

A Commentary on St. Mark's Gospel

by

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(Chapter 3, verses 1-6)

The Evangelist again tells us about the clash which occurred between the Lord and Pharisees, and again this clash was on the subject of the Sabbath.

The scribes and Pharisees were especially unyielding and jealous about the issue of the Sabbath, because they relied not only on the ancient custom or tradition of the elders, but also on the specific commandment of God. The Fourth Commandment of the Sinai Law was:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it (Ex. 20:8-11).

The thirty-first chapter of the Book of Exodus spoke even more decisively: *And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you. Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you. Every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death (Ex. 31:12-15).*

Based on these direct and definitive requirements of the Law of Moses, a Jew was forbidden to do any work on the Sabbath day: it was not allowed to make a fire or cook food; even movement was limited to 2400 steps. These decrees were upheld with inexorable severity, and the rule of the Book of Exodus concerning execution for desecration of the Sabbath was fulfilled literally.

In the Book of Numbers, we read the following episode:

And while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man that gathered sticks upon the sabbath day. And they that found him gathering sticks brought him unto Moses and Aaron, and unto all the congregation. And they put him in ward, because it was not declared what should be done to him. And the Lord said unto Moses, The man shall be surely put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp. And all the congregation brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died (Num. 15:32-36).

An even more striking example was described in the first book of the Maccabees. During the rebellion of Mattathias, a unit of the rebelling Jews, zealots of the Law of their fathers, took refuge in the mountains where on the Sabbath day they were caught up by the troops of King Antiochus. When the enemies started the battle, the Jews were completely defenseless, because they did not want to fight on the Sabbath day, and *they answered them not, neither cast they a stone at them, nor stopped the places where they lay hid; but said, Let us die all in our innocency: heaven and earth shall testify for us, that ye put us to death wrongfully. So they rose up against them in battle on the sabbath, and they slew them, with their wives and children, and their cattle, to the number of a thousand people* (1 Macc. 2:36-38).¹

So fervently was the rest on the Sabbath day safeguarded among the Jews! It is true that the demands of life gradually took their toll and in order not to find themselves in a hopeless situation like the Maccabean detachment, many casuistic deviations and circumventions of the Sabbath law had to be made, although outwardly it was upheld very strictly. Medical practice was also forbidden on the Sabbath day and expanding the miraculous healing of the sick by the Lord Jesus Christ to the concept of medical treatment, the Pharisees also considered such actions unlawful.

When one day the Lord healed a sick, crippled woman in the synagogue, *the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because that Jesus had healed on the sabbath day, and said unto the people, There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the sabbath day* (Lk. 13:14). The miserable hairsplitter did not understand the simple and obvious truth that if God was not pleased with cures performed on the Sabbath day, He would not have allowed His power to act in them, because they were performed by the power of God.

The Evangelist Mark tells us that knowing the attitude of the Lord toward the issue of the Sabbath, the Pharisees *watched him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him*. And at the time when the Lord came to the synagogue, there was a man with a withered hand. The Lord did not want to pass by him indifferently without giving him any help, but He saw the Pharisees' malicious and wary gazes, and decided to teach them a lesson.

And he saith unto the man which had the withered hand, Stand forth. And he saith unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace (verses 3-4).

What could they answer? This simple, clear, and wise question of the Lord immediately exposed the absurdity of their position. Really, what could they say? To say that it is possible to do good on the Sabbath day meant recognizing the healing as permissible, and this already produced a radical break in their views and doctrine of the Sabbath. Moreover, this meant acknowledging the injustice of malicious insinuations and attacks on Jesus, as well as fallacy of their own judgments in

¹ The Septuagint translation is used here.

front of all the people. On the one hand, professional self-conceit and pride of the scribes could not allow this. On the other hand, saying that evil should be done and the person should perish without help on the Sabbath day was so absurd and did not fit the role of the Sabbath as the day dedicated to God, that even their blunt conscience and mind distorted by fanaticism realized that.

In addition, ordinary people would feel all falsity and outrageous cruelty of such an answer with their hearts, and a challenge to their authority among the people was the worst thing for a Pharisee.

But they held their peace. And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other (verses 4-5).

The Lord proved by His example that one can do good things on the Sabbath day.

In this event, more clearly than elsewhere else, the Pharisees revealed their dry and formal attitude towards religious regulations. According to their understanding, indeed, man was made for the Sabbath, and not the Sabbath for man. It is better to let a person perish, let him miss possibly the only opportunity to receive healing from the Great Prophet, but the law of rest on the Sabbath day had to be observed. This was their point of view.

Yet the Lord as always was faithful to Himself. Here again, the issue of man was the top priority for Him, and if for his salvation it was necessary to violate the Sabbath law in its literal sense, He did not hesitate to do it.

The encounter of the Lord with the Pharisees described above poses a very important question for us: how should we celebrate holidays according to the Christian doctrine and what should our attitude towards them be? What does the example of Christ teach us in this case?

It is clear that the Lord did not reject holidays from the fact that every year He would come to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover, as the established custom required, and even before His death, already anticipating its approach, He found it necessary to celebrate the Passover with His disciples according to the customary Jewish ritual. He certainly did not reject the Sabbath as a special day dedicated to God, since the direct commandment of God required the observance of the Sabbath, and He strictly obeyed these commandments, thus saying about them: *Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled (Mt. 5:18)*. Since He considered the Old Testament generally necessary for all people, as we have seen above, by all means He considered the cornerstone of this Testament, the Law of Sinai, as a necessary foundation of life, unchangeable to the last jot as the law of the will of God.

In Christianity, the Sabbath was already replaced by Sunday in the days of the Apostles. In the Book of Acts 20:7, we read that Christians would gather for the sacrament of Communion on the first day of the week, that is, on the day immediately following the Sabbath, since the Jewish week ended

on Saturday. In other words, it was the Sunday service. The Apostle Paul also mentioned the special importance of this day when speaking about collection of alms (1 Cor. 16:2). The Council of Laodicea of the Christian Church² already decisively replaced the celebration of Saturday with Sunday.

“Christians must not Judaize,” says the Canon 29 of that Council, “by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honoring the Lord’s Day; and, if they can, resting then as Christians.” The reason for this replacement is quite clear: our Lord Jesus Christ rose on the first day of the week and the recollection of this event – the most important event in Christianity – gives an outstanding importance to that very day with which it is associated. Therefore, the requirement of the Fourth Commandment to celebrate the seventh day of the week in New Testament Christianity refers to Sunday.

Thus, we have a specific commandment of God to honor the holidays. Since all commandments have been given by the Lord for the benefit of man, it is obvious that this commandment is also useful and needed for people. It is just as important and just as necessary as all the other commandments, since it expresses the same will of God as did the entire Law of Sinai. And yet there seems to be no other commandment which we break as easily and as frequently as the Fourth. In all likelihood, this happens because harmful consequences of violating the honor of holidays are not as obvious for us as the harm from violating other commandments. Murder, theft, slander – this is clear evil, obvious to everyone. But doing daily work on a holiday, partying, or doing occupations which do not correspond to the importance of God’s day – whom does this harm? Isn’t it the other way around? Labor is always useful and therefore any work, even on a holiday, is perfectly acceptable. Many people think like this. However, violation of holidays is undisputable evil; otherwise the Lord, Who always cares about the well-being of man, would not have protected their honoring with a special commandment.

