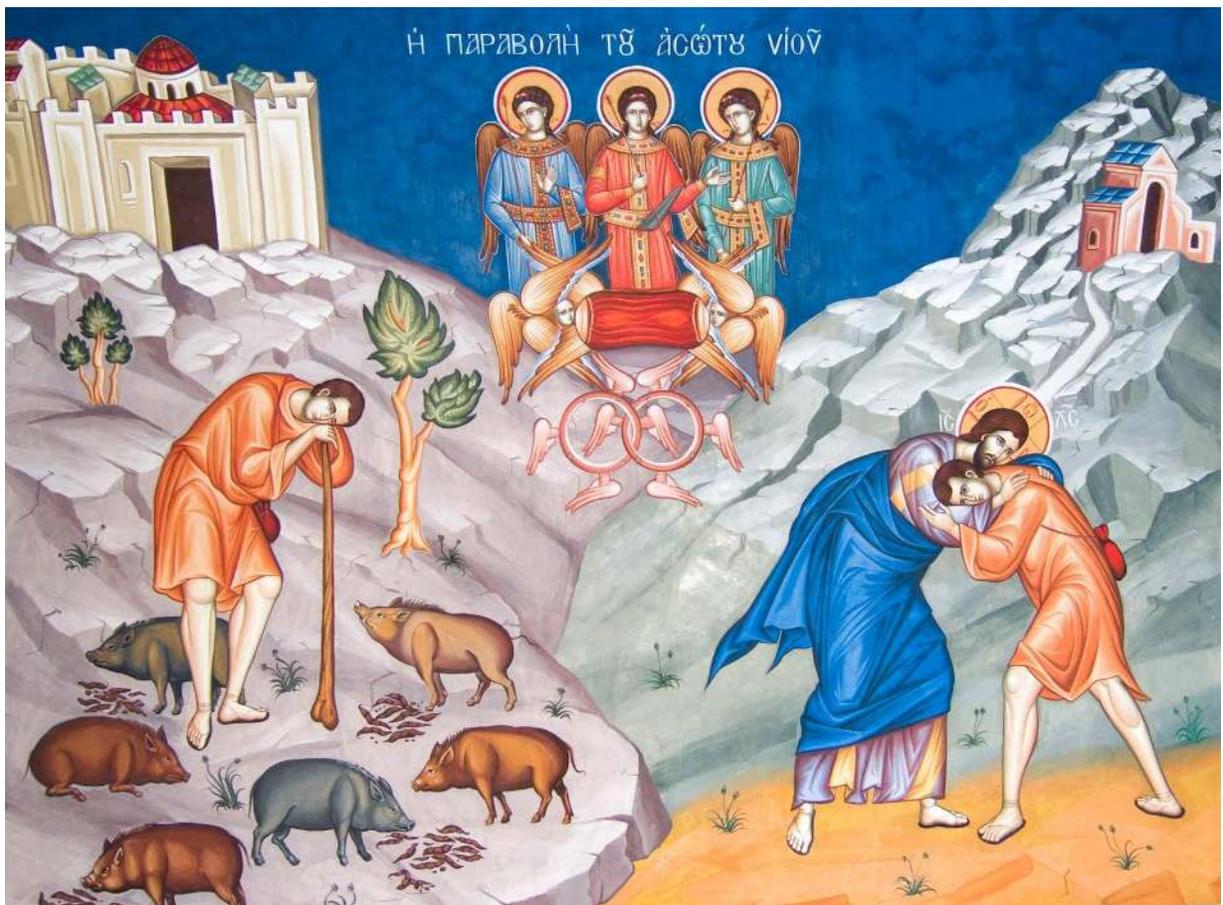
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LESSON 1 - THE PRODIGAL SON

Objective: Free-will, humility, and repentance

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is read during the fourth week of the Great Lent, and the words of the prodigal son are echoed in the prayer before Holy Confession. This is a familiar story to most Christians, and yet few realize this simple parable teaches us the basics of Orthodoxy, the ancient understanding of God, and our path to salvation.



The parable begins with an introduction to a father who has two sons. The youngest asks the father to give him his inheritance, and he leaves and journeys to a distant country soon after the father gives him his share of the wealth (**Luke 15:11-13**). A closer analysis of these few verses brings attention to very important theological points.

“So he divided to them his livelihood ...” (v.12): This highlights a fundamental teaching of the Orthodox Church i.e., God has created us with *free-will*. Free-will is the ability to choose and therefore be responsible for our decisions, even when our choices are not always the best. Many Christian denominations, in particular those that align with the teachings of John Calvin, reject this concept of the ability of man to choose and instead believe in the doctrine of *predestination*. Predestination is rejected by the Orthodox Church, and can be summarized as a teaching where God determines the fate of the universe and all creation throughout time and space, and therefore people have no say in what happens. Simply put, God created some men and women to do good and others to do bad.

Orthodox Christians reject this teaching and instead embrace that God has blessed us with the gift of free will. Why? Because God is love (**1 John 4:8**), and only wishes in return for us to love Him (**Matthew 22:36-40**). He created us to be sons and daughters, not slaves which is what we would be without the freedom to choose. Without freedom, there can never be true love. We see this fundamental teaching that Christians must choose to willingly and freely choose Christ in Scripture (**Revelations 3:20**) as well as in the writings of the Church Fathers (e.g., St. John Chrysostom teaches that “God never draws anyone to Himself by force and violence. He wishes all to be saved, but forces no-one”).

We also hear about a “far country” (**v.13**) in the parable. With an understanding of free-will, what does this far country represent? Those who choose to live a life in exile from God (i.e., away from the Father’s House). Sadly, we can see all around us that many people choose a life away from God, and in the parable choose to live in the far country. It is important to stress that man was not sinful at creation. In St. Paul’s letter to the **Romans 7:17**, he reminds us that “it is no longer [I] who do it, but sin that dwells in [me]”. We must understand that sin is something distinct from who we are created to be as we have been created in the image of God (**Genesis 1:26-27**). We are icons of Christ, and this is true despite the poor choices we may make during our life. God loves us, and sin can be thought of as a foreign force that dwells in us that turns us away from who we are supposed to be. The Orthodox Church emphatically rejects teachings found in some other denominations that the human body is itself sinful and despised by God.

Returning to the parable, we read the prodigal son initially immerses himself in the pleasures of the world. From a theological perspective, the son was living outside his true self - the person that God had created man to be like.

But in **Luke 15:17**, we read the important words - the prodigal “came to himself”. At this point in the story, the son has lost everything but remembers that even the servants of his father had more than enough to eat whereas he had nothing and at that moment gladly would eat the food given to the pigs. We see both repentance and true humility in the son, and the prodigal remembering who he was and that he was the son of his father.

The Orthodox Church embraces what’s written in Scripture - that all men and women are created in the image of God, and grow into His Perfect likeness (**Genesis 1:26-27, Matthew 5:48**). Adam began in a state of innocence and simplicity - as St. Irenaeus explains, “He was a child, not yet having his understanding perfected. It was necessary that he should grow and so come to his perfection”. Because of free-will, we often through our own decisions choose to fall away from the path of perfection, but even then we always remain as children of God and created in His image - an icon of Christ! It is our thoughts, words, and actions reflect how close we are to His likeness. This is what we see in the prodigal son at this moment - his past deeds did not negate the fact that he was a son of his father, and he chooses (“came to himself”) to return to the path of holiness.

The parable also teaches us that God is love. Even a child can identify that the father in this parable is God the Father. After the prodigal repents and begins to walk back towards his father, we read a beautiful event (**v.20**) - “when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.” Note that the father embraced and loved his son even before a single word was uttered! Only after the embrace do we hear the son admit his sinfulness. See how great the love of the Father is for His children!

Let’s imagine a different story, where the prodigal son was afraid the Father would punish the son for wasting his wealth. Or, another twist of this story where the son decided to give up in the pig-pen. What Christ is teaching us is the importance of faith and repentance. No matter how much trouble we get ourselves into, if we truly repent and humbly return to the God, our merciful and loving Father will embrace!

God’s self-humiliation for the sake of His beloved creation is also prominent in this simple parable - we are not slaves to an angry god, or a created by a god who wants everyone to go to hell except for those he predestined as special! The ancient Christian Church always proclaimed that God is Love, as taught to us by Christ Himself. We also read this in Scripture e.g., **John 6:37, Ezekiel 18:23**, etc.

Christ teaches us that the only mortal sin, the only sin unto death, is the sin that's not repented - in Scripture, Jesus said there's only one unforgivable sin – the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Why? Because the blasphemy of the Spirit would mean that we don't repent – that we don't accept His forgiveness and His mercy. The sin of Judas was not the betrayal of Christ, but rather that he did not repent and chose to commit suicide. As Fr. Thomas Hopko once explained, “we think that our prodigality, our madness is greater than the mercy of God which is just the blasphemy.”

The parable also teaches us the importance of the Church in our return to God and our growth as His children. There is deep symbolism in **vv. 22-23** that teach the importance of the Church and the Sacraments.

- ❖ **Robe (Isaiah 61:10)** - Righteousness granted by Baptism. After a person is baptised, he or she is often wrapped in a white robe or cloth
- ❖ **Ring (Haggai 2:23)** - This is the family identity, signifying that the son is no longer a prodigal. In Baptism, we become children of God
- ❖ **Sandal (Ephesians 6:15)** - walk according to Gospel
- ❖ **Fatted Calf** - wheat-fed calf used in religious sacrifice. This is a reference to the Holy Eucharist (or Holy Qurbana)

At the end of the parable (**vv.25-29**) we are introduced to the resentful and unhappy older brother. Who does the older brother represent? We are taught often that the older brother represents the Pharisees, or the members of Israel (in comparison with the prodigal being the Gentiles). The parable is very deep in meaning as all of this is true, but another important teaching is that the older brother represents those of us who are members of the Church. The reality of our life is that at times we can relate more to the prodigal, and at other times we are more like the older son. The older brother was resentful and not forgiving, which reflects that he was not humble. In order to forgive, we also need humility!

As members of the Church, we must always rejoice and be grateful for all that we have been given and rejoice even more when “someone who is dead and lost returns back”. As St. John Chrysostom said, “Almost any noble person can weep with those who weep but very few of us can rejoice with those who rejoice.”

Let's also reflect on the meaning of the Father's House - this is the Church! An Orthodox Church is not a mere building, but rather a gathering of the people called by God and where God Himself is present and presides. The Church exists because God is there,

and the Greek word *ekklesiā* (or Latin *ecclesia*) literally "assembly, congregation, council" and is the traditional term referring to the Christian Church.



This also brings us to the meaning of the word "Liturgy," which comes from the Greek words *laos* (meaning "people,") and *ergos* (meaning "work"). Thus, the Divine Liturgy is the "holy work of the people." The presence and participation of the faithful in the service are essential. In fact, if no one is present to receive Holy Communion, a priest cannot celebrate the Divine Liturgy.

Luke Chapter 15 begins with Christ teaching the joy of God when a person repents - in **v.10**, Jesus says, "There is joy before the

angels of God over one sinner who repents".

Our responsibility as a Christian is to believe in Christ, take our Cross and follow Him so that we can learn from Him and to grow to perfection like Him.

This parable teaches us of the condition of one who chooses to sin, the one who truly repents, and the greatness of God's compassion. For all who have fallen into great despair over their sins thinking that there is no forgiveness, this parable offers hope.

The Heavenly Father is patiently and lovingly waiting for our return. There is no sin that can overcome His love for us. This offers us insight into the world in which we live, and the need for the Church.

LESSON 2 – FREEDOM, LOVE, AND DISCIPLINE

In Orthodox Christianity, the teaching of man's free-will is a foundation for everything we believe. God never forces a person to do anything against their will. The greatest example is of St. Mary, who was chosen by God to be His Mother after she willingly agreed to bear the child (**Luke 1:38**). This teaching is fundamental to our understanding of God because love only exists with freedom. If love has to be forced, then it is not truly love.

