

Chapter 6, verses 1-13

The Lord Jesus Christ began His mission in Galilee. He found His first disciples and followers there near Lake Gennesaret; there for the first time the eternal words of the Divine sermon were heard; there the first miracles were performed.

At that time, Galilee was a flourishing land with well-developed agriculture and active trade. Its population was a strong and courageous tribe, agricultural and militant, even restless and highly valuing freedom. Its ancestors from the Tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali left a brilliant page in the history of the conquest of Canaan. Despite these great memories and energetic patriotism, Galilee did not have famous scholars and schools and did not enjoy the slightest respect in those times of formalism and religious legalism, when only the scribes and rabbis enjoyed the full confidence of the people. The inhabitants of Jerusalem and pure Jews despised Galilee. A Galilean seemed to be an uneducated, ignorant, simple, and crude creature to them. His dialect and pronunciation was ridiculed.

And yet this country deserved a much better reputation. Loyalty to native traditions was strong there; the love of freedom was not suppressed by the Roman yoke and supported vivid expectations of the Messiah-deliverer; the heart of the people, in spite of their outward crudeness, preserved virgin purity and was receptive to the truth of God and words of eternal life.

From the very first steps of His preaching, the Lord was very successful there. People flocked to listen to him in crowds. Many came from afar and accompanied Him for weeks, reveling in the divine words. They were ready to listen to Him for days on end, forgetting about food. Faith in Him, in His teaching, in His miraculous power grew every day; together with this, His influence among the people grew and His miracles multiplied.

When the Lord wanted to go from [these parts of] Galilee to His fatherland, to Nazareth, where His family lived and where He spent his childhood years, He already had great fame.

Rumors about Him travelled far. He was spoken of as a Great Prophet, possessing great power of word and miracles. Many were ready to recognize Him as the Messiah. It seemed that under such conditions, the dwellers of Nazareth should have met Him with special warmth and enthusiasm. After all, it was their prophet, Who came out of their midst, Who grew up in their town, their glory, pride, and adornment.

And instead, we see the completely opposite phenomenon. In his hometown, the Lord was met with complete indifference. Neither His wondrous, inspired sermon, full of strength and wisdom, nor the amazing miracles which He performed, nor the blaze of glory that crowned Him could arouse faith in Him, in His Divine mission, among his compatriots, and so Jesus *marvelled because of their unbelief* (verse 6). This is all the more surprising since the dwellers of Nazareth had every

opportunity to personally evaluate the influence of His sermon and miraculous power. There was no way to ignore this extraordinary power in Him.

But instead of succumbing to the charisma of His teachings and recognizing Him at least as a prophet, they only wondered with amazement: *From whence hath this man these things? and what wisdom is this which is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands?* (verse 2).

These are the questions of idle, excited curiosity, which do not commit anyone to anything and lead to nothing.

This attitude of His compatriots toward Him caused a sorrowful remark from the Lord Jesus Christ: *A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house* (verse 4).

We already know how the Lord's household and relatives related to Him. *Neither did his brethren believe in him*, says the Evangelist John (Jn. 7:5), and considered Him to be simply crazy. But the attitude of His fellow citizens was no better. Initial indifference and incredulous curiosity soon turned into rage and open malice when the Savior's sermon brushed against their national self-conceit. The result was that they thrust Him out of the city and wanted to cast Him down from the hill (Lk. 4:29).

How can this be explained? How can we understand this incredible numbness of conscience and darkening of reason leading to such actions? After all, they could not be ignorant that they were expelling at least an extraordinary person already recognized as a Great Prophet in many towns.

The key to solving this psychological mystery is the third verse of the Sixth chapter.

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him.

They knew the whole family of the Lord and never found anything unusual in it; they had not even noticed any special gifts in any of its members. They had known Jesus for a long time, since His childhood. They often saw Him on the streets of the town or at the pool of the spring with his Mother. They saw Him in the workshop where He worked under the guidance of the elderly Joseph. And it never crossed their minds that something extraordinary would come of this boy. To them, He seemed to be the same as all the other children.

They had known Him for too long, seen Him too often, and become too used to Him.

This explains their attitude towards Him.

We never value something we are too much used to. A familiar object does not arouse that intense attention with which we meet a novelty. Even the miraculous begins to seem ordinary by virtue of habit. A person whom we know too well cannot count on an excessively high degree of respect and the deferential amazement which we are ready to render to those whom we know only

superficially, from hearsay. A certain amount of obscurity always raises the tone of a relationship. The groom admires his bride much more than a husband does his wife, and as they say, “a footman never respects his master.”

The same occurred with the dwellers of Nazareth: they were so accustomed to the Lord, accustomed to consider Him their man, their equal, that even noticing something marvelous about Him, they became only perplexed, shrugged, and tried to find a natural explanation for everything. This is why they did not believe in Him as the Messiah and did not surrender to Him with all their souls, as many Galileans