Why do we need holidays?

Once I discussed why Sunday is so strictly observed in England with a young English student. “You know what, sir,” he said, “However it may be, one needs to have at least one day a week for better thoughts!...” This idea was more fully elaborated by the Eminent Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow: “A holiday is pious contemplation in which the spirit rests from the labor of the flesh and gathers strength for the working days of life.”³ Indeed, during the week we simmer in everyday concerns and worries as if in a cauldron, and live as if in a marketplace where the clamorous bustle of life obscures everything. As if in a suffocating fog, the soul is shrouded in nagging thoughts about everyday needs and squabbles, about profits, about careers, about pleasures, about anything, but not

² This was a regional council of the representatives of the dioceses from Asia Minor, assembled about 363–364 in Laodicea, Phrygia.

³ From the Sermon on the Feast of Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos (1832). In 1994 St. Philaret was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church.

about God; and the sediment of these thoughts, like soot or mold, clouds the soul making the mind unclean and making the heart blunt. A layer of moral dirt accumulates in the soul, and this dirt needs to be cleansed from time to time to avoid becoming covered with a dense crust of sin, under which the rotting and decomposing of spiritual powers immediately begins. The Russian people have a custom of going to the bathhouse every week on Saturdays. In the same way, the soul also needs a kind of periodical moral washing, and holidays should serve as such washing for the soul.

Holidays are a shower for the soul. *The seventh day is...of the Lord thy God*, the commandment says. Away with all everyday worries, dull thoughts, dirty petty wishes, aching envy, and hostility! For one day, give your soul to better thoughts – thoughts about God, about love, about eternity, about the bright world of angels and saints, about immortality of the future (so you would become better, purer, and kinder). Shake off the dust of everyday life, for *God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it* (Gen. 2:3). Think about the soul at least on this day; otherwise you are in danger that thoughts of the body will turn into the essence of life for you.

This is the main meaning of the holiday. It is a day of purification, and hygiene of the soul demands it.

It is difficult for a weak, worldly person to live in a state of constant aspiration for God. This requires continuous efforts and a well-disciplined will, since everyday trifles constantly strive to capture one's consciousness and squeeze out any thought about God. It is often beyond the powers of an ordinary person who is not trained in spiritual struggle to fight with this pressure constantly, every minute, without losing ground. The Church knows this and therefore leaves six days a week at the disposal of a person for his everyday chores. The Church only demands one day of special effort from him to break free from everyday hustle and bustle, and for at least a short while to ascend to a purifying and sanctifying height by the efforts of the spirit. This is wise pedagogy. When an experienced trainer gives lessons in gymnastics to his students, in the beginning he always alternates strong tension with prolonged periods of rest: otherwise it is easy to overexert oneself. It is the same in spiritual training: the increase of spiritual forces on the holiday is replaced by prolonged spiritual weakening on working days, and therefore it is easily endured even by a weak Christian beginner. So little by little the soul is brought up and strengthened. Before running, you must learn how to walk.

Thus, the establishment of special holidays interrupting the course of everyday life has a spiritual and educational value.

It is hard to imagine what life would be like without holidays, but certainly it would be very dull and joyless. Have you ever seen factory towns where some streets consist entirely of manufacturing plants and factories? A more unsightly picture than these streets cannot be imagined. Gray, dusty pavements; dirty-red endlessly monotonous buildings like boxes, without architectural ornamentation, without decorative patterns, without style, with rows of monotonous windows enclosed

in grids of small panes; an endless string of long, bare smokestacks stretching toward the sky like cannon barrels and spewing clouds of acrid smoke and soot out of their mouths. One cannot see the clean, clear azure sky: it is all bespattered and fouled by these pipes, and covered with their gray smoke like dust. Nowhere is there a single bright, colorful spot which would liven up this monotonous horror. Everything is gray, miserable, deadly boring. Dirt and soot, from which you can't hide anywhere, is everywhere.

Such should be the impressions of life consisting only of working days without holidays. But the soul cannot bear this depressing monotony: it demands bright spots of flowers, the blazing sun, a laughing sky, song of a lark, and the joy of life. This is what holidays give. With a religious, Christian attitude towards holidays, they bring so much joy, so much pure delight that one starts to pity those people who have not received a Church upbringing and who have never experienced this holy surge of holiday mood. After a holiday, even working days become somehow more meaningful, reasonable, and therefore more interesting.

People who are attached to the earth and think only about earthly things often say that holidays reduce the productivity of people's labor, that holiday time is wasted unproductively, and that it would be better to use it for work, since people then would be wealthier and live better. Even without mentioning that "man shall not live by bread alone" and the purpose of life is not wealth, but development of the spirit which is fostered by Christian holidays, it turns out that holidays do not reduce, but on the contrary increase the productivity of physical labor and therefore contribute to accumulation of material assets. There is a special book by the foreign scholar Niemeyer on this issue, entitled *On the Rest of Sunday*. One very simple idea is proven in this book using statistical data: human working energy wears out extremely quickly and needs certain periods of rest for its recovery; otherwise, the quality and intensity of work decrease so that the time gained from abolishing the holiday rest disappears almost without effect and does not increase the overall productivity of labor.

In addition, the richest European country, England, serves as a classic refutation of this objection. Sunday's rest is nowhere else observed more strictly than there. If you happen to be on a weekday in Central London, in the so-called City, you will be stunned by the frantic, noisy stream of life that rushes along the main streets. All the sidewalks are filled with movement; a dense crowd of preoccupied, busy people in an endless band flows on them; vehicles of various kinds – cabs, cars, handcarts, elegant convertibles, cumbersome buses, etc. – fly along the pavement in a continuous mass; feverish movement is also below the earth: electric trains run there with terrible speed along special underground corridor-tubes at a depth of six sazhen⁴; trains of the so-called underground dive below the earth and then run up to high, elevated pathways and rumble over your head... All this creates the impression of real pandemonium.

⁴ An old Russian measure of distance equal to 2.13 meters.

But come there on a Sunday and you will be amazed by a completely different picture. Everything is quiet. Store fronts, the numerous offices, and banks – everything is closed. The streets are deserted. Almost no people can be seen. Very rarely does a passerby appear, walking somewhere with quick steps as if embarrassed by his loneliness and need which made him break the tradition. Your lonely steps are heard strangely loud and distinct on the empty corridors of the streets. Once you have passed, everything becomes silent again. Only the Bobbies – the magnificent London policemen – stand still at their posts like statues, thus even more emphasizing the stillness of the picture. The whole population spends time after the church service at home either playing the piano, to the accompaniment of which sacred hymns are sung, or in conversations with friends by the fireplace. This is how England spends Sundays. It should be added that already on Saturday starting from noon, activities stop everywhere, and yet England is the richest and most industrialized country in Europe.