When we consider the freedom of man, we must also understand that there is still a need for discipline. In North America, we are blessed to be citizens of a free country, however, as citizens we are also bound to obey the laws of the land both for our own self-interest as well as the considerations of all citizens.

Freedom and discipline go hand in hand. St. Paul reminds us in the letter to the Galatians that we should not use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. Through love we must be servants to one another. True love will make us disciplined. According to St. Paul, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (**Galatians 5:22-23**). It is interesting to note that St. Paul uses the singular (i.e., "fruit", as compared to the plural "fruits") thereby instructing that a true Christian filled with the Holy Spirit should exhibit all of these characteristics.

The letter to Galatians is a good summary of Christian freedom and discipline, and the behaviors expected of us if we choose to be a Christian. Through the Church, we are able to follow the full teachings of Christ through the Sacramental Life, which may be thought of as "discipline" and "rules" to those outside the Church but for us is the path to Salvation. Christ's yoke is life in the Spirit, which includes (1) regeneration through Holy Baptism (**Galatians 3:27**), (2) obedience to Christ and growth to perfection (**Matthew 5:48**), (3) being justified by grace, God's righteousness which becomes ours, (4) freedom from the power of sin, (5) dependence upon the Spirit (**Galatians 5:5**), and access to the perfect and glorified human nature of Christ, and (6) union with Christ and the grace of God. Our goal in life is not just to be "good", but rather to be "perfect, like our Heavenly Father is perfect" (**Matthew 5:48**). Our calling is to be Holy, and this requires as much preparation and hard work as the athlete who trains for competition. Knowing his death is near, St. Paul's reflection in his letter to Timothy (**2 Timothy 4:7**) uses this analogy - "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith".

To be an athlete takes discipline. You must constantly be working toward your goal. It involves patience. You can't expect to run a marathon a week after you begin running. It involves discipline and denying yourself certain things you may want because they are not good for your training.

Similarly, being a Christian isn't easy as some people may lead you to believe. There are constant hurdles that you will come across. They may seem insignificant at the time like missing church one Sunday, not taking time for reading the Bible, or not fasting on the prescribed fasts. But when you add them up, they are all designed to keep you from training, to keep you from progressing toward your spiritual goal.

It's important to understand that the Orthodox Church is not an institution that creates new rules - rather, the Church preserves and hands down the Holy Tradition of the apostles as was taught by Christ Himself. We read this in Scripture as well, "But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us" (**2 Thessalonians 3:6**). The tradition of the apostles, or Holy Tradition, is to be preserved by the Church, for God is its source. The Church continues to teach, remind, and sometimes clarify Holy Tradition but at no time is it changed or modified. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we adhere to Holy Tradition as it is present in the Apostles' writings and as it is resident in the Church to which the truth is promised (**John 16:13**). It is important to note that other Christian denominations that do not adhere to Apostolic teachings often use Scriptural translations that replace the original Greek word *paradosis* in Thessalonians to 'teaching' rather than 'tradition', in order to de-emphasize the important Christian understanding of keeping, entrusting, and delivering the True and unchanged Faith to the next generation.

For Orthodox Christians, love is not an emotion. When Christ tells us to love our neighbors (**Matthew 22:39**), He is not commanding us to have a feeling but rather to act. St. John explains, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (**1 John 3:18**). The Church teaches us how we should act and work in order for us to be perfect like Christ. In Greek, this process of transformation is called *theosis*, which means to become like Christ.

LESSON 3 – APPROACH TO DOCTRINE

St. Paul writes in **Galatians 1:12**, “for I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ”. This is sung in hymn at every Holy Qurbana before the reading from the epistle of St. Paul, “I heard Paul the Blessed/Saint, the Lord’s Apostle, said/ If one comes to preach to you ...”

The Orthodox Church is the only Christian denomination which maintains and affirms the Faith given to us by Christ through the Apostles. The word “Orthodox” is a combination of two Greek words - *orthos*, meaning ‘upright’ or ‘proper’, and *doxa*, which means both ‘opinion’ and ‘glory’. Therefore, “orthodox” means “right belief” or “right praise.”

The basics of the Apostolic teaching is summarized in the Nicene Creed, which is our statement of faith adopted in Nicaea in 325 AD and further clarified in the Councils of Constantinople (381 AD) and Ephesus (431 AD). The Oriental Orthodox Churches acknowledge and proclaim the sacred and Holy Ecumenical Synods of Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus.

The Great Ecumenical Councils were important meetings that brought together the leaders of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church to counter false teachings about the Holy Trinity that were growing in popularity. The Oriental Orthodox Churches recognize the first three Great Ecumenical Councils. Although these councils occurred in the past, it is important to realize that these misunderstandings about the Trinity still remain in one form or another today.

- **Council of Nicaea (325 AD):** This Council was held in order to oppose the heresy of Arius. Arianism refers to many non-Trinitarian theological systems, that regarded the Son of God, the Logos, as a created being (as in Arianism proper and Anomoeanism) or as neither uncreated nor created in the sense other beings are created (as in "Semi-Arianism"). Arius posed the question, "Is Jesus unbegotten?" In other words, he taught that God the Father and the Son did not exist together eternally. Further, Arius taught that the pre-incarnate Jesus was a divine being created by (and possibly inferior to) the Father at some point, before which the Son did not exist. It is sometimes said that Arians believe that Jesus is or was a "creature"; in this context, the word is being used in its original sense of "created being."

- **Council of Constantinople (381 AD):** Again the true Faith was maintained against the Arians, giving answers to many including Appolinaris (Bishop of Laodicea) and Macedonius (Bishop of Constantinople). In answering the latter which denied the Godhead of the Holy Spirit, the dogma of the Church was again stated and the words were introduced into the Nicene Creed declaring the truth about the Holy Spirit.
- **Council of Ephesus (431 AD):** The Church proclaimed the Blessed Virgin is the Mother of God (Theotokos) and presented the teaching of the truth of One Divine Person in Christ. This was convened due to the rise of Nestorianism, identified with Nestorius (Archbishop of Constantinople) who taught that the human and divine aspects of Christ were distinct natures, not unified. He preached against the use of the title Mother of God (Theotokos) for the Virgin Mary and would only call her Mother of Christ (Christotokos). He also argued that God could not suffer on the cross, as He is omnipotent. Therefore, the human part of Christ died on the cross, but not the divine.

It's important to be aware that aspects of Arianism and Nestorianism still exist today in other Christian denominations. There is a danger due to the popularity of some of these denominations that these false teachings about the person of Christ could confuse or influence our own thoughts and opinions if we are not aware and careful. In order for us to continue to be followers of Christ, it is very important to study our Faith and our history.

The Nicene Creed confirms the Faith taught to us by God, “who spoke by the Prophets and the Apostles”. We also see this confirmation in Scripture. In **2 Peter 1:16-21** we read about the prophets (**v.21** - “for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit”) and the Holy Apostles (**v.16** - “were eyewitnesses of His majesty”).

For Orthodox Christians, the core narrative of the Gospel, the Good News according to the Orthodox Christian faith, is that (1) Jesus Christ is the Messiah, (2) He Rose from the dead, and (3) all of humanity can therefore be saved. To truly understand how our Salvation is through our Lord Jesus Christ, we must understand why God became man and why the Resurrection is the central truth of the Christian faith.

Creation

The Nicene Creed begins with, “We believe in One True God, Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth”. God is the creator of all things, visible and invisible, and that One Triune God is the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) who were not created and existed at all times. Orthodoxy makes no definitive statement about exactly how God created the universe or in what amount of time. The important point is that He did create everything (visible and invisible) *ex nihilo*, out of nothing.

In later lessons, we learn how the Church uses the Holy Bible as a Book of Faith, and not as a Science textbook e.g., we do not read Genesis to explain scientific discoveries. For the Orthodox Church, Science and Church will never be in contradiction or conflict with each other as the Book of Genesis confirms our belief and doctrine that God is the creator of all things, and mankind is His beloved creation. As one of our hymns in Divine Liturgy reminds, “*After God had made Adam, He Sat down, contemplating him; He saw how fair and like the Creature was to Creator*” (*Deivom strishtichaadathe*)

All that God created is good, and we should never think that our bodies are in anyway unpleasing to our Lord. God created out of His own will and Divine Love. God did not have to create in order to be God, and every man and woman is created uniquely in that God created us in His image and likeness of God (**Genesis 1:26-27**). We are all icons of Christ!

The Fall of Man

God established a place for man called Paradise (**Genesis 2: 7**), and gave a commandment regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil - “And the Lord God commanded Adam, saying, ‘You may eat food from every tree in the garden; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat; for in whatever day you eat from it, you shall die by death’” (**Genesis 2:16, 17**).

This instruction from our Father was not a test or temptation to prove the loyalty of man towards God. Just as a parent does not give full explanations to an infant child, so too is our understanding that God gave us the warning out of love for Adam but did not explain further as man was like an infant and not ready to understand the reason. God’s warning to Adam was that if he eats of the fruit now when he was not ready, he would die a spiritual death.

This teaching is reaffirmed both in Scripture as well as the writings of our Church fathers. St. Ephrem the Syrian explained, “...had the serpent been rejected, along with

the sin, (Adam and Eve) would have eaten of the Tree of Life, and the Tree of Knowledge would not have been withheld from them any longer; from the one they would have acquired infallible knowledge, and from the other they would have received immortal life. They would have acquired divinity in humanity; and had they thus acquired infallible knowledge and immortal life, they would have done so in this body". If Adam had been obedient, the fruits of knowledge and life would have been given when man was ready.

Ancestral sin is the disobedience of Adam and Eve to God's command regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam willingly disobeyed this commandment and diverted himself, or fell, from God's path to perfection, thus separating himself from His Creator, the source of life.

We read in **Genesis 3** how the serpent tricked Eve, who in turn gave the fruit to Adam. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit, just as God had warned they began to die. This is why the Church often refers to St. Mary as the new Eve, as she was obedient and submitted to the will of God with humility and love unlike Adam and Eve who chose to disobey.

But, St. Gregory the Theologian when expanding on the Fall of Man points out how loving is our Father, "Yet here too He provides a benefit – namely death, which cuts off sin, so that evil may not be everlasting. Thus His punishment is changed into a mercy." Unlike other Christian denominations, we believe the exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden was a mercy, which is seen by the fact that God gave His beloved children clothing (**Genesis 3:21**).

St. Basil also teaches, "To the extent that man stood apart from life, in like amount he also drew closer to death. For life is God, and the deprivation of life is death. Thus, Adam prepared death for himself through his withdrawal from God, as it is written, 'Those who separate from You are lost'. Therefore, God did not create death, but we brought it upon ourselves by our wicked purpose. Neither did He prevent the dissolution (i.e., the Fall) for the reasons already stated: so that the illness would not be preserved immortal in us."

We do not believe in the teaching of Original Sin, which explains that because of the disobedience to God we were marked with sin by an angry god and only a sacrifice could appease or pay off some debt. Rather, with the fall of man, we see death and sin entered the world and man began to die. But as God so loved the world (**John 3:16**), He made the plan for salvation for the world which involved the Resurrection which, as we sing in Divine Liturgy, - "*Thou didst trample death by death/ending this our death*"

God's plan for His children was always to be in communion with Him, and our fall from paradise initially resulted in death which separated us from the source of all life. The Resurrection brought us back in communion with God, and for those who willingly choose to follow Christ and be like Him, we enjoy the fruits of paradise that has been re-opened for us.

Theosis is the understanding that human beings can have real union with God, and this union with God is what was intended for us in Paradise. We become like God to such a degree that we participate in the divine nature. Also referred to as deification, divinization, or illumination, it is a concept derived from the New Testament regarding the goal of our relationship with the Triune God.

Becoming like Christ is our salvation, our return to Paradise and communion with Him. This completes the gift of creation itself (being created in God's image), as we grow to become His likeness. Being created in the image and likeness of God, all human beings have the potential to be like God i.e., Christ-like. All men and women are appointed to represent and manifest the invisible God in all spheres of life (school, college, office, home, Church, etc). All of us have this basic calling (not just the Saints!)

In the Orthodox Church, all believers are to be deeply bonded with God - our worship brings us intimately close to God and makes us feel, think and act like Him. This is the "fullness" of the Gospel teaching, that by being like Christ we brings ourselves closer to Him.

Even as believing Christians, we must not take the outcome of God's final judgment for granted. At the second coming, those who are condemned have chosen (free-will) to reject God. In the Orthodox Church, our faith teaches us that God is love but we have a choice to obey and love. This is how we should understand the parables of the Wheat and Weeds, as well as the Good Fish and The Bad Fish (**Matthew 13:24-30, 47-50**).

LESSON 4 – ORTHODOX UNDERSTANDING OF SIN

In **Genesis 1:26**, we read that man is made in God's image and we are called to be like Him. After the Fall (**Genesis 3**), we are predisposed to self-centered choices directed by the passions rather than choices based on agape (sacrificial love), or the type of love reserved for God. "For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man" (**Mark 7: 21-23**).

These passions turn us away from God to focus on what we want, and this is sin. St. Paul warns, "Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (**Galatians 5:19-21**).

Sin removes us from communion with God, but salvation can be ours by accepting the love of God.

St. John Chrysostom reminds, "Did you commit sin? Enter the Church and repent for your sin; for here is the physician, not the judge; here one is not investigated, one receives remission of sins". If the Church is a "physician," this implies that the effect of sin needs healing. Sin is missing the mark and not being centered on God and His will. Sin is an illness or infirmity. With healing we are restored to our former condition, to be what we were created for.

Healing takes place in Holy Baptism, the Holy Mystery of Penance, Holy Unction and by receiving the Holy Qurbana or Eucharist. St. John Chrysostom, in his Divine Liturgy reminds us, of all that God did for us: take on our flesh, the cross, the grave and the Resurrection. The end of which is to reconcile us to Him: "when we had fallen away didst not cease to do all things until thou hast brought us back to heaven."

Need we be reminded that when Christ gave us the Eucharist he said, "Take eat: this is my Body which is broken for you for the remission of sins," and "Drink ye all of this: this is my Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you and for many, for the remission of sins".

Pride makes us forget our sins, but the remembrance of them leads to humility. When someone offends us, we should imitate God and embrace the repentant sinner with

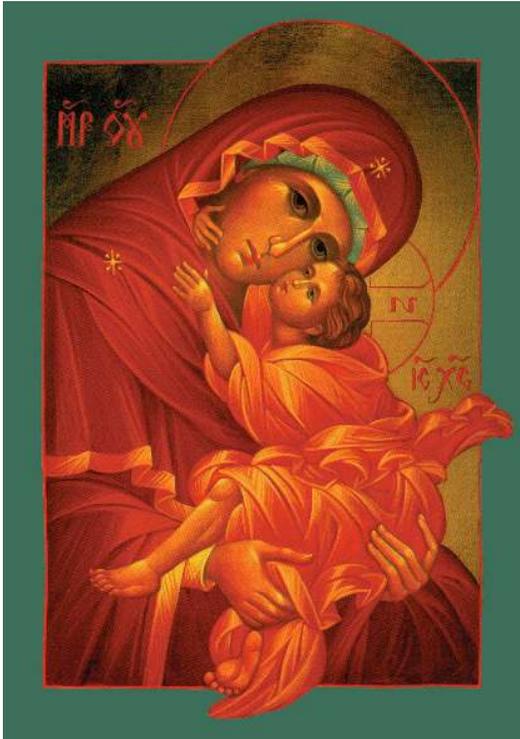
God's own love, in order to forgive him (just like the parable of the Prodigal Son, when the Father never stopped loving the son). We have to pray that we or anyone who has offended us or God, be reconciled to God and to us through His Church. A wise person once said that God doesn't look where we have come from, only where we are going. If repentance is drawn from a desire for a pure heart, the repentant will find God no matter how many times they have failed. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (**Matthew 5:8**).

To be like God (theosis) can only happen if we heal the passions of our soul. For the offender this means healing the passion that led to the offense. For the one who to forgive this means healing the passion of anger and increase in the virtues of humility and meekness. Forgiveness and repentance are a two-sided coin. One cannot exist without the other. Theosis not only means being enlivened with the fire of God's warmth and light but being in communion with one another.

During the Holy Qurbana, we pray and beseech the Lord for the sins we have committed, willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly. Jesus forgives our sins through the sacramental power given to the Church, first to the Apostles, then to their successors, the bishops and priests right down to the present day, when He told them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (**John 20: 22-23**).

Adapted from the article of the same name by Fr. George Morelli, from the website of the Self-Ruled Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America.

LESSON 5 – SAINT MARY AND OUR SALVATION



Two important feasts of St. Mary fall close on our Liturgical Calendar - the Nativity of the Theotokos (September 8th) and Dormition (August 15th).

Why does our Church give St. Mary so much honor? All Christians would agree she is the mother of Jesus (**Luke 1:26-38**), but is it really important to emphasize her so much in our prayers and calendar? The short answer is – yes!

A correct understanding of the Theotokos is essential, not only to help us understand God but also to learn how we can be saved.

In **Romans 12:2**, we are reminded that we must transform ourselves to be like Jesus, the 2nd person of the One Triune God who became man. The “perfect will” of God is to be One with Him, and St. Paul uses the word “mind” to mean not just our intellect but our thoughts and our heart. Transformation is more than being happy by a good sermon, but rather the choice of transforming how we live, how we think, changing so we are thankful for the fast before major events/feasts, and happy to pray and be with God.

St. Mary, like all the saints, is human. She was born and died a natural, human death. However, by calling her a Saint, the Church confirms that she led a life pleasing to God, that her life was a model for us on how to live a Christ-like life. And for Mother Mary, the Theotokos, in particular we hold an even higher level of respect, veneration and honor...and that is even written in the Bible as being proclaimed by an angel! (**Luke 1:28**)

For Orthodox Christians, St. Mary’s glory lies precisely in the fact that she is human just like us! Our goal as a Christian is to have Jesus within us; St. Mary literally had Christ within her!

St. Mary was chosen by the Father to bear His only begotten Son – a fact that we remember when we sing the Quqliyon (or cycle of prayers) to St. Mary (“*See the Royal Daughter stand ..*” from **Psalm 43 OSB**). Jesus received his humanity from St. Mary, and yet He was always God, which means even in the womb He was divine. This is why St. Mary is the Theotokos, and we see the typology in the Old Testament (the Burning Bush, the Mercy Seat, Jacob’s Ladder, the Ark of the Covenant) as well as in Church (the Holy Chalice, which is a cup but hold the real Body and Blood of Christ).

These are a few of the many reasons we venerate St. Mary, but it’s important to understand the difference between veneration and worship of God. In Greek these are different words - *lateria* is the veneration reserved only for God, and *proskynesis* is the veneration used for saints and most of all, Mother Mary.

An Orthodox writer and teacher Dr. Clark Carlton explains, “There is nothing - absolutely nothing! - that we affirm dogmatically about the Virgin Mary that is not at once a witness to the incarnation of her son and also a confession of what we ourselves expect as members of His Body. When we celebrate the Dormition, Resurrection and Glorification of our Lady, we are celebrating our own death, resurrection and glorification with Christ. For everything that we say happen to the Theotokos will one day happen to those who follow Christ and love his appearing”.

It’s important for us to know that everything we believe about St. Mary is also in Scripture, and we should be able to answer any questions with humility and love about our Faith and most of all our own Mother Mary, who is the Theotokos and the one whom God favored because of who she chose to be!



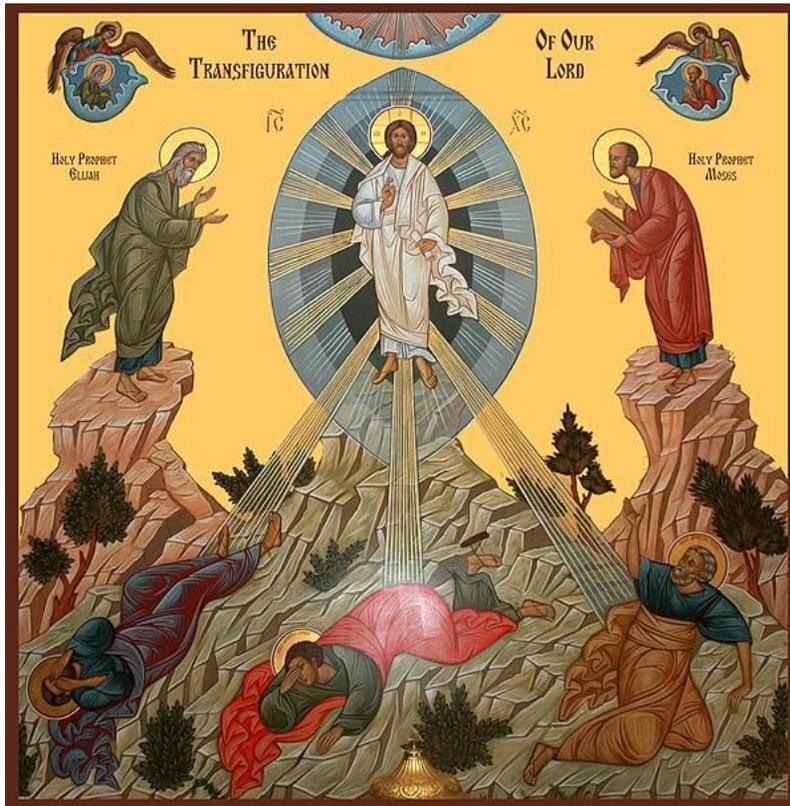
Summary

Highly favored	Luke 1:28	Peace to you (Hail) Mary, Full of Grace
Mother of God	Luke 1:31-35	Our Lord is with you
Special	Luke 1:28, 42, 48 John 19:25-27 Romans 12:10 1 Peter 2:17	Blessed are you among women
Mother of God	Luke 1:43	And blessed is the fruit of your womb, our Lord Jesus Christ
The Sign	Luke 1:27, 34 Isaiah 7:14	O Virgin Saint Mary
	Luke 1:43	Mother of God
Intercession	John 2:1-11 1 Timothy 4:16	Pray for us sinners, now and at all times and at the hour of our death
Humility	Luke 1:29, 48, 52	
Free Will	Luke 1:38	<i>Refer back to Lesson 1 about the importance of free-will in Orthodox theology</i>
Ever Virgin	Ezekiel 44:1-3	
Royalty	Psalm 44(45):9-12, Revelations 1:5-6	
Essential in God's plan to save man	Genesis 28:12	

Adapted from the podcast by Dr. Clark Carlton on Ancient Faith Radio

http://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/carlton/the_theotokos_and_the_church_year

LESSON 6 – SALVATION: OUR CHURCH TEACHING



Light and fire are interconnected. Light radiates heat, and when focused produces fire; fire emanates light. Light illumines, and is life giving, but also burns.

Orthodoxy teaches that on a supernatural level, uncreated light, fire, energy, and grace eternally emanate from God's divine nature. Like God's love, they existed before the creation of the universe and time, and are called "uncreated". We can see created light with our physical eyes, but uncreated

light can only be seen with the eyes of the heart. This is why before the start of the Divine Liturgy, we sing *"By Your light we see the light, Jesus full of light"* (**Psalm 35:10 OSB**), as this refers to the reality that when we walk and live in God's light, we experience the uncreated light that is beyond visible light. God's Divine Essence is forever unknowable; yet God reveals Himself in us His divine energies and grace, in which He is knowable. For simplicity's sake, this is like saying we cannot have a direct experience of the surface of the Sun without being immediately destroyed, but it is possible to encounter the Sun by means of its heat and light. In receiving its heat and light we actually do encounter the Sun, but in a form we can survive.

The divine light, fire, energy, and grace of God pervade and sustain the universe. This light/fire was present in the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It burned the bush, but did not consume or destroy it. During Jesus' Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, the uncreated divine light of God's presence revealed Jesus' divine nature to St. John, St. James, and St. Peter. They were enabled by God's grace to see this Light, but had others been present, they might not have seen it.

Our Church teaches that whether the divine light of God illumines or burns is determined not by the condition of the light or the action of God, but by the condition, nature, and perception of the person receiving the light. To the one who gladly receives the light, it illumines. To the one who resists the light, it burns. This holds true for both this life and the life to come. This explains how God can love man unconditionally forever, and yet be experienced as the source of anguish and suffering by those who seek to flee Him.

The Christian Faith holds that at the general resurrection of the dead at the end of time, the souls of the lost will be reunited with their raised incorruptible bodies. Many other Christian denominations view death as God's legal punishment for sin, their view of the afterlife is that God actively continues and intensifies this punishment forever. In their resurrected bodies, the lost will suffer forever – physically as well as spiritually. In this concept, the bodies of the damned are specially designed by God to endure all the suffering and physical pain imaginable with no destruction or deterioration. This torment has no hope of ceasing or producing reconciliation. It serves no purpose other than the satisfaction of the “necessity of divine justice”. Therefore, those judged receive an infinite amount of punishment for a finite number of sins committed in a relatively short lifetime.

In contrast to both Roman Catholic and Protestant teaching, the Orthodox teach that hellfire is actually the presence of God for those who reject God's love. This fire is not physical but spiritual, because it is uncreated. For those who love God and desire Him, His divine light and presence is heaven. For those who want to escape God's presence, His light, purifying fire, and omnipotence make existence hell because the lost are unable to escape Him. St. Basil the Great wrote, “The evils in Hell do not have God as their cause, but we cause them”.

In the Nicene Creed, we confirm that God is the “*maker of heaven and earth*”, and do not mention a place called hell. The Creed summarizes all that we need to understand for our salvation, and as such affirms that there is no place called Hell and that, in fact, we are the cause of our own eternal suffering by the actions and decisions we do in our life.

Hell is commonly taught to be a place created by God for the express purpose of banishing the wicked for everlasting punishment. The damned are spatially cut off from God, His Kingdom, His people, and His love. But in the Orthodox Christian understanding, both heaven and hell are not spatial, but *relational*.

The goal of the Christian is not to “get to heaven” as to a locale, but rather to grow into deepening communion with God by acquiring the Holy Spirit, beginning in this life and continuing forever. Similarly, the Church does not see herself as sending people to heaven or hell, any more than God sends people there. Rather, the Church is the hospital for sinners, preparing people for the experience that all will have being in the presence of God. The only real question is what effect seeing God will have on us.

The Orthodox understanding is that heaven and hell are primarily states of the human soul. What makes them what they are is our individual response to God’s love, whereby God is either included or excluded from our being. In this present life, we can experience a foretaste of heaven as we live in communion with God, regardless of our physical circumstances. Jesus says, “For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you” (**Luke 17:21**). We can also experience a foretaste of hell by excluding Him from our lives: “but he who does not believe is condemned already” (**John 3:18**). In either case, it is neither a change in our physical location nor a change in God’s attitude that determines our soul’s state; it is our own choice (free-will).

Jesus says that the unrighteous are to be cast into outer darkness (see **Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30**, which refer to She’ol). Orthodox Christianity speaks of hell as darkness; its fire is a dark fire. Though the fire itself is light and spiritually illuminating, it is not perceived as such by the lost because they are spiritually blind.

Thus, because of the willful blindness of the lost, the light appears as darkness. This provides insight into our Lord’s saying, “If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (**Matthew 6:23**). Likewise, St. Anthony the Great of Egypt said, “Thus to say that God turns away from the wicked is like saying that the Sun hides itself from the blind”.

The Orthodox believes God never withdraws His love or ceases loving the lost. In resisting God, we do not change Him; we only change ourselves. Resisting the divine light of God’s love does not change God, but it has everlasting consequences for those in opposition.

When we sin but remain unrepentant, we begin to experience God’s love as fear and wrath. This is not because God has changed and become vindictive and wrathful, but because we have changed our relation to, and therefore our experience of God (**John 1:5, 9-11; 3:19-21; 1 John 1:5-7**). Jesus never turned away anyone who came to Him seeking forgiveness, healing and life.

An example of this divine fire is presented in the Orthodox icon of the Last Judgment, which depicts the river of divine fire proceeding from the throne of God. This river is presented as heaven for those on one side, and as hell for those on the opposite side. The fire prepared for the torment of the devil and his angels, is divided by the voice of the Lord, so that after this there might be two powers in it: one that burns, and another that illumines; the tormenting and punishing power of that fire is reserved for those worthy of torment; while the illumining and enlightening power is intended for the shining of those who rejoice. Therefore the voice of the Lord Who divides and separates the flame of fire is for this: that the dark part might be a fire of torment and the unburning part a light of enjoyment (St. Mark of Ephesus quoting St. Basil the Great, Homily on **Psalm 27 OSB**).



So the Scriptures and the Orthodox Church understand that it is not the absence or exclusion of God that makes hell. Rather, because He is everywhere present, it is the impossibility of completely excluding God that makes life hellish for the lost. Human freedom permits a certain degree of exclusion of God from one's will and life, but total exclusion is impossible – even the continued existence of the lost is the gift of His grace and love.

It is a paradox that the same fire that purifies gold also burns and consumes wood. It is “like a refiner’s fire...a refiner and a purifier of silver” (**Malachi 3:2,3**). Previously we discussed the metaphor of the sword in the fire, where the sword represents Jesus’ glorified human nature and the fire the energy of God’s divine nature. The heated sword

represents the indwelling and energizing of Christ's human nature by His divine nature. When we bring the sword of our life or nature into contact with the energized sword of Jesus' human nature by receiving His Body and Blood and living holy lives, our lives take on similar qualities, radiating spiritual energy, light, fire, and love.

Extending this metaphor, we can view God as the furnace a craftsman uses to temper a sword. When a properly prepared sword is placed within a fire, it is purified and strengthened, and takes on the properties of the fire by radiating heat and light. If the metal is properly forged and wrought, it will not be destroyed. However, this same fire will melt and destroy a sword that is not properly prepared. This metaphor illustrates those who desire God and His light/fire are purified, enlightened, and transformed, while those who abhor His light/fire experience destruction.

The fire of God's furnace is a loving fire, for God is love and the divine fire of His presence is love. The divine light of God is also a two-edged sword. The surgeon's sharp scalpel of healing can also be used as a dagger of death. For the one who permits the master surgeon to wield the knife, it removes the sinful spiritual tumor. In contrast, for the one who distrust the master surgeon and struggles and resists, the potentially healing and life-giving scalpel can be deadly.

This purging or burning of the Holy Spirit is purification for our good as we receive it in faith and love. The uncreated fire is both a spiritual and a loving fire, for God is Love and the divine fire of His presence is Love.

Several places in the Scriptures appear to say that God is the one who punishes and casts the sinners out of His presence. Examples include the parables of the unforgiving servant (**Matthew 18:21-35**), the wedding feast (**Matthew 22:1-14**), and the wise and foolish virgins (**Matthew 25:1-13**). These imply that people were punished and cast out at the Master's command. However, in every case the cause of the suffering is the people's own actions. In general, being in the presence of the Master unprepared causes their suffering.

The Scriptures do represent God as a judge and the judged as suffering torment, but such passages should be interpreted in harmony with the whole Biblical teaching on the subject. The Fathers taught that such language communicates truth to those who are able to understand only at the most simple and basic level, which includes most of us. St. Basil the Great wrote that such representations of God are given because "fear ... edifies simple people" (St. Basil the Great, "On the Human Condition", Homily: That God is not the Cause of Evil, p.g. 7.98).

This life is either a foretaste of heaven or a foretaste of hell. Those who go to hell do not want to go to heaven; “going to heaven” is not a change of location, but drawing ever closer to the God who is repulsive and abhorrent to them. C.S. Lewis wrote, “Ultimately, there are only two kinds of people ... those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done’. All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. The doors of Hell are locked on the inside”.

Such is the nature of a loving God. God really is Love, rather than merely having love. On Judgment Day, as we stand naked before God, the penetrating divine light of His presence will open the “books” of our hearts. His light will reveal what these books contain. They will show whether our hearts are drawn to God or repulsed by Him, either foretasting heaven or foretasting hell. St. Simeon the New Theologian says that it is not so much what we believe or what we do, but what we are that will determine our future state.

Because heaven is primarily a state of being in which the redeemed are moving into an ever-deepening life in God, the experience of heaven is not static, but ever intensifying. Yet we are told that not all advance at the same rate. The greater our desire, love, and inclusion of God in our life, the greater is our capacity to receive the divine light and the fuller is our experience of heaven.

An everlasting rejection parallels an everlasting acceptance of God. Just as there exists the possibility of going from glory to glory drawing ever closer to God, going deeper and deeper into heaven, there exists the possibility of spiraling down into deeper degrees of hell. That is what the Scriptures mean when they speak of different levels of reward and punishment in the afterlife.

So the Orthodox understanding is that heaven is more than a place with an inside and an outside. Similarly, it is more than an achieved condition that is static, never deepening or changing. Rather, it is a dynamic, living condition, moving from one degree or level of bliss to a deeper degree or level of bliss. It is an everlasting journey in which the redeemed go, as the Scripture says, from glory to glory (**2 Corinthians 3:18**).

Of course, mere words are inadequate to describe judgment and salvation. Human language uses words based on our common understanding and experience. The saints and the prophets received glimpses or tastes of being in God’s presence, and then

resorted to words and allegory to share these experiences in the Scriptures and their writings.

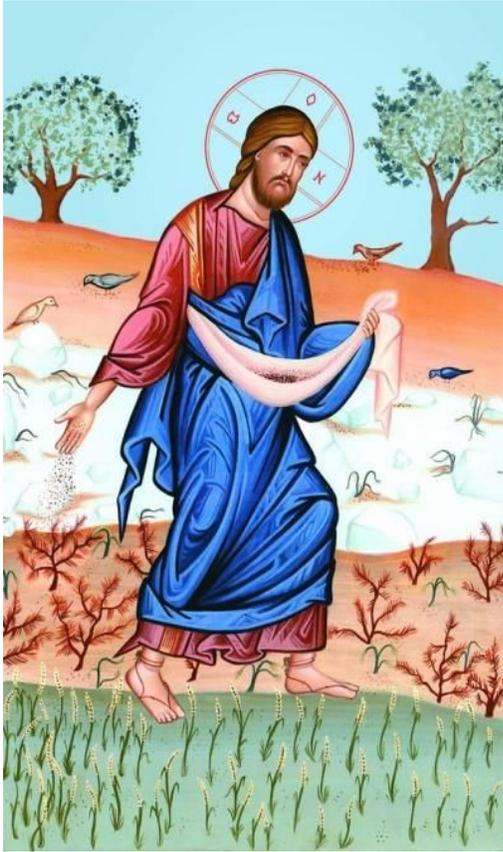
As St. Paul quotes in **1 Corinthians 2:9** from the prophet Isaiah –

*“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard,
Nor have entered into the heart of man,
The things that God has prepared for those who love Him”*

Adapted from “The Divine Fire of God’s Love”, Chapter 19 of the book “Surprised by Christ: My Journey from Judaism to Orthodox Christianity” by Fr. James Bernstein (published by Conciliar Press in May 2008)



LESSON 7 – THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER



The Parable of the Sower is usually referred to as the first of the Lord's parables. It appears in all the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

Saint Cyril reflected on the first and second kinds of soil in the parable -

“No sacred or divine word will be able to enter those who have minds that are hard and unyielding, for it is by the aid of such words that the joyful fruit of virtue can grow. Men of this kind are highways that are trodden by unclean spirits, and by Satan himself, and they shall never be producers of holy fruit, because their hearts are sterile and unfaithful”. He further reflected, “A religion without roots....When this kind of person goes out of the church, he immediately forgets the holy teachings he has heard there. And as long as Christians are left in peace, he keeps the faith, but as soon as persecution arises, he will be ready to

take to flight in search of safety.”

