

The Prodigal Son

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

This past week I read a very interesting article about a group of Protestants who decided to live—for one month—by all of the minute and detailed laws given in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus. This meant, for instance, not eating shellfish or shaving your sideburns, keeping bodies and homes meticulously clean, keeping a kosher kitchen and meals, issues of ritual uncleanness (which had to do with bodily discharges) etc., etc. The list of rules and regulations in Leviticus is almost endless, and Orthodox Jews to this day do indeed try to abide by all of them, believing that in this way they honor God, draw closer to Him, and ensure their own place in the next world.



This Old Testament book is called the Book of Leviticus because it was primarily the manual of rules for priests under the Old Covenant—the Levites, as they were called. The Levites were and are the lineal descendants of Aaron. The brother of Moses, Aaron represented the priestly functions of the Jews, becoming the first High Priest of his people. Thus, the Book of Leviticus contains laws and priestly rituals as dictated by God to Moses, but in a wider sense it is about the working out of God's covenant with the Jews, which entailed bringing them into a special relationship with God, for through this people God intended to bring forth His only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Protestant group that decided to live by these rules for one month first studied Leviticus and saw that it is divided into two large sections, the "Priestly Code," and the "Holiness Code". So of course they realized that some of these laws, especially in the Priestly Code, could only be observed in the spirit, not the letter—such as animal sacrifices, stoning people to death, etc. But everything else they committed themselves to follow to the letter.

The pastor of the church where this experiment took place has written a hilarious and also thought-provoking book about it, called, "How to Be Perfect: One Church's Audacious Experiment in Living the Old Testament Book of Leviticus."

But, interestingly, there has also been another book, written by A.J. Jacobs, titled "The Year of Living Biblically," in which the author attempted to keep these biblical laws for 12 months. (It's curious that these good folk chose to follow the Old Testament laws, rather than returning to the ancient Christian traditions and laws that are still preserved in the Orthodox Church, but perhaps they don't know that?)

And what was the outcome of these experiments? You might think, as most people do, that trying to follow all of these rules and laws was a foolish waste of time, for we "modern" people are quite enlightened now and know that it's what you "feel" in your heart that matters, not

whether you obey laws and regulations. For us, everything is now subjective and relative; there are no absolutes. For many Protestants this goes a step further because they believe that they are saved only by Faith, not by Works. (In Orthodox Christianity, by the way, we believe that Works are a sign that we do indeed have Faith.)

Well, lo and behold, these experimenters with the Book of Leviticus found that a life faithful to God involves both grace—that is Faith—and the Law. They discovered what pious traditional Orthodox Christians have always known and experienced: that nothing is too small or unimportant for God to be concerned about and, conversely, nothing is too big. In fact, they discovered that observing the outward rules had a positive transformative effect on their souls, their minds, their emotions and their lives. They recovered the almost forgotten virtue of integrity—whereby we are the same on the outside as we are on the inside. They discovered the power of obedience to tradition, something that is now almost completely lost in Western Christianity.

Now, what does this have to do with us Orthodox Christians today? Does this mean that we should be following the laws outlined in Leviticus?

No. Although Christ did not abolish the Law, He fulfilled it, and He gave to His Church the power to bind and to loose, to legislate and to organize, and promised that the Holy Spirit would guide the Church “into all truth.” Therefore, the Holy Fathers of the Church have discerned what, in the Old Testament, has been fulfilled and perfected in the New Testament, and what has not. The Church has not abolished the necessity to follow rules and laws and regulations, but she has seen how these are to be applied in a way that leads us to salvation, to theosis. In a short sermon I can only cite just one example. In Leviticus the Jews were given the law of circumcision, and Jews still follow this to this day. God intended this to be a visible sign that His people were completely separate from other people and tribes on the earth. But under the New Law given by Christ to His Church, fleshly circumcision was taken to a much higher level and fulfilled, when St. Paul explained that we are to circumcise our *hearts*—because it is through the inner life of the spirit that we are to be different from others, not from a mark on the body. Thus, the law of circumcision was not abolished, but was fulfilled and perfected.

Now, let us take this a step further and recall that this is the Sunday of the Prodigal Son.

We read this parable in the Gospel this morning. It is one of the preparatory Sundays leading us into the sacred and holy season of the Great Fast. Lent is a time when many rules and regulations kick in for observant Orthodox believers, although in America you wouldn't know it, so assimilated are we into the easy-going and self-centered culture of American materialism, where we deny ourselves nothing, especially when it comes to food. (It is not a coincidence that Americans are among the most obese people on the face of the earth.) Yet,

we are enjoined by tradition, going all the way back to the earliest centuries of Christianity, before there were any divisions in the Church, to fast from certain foods in a significant way during these holy forty days leading up to Passion Week and Pascha. And we know what this means. We know what the fasting rules are. This is not a secret, nor is it only for priests and monks and nuns as a Russian lay woman once brazenly told me. Fasting in the appointed seasons and on the appointed days of the Church year is *not* optional, according to the canons of the Church Councils, the teaching of the Fathers, and the example of the saints. In fact, several righteous and holy elders have gone so far as to say that he who does not fast, is not a Christian! Paying attention to the rules of fasting is one of the ways in which the Lord wishes to set us apart from unbelievers. We remember that He said that after He, the Bridegroom, would be taken away, *then* His followers would fast. God knows that fasting is one of the most important tools we have for spiritual growth and overcoming passions, sins, and temptations. We do not fast for God. He doesn't need our fasting. We fast for ourselves; we are the ones who need it, for if we wish to be saved, fasting is not voluntary; it is mandatory. The only exceptions are for health and illness and old age—although, in my experience, I have known very old Orthodox men and women to fast more rigorously than even healthy young people!

But keeping the appointed fasts of the Church year are not the only rules we are advised to implement. Orthodoxy is a *complete* way of life—although you wouldn't probably be aware of that in this country, in western culture. Orthodoxy is the water in which we swim, like fish. Orthodoxy is our nationality; it is our race, our tribe, our home. It affects *everything* we do and all that we are, and not just what we eat. It affects how we dress—always modestly--and not just when we go to church. It affects the kind of entertainment we seek out; it puts a break on our impulse to buy and indulge ourselves unnecessarily. *But most of all*, it means that we are to govern ourselves and our lives by the law of love, given by Christ, who has first loved us, so that we might love Him and each other, keeping in mind that "God *is* love."

The Prodigal Son in today's Gospel had forsaken all of the traditions of his ancestors, the laws and rules which God had given to His people for their sanctification. He had greatly grieved His father and gone off with his share of his inheritance to waste it and his life in sin and degradation. His return to his father and his home is not just a question of repentance and forgiveness, but of a decision made by the Prodigal Son to once again immerse himself in the saving traditions and rules of his family his tribe.

May those of us, who have perhaps neglected the "saving traditions and rules" of our own Orthodox "tribe," or who have never bothered to learn them, or were never taught them, may we, too, like the Prodigal Son, now return home to our Heavenly Father through this coming season of Lent. May we consecrate this time to studying, learning, and living—by keeping the

fast and attendance at the special Lenten services during the week and, especially by confession—so that, at the end, we may experience the glorious joy of our Lord’s resurrection to a degree that we have never even imagined before!

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