



Sunday, November 27, 2011

"And a certain ruler asked him, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" (Luke 18:18)

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Luke 18:18-27

⁸ A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

¹⁹ "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'^[a]"

²¹ "All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said.

²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

²³ When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. ²⁴ Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

²⁶ Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?"

²⁷ Jesus replied, "What is impossible with man is possible with God."

This morning's Gospel is similar in theme to the Gospel for last Sunday, of the Rich Fool. Today's Gospel account speaks of the Rich Young Ruler who asks Jesus what is necessary to obtain salvation, and when the Lord explains it all to him he walks away, dejected and unable to obey the Lord's instructions, for Christ has just told this young man the following:

"Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

This verse is one of the evangelical precepts followed as closely as possible by those men and women who choose to answer the Lord's call and follow Him in monastic life. We divest ourselves of all that we personally own, in order to have treasure in heaven, and then we enter the monastery in order to follow as closely and intimately as possible the Lord Jesus Christ. This in addition to obeying others of the Lord's so-called "hard commandments" is what puts Orthodox monastics on the cutting edge of spirituality, leading the way for the laity, who may be unable to follow these more difficult precepts.

But there is more to this Gospel narrative than just establishing a foundation for monastic life. Much more. When the rich young ruler rejects the Savior's counsel and walks away, Christ responds, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!" But just like the Gospel account from last Sunday, the "riches" spoken of here are not only material things, but all of the many, many worries and

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concerns that we allow ourselves to wear heavily around our necks, like chains, and which drag us down to the earth instead of setting us free to fly to the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is my observation—and perhaps it has always been this way—that almost everyone I know and have contact with is so worried and frightened, now, that it's difficult for them to have much of a spiritual life, much less to be set free so that they can spiritually fly. Worried about their own economic future and survival; worried about the future of the country and indeed the world; perhaps worried even about their own health, or whether they will ever be able to afford to retire—these are among the things that consume many people nowadays. Some secret Christians live in countries and cultures where it would be a death sentence if their love for Christ were known. These are the kinds of psychological and spiritual chains and fetters many people are dragging around nowadays, not realizing that they actually don't have to do this.

It is true that there are many dark things happening around us and to us, and these may and probably will get even more difficult in the coming months and new year. But Christians have survived this and much, much worse things before. In the long history of the Church, Christians have survived, and survived with peace in their hearts and joy in their minds, in spite of even quite savage holocausts of persecution against them. Beginning with the earliest martyrs, who went into the coliseum to be fed to the lions or turned into human torches, with smiles on their faces and joyfully singing hymns, all the way up to our own times, and the many, many Orthodox Christians who suffered—but whose faith radiantly survived—under the savage heel of Communism. Therefore, we today have no excuse whatsoever, we who still live in relative comfort and freedom, by comparison with many others in Church history or elsewhere in the world today.

On the subject of worldly cares and concerns, here is what St. Theophan the Recluse wrote more than a century ago to a spiritual child of his:

"There is a widely-accepted misconception among us that when one becomes involved in work at home or in business, immediately one steps out of the godly realm and away from God-pleasing activities. From this idea, it follows that once the desire to strive toward God germinates, and talk turns toward the spiritual life, then the idea inevitably surfaces: one must run from society, from the home—to the wilderness, to the forest.

"Both premises are erroneous!

"Homes and communities depend on concerns of daily life and society. These concerns are God-appointed obligations; fulfilling them is not a step toward the ungodly, but is a walking in the way of the Lord.

"All who cleave to these erroneous premises fall into the bad habit of thinking that once they accept worldly obligations, they no longer need strive towards God.

"I see that these misconceptions have trapped you also. Cast them aside and grasp the concept that everything you do, in and outside your home, concerning social life, as a daughter, as a sister, as a Muscovite—is godly and God-pleasing. There is an appointed commandment for everything in our lives.

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How can the fulfillment of commandments be displeasing to God? Your misconceptions truly make them ungodly, because you fulfill your daily tasks with an attitude contrary to the one God intended you to have.

"You complete godly deeds in an ungodly manner. They are needlessly lost and tear your mind from God. Correct this and, from now on, approach daily matters with the knowledge that to fulfill them is a commandment. Administer them as administering God's law.

"Once you adjust yourself to this outlook, no worldly duty will distract you from God. Instead, it will bring you close to Him. We are all servants of our God. God has assigned to each his place and responsibilities, and He watches to see how each approaches his assignment. He is everywhere. And He watches over you. Keep this in mind and do each deed as if it were assigned to you directly by God, no matter what it is.

"Do your housework in this manner: When someone comes to visit, keep in mind that God has sent you this visitor, and is watching. When you have to leave your house, keep in mind that God has sent you out on an errand, and is watching. Will you complete it as He wishes?

"By orienting yourself to God at all times, your chores at home and responsibilities outside the house will not distract your attention from God, but, on the contrary, will keep you intent on completing all tasks in a God-pleasing manner. All will be performed with the fear of God, and this fear will keep your attention on God unswervingly.

"To determine which duties inside and outside the family are God-pleasing, take the books in which these matters are discussed as your guides. Be careful to distinguish between concerns prompted by frivolity, passions, flattery and worldliness, from those that are correct, appropriate and honorable.

"Of course, having expressed the firm determination to live in a God-pleasing manner, you will need no prompting to discriminate between godly tasks and ungodly ones."

You might say: Well this is good advice for "normal" times, but today it's not normal. But St. Theophan would say: "Study history. When have there ever been 'normal' times?" And I would add: as for tomorrow, let tomorrow take care of itself. The Lord told us, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." We don't need to "borrow trouble and worry" as the old saying goes. We really only have today, you know. The past is dead and gone and cannot be changed or recreated and the future doesn't exist yet. This is why St. Paul taught us that "today is the day of salvation; now is the acceptable time"—not tomorrow, or next year, but NOW. How quickly we forget this wise and heavenly counsel.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us once again take this counsel to heart, especially during this holy and sacred season of the Nativity Fast, as we prepare our hearts to become a manger to receive the Christ Child. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.