Saint John Chrysostom expanded on the parable by teaching that

1. The seed = the doctrine of Christ
2. The ground = the souls of men
3. The sower = Christ, Himself

But, let's pause and reflect - why would the divine Sower sow His seed where He knows it won't grow? It is to show that the Lord makes no distinction between rich and poor, wise and unwise, slothful and diligent, brave and cowardly, but He discourses to all. The sower would also not make any distinction among the land before him.

Unlike the ground, the human soul can be converted and therefore we should not hesitate to teach or proclaim God's word to everyone. For an ordinary farmer, indiscriminate sowing is pointless, but with God and His Word it is possible for rock to become rich land, and it is possible for the wayside to no longer be trampled on, nor lie

open to all that pass by - it is possible that the thorns are destroyed, so that the seed may enjoy full security.

Had it not been possible, this divine Sower would not have sown His seed.

Therefore, the lesson for us is that it is not up to us as God's messenger to decide beforehand who we should share the word of God.

To further reflect on the seed, itself - it is small, and yet every seed grows. The natural seed seems small and unimportant, but it contains a lot of power inside it.

We see several examples in Scripture -

1. St. Matthew was a tax collector. He only heard the simple words, "Follow Me" and it changed his life. It was enough for him to leave his office and follow Christ.
2. St. Paul was a persecutor of Christians. He journeyed toward the path of sainthood after only hearing a few words, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." The former enemy became the foremost preacher.
3. St. Antony – his whole life changed when he heard the Gospel reading, "Sell all that you have and give to the poor...".
4. Blessed Augustine heard a voice say "take up and read", and then read the words of St. Paul in **Romans 13:12-14**. This caused him to abandon his sinful, dark life and to become a light in Christianity.

However, when we talk about the word of God, our words may seem small and unimportant, but to those who truly receive it performs great miracles within.

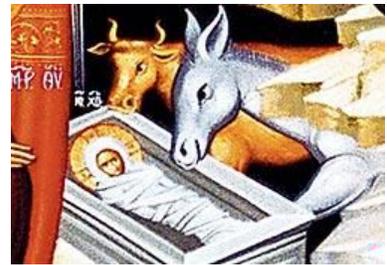
LESSON 8 – THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD



Studying the Icon of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ while reading Scripture (**Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 2:1-20**) clearly emphasizes the importance and beauty of the Incarnation of our Lord. The icon tells the story of Christ's birth from the Scriptures and shows that all creation is taking part in Christ's birth. The angels give thanks with their song; the heavens give the star; the Wise Men give their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The poor, humble shepherds give their praise and amazement; the earth gives the cave; humanity gives the Virgin.

The importance of the Theotokos, the Mother of God, is emphasized by her placement near the center and is the largest figure in the icon. In this icon, she is kneeling with crossed arms, looking at the Christ child. The three stars, denoting her

virginity before, during, and after the Nativity, are on her garments. The Christ Child, in the center of the icon, is in swaddling clothes and is lying in the manger. In the background is the dark cave where He was born. In the



cave are an ox and a donkey guarding the newborn Babe. Even though the Gospels say nothing of the cave, this information is from Holy Tradition. Neither do the Gospels speak of the ox and the donkey, but all icons of the Nativity include these animals. Including the animals in the icon fulfills the prophecy of **Isaiah 1:3**, "The ox knows his master, and the donkey his master's crib; but Israel does not know me, and the people have not regarded me." The long ray of light from the star points directly to the cave. This ray comes from the star and travels to all parts of the world. It teaches that this bright star is an astronomical happening, and a messenger from heaven announcing the birth of Jesus.

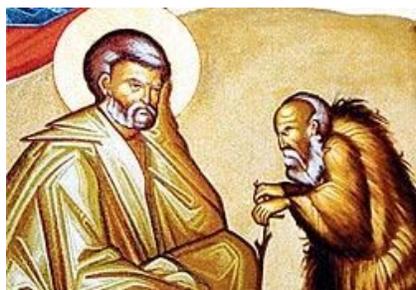
On the left hand side of the icon is another scene. The Wise Men, who were led by the star, are riding horses to bring their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus. The Wise Men are of various ages. One is without a beard. In those days, young men did not



wear beards. The other Wise Man has long hair and a long beard, which indicates that he is much older. These details teach that regardless of age and appearance, the Good News was given everyone. Opposite the Wise Men is the scene with the humble shepherds. An angel proclaims the glad tidings. A young shepherd plays a reed instrument. This scene reveals that the music of the humans was added to the hymn of the angels. Across from the shepherd's

scene is the heavenly choir of angels. They are giving glory to God. The angels serve two purposes in the Nativity of Christ: they give glory to God and announce the Good News to all mankind. The background shows a very rugged terrain. This is not a true representation of the land in this area. Joseph could not find room in Bethlehem, so they went outside of Bethlehem to a cave. This rocky mountain formation only serves as a background for the event.

In the lower part of the icon are two more scenes. In the right hand corner are the two women Joseph brought to take care of the Christ child. They are bathing Him just as any baby is bathed. The humanity of Jesus is clearly shown in this setting. Opposite the bathing of Jesus scene sits a sad and worried Joseph. He is not part of the central group the Christ Child and the Theotokos. Joseph is not the natural father. Joseph is troubled and despondent.



There is an old man talking to Joseph. The old man is Satan. Satan can appear in many forms. Here he is as an old man who is tempting Joseph and disturbing him. Satan is telling Joseph that virgin birth is impossible. He's telling Joseph that he's a fool if he believes this. This story comes to us from Holy Tradition. The sad Joseph shows us not only his personal predicament but the dilemma of all mankind the difficulty of accepting

that which is "beyond words or reason."

The tree, which is in the middle of the lower part of the icon, is a symbol of the Tree of Jesse. This tree refers to **Isaiah 11:1-2**, "But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him." King David was often mentioned as the son of Jesse and Jesus was from the House of David.

The Holy Icon of the Nativity reminds one to praise and glorify the Birth of Christ. The celebration of Christmas each year serves to remind each and everyone of us that Christ came for you and me. However, no description of the Nativity Icon would be complete without mention of Jesus' appearance in the manger.



It should be never forgotten that Jesus came to us in order to die – this was known by Him, at least, from the very beginning. Therefore, in Iconography, the manger in the Nativity Icon deliberately resembles a stone coffin, the swaddling clothes resemble a burial shroud, and the cave itself can even be said to prefigure Christ's tomb.

With the side-by-side comparison shown above of the Icon of the Nativity with the Icon showing the Myrrh-bearing women discovering Jesus' empty tomb, no more words are necessary. This is why in iconography, Mother Mary is never shown smiling as she's already thinking about the suffering her Son will one day endure on the Cross. However, the message of the Gospel – the Good News – is that the bright glory of the Resurrection lasts forever.

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© Material from "A Reader's Guide to Orthodox Icons" has been adapted for this lesson <http://iconreader.wordpress.com/2010/12/24/the-womb-and-the-tomb/>



Coptic Icon of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ

LESSON 9 – THE HOLY BIBLE

How should we respond when someone asks, “Who wrote the Bible?” Have you ever wondered which Bible was used by Jesus and the Apostles? Or, to the question - “Do you go to a Bible-based Church?”

The Holy Bible (or Holy Scriptures as the Bible is a collection of books) is not only the book of the Orthodox Church, but was written by the Church and intended to be read by those who believe in God and constitute His People within the Church. There has always been an implicit assumption that those who read the Holy Bible were Christians or catechumens (a Christian convert under instruction before Holy Baptism). Every word in Scripture presupposes faith in God. The Holy Bible was never intended to be an isolated manuscript, nor the fruit of scientific or historical research. Rather, the Holy Bible is a faith document for the children of God and was intended to be read and interpreted within a “Canon of Truth” i.e., the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The Bible is the record of the revelation to God to man, through the prophets and Christ. The four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are the center of the Bible, just as Christ is the center of the Church. For this reason the Four Gospels are always enthroned on the altar in an Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox interprets the Bible in terms of Christ. The Old Testament prepares for the time of Christ, the Messiah, who fulfills its message and history. The New Testament writings are also centered around Christ and tell of His action in the world and in the Church through the Holy Spirit.

The Bible is central in the life of the Orthodox Church and gives both form and content to the Church’s liturgical and sacramental worship, just as to its theology and spiritual life. Nothing in the Orthodox Church is opposed to what is revealed in the Bible. His Grace Dr. Geevarghese Mar Osthathios emphasized that the sacred traditions of the Church will never contradict Scripture, and in fact “We must always explain the Scriptural truth in the context of the sacred traditions of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and not establish any dogma on the basis of the traditions alone.” In other words, our tradition is the Holy Bible!

The Bible is the written Word of God - this neither means the Bible fell from heaven ready made, nor that God dictated the Bible word for word to men who were merely His

passive instruments. It means God has revealed Himself as the true and living God to His people, and that as one aspect of His divine self-revelation God inspired His People to produce scriptures, i.e., writings which constitute the true and genuine expressions of His Truth and His Will for His People and for the whole world.

The authors of the books of the Bible were human, and used the words and language they knew to reveal the Truth that God Himself inspired to be written as witness. Moses, the prophets, and the Apostles all had Divine Inspiration, but expressed in their own language, words, and perspectives. Nevertheless, in the full integrity of their human condition and form, the words of the Bible are truly the very Word of God.

As St. Paul explains, “All scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**). It is the faith of the Orthodox Church that the Bible, as the divinely-inspired Word of God, contains no formal errors or inner contradictions as a whole concerning the relationship between God and the world. If Scripture is read in parts or out of context there can be misunderstandings or contradiction, but this is not the proper use of the Holy Bible as the eternal spiritual and doctrinal message of God, presented in the Bible in many different ways, remains perfectly consistent, authentic, and true.

The purpose of Scripture can be summarized in **John 20:30-31** - “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you have life in His name”.

So, God did not write the Bible. Rather, the Holy Saints inspired by God wrote so that we may grow as Christians and find salvation by becoming like Christ in the Church (*theosis*). Church views differ on what He wrote - some say 10 commandments, some say the name of the accusers; whatever was actually written does not change our understanding of Christ.

So, if Jesus did not write the Bible, what did He do? He established the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. In Scripture itself, we clearly read that the Church is the Body of Christ (**Colossians 1:18-29**, **Ephesians 5:23**, **1 Corinthians 12:12**, etc.). It is with the understanding of the Church that the Holy Bible is to be read and understood.

Regarding authorship of the various texts of the Bible, there is no doubt that inspired and holy people are attributed authorship of Books. However, this does not necessarily mean that person wrote it themselves - for example, we know Moses is the author of the first 5 Books of the OT (Pentateuch). But who wrote about Moses' death? In ancient times, authorship was given to the first speaker i.e., if one person spoke and a second person wrote what the first person had said, the author was said to be the first person. This also explains why there is some confusion of St. Paul's authorship of Hebrews. As a Church, we should be comforted that the Holy Church has blessed St. Paul to be the original speaker, even if historically St. Paul himself did not write the letter.

Scripture and Tradition

For the Orthodox Church, the Holy Scripture is our Tradition. It was the Church that wrote down the words of Scripture (from Moses, to the Apostles and St. Paul). It was the Church that preserved the words of Scripture (**1 Corinthians 15:1-8**). It was the Church that told us what Scripture is – She chose from among several texts (**Luke 1:1-4**) and selected those that upheld the Canon of Truth.

It is the Church alone that correctly interprets the Scripture because She alone upheld the fullness of Christ's teachings. For all Christians, the Canon (Greek κανών, meaning "rule" or "measuring stick" - it is the list of books considered to be authoritative scripture) of the Holy Bible is closed, and no books are added. In Roman Catholicism, teachings have been expounded to the point of new additions (e.g., the Immaculate Conception, papal infallibility), and in Evangelical/Protestantism, teachings were taken away (belief that Holy Eucharist is not the Body and Blood of Christ, belief on the departed and Saints, changed views on Sacraments including Holy Baptism, priesthood and Confession, etc.). For the Orthodox Church, we do not add any new teachings unlike other denominations.