So, holidays do not in the least reduce the productivity of people's labor. But, of course, they need to be spent in a proper way to be of real benefit to the person by purifying and elevating the soul. Unfortunately, a holiday for us usually means only intensification of earthly rushing around. Guests, concerts, parties, balls, theaters, gatherings, card games, drinking – all kinds of entertainment, often crude, often immoral – all this is intentionally set on holidays: there is no time for it on the weekdays. It is clear that spending a holiday in this way does not at all mean to dedicate it to God or to rest. This results only in fatigue, some kind of muddy sediment, dullness of the soul. We can really say that it is much better to work than to fill one's time with this vain rushing around, which poisons the soul.

How should one spend holidays in a Christian way?

Look at the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. What does He do on the Sabbath, that is, on the holiday?

The Evangelist Luke makes the following remark: *and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day* (Lk. 4:16).

This is what the holiday custom of Jesus Christ was: He would go to the synagogue, that is, to the house of prayer. Among us, synagogues are replaced by churches, and therefore our primary duty is to attend church.

Indeed, the church of God and public divine service are a powerful means of spiritual upbringing, enlightenment, and purification. "The action of the Divine Liturgy is great..." writes Gogol. "If only the praying person watches every action reverently and diligently, his soul gains an elevated disposition; the commandments of Christ become accomplishable for him; the yoke of Christ becomes easy and the burden light."⁵ "I love to pray in God's temple," says Father John of Kronstadt, "especially within the holy altar, before the Holy Table or the Prosthesis, for by God's grace I become wonderfully changed in the temple. During the prayer of repentance and devotion the thorns, the

⁵ From the concluding passage of N.V. Gogol's *Meditations on the Divine Liturgy*.

bonds of the passions, fall from my soul, and I feel so light... I live in God and for God... I become like a child soothed on its mother's knee. Then my heart is full of most heavenly, sweet peace... you feel friendship and love towards everyone, even towards your enemies, readily excusing and forgiving everyone."⁶

A church inspires the thought of God and desire for Him. Even its appearance: those golden cupolas, looking like burning candles with pointed tongues of flame soaring up to the sky, call for breaking away from the earth for there, for the heavens, for the infinite. The church services also teach those who pray at the service, bringing to their attention the whole content of Christianity in a series of deep symbolic images, and comfort, soften, and elevate them. Here is a small excerpt from a letter of a fifteen-year-old girl, conveying the impressions of a young soul concerning the church service: "I sing a wonderful song to Thee, to Thee High and Bright, Who sendeth a breeze of unearthly bliss into my soul...The sun's rays, light and joyful, dance brightly on the blue vaults of the church. A white dove gently soars high above and swings in the transparent streams of incense. The soft, light streams of incense rise imperceptibly. The rays of sun, laughing, cut the streams of incense and fall on the semicircular vaults... How beautiful this bright day is! How clear the blue sky is! How joyful and resounding are the young and beautiful voices singing praise to Thee! How marvelous it is here in Thy church! How all hearts burn with pure love for Thee...! The whole world is Thy great church, and everything in this church is beautiful and bright, and everything sings a resounding and beautiful song to Thee, sounding with exaltation and delicate love: we love, we love Thee, oh, Bright, Sublime, and Beautiful One...!

We quietly enter the darkened church and reverently kneel before Thy mysterious altar. The first prayer of trembling hearts, burning with boundless love for God, flies inaudibly upward toward the darkened vaults. Candles glow with steady light ahead. Familiar chants which are close to the heart pour forth smoothly...And from the very depths of an overwhelmed soul ardent and pure prayer sweeps up to Him, Who was crucified by us, suffers from us, and loves us: 'Oh God, oh God! Thou seest our grief, Thou seest the darkness in which we live, Thou seest how our souls are striving toward Thy light...! A fiery, pure prayer is sweeping up to Thee from ardent, loving hearts for those who do not know this bliss of praying to Thee, for those in whose souls there is not a single spark of Thy great love, warming and enlightening the hearts of all! Oh, they do not know what a joy it is to feel Thee in one's heart, what bliss there is in love for Thee, how easy and joyful it is to forgive people all offences in Thy name! To Thee, Great and Merciful One, we pray: let them understand Thee for at least a minute, give them at least a moment to pray to Thee with their heart revived and cleansed of everyday dirt, let them feel bright and marvelous love for people in their hearts! Awaken all that is good and

⁶ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, trans. E.E. Goulaeff, Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, 1984, p. 281-2.

pure in their souls, that has disappeared beneath the dirt of life and that is still in a deep sleep in their hearts!”

These are the impressions which the Orthodox church service made on the innocent heart of a child; the church gives such a lofty state! No wonder the Christians of old valued so much public worship on holidays and strived for it to the degree that even the danger of death would not stop them.

This is an example known from Church history.

Severe persecution of Orthodox Christians raged at one time during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Valens. A special edict prohibited people from going to Orthodox churches. This prohibition was accompanied by the threat that everyone who came to the divine service would be beaten in the church. The execution of the edict was entrusted to the city Prefect. Early in the morning, when, according to the Prefect, the Orthodox service was about to begin, he went to the church accompanied by an armed detachment. He hoped that the Imperial edict would frighten Christians so much that no one would dare to come to church. Imagine his surprise when he saw that the streets adjacent to the church were filled with Christians heading for the Liturgy. He was particularly amazed when he noticed a young Christian woman leaving her house with a child in her arms.

“Listen,” he said, “where are you going?”

“To the church,” she answered.

“But you know about the edict?”

“Yes, I do,” she said quietly.

“And you are not afraid of death?”

“Oh,” she said, and her eyes shone with delight, “I would be happy to die for Christ...! Look – everyone is going... Can I really miss such an opportunity – to suffer for the Lord...”

“But at least take pity on the child... Why did you bring him?”

“I want him to share my happiness... He is big enough to confess the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The Prefect was confused, disturbed, and shocked. The edict of the Emperor was not fulfilled.

This is how much Christians treasured the church and church services. Understanding the importance of church services for Christian upbringing, the Sixth Ecumenical Council even issued the following strict rule concerning holidays: “If anyone who has no very grave necessity nor difficult business...does not go to church on three consecutive Sundays — three weeks — if he is a cleric let him be deposed, but if a layman let him be cut off.”⁷

Thus, going to church is the primary duty of a Christian on a holiday.

⁷ Canon 80 of the Council in Trullo (692).

The second duty is charity. We are also taught this by the example of the Lord Who healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath and thus showed that good deeds should be done on the Sabbath day.

Finally, all sorts of occupations pleasing to God – prayer at home, reading spiritually beneficial books, religious conversations, etc. – are most appropriate for the holiday, since this sanctifies the holiday as is required by the commandment:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God (Ex. 20:8-10).

Chapter 3, verses 7-19

This passage describes the election of the twelve Apostles.

The fame of the Lord Jesus Christ increased. His wondrous deeds, His word imbued with spirit and power, the attraction of His personality full of meekness and mercy – all this aroused the attention, curiosity, and delight of the people. Crowds of people who wished to listen to His teaching or receive healing flocked to Him from all sides. It was the period of His growing popularity. *A great multitude from Galilee followed him, and from Judea. And from Jerusalem, and from Idumea, and from beyond Jordan; and they about Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they had heard what great things he did, came unto him* (verses 7-10). There were many sick among the people, who rushed to Him trying to touch Him. It was impossible for Him alone to satisfy this crowd of many thousands of people, quench its thirst for hearing sermons, heal all the sick who needed help. The time had come when the Kingdom of God preached by the Lord was beginning to expand and leave the small circle of His closest disciples, when the number of those who wanted to hear about this Kingdom or join it became so great that assistants were needed for working with them. The time had come to lay the foundation for the building of this Kingdom. The Lord did this by choosing twelve Apostles as His closest associates, who were to form the first backbone of the future Kingdom. *He goeth up into a mountain, and calleth unto him whom he would: and they came unto him. And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach. And to have power to heal sicknesses, and to cast out devils* (verses 13-15).

His disciples needed to be with Him, since this was the source of strength without which they were weak and fainthearted. The main way to create the Kingdom of God was to send them to preach, and the Apostles were chosen for this purpose. Having the power to heal from diseases and cast out demons was the main means of exercising influence on listeners, who were not yet prepared to appreciate the inner beauty of the future Kingdom and to choose it for its own sake and for the sake of pure love for goodness and for God.

These are the goals for which the Apostles were chosen. The Apostolic ministry needed special qualities of the heart, therefore the Lord chose simple Galilean fishermen, or, as the Apostle Paul says, *God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence* (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

Self-conceit and pride are great obstacles in building the Kingdom of God, and although the Lord sometimes uses strong and talented people for His purposes, such people are particularly susceptible to the temptation of self-deception.

The Apostles fulfilled their purpose. Despite numerous obstacles, despite persecutions, executions, and harassment, despite difficulties of traveling and preaching often among wild, barbaric peoples, they courageously carried the light of the Gospels' teaching everywhere, stopping at nothing. They preached the Word of God *in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness* (2 Cor. 11:26-27). They sacredly fulfilled the Lord's covenant – they *preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following* (Mk. 16:20). They built the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of goodness and truth, with great patience and perseverance, with great courage and selflessness, with great love for people. Through their efforts, the world was reborn, rejecting paganism which was full of cruelty and selfishness, and accepting Christ's teaching about love and self-sacrifice. This kingdom is still being built now.

The Apostles have long since passed away, but their successors – shepherds and teachers of the Church – still continue, according to their strength and zeal, to work on creating the Kingdom of God on the Gospels' foundation which the Lord laid. We do not know when this building will be completed, but we believe that sooner or later this Kingdom will come – the bright, light, beautiful kingdom of goodness, truth, holiness, and purity, when God will *be all in all* (1 Cor. 15:28).

How should we relate to this – to the apostolic work of building? Can we be satisfied that only a few, special people were chosen by the Lord for this and consequently, our participation in this work is not necessary, and thus we may remain simply quiet spectators?

There are two answers to this question. One says that we all must take on ourselves a share of the apostolic work, be on par with them, and do the same as they did, that is, teach, preach, and explain the Word of God.

This is the view of the sectarians.

Another answer is given by the ordinary life of ordinary people.

“It is not our business,” they say, and unfortunately this opinion is held by the vast majority of modern Christians. “It is the business of priests, preachers. It is not our concern!”

Both answers are incorrect. Not everyone can and does have the right to do purely apostolic work, that is, to teach and preach the Word of God. No wonder the Lord Jesus Christ selected only twelve out of the vast number of his followers, and later added seventy to them. The Lord *gave some, apostles*, writes the Apostle Paul; *and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith... unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ* (Eph. 4:11-13).

Are all apostles? he exclaims, are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret? (1 Cor. 12:29-30). And in another passage he gives the answer: *No man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron* (Heb. 5:4). Thus, the apostolic work of teaching, preaching, and communicating the gifts of grace can only be done by those who have been called.

On the other hand, the opinion that we can completely refuse to participate in building the Kingdom of God and that this is only the business of people who are specially appointed for this is completely unjust. Addressing all believers, the Apostle Peter writes: *To whom coming* (to Lord Jesus Christ), *as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ* (1 Pet. 2:4-5). We are all living stones from which the magnificent building of the Kingdom of God is being built; we all are called to participate in this Kingdom, and therefore we all are responsible for this building; we all have to work. No one should dare to refuse, but our participation in this work varies. *For as we have many members*, says the Apostle Paul, *in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness: Let love be without dissimulation...* (Rom. 12:4-9).

In other words, each of us is obliged to work on building the Kingdom of God in the place and ministry in which he was placed by God. Participation in this common work is obligatory for everyone, but this participation does not have to be necessarily manifested in the form of apostolic ministry. Do whatever you can, wherever you can, and however you can, provided that it is done with love.

In order to make the thought about the necessity and obligatory nature of common work for the benefit of the common cause more persuasive for ourselves, we need to clarify how the Apostles

understood mutual relations between believers. For the Apostles, the entire community of the followers of Jesus Christ, or the Church, represents one body in which the head is Christ, and we all are different members. This is not an allegory, not just a simile, not an image of visual expression, but something much greater: it is a mystical insight into the very essence of things. We really make up one body or one organism. This can only be imagined in the mind's eye; it is impossible to comprehend and explain it in all detail. *This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church*, says the Apostle (Eph. 5:32). Already in the above text, the Apostle Paul expressed this idea about the community of believers as a single body. He clarified this in much more detail in the Epistle to the Corinthians, and there his words are so definite and give such a captivating, deeply mystical picture of inner relations in the Church that we should pay full attention to them.

As the body is one, writes the Apostle *,and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honor... But God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honor to that part which lacked. That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular* (1 Cor. 12:12-27).

These words of the Apostle Paul should be imprinted in fiery letters in the heart of every Christian. It becomes clear how closely we all are connected with each other, to what extent we are dependent on each other, and how we are responsible for each other and for the well-being of the whole body. Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. This is the law of Christian responsibility. If one member is infected, the infection will inevitably be transmitted to the other members and to the whole body. If one person has sinned, the infection of sin in a greater or lesser dose inevitably passes on to the whole organism – the community.

Therefore, I do not dare to sin not only because it destroys me personally, but even more so because it infects and destroys others. On the other hand, if I see a sinning brother, I cannot remain indifferent, because in one form or another, this sin will also reach me.

Sometimes it seems to us that our sins pass without a trace and do no harm to anyone. This is illusion and self-deception. Somewhere, someday, one way or another, the consequences of sin will be felt. "Life is like the ocean," says one of our writers, "an invisible connection is everywhere: you touch it at one end, and it is felt at the other. You pass by a child. You may not notice him; but your wicked image is already imprinted in the heart of the child, and sooner or later it will be reflected in something: in thoughts, in actions, or in words."

What should our commitment to society be in view of this responsibility?

An indirect answer to this question was given again by Apostle Paul.

From Christ *the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love* (Eph. 4:16).

This means, first, that in addition to direct fulfillment of the duties which God has entrusted to me, I must take care of strengthening mutual relations between the members of society. Second, I must do my own work in the spirit of love so it would help to strengthen the bond between myself and other members. If everybody in their activities obeys these rules, the society will be built and grow in the spirit of love, will acquire strength and flourish. On the contrary, if these rules are violated, the society will disintegrate.

Each work can be done in different ways. You can do it as a duty to serve your neighbors, caring more about their benefits than your own; then it more strongly binds the people who serve and who use this service and is a means of consolidation, development, and prosperity of society, a creative and vital force. Or you can do it with a purely selfish calculation to squeeze as much benefit out of it personally for yourself as you can, not at all thinking about the benefit of others. In this case it not only weakens, shakes, and completely breaks people's mutual affection, but brings something completely opposite into their relationship: cooling, bitterness, and mutual repulsion. It is a process of decay, disintegration, and death. Decay is the process when individual particles of a rotting body lose the force of mutual attraction or cohesion, and disintegrate. This happens both in the physical world and in human society.

Suppose I am a peasant. I can do my own peasant business in the spirit of the narrowest self-love: grab the throat of anyone who dares to encroach on my property or my rights, be stingy at gatherings, with foaming mouth fight for every extra inch of hayfield, steal firewood from my neighbors, growl at everyone who turns to me with some need, etc., and then I am an element of decay, a socially harmful element. Or I can concede in land disputes, avoid quarrels, help those in need as

much as I can – with my work, tools, or food, set aside some of my wealth for the helpless and poor, etc., and then I fulfill the Commandment of God and I become a vital, creative element, a socially useful element.

Egoism, self-love is always the power of decay and decomposition, and this disintegrating effect of egoism is manifested in all conditions. In vain they say that society cannot be built on the Gospel principles of self-denial and that the best solution to the problem, which can only be hoped for, is to bring the personal egoism of each member into legal limits so he would not clash with the egoism of his neighbor or at least so he would know his limits. To define the rights and obligations of all and everyone accurately and clearly without offending anyone is all that is needed for social prosperity.

Such formulation of the issue is fundamentally wrong. Not even to mention that it is absolutely impossible to precisely determine responsibilities and rights without “offending anyone,” because with a selfish attitude towards life, there will always be offended and dissatisfied persons. The most important objection is that it is by no means possible to squeeze personal egoism into lawful and legal limits, since it will always try to crawl out of them and expand at the expense of his neighbor and in the end will find means or loopholes for that. Why are contemporary capitalist societies decomposing despite their precise regulation of rights and obligations? Because they are built on a crudely selfish basis, but any other society which comes to replace them will inevitably become the subject of the same law of decaying if it remains on the same basis of self-love and egoism.

Thus, our participation in the apostolic work of building the Kingdom of God should primarily consist of doing every work in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the spirit of the Gospels’ love and self-sacrifice.

But, besides this, we also have the duty of strengthening mutual relations between people by all means which depend on us, promoting the development of religious faith, love, friendship, and trust to the best of our abilities, and fighting against the opposite phenomena. Thus, if I preach disbelief, enmity, and violence, set people against each other, slander, judge people, spreading false rumors about them, and sow discord and suspicion, I bring corruption into society with all this and thereby even if I do not stop the growth of the Kingdom of God (for according to the inexplicable laws of God, it grows under all circumstances), I distract many people from participating in it. Conversely, if I spread true faith, preaching love and brotherhood, indiscriminate forgiveness and self-sacrifice, say good things about people, give alms and help those in need, fight slander and lies, and reconcile those who are in conflict, I strengthen society and the mutual relations of its members, and contribute to the development and expansion of the Kingdom of God.

Unfortunately, this obligation is not recognized by the vast majority of modern Christians. Even the best of us are usually happy with just barely looking after ourselves, our dispositions and actions, but hardly anyone thinks about the moral condition of their neighbors and improvement of

their mutual relations. What do I have to do with another person? He is responsible for himself! Am I my brother's keeper? Cain's harsh question, even if it is not pronounced openly by the mouth, is heard in every selfish heart. Indifference to one's neighbor, appalling dead indifference, is our common sin.

Think of a time when blatant, outrageous injustice was committed before your eyes, and the fundamental rules of justice were violated in the most rude and cynical way. As always, a weak and helpless person suffered from the strong and arrogant. Did you stand up for the offended? Did you protect him? Did you help him? Did you at least express your compassion for him? Or... did you pass by indifferently? "Why should I care? Am I my brother's keeper?"

Imagine you happen to meet a fallen woman. The lost human soul looks at you from those weary eyes marked with bold eyeliner. A shameless smile snakes on her lipstick-covered mouth. In this being the wondrous image of God is profaned. Do you try to wake the soul asleep in sin? Do you make an attempt to pull the miserable creation of God out of the mud? Or do you step aside with disgust, putting on the look of a righteous person, proud of your superiority? "Am I my brother's keeper?"

A sick, old man who has turned blue from the cold is standing in front of you stretching his trembling hand for alms. How do you relate to him? Do you help? Do you show mercy and concern? Or do you remain cold and indifferent? "It's none of my business! Am I my brother's keeper?"

Evil, poisonous gossip is spread in your presence. The honor of people you know is spat on. Their good name is spattered in mud. You know that everything in this gossip, from the first to the last word, is a lie. But do you have the courage to say this? Do you stop the slanderer with a severe rebuke? Do you restore the truth and the desecrated honor of your neighbor? Or do you listen with hidden gloating, laughing together with the cheerful company? Or maybe you just keep silent? "Why do I care? Am I my brother's keeper?"

We all think only about ourselves; the problem of our neighbor does not concern us and as a result, moral evil like an infection, like gangrene, spreads wider and wider, capturing new victims. And we are all to blame. What are we doing to stop this vice? Are we making any efforts to save our perishing brothers?

These efforts are hardly visible. Callousness and indifference are everywhere. But callousness always causes bitterness, and the vice to which we are so shamefully indifferent, will in some way or another fall upon our heads.

What terrible examples of punishment for indifference and a callous attitude towards one's neighbors history gives!

One of the last kings of France before the Revolution, Louis the Fifteenth, was hunting in the Versailles forest, surrounded by the brilliant cavalcade of his courtiers. They happened to meet a sad

procession on their way: a simple wooden coffin on a poor hearse drawn by a miserable peasant horse, accompanied by a group of people mourning.

“What did the deceased die of?” the king asked.

“Hunger,” was the answer, and... the King spurred his horse on. In the response, he sensed an unpleasant hint at the miserable condition of the people.

He did not like to concern himself with this. He loved comfort and was indifferent to everything except pleasures. “After us the deluge,” he would say. But how cruelly did the French kings pay for this indifference at the time of the Revolution!

However, if our neighbors do not demand anything from us, should we go to them on our own, impose on them charity and concern? This is obtrusive and tactless!

Yes, great love is needed so that uninvited concern would not be a crude invasion of someone else’s soul; one needs great tenderness and subtlety so it would not offend. Yet, the holy ascetics did not wait for invitations and went wherever their help was needed on their own.

At one time a beautiful harlot, Taisia, lived in Egypt. The name of the seductress was heard throughout the entire country. Gold flowed like water into her dissolute house. The most brilliant youths were at her feet. Glory, worship, success, wealth, and passion intoxicated her, and the soul of the young harlot was slumbering in this frenzy of sin. But the Lord in His mercy did not leave His fallen creature. Once there was a feast in her house. Music resounded. The air was filled with fragrant smoke of incense and intoxicating aromas of the East. The gold of expensive dishware shone on the tables. Chosen rich men of Egypt were the guests. In the midst of the feast, some mysterious stranger called Taisia for secret negotiations. She took him to her bedroom, and there the unknown visitor began to beg her to give him one date for a large sum of money, but “only there,” he added, “where people and God would not see us.”

The proud, beautiful woman laughed.

“There is no such place!” she said...

The stranger suddenly threw off his magnificent clothes, and Taisia discovered the great ascetic of the desert – St. Paphnutius. The elder left his solitude to save her, fallen and defiled... An ardent, heart-catching speech poured out, full of pity and love for the perishing woman. It contained a call to repentance and a threat of the terrible end, and words of hope were heard in this speech.

“What answer will you give to God...?”

Her soul trembled; her heart melted; her dormant conscience woke up.

For the first time, the thought of God, of His law, of His wrath pierced through her consciousness with a bright ray. The change was decisive and immediate. Taisia gathered her jewelry, burned it in the town square and left with Paphnutius for the desert, and there, among the burning Thebaid sands, she spent the rest of her life in strict reclusion, prayer and tears of repentance.

The elder saved a soul that was perishing.

Another great saint – John the Merciful, the Patriarch of Alexandria – would sit every day at the door of the church so everyone could come to him. There he distributed alms to the needy, examined complaints, and gave advice. If no one would come to him, he would be distressed and say:

“Today, humble John, you have gained nothing for yourself!”

In this way, saints looked for an opportunity to do good things.

In conclusion, let us recall the words of Father John of Kronstadt from his diary: “Do you believe that all Orthodox Christians are members of one and the same body, and that therefore we must all ‘keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,’⁸ must care for one another, help one another? Do you believe that saints are likewise members of the one body of Christ – that is, of the Church, and are our brethren, interceding for us before God in heaven? Do you respect every Christian, as a member of Christ, as His brother according to human nature? Do you love everybody as yourself, as your own flesh and blood? Do you generously forgive offences? Do you help others in need, if you yourself have means? Do you teach the ignorant? Do you turn the sinner from the error of his ways? Do you comfort those who are in affliction? Faith in the Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church inspires, obliges you to do all this; and for all this you are promised a great reward from the Head of the Church – our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁹

Chapter 3, verses 20-35

This passage from the Gospels begins with a small but extremely indicative episode that casts some light on one very sad side of the Lord’s earthly life: on the attitude of His closest relatives toward Him. We know that the path of the Lord Jesus Christ was not covered with roses. It was a thorny, mournful path where endless grace and mercy constantly stumbled upon the thorns of human ingratitude and misunderstanding. But if you think about it, verse 21 of chapter 3 of the Gospel of Mark sounds especially sad, since it reveals a hidden place in the Savior’s life, where sorrow was hidden from outsiders and inaccessible even to His disciples, because its sad traces could not be seen on the surface of the public activities of the Lord. This sorrow was deeply hidden in the sanctuary of the heart, where it is usually felt especially heavily.

His close ones¹⁰...went out to lay hold on him: for they said, He is beside himself.

Just think what this means.

People, as always, flocked to the Lord in multitudes; people glorified the Great Prophet who had appeared, and listened with delight to His teachings, but His close ones, His relatives, were

⁸ Eph. 4:3

⁹ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, trans. E.E. Goulaeff, Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, 1984, p. 389.

¹⁰ The KJV reads “His friends.” The words are adjusted here to correspond to the Russian translation of the Bible quoted in the text.

worried and went to take Him, *for they said, He is beside himself*, or, to put it more simply and more precisely, “went crazy.”

Crazy! How simply and easily can everything unusual, out of the ordinary, great and wonderful, mysterious and inscrutable in the life of the Lord be explained! His anguished life of a wanderer who hath not where to lay his head, the split from His family, from the spiritual leaders of the people, from the ruling parties, from the usual notions of Jewish society; His teaching – high, inspired, hardly accessible to mediocrity – is explained by the understandable and simple word “crazy.”

And notice: from a narrow-minded point of view, this conjecture, calling up suspicion and alarm, sounds believable. In fact, is it not crazy to lead such a life as this Galilean Prophet does: to leave home, to leave His relatives, give up the comfort and coziness of home, and instead to gather around himself a bunch of strange, unfamiliar people, wander with them around the villages of Palestine without staying for a long time anywhere, eating whatever comes their way and preaching something incomprehensible and incongruous? He could have lived in peace without bothering anyone, but instead He reproves the powerful Pharisees and Sadducees, annoying them and exposing himself to the terrible danger of their revenge. He could have had great, extraordinary glory and use it for his personal plans, but it is as though He avoids this glory and forbids telling people about His acts. He could have gained tremendous power, become a king or a popular leader – people almost by force try to make Him take this step – and instead He prefers to lead the life of a wandering beggar.

Well, what is this in keeping with? Is it not craziness? And what wild, extraordinary teaching He preaches! We are all accustomed if not to think about wealth and luxury, in any case to take care to have food, clothes, and a decent home. But He... Listen to what He demands: *Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?...Take therefore no thought for the morrow* (Mt. 6:31,34).

We all think that we can and even should protect our rights from impudent encroachments; otherwise people will walk all over us and push us around. But He says: *That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain* (Mt. 5:39-41).

We all try to live our life as easily as possible, with the greatest comfort and least work, and we absolutely do not understand why we need to constrain ourselves, limit our needs, and take upon ourselves the feat of deprivation and suffering, but He teaches us: *Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it* (Mt. 7:13-14).

Many of the contemporaries of the Lord Jesus Christ, accustomed to the course of life established by the Pharisees and legalists must have thought in this way or in a similar way. Undoubtedly, Christ's closest relatives thought this way, who could not understand and appreciate the full depth of His teaching, and who neither wanted to obey His authority nor accept His words on faith. Being more often than others in His presence during the entire preparatory period of His ministry, they certainly began to notice earlier than others these signs of seeming abnormality in Him – love of solitude, pensiveness, incomprehensible speeches, strange actions. That is why a terrible suspicion crept into their souls much earlier, now turning into certainty: “He is beside himself! He has gone crazy!”