The Holy Bible is the Divinely inspired Word of God (**2 Timothy 3:16**), and although has two parts (Old Testament and New Testament), the entire book is one message, one Word - Jesus Christ.

As a final note, it must be understood that despite some modern theories or popular media outlets claiming that "lost books" are being discovered that shed new light on Christianity, there are no "lost books" as all the writings that had been written in those times were read by the Church. Rather than thinking of these books as "lost", it is more proper to view these books as "rejected" as the Church determined these writings did not uphold the full revelation of Christ. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas is a good example of a rejected, Gnostic book that portrays Christ as a supernatural being who killed and

then resurrected a childhood acquaintance which the Church rejects as we know Christ lived as man who did no sin.

New Testament

The New Testament contains 27 books, beginning with the Gospel of Matthew and ending with the Book of the Revelation. All Christian denominations accept this with no dispute.

How were these books selected? By the Church! It is important to understand that in the days of Christ and the Apostles, there was no “New Testament”. For example, when St. Paul wrote in **2 Timothy 3:16** that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, he was referring to what we call the Old Testament today as many books of the New Testament had not been written yet.

In 367 A.D., St. Athanasius wrote a Paschal Letter where the books of what we call the New Testament is listed in the order it is seen in today’s Holy Gospel. However, we never claim that St. Athanasius decided these books individually, but rather these were the teachings of Christ that were being read in Churches at that time and written down by St. Athanasius. Writings from a local council held earlier at Carthage in 318 AD also made note of these books. This is a reflection of the authority and sacredness of oral teachings, which upheld the teachings of Christ to His Apostles in the Christian community of the early Church.

Old Testament

As mentioned earlier, the Apostles refer to what we call the “Old Testament” as Scripture. These sacred books are not intended to be ignored by Christians, and there is much we can learn about Christ in the pages of the Old Testament. For the Church, the Old and New Testaments together is referred to as Holy Scripture, and understood as One Word.

The Number of Books are disputed between the different Christian denominations. For Orthodox Christians, there are about 46 to 50 books depending upon whether the original source is the *Septuagint* (Greek) or other (e.g., the Syriac text is called the *Peshitta*). What’s important is that there are more than the 39 books that are most commonly found in most Holy Bibles.

To understand this discrepancy, we must first understand that the earliest Christian community used the Greek version of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, which references the 70 finest Jewish scholars from all 12 tribes who made the translation

from Hebrew into Greek. This became the universally accepted version of the Old Testament since the time of its appearance some three centuries before the birth of Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ, together with all His apostles and evangelists, used this Greek version when quoting the Old Testament in their gospels and epistles.

Greek was the language used by early Christians as their language of global communications because of the importance of Alexandria. As Fr. Reji Matthew, a professor at Orthodox Theological Seminary in Kottayam, explains - “It was just like the new generations of the Malankara Orthodox Church use English instead of Malayalam” - although many readers of this textbook may be from India, it is being written and read in English and not Malayalam.

With the death and Resurrection of Christ, and the ever growing popularity and growth of the Christian Church fueled by the blood of the martyrs and the prayers of the Saints, a Council of Jewish rabbis held in a place called Jamnia came together and chose 39 books as the Jewish canon of their Bible in A.D. 90. It’s interesting to think that one reason the rabbis rejected certain Books of what was the Old Testament was they thought Greek was the language of Christians, and if the scholars thought the Book had no Hebrew origin than it was viewed to be “perverted” by Christians and rejected. An example of a book not in the Jewish canon (and subsequently adopted by Martin Luther who did not choose the ancient Christian canon) is the Book of Maccabees, which contains the account for the Jewish festival of Hanukkah which is one of the important feasts in Judaism.

Summary

We see in the early days of the Church there was no Holy Bible as we know today - so how did the faithful survive? If there was no complete written and authorized collection of writings, how did those who believed in Christ function? The answer is the Church, following the instructions of our Lord Jesus Christ as given to the Apostles.

For the Orthodox Church, the role of the Holy Bible is the same as how we use our oral teachings - together this is the Tradition of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. For example, many texts in the Old Testament is interpreted as typological - e.g., the burning bush (**Exodus 3**) is a type of the Virgin Mary, the ram (**Genesis 22**) that was sacrificed in place of Isaac was a type for Christ, etc. - and it is the oral tradition along with the written word that together brings the fullness of the Christian faith.

The Bible is a Faith document, and every word in Scripture is put in context and understanding of one who believes in Christ and is a member of the Church. Scripture is

not Self interpreting (**2 Peter 1:20-21; Acts 8:30-31**), and nowhere in the Bible is it stated Scripture alone is Truth - this teaching known *Sola Scriptura* contradicts itself. We believe all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and we understand this with the guidance of the Church. Patristic Teaching is the term used by the writings of our Church fathers to help us understand the meaning and depth of Scripture.

As an Orthodox Christian, we reject any new way to understand the Bible, as our understanding comes from Christ Himself.



To illustrate the importance of using the fullness of the Faith as given to us by the Apostles, we need to reflect on the interpretation of the Old Testament. Without teachings (or traditions), the Old Testament may appear very confusing. However, with the illumination from Christ Himself, we know today that the Old Testament has many examples of typology. Typology in Christian theology is a tradition concerning the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament. Events, persons or statements in the Old Testament are seen as types *prefiguring* or *shadowing* by real events or aspects of Christ or his revelation described in the New Testament. For example, Jonah may be seen as the type of Christ in that he appeared to have emerged from the whale's belly and from death. The whole purpose of

the Old Testament is about Jesus Christ when read in this manner.

The Burning Bush that Moses had seen is a great example of the foreshadowing of the Holy Virgin Mary. As we know, God spoke from within the bush, but the bush did not catch fire, burn, or otherwise change or be destroyed. In the same manner, St. Mary bore Christ within her, and yet never changed - she is ever-virgin, and a human being like us. This is one of many gems that show how Apostolic tradition illuminates the Holy Bible as a whole.

LESSON 10 – GOD’S REVELATION

A common response for people when they initially read the Bible is to feel overwhelmed on where to start. This is a natural response when presented with any book that’s over an inch thick, printed on very thin pages, and with a page count of over 1,800 pages long. Part of being overwhelmed can also be a mistaken assumption that everyone needs to start by picking up the Bible and reading it from cover to cover like a normal book.

Instead, Holy Scripture should be thought of as a companion who will be a constant part of your life from here on out. As with any new “friend,” your initial steps should be based on introduction, in which to help acquaint that person with the Bible and its contents. As we read in Joshua 1:8, the teaching of Scripture should always be in our mind and we should be thinking about it day and night, and by doing so we will better understand what we need to do.

Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk had this to say about our attitude towards the Holy Scriptures - “If an earthly king, our emperor, wrote you a letter, would you not read it with joy? Certainly, with great rejoicing and careful attention. You have been sent a letter, not by any earthly emperor, but by the King of Heaven. And yet you almost despise such a gift, so priceless a treasure.” He goes on to say: “Whenever you read the Gospel, Christ Himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking to Him.”

We are to see Scripture as a personal letter addressed specifically to each one of us by God. We are each of us to see Scripture reading as a direct, individual dialogue between Christ and ourselves.

The Old and New Testament is to be read as One Word, and they are at once divinely inspired and humanly expressed. They bear authoritative witness to God’s revelation of Himself—in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word, and the whole history of salvation. And as such they express the word of God in human language. . . . We know, receive, and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church.

The Orthodox Study Bible reminds us that there are four key qualities which mark our reading of Scripture. First, our reading should be obedient. Second, it should be ecclesial, within the Church. Third, it should be Christ-centered. Fourth, it should be personal.

We read the Bible personally, but not as isolated individuals. We read as the members of a family, the family of the Orthodox Catholic Church. When reading Scripture, we say not “I” but “We.” We read in communion with all the other members of the Body of Christ, in all parts of the world and in all generations of time. The decisive test and criterion for our understanding of what the Scripture means is the mind of the Church. The Bible is the book of the Church.

To discover this “mind of the Church,” where do we begin? Our first step is to see how Scripture is used in worship. How, in particular, are biblical lessons chosen for reading at the different feasts? We should also consult the writings of the Church Fathers, and consider how they interpret the Bible. Our Orthodox manner of reading Scripture is in this way both liturgical and patristic. And this, as we all realize, is far from easy to do in practice, because we have at our disposal so few Orthodox commentaries on Scripture available in English, and most of the Western commentaries do not employ this liturgical and patristic approach.

As an example of what it means to interpret Scripture in a liturgical way, guided by the use of Church feasts, let us look at the Old Testament lessons - (1) **Genesis 28:10-17**: Jacob’s dream of a ladder set up from earth to heaven; (2) **Ezekiel 43:27-44:4**: the prophet’s vision of the Jerusalem sanctuary, with the closed gate through which none but the Prince may pass; (3) **Proverbs 9:1-11**: one of the great sophianic passages in the Old Testament, beginning “Wisdom has built her house.”

These texts in the Old Testament are all to be understood as prophecies concerning the Incarnation from the Virgin. Mary is Jacob’s ladder, supplying the flesh that God incarnate takes upon entering our human world. Mary is the closed gate who alone among women bore a child while still remaining inviolate. Mary provides the house which Christ the Wisdom of God (**1 Corinthians 1:24**) takes as his dwelling (in another interpretation, the title Wisdom or Sophia refers to the Mother of God herself). Exploring in this manner the choice of lessons for the various feasts, we discover layers of biblical interpretation that are by no means obvious on a first reading.

Studying the Old Testament in a liturgical way and using the Fathers to help us, we uncover signposts pointing forward to the mystery of Christ and of His Mother. Reading the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament, and the New in the light of the Old—as the Church’s calendar encourages us to do—we discover the unity of Holy Scripture. One of the best ways of identifying correspondences between the Old and New Testaments is to use the Orthodox Study Bible and other patristic commentary.

In the words of an early ascetic writer in the Christian East, Saint Mark the Monk: “He who is humble in his thoughts and engaged in spiritual work, when he reads the Holy Scriptures, will apply everything to himself and not to his neighbor.” As Orthodox Christians we are to look everywhere in Scripture for a personal application. We are to ask not just, “What does it mean?” but, “What does it mean to me?” Scripture is a personal dialogue between the Savior and I—Christ speaking to me, and my answer.

I am to see all the stories in Scripture as part of my own personal story. Who is Adam? The name Adam means “man,” “human,” and so the Genesis account of Adam’s Fall is also a story about me. I am Adam. It is to me that God says, “Adam, where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). “Where is God?” we often ask. But the real question is what God asks the Adam in each of us: “Where are you?”

When, in the story of Cain and Abel, we read God’s words to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” (Genesis 4:9), that also is addressed to each one of us. Who is Cain? It is myself. And God asks the Cain in each of us, “Where is your brother?” The way to God lies through love of other people, and there is no other way. Disowning my brother, I replace the image of God with the mark of Cain, and deny my own essential humanity.

Reading Scripture in this way—in obedience, as a member of the Church, finding Christ everywhere, seeing everything as a part of my own personal story—we shall sense something of the variety and depth to be found in the Bible. Yet always we shall feel that in our biblical exploration we are only at the very beginning. We are like someone launching out in a tiny boat across a limitless ocean.

A list of the Old and New Testament follows, and more information can be found in the Orthodox Study Bible.

Edited from “Overview of the Books of the Bible”, by The Right Reverend Basil (Bishop of the Diocese of Wichita and Mid-America, The Orthodox Study Bible Pages xv-xx) & “How to Read Your Bible”, by Bishop Kallistos Ware (copyright by Conciliar Press/Ancient Faith Press)

Old Testament

The Five Books of the Law

1. Genesis, meaning "beginning"
2. Exodus, meaning "exit" or "departure"
3. Leviticus
4. Numbers
5. Deuteronomy, meaning "second law"

The Books of History

1. Joshua
2. Judges
3. Ruth
4. First and Second Kingdoms (also known as First and Second Samuel)
5. Third and Fourth Kingdoms (also known as First and Second Kings)
6. First and Second Chronicles
7. Nehemiah
8. First and Second Ezra
9. Tobit
10. Judith
11. Esther
12. Maccabees (1, 2, and 3)

The Books of Wisdom

1. Psalms
2. Job
3. Proverbs
4. Ecclesiastes
5. Song of Songs
6. Wisdom of Solomon
7. Wisdom of Sirach

The Books of Prophecy

Minor prophets

1. Hosea
2. Joel
3. Amos
4. Obadiah
5. Jonah
6. Micah
7. Nahum
8. Habakkuk
9. Zephaniah
10. Haggai
11. Zechariah
12. Malachi

The Books of Prophecy

Major prophets

1. Isaiah
2. Jeremiah
3. Ezekiel
4. Daniel

New Testament

Gospels

1. Matthew
2. Mark
3. Luke
4. John

Acts of Apostles

The General Epistles

1. James
2. I Peter and II Peter
3. I John, II John, and III John
4. Jude

Revelation

The Letters (or Epistles) of St. Paul

1. Romans
2. I Corinthians and II Corinthians
3. Galatians
4. Ephesians
5. Philippians
6. Colossians
7. I Thessalonians and II Thessalonians
8. I Timothy and II Timothy
9. Titus
10. Philemon
11. Hebrews

LESSON 11 – ATTAINING THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Parables are stories that reveal spiritual truth. The Hebrew and Aramaic words for parable also means “allegory”, “riddle”, or “proverb”. The Scriptures, especially the Gospels, are filled with parables - images drawn from daily life in the world to represent and communicate the deep things of God. Parables give us glimpses of Him whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways (**Isaiah 55:8,9**).

In the parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl (**Matthew 13:44-46**), there is a merchant in search of fine pearls, who then finds a truly great one and proceeds to sell all that he had and bought the pearl – ever since known as the “pearl of great price.” What Christ refers to in the parable, of course, is the Kingdom of God. And lest we confuse anyone – the Kingdom means everything – God Himself and all that you could possibly hunger for as well.

As Fr. Stephen Freeman commented, the problem about searching for Great Pearls is they are found among many false pearls, as well as pearls of far lesser value. More than the “needle in the haystack” – it’s finding a pearl among pearls – even if all pearls are not alike. The Apostles were merchants in search of fine pearls, and they gave up all they had. The simple fact is they believed the pearl was the Kingdom of God, manifested in the life of the Church. For this they suffered the loss of all things and purchased the pearl with the price of their blood. The pearl of great price exists and is worth all that a man has - it is the true faith, preserved by those who have bought it through the years and kept it as a pearl without deviation from the pearl as it was received. It is worth all that we can give, and nothing in this world is more precious than the fullness of the Faith, which is that One Pearl.

The Kingdom of God is what Christ has brought to the world. The Gospel is full of Christ’s insistence that the Kingdom of God is given to men by His coming. It is a Kingdom not of this world, but of God, a Kingdom of everlasting life in union with God, the Trinity.

Thus, we define the Kingdom of God as life in and with God. The Orthodox Church believes that this life is communicated to men in the Church through Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is a life where men worship and obey God and do His will by the presence and power of His spirit.

One saint has even defined the Kingdom of God as life in the Holy Spirit, which is the same definition given by Orthodox to the Christian Church itself.

What we know in the Church, in the Holy Spirit, of communion with God the Father through Jesus Christ, remains still a mystery. The Kingdom is really here, but in symbol and sacrament. At the end of the ages this Kingdom will come with observation, with power and glory, when Christ will be revealed and God will be “all in all.”

Thus because we Orthodox believe that the Kingdom is already given to those who believe, and that the righteous dead have even a greater access to this Kingdom than we have on earth because of our mixture with the evil of this age, we insist that “heaven” is not a locatable place within the space of our created universe, but a spiritual, divine, condition of existence which will fill the universe at the end of time. It is “eternal life” already revealed to the saints in death and to the holy people of God within the sacramental life of the Christian Church.

To conclude, we read in **Luke 12:31-34**, a key message of love and encouragement from our Lord Jesus Christ - “Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

This is a message to all believers that we can attain the Kingdom if we obey. We experience a foretaste of the Kingdom in the Church, and in worship we join the heavenly hosts - the saints and the angels - together with the departed faithful of the Church in giving praise to our God. And this foretaste of the Kingdom should inspire us to seek its fullness.

St. John writes, “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (**1 John 3:2, 3**).

© Material adapted from the Orthodox Study Bible, the Orthodox Church of America website (<http://oca.org>) and Fr. Stephen Freeman (<https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/glory2godforallthings/>)

LESSON 12 – THE CHURCH

One of the tragic aberrations of modern Christianity is “Churchless Christianity” - the assertion that Christ saves us outside of the Church. Many modern Christian books such as the one titled, “Love Christ, Hate Church”, reflect a very popular sentiment in today’s world that Church is not relevant for our salvation.

There is no doubt that the Orthodox Church firmly teaches that Christ alone is the One who saves - He is the second person of the Holy Trinity, and the Son of God who has assumed human flesh “for us men and for our Salvation”. However, Christ established the Church on this earth so we may grow to become what we had been created, maturing and being perfected so we may truly enjoy the rewards of eternal life.

In the Holy Scriptures the Church is repeatedly called the Body of Christ e.g., "(Paul) now rejoice in my sufferings for you, ... for His Body's sake, which is the Church (**Colossians 1:24**), the Apostle Paul writes about himself"; "And He (Christ) is the of the body, the church (**Colossians 1:18**); "which is His body, the Fulness of Him the that Filleth all in all (**Ephesians 1:23**), etc.

The Church is unity in Christ, the closest union with Christ of all who rightly believe on Him and love Him, and all their union is through Christ. We read this in the **Ephesians 5:32**, “This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.”

For the full sanctification of man, our bodies are united with the real and true Body of Christ, and this is accomplished in the mystery of Holy Eucharist (Holy Qurbana). The true Body and the true Blood of Christ which we receive, becomes a part of the great Body of Christ. Of course, for true union with Christ, we must prepare ourselves and partake of the Body and Blood of Christ in a worthy manner (**1 Corinthians 11:27-29**). The consumption of the Body of Christ becomes beneficial when in spirit we strive toward Him and unite ourselves with Him. Reception of the Body of Christ, with aversion to Him in spirit, is like the approach to Christ of those who struck Him and mocked and crucified Him. Their approaching Him served not for their salvation and healing, but for their condemnation.

But those who partake with piety, love and readiness to bring themselves to serve Him, closely unite themselves with Him and become instruments of His divine will. "He that eateth My Flesh and drinketh My blood, dwelleth in Me, and I in him," said the Lord (**John 6:56**).

We partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, in the holy Mysteries, so that we ourselves may be members of Christ's Body: the Church.

Through repentance, a Christian is cleansed and united closely to Christ in partaking of the Holy Mysteries. Communion of the Holy Body and Blood of Christ strengthens our contact with Him and refreshes us with the living streams of the grace of the Holy Spirit flowing through the Body of the Church - this is necessary for everyone. We see how angels brought Holy Qurbana to St. Onuphrius the Great while he was dwelling in the same desert, in the life of St. Mary of Egypt we read that her final wish after many years of desert life was the reception of the Holy Mysteries. Not in vain did the Lord speak and say: "Amen, amen, I say unto you, except ye eat the Flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His Blood, ye have no life in you" (**John 6:53**).

The Church, then, is that place established by Christ where we each become what we are created to be, maturing and being perfected, while the Church receives what it needs from each of us, so that it too is being perfected. The Church as the body of Christ carries us beyond our petty and worldly concerns, stretching our vision to the eternal and the heavenly as we ascend together to worship the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Edited from the Orthodox Study Bible Note titled "The Church" (pg 1604), and the article "The Church as the Body of Christ" by St. John Maximovitch (translated from the Russian by Fr. George Lardas)

LESSON 13 – OUR BODY: GOD’S TEMPLE

High school is exciting - there's that wonderful feeling of making a fresh start, catching up with old friends, and making progress by moving up a grade. But there's no denying that it can be stressful too. The world that you are a part of is one where we worry most about social issues like fitting in, having friends, being judged, or being teased. Since social life is such a big part of school, it's not a shock that social issues are the biggest worry for some people. And another category ranks high on the worry list: appearance.

But, it's times like this that we forget one important truth that happened the day you were Baptized and became a Christian - something happened to your body and another dimension was added to your being. Your body became the temple of the Holy Spirit.

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body,” **(1 Corinthians 6:19-20)**.

“Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” **(John 14:23)**. Your body is now the temple of God. Be careful where it goes. Be careful what it does. Be careful what it ponders. Be careful how it reacts.

The Holy Spirit lives within you.

He regenerates **(John 3:3-5)**. He indwells **(Romans 8:11)**. He anoints **(1 John 2:27)**. He baptizes **(Acts 2:17-41)**. He empowers **(Micah 3:8)**. He sanctifies **(Romans 15:16)**. He comforts **(John 14:16-26)**. He gives joy **(Romans 14:17)**. He gives discernment **(1 Corinthians 2:10-16)**. He bears fruit **(Galatians 5:22-23)**. He gives gifts **(1 Corinthians 12:3-11)**.

Surrender your body to the Lord. Glorify God in your daily life.

We are God’s workmanship - as St. Basil the Great teaches, “Ponder how you were molded. Consider the workshop of nature. The hand that received you is God’s. May what is molded by God not be defiled by evil, not be altered by sin; may you not fall from the hand of God. You are a vessel divinely molded, having come into being from God. Glorify your Creator. For you came to be for the sake of no other thing except that you be an instrument fit for the glory of God. And for you this whole world is as it were a

book that proclaims the glory of God, announcing through itself the hidden and invisible greatness of God to you who have a mind for the apprehension of truth.”

Man was the crowning act of the creation of God, made in the image of God, and designed to be a counterpart of God. Man is very dear to God, because he was formed in his own image. We are icons of our Lord Jesus Christ. This fact should impress us with the importance of teaching by precept and example the sin of defiling, by the indulgence of appetite or by any other sinful practice, the body which is designed to represent God to the world.

Our body is the expression of the whole person, which Christ has redeemed so we might become united with him, for “anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with Him” (**1 Corinthians 6:17**). And because we are now spiritually united to the Lord, we must be careful not to defile our bodies with Sin. Our bodies are not our own, but are God’s gift to us so that we might use them to come to know Him and glorify Him. It is through our bodies that we taste the sweetness of the Eucharist and with our bodies that we embrace one another in love. As St. Paul tells us, our very flesh is filled with the Holy Spirit (**Romans 8:9**). Sure, we know that it’s often through our bodies and the temptations of the flesh that we fall, but it is with the knees we’ve been given that we fall down in contrition and with the eyes we have that we shed tears of repentance.

We should treat our bodies with the utmost respect as hand-crafted creations of the Creator Himself, and this includes not joining in sexual immorality. Those sanctified by the Lord are now his holy temple, where he dwells by means of the Holy Spirit. Because they are inhabited by the Holy God, they must live in holiness.

The attitude towards casual sex continues to grow bolder and more acceptable to the secular world, but the Church is clear that one who falls to this temptation has taken the wrong turn. The sexual act is sacred and can only be consummated after the Sacrament (Mystery) of Holy Matrimony, after which a man and woman creates a permanent bond. Physical love makes two people ‘one flesh’ – fused into one – happily married for a long time. They are incomplete without each other. However, physical union for mere pleasure is not eternal, and not sacred. Permanence and stability are excluded from this and therefore the act is in a way a lie. God dwells within our body, therefore making us the temple of God. Our bodies are holy and must be used to give glory to God, not to act out a lie and insult Christ.

Adapted from “Our Body, His Temple”, written by Fr. Tenny Thomas

LESSON 14 – PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

The Parable of the Talents is given in **Matthew 25:14-30**, and is about accountability as Christians and the use of the gifts given to us by God. A talent was a large amount of money equating to about 15 years of salary, and in the parable represents the goodness God has bestowed on each person.

Does God show partiality by giving people unequal talents? Of course not! As we read in **Romans 12:4-7**, we are unique individuals with different gifts, just as in one body there are different parts each with a different purpose. However, just as all the parts of the body work together as a whole, so too Christ wishes us to use the gifts given to us to serve the world as He would serve. God does not show partiality in the ultimate reward, for all are invited to share the same joy.

The parable illustrates the use of the gifts that God has given us. The man that was given one talent, "...went and dug in the ground and hid his lord's money" and "kept put away in a handkerchief." Burying the talent in the ground (**v.18**) is an illustration of using one's God-given gifts for earthly pursuits. The wicked and lazy servant (**v.26**) could not evade responsibility for ignoring his talent, for idleness is as much a rejection of God as outright wickedness. The bankers (**v.27**) represent other faithful people to whom the man could have turned to help him use his talents wisely. Since help was available to him in the Church, the man has no excuse.

St. John Chrysostom reflected on this parable, saying, "Knowing then these things, let us contribute alike wealth, and diligence, and protection, and all things for our neighbor's advantage. For the talents here are each person's ability, whether in the way of protection, or in money, or in teaching, or in what thing soever of the kind. Let no man say, I have but one talent, and can do nothing; for you can even by one approve yourself. For you are not poorer than that widow; you are not more uninstructed than Peter and John, who were both "unlearned and ignorant men;" (Acts 4:13) but nevertheless, since they showed forth a zeal, and did all things for the common good, they attained to Heaven. For nothing is so pleasing to God, as to live for the common advantage."

For this end God gave us speech, and hands, and feet, and strength of body, and mind, and understanding, that we might use all these things, both for our own salvation, and for our neighbor's advantage. For not for hymns only and thanksgivings is our speech serviceable to us, but it is profitable also for instruction and admonition. And if indeed

we used it to this end, we should be imitating our Master; but if for the opposite ends, the devil.”

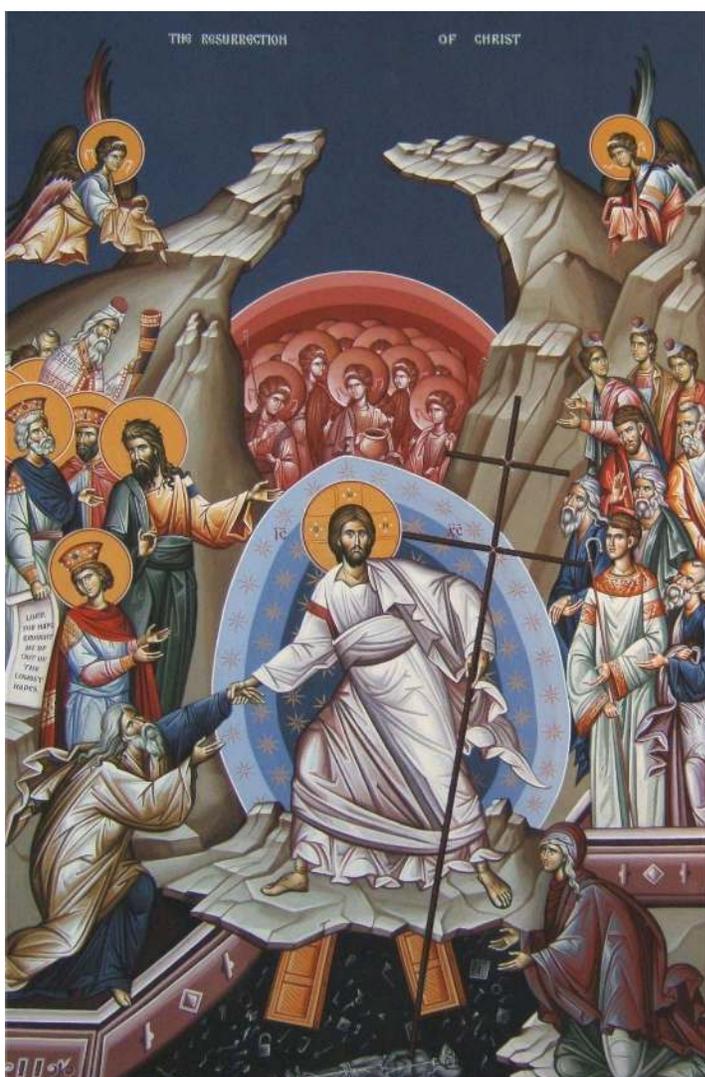
This parable like many others in the Gospel of Matthew describes something about the Kingdom of Heaven. They illustrate characteristics of what heaven will be like, often in very concrete moral terms. Heaven, it appears, is not a place of idleness but co-creativity with God.

We must carefully consider the talents God has given us. We must evaluate how we manage them. We must be clear on the obligation our talents place on us particular in terms of how we serve and treat other people who enter our life. God is the giver of our talents. We must be the wise steward. The words we want to hear when our stewardship is judged by the master should be the same as the good steward: "Well done good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord."

LESSON 15 – THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED

There is no distinction today between the living and the departed in the teaching of the Holy Church. All are one in the love of the Father.

Before the Resurrection of Christ, death meant a return to the same earth from which all were taken (**Genesis 3:19, Job 7:21**). When we died, we were truly dead. There was a general idea that the souls of the dead continued in Sheol or Hades, the place of the dead. This is why when we read the Old Testament or sing the Psalms, we hear references to the dead as being without power of deliverance.



But, the inspired authors of the Old Testament books understood there was hope for all who had died of a coming life after death. As Christians, we know this because of the Resurrection of Christ and the defeat of death. We read Scripture and sing hymns on Holy Saturday to remind us of the fulfilment of the promise - that death brought into this world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve will be destroyed, and our Lord Jesus Christ has saved us and “the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (**1 Corinthians 15:52**). Christ promises that believers will be with Him after death (**Luke 23:42, 43, 2 Corinthians 5:8, Philippians 1:21-23**). The souls of believers are further enlightened in Christ, as they experience a foretaste of the eternal heavenly kingdom. Yet all

the departed still await the general resurrection, the day when their souls will be

reunited with their bodies, which are transformed into a glorified state (**1 Colossians 15:50-54**) like Christ's own body (**Philippians 3:20, 21; 1 John 3:2**)

This is why Christ is the Messiah, the Savior - He has defeated death and saved us. It is very important to understand that as followers of Christ, we must always without doubt or confusion proclaim that Christ has truly Resurrected ... else there is no Christ nor Christianity! In today's world, we too often see sensational articles written and documentaries on The History Channel and Discovery Channel claiming to have found the tomb and bones of Christ - for believers, this is simply heresy. If the bones of Christ were ever found, then there is no Resurrection. In the words of St. Paul (**1 Corinthians 15:14**), "if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty"

Because of the Resurrection, those who die are with the Lord and are alive in spirit and tasting paradise - as we read earlier, for some this is a blessed and enjoyable experience, and others not. Because the departed are alive, we believe the faithful departed (those who were members of the Church before passing away from this world) are still members of the Church .

In the words of Bishop Kallistos Ware - "whether we are alive or whether we are dead, as a member of the Church we still belong to the same family, and still have a duty to bear one another's burdens. Therefore just as Orthodox Christians here on earth pray for one another and ask one another's prayers, so they pray for the faithful departed, and ask for the faithful departed to pray for them. Death cannot sever the bond of mutual love which links the members of the Church together."

This is why we pray for the faithful departed - those who in love and in the true faith have departed as members of the Holy Church - numerous times in our prayers and our hymns, and in particular during Holy Qurbana. It's important to understand that we know that as we join together for Liturgy, we are joined not only with the faithful departed from the parish, but from everywhere - this Church, this place, all places and regions. The faithful departed are often referred to as "fallen asleep", and are at rest with God. And just as we pray for our brothers and sisters who we can see with our physical eyes, we also pray for our brothers and sisters who are departed so that all of us together may be worthy of enjoying His heavenly kingdom.

The *Quqliyons* are intercessory prayers during the Holy Qurbana, and the hymns and prayers of the Quqliyon for the departed provides all the necessary teachings and references to Scripture to properly teach us about life after death. As St. Paul wrote in

his letter to the Hebrews, we are “surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses” (**Hebrews 12:1**) and during the Divine Liturgy we are closest as the true believer understands that heaven and earth are One in that sacred moment and time.

The intercessory prayers start by referencing **Psalm 102:13-15 OSB**, and the hymn reminds us that just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion for all those who love and fear Him. The Psalmist recalls back to Genesis and the story of Creation, and as Christians we should know that God so loved His creation that He made a promise to bring eternal life and rescue from death -

*May Your Living voice awake
Your servants who slept in hope
And trusted in Your mercy
From the graves to Paradise*

Our hymns continuously remind us of the glory of our Lord, and that those who kept the Faith and strived to grow in love and likeness of Christ will be glorified (**1 Thessalonians 4:16**, Hymn - *Rakshakane nin gathrathe; O Savior, raise up the dead*) -

*The Son of the King who gives life to the dead
will be carried above the clouds of beauty
The righteous who hear the trumpet before him
will be clothed in glorious garments and meet him*

With this understanding of the faithful departed and how they prepared in life to be with our Lord when they pass from this world, we sing in the hymn *The Life-Giving King ... (Uyierekunon raja...)* -

*How sweet are the words
our Lord spoke in His Gospel:
“He who receives - My Body and Blood
shall not be left in
Sheol for I tasted death
that he may have - everlasting life”
Lord have mercy upon us and help us*

We read this reminder in **John 5:28-29** - “.. the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

LESSON 16 – LOVE

We learn from Christ Himself that love is the Greatest Commandment (**Mark 12:28-31**). St John writes, “and we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in Him” (**1 John 4:16**).

God loves us, we love God ... and in turn, we are to love like God. But how?

It is important to know that different Greek words each with significant meaning in Scripture all translate to the same English word “love” -

- **Agápe** (ἀγάπη) means love in a "spiritual" sense, and is love reserved only for God to express our unconditional love.
- **Éros** (ἔρως) is romantic love, which is best defined between a man and woman in marriage.
- **Philia** (φιλία) is brotherly love, the type of loyalty to friends, family, and community, and requires virtue, equality and familiarity. In ancient texts, philos denoted a general type of love, used for love between family, between friends, a desire or enjoyment of an activity.
- **Storge** (στοργή) means "affection" in ancient and modern Greek. It is natural affection, like that felt by parents for offspring. Rarely used in ancient works, and then almost exclusively as a descriptor of relationships within the family.

Further, the word “love” in English could refer to inanimate objects - you may love chocolate, or love to play sports or video games. Clearly, this is not the love of your siblings, parents, or towards God.

The highest form of love is reserved for God, and is different than the love we have for anyone or anything. Having said that St. Paul, in his letter to Ephesians he uses the word *agape* to stress that husbands are to love (*agape*) wives, just as Christ also loved (*agape*) the church and gave Himself for it. This is to emphasize that Marriage is a Sacrament (mystery) between a man and a woman - holy, blessed, and everlasting in the sight of God and His Church. Within the bonds of marriage, there is both a fullness of equality between husband and wife, and God mysteriously transforms both people into One with Him. This is why in an Orthodox wedding, the marriage vows are never said between man and women but rather between both to God directly.

We must also understand that being a Christian means we love everyone like ourselves. Why? Genesis 1:27. Everyone is an Icon of Christ. We cannot pick our neighbor or only love the ones we wish.

Does this matter? Yes! Read **Matthew 25:34-46**

This is why we see in the examples of the Saints that loved their enemies even through persecution (e.g., the martyrdom of St. Stephen, **Acts 7:54-60**).

We are to bring the Truth and love of God, the Gospel, to everybody.