We can further imagine the relations which resulted from this certainty. Those sidelong, distrustful glances, particular caution in words, choice of expressions and topics for conversations with a poorly hidden concern not to irritate the sick person, constant and closely intrusive observation of His behavior – how much all this must have been troubling, upsetting, and insulting! Misunderstanding from the closest people is especially painful. You enter the room where the whole family has gathered, and the conversation immediately stops; an awkward silence sets in, and you feel that they were talking about you, maybe with judgment, maybe with sympathy. You sit down at the family hearth, and they carefully move away from you, keeping their attentive, scrutinizing eyes on you. You sit down at the table – they anxiously watch your hands, and you realize their hidden thought and fear, “What if he throws a knife or dish at someone!” And there is no way to convince these people that you are not crazy, but a completely ordinary person, that they simply do not understand your thoughts and words, nor do they make an effort to think more deeply about them.

This had to be very difficult, and all this had to be lived through by the Lord Jesus Christ.

The 21st verse tells us exactly about this externally imperceptible, deeply hidden, dramatic, and bitter tragedy.

But the Lord Jesus Christ had to hear an even more grievous, even more caustic insult from the scribes and Pharisees.

The scribes which came down from Jerusalem said, He hath Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils (verse 22).

The scribes of Jerusalem were famous for their learnedness, and their word was very influential among the people. Using this influence to destroy the charm of the personality and miracles of the extraordinary Galilean Prophet, they raised an even more severe and monstrous accusation against Him than His relatives: they declared Him to be possessed by an unclean spirit.

This high, inspired teaching, the wondrous parables full of inexplicable inner attraction, His moving preaching and lessons of ethical relations, this inexorable scourging of lies and search for truth – all this was nothing but demonic delusion. This beauty and nobleness of character, mercy, meekness,

compassion for the weak, burning love for the truth, boundless selflessness – all this was inspired by an unclean spirit. Finally, these wondrous deeds containing so much love for the suffering person and so much divine power – all this was a gift of the demonic prince Beelzebub.

Such an accusation is much more painful and harder to bear than the rebuke of insanity. By influencing people and arousing their suspicion, it impeded and delayed the development of the very work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The accusation of insanity was too obviously absurd for those who listened to the wise, though sometimes mysterious, speeches of the Lord. The accusation of being possessed by an evil spirit could have been more easily accepted and could have alienated many followers from Him, since it seemed more plausible. But this accusation not only slowed down the work of salvation of mankind, which was valuable for the Lord, but even more painfully it was related to His attitude and love for God. The suspicion of insanity could be insulting to Him personally as a man. The accusation raised by the scribes was insulting to God acting in Him. *The Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works* (Jn. 14: 10), the Lord Jesus Christ testified of Himself. He knew the mystery of His power, knew that the deeds done by Him were done by the power of God; He regarded this as a testimony of His Divine mission, which should convince people to believe in Him (Jn. 10:37-38), and suddenly they call the power acting in Him the power of Beelzebub; they want to make people think that God who abides in Him is Satan. All the boundless love of the Lord Jesus Christ for God, the love of the Son for the Father, had to be filled with indignation. That is why He answered the slanderers so sternly: *Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation: Because they said, He hath an unclean spirit* (Mk. 3:28-30).

In the Gospel of Matthew and Luke, the rendering of these words provides a new accent to the thought: *whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come* (Mt. 12:32; cf. Lk. 12:10).

Already from these words one could see how hard it was for the Lord Jesus Christ to hear the slander of the Pharisees against the Spirit Who acted in Him – the Pharisees who tried to bring forth the suspicion to the people that He was possessed by demons.

But the Lord predicted the same fate – to be a victim of slander, misunderstanding, insults of all kinds, persecutions – to all His disciples and followers: *The disciple is not above his master, He says, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?* (Mt. 10:24-25). *If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you* (Jn. 15:20).

So, whoever decides to follow the Lord Jesus Christ and be faithful to Him must be prepared: persecution, resentment, and ridicule are inevitable.

Is there not deep and sad truth in this warning? How the world fights against anyone who decides to betray it and choose the new path of the Gospels' love and truth! *If ye were of the world, the Lord confirms, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you* (Jn. 15:19).

Today you belong to the world, live by its interests and tastes, worship its idols – luxury, wealth, fame, a noble origin; wallow in a whirlpool of vanity, lust, self-love, and other passions; wear like everyone else a mask of hypocritical decency, conduct so-called witty and entertaining conversations full of hidden cynicism and poisonous judgment, do not dare even to mention God, eternal truth, or strict laws of a virtuous life, because speaking about this is considered ridiculous and boring in respectable society, and everyone is pleased with you. You can be the soul of society; you are welcome everywhere; they listen to you with pleasure; you are flattered; people speak well of you; your poorly hidden sins are eagerly forgiven or you are good-naturedly, patronizingly teased about them. Everyone loves you: you are their type of person. But then a sharp change occurs with you: you start to think more seriously about life and its meaning; something restless, unsatisfied awakens in your conscience; long-forgotten words of holy legends and parables arise in your consciousness from somewhere; the thought of God and His truth appears; all the loud, vain rushing around and insignificance of the secular life acutely appear before your inner eye. You feel that there is no satisfaction in it and that it is impossible to find it; you decide to break with it, with your old habits, with friends and acquaintances, and follow Christ, abandoning everything. A radical change has occurred in your life... And look how quickly and dramatically the attitude of the world towards you changes. There are howls, hisses, whistles, and jeers from all sides. Former friends avoid you and pretend not to recognize you if you meet them. Stigmatization begins... Rumors, gossip, talking...

“Have you heard what happened to N? He stopped making appearances in society, abandoned everything... They say he wants to become a monk...”

“Poor thing...! Did he go crazy? You know, I always noticed something weird about him... Too bad... And what a merry fellow he was! But what is the reason? Was he in love with someone and it went awry?”

“No, he is just a goody-goody, holier-than-thou! Whom does he pretend to be?! Hypocrite...! He is the same as all of us... We know it perfectly well...!”

And so on. But do not be afraid! Do not give up the first step because of this noise. There is no real danger in it yet. This is only the first, relatively easy test of your will and the seriousness of your decision. You must overcome this in order to gain the first hardiness.

Do not be afraid! This is a choir of demonic power howling and jeering in people, which is losing its former servant and admirer, and does not want to allow this. It frightens you in order to make you abandon your accepted intention. Do not pay attention and remember that as a rule, demons always make more noise and scare people more than they really do them harm. Without God's permission, they cannot do anything to you.

Do not be afraid! You are not alone. The Lord goes to meet you and reaches out his hand. Rely on Him. *For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted* (Heb. 2:18). You can count on this completely, for you have heard what a wonderful promise He gave to His faithful followers: *For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother* (Mk. 3:35).

What great joy and spiritual encouragement is in these words! Is this not the pledge of victory – to have such a brother? Can such a brother leave you without help and support when life gets hard? And is it really a problem that your former acquaintances have turned away from you, that you are being slandered by your friends, if you have acquired such a brother?

But in order to have the right for this, one condition is needed: to do the will of God. The Lord recognizes the lofty title of His brother, His sister, and His mother only for those people who do the will of God. From the moment you take this decisive step, you should have no other goal but to learn this will and fulfill it in your life.

We have already said in the previous talks that when a person manages to merge his will with the will of God, obeying it unconditionally, this gives him tremendous strength and ensures victory in the fight against evil. In addition, there are other serious reasons why a Christian should renounce his will and set as the goal of his life the fulfillment of God's will.

After the fall, human will became imperfect, and his desires became sinful and irrational because now they are controlled by his passions. There is an old Greek legend about King Midas, representing a typical example of the foolishness of our ordinary desires. For some merits, destiny granted Midas the right to ask for the fulfillment of one of his desires. The king, greedy for gold, demanded that everything he touched should turn into gold. He received this magical gift and amazing things began: the armchair on which he sat suddenly became golden; the table on which he leaned turned into gold; he went into the garden, and every step of the staircase leading to the garden immediately became golden once he stepped on it. In the garden, it was enough for him to touch any tree, and it would become covered with golden leaves. At first it amused him. He turned everything that he could touch into gold, and soon everything around him shone brightly and gleamed. But when his little son ran out of the palace and, throwing himself into the arms of the King, suddenly turned into a golden statue, Midas thought that maybe it was not as good as it had seemed at first sight. And when he sat down to dine, he was horrified to notice that the bread, vegetables, fruits, all the dishes

with which he tried to satisfy his hunger, turned into gold and he could not swallow a single piece without the cursed gift acting immediately, and he began to despair. Alas! It was too late for repentance.

True, this is only a legend, an instructive tale. But even if we are so smart that we would not ask for such a clearly dangerous gift from destiny, still, in essence, our desires are rarely better. From the moral point of view, they almost never exceed the desires of that proverbial gypsy who wanted to be king in order to eat gingerbread cookies with honey every day. Isn't that true? Are not the vast majority of our desires narrowly selfish and sensual in nature? All of them are born from our passions, and trying to satisfy them, we inevitably destroy the body and poison the soul, for each passion is destructive and fatal. At the end of the day, if each of us was granted the terrible privilege of King Midas, we would have almost certainly chosen a no less dangerous and fatal gift. The harm from our choice is not so obvious; the poison by which our desires are poisoned is finer, but it acts just as surely and just as destructively. One wants wealth; another wants good food and fine wines; a third one wants success in fornicating, etc. In their bad consequences, all these desires are no better than the wishes of King Midas: maybe slower, but they also kill the person and his soul.

With such irrationality of our desires, how can we trust them? Who can say where they will lead us? How often does it happen that after long labors and efforts one attains his desires, and then sees with surprise and frustration that he was chasing after ghosts and that the radiant dream which inspired him has lost all its charm upon reaching it. It is like a rainbow soap bubble which bursts when grabbed by the hand, leaving only a bit of caustic foam. In the best case, labor and time are lost; in the worst case, an annoying burden, harmful and unnecessary, has been acquired instead of happiness and enjoyment. We often, like moths, fly into the fire just to singe our wings. I knew one talented young man who imagined that his happiness was in the career of an actor. He was intoxicated by the glare of the footlights, tinsel of the costumes, enchanting beauty of life depicted on the stage, the noise of applause, worship of the crowd, and in order to win this "happiness," he gave almost his entire life and all his remarkable talents. He achieved what he wanted, achieved major success in the theatrical world, and only then did he realize that it was a tragic mistake, that he needed neither the stage nor success on it, and that the hidden side of the actor's world was simply abhorrent for him. It was almost impossible to change his career: the dissolute life of an actor consumed his strength, health, talents, and it was already too late to start something new. His young, promising life was ruined.

St. Nilus of Sinai, a man of deep spiritual experience, thus spoke about his wishes: "Many times while praying, I asked, let me have what seemed good to me, and insisted on a petition, unreasonably forcing the will of God rather than giving it to God to better arrange what He knows is useful for me. But after receiving what I asked for, I would then be in great sorrow precisely because I

did not ask, ‘Let it better be according to the will of God,’ for the matter turned out for me to be different from what I had thought” (St. Nilus of Sinai, *On Prayer*, ch. 32).

A precious testimony of a great ascetic who learned all the deceptiveness of human desires from experience!

How much better it is to completely give yourself over to the will of God, abandoning your daydreaming and desires! For this will is good, pleasing and perfect; this will is benevolent, for the Almighty loving Father of ours *will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim. 2:4). We can completely entrust ourselves to the Lord, for He knows better what we really need and what is useful for us, can lead us better, cares more about us, and loves us more than we do ourselves.

If the Lord said: *I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me* (Jn 5:30), if the Angels of God, mighty in strength, perennially hearken unto the voice of the Word of God and perfectly do His pleasure (cf. Ps. 102:20-21),¹¹ then we, *without strength* (Rom. 5:6), who are *all gone out of the way* (Rom. 3:12), who have lost sight of Him and are unable to find Him by ourselves (cf. Is. 59:9-10), would not we wish to approach the Light, which *lighteth every man* (Jn. 1:9), and learning the holy will of God revealed to us by His only begotten Son, wish to do it as much as possible, for all goodness of our life lies in this?

“One definite commandment was given to Adam and Eve,” writes Father John of Kronstadt, “in order that by fulfilling this one commandment – which was, moreover, a very easy one – men might acquire the habit of fulfilling the will of God, the fulfillment of which constitutes the whole well-being of creatures, and might be strengthened in the love of God. If we turn our attention to the contrary – to the non-fulfillment of the will of the Creator and the fulfillment of our own will, in opposition to the Creator’s – we observe that little by little a man changes for the worse and perverts his own high nature, created after the image and likeness of God, and becomes God’s enemy. So important is the fulfillment of God’s commandments, and so destructive is their non-fulfillment! By giving to the first men His definite commandment...the Lord God revealed Himself as the Guide of the newly-created reasonable creatures. Whose fault was it that this guidance was rejected, and that man preferred to be governed by his own will? Even until now, notwithstanding all the progress in sciences and arts, notwithstanding all the treasures of human wisdom, neither the man of ancient nor of modern times can educate himself, because he rejected even from the beginning the guidance of God; for, say, who but God should be our guide? And both at present and in the past only those men successfully completed their mental and moral education who trusted in God and lived in accordance

¹¹ Ps. 103: 20–21 in the Western tradition.

with His commandments, or who now live in accordance with the Gospel and the teaching of the Church, submitting themselves to her guidance.”¹²

Lord! Teach us to do Thy will, for Thou art our God, from Thee is the source of life!

¹² Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, trans. E.E. Goulaeff, Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, 1984, p. 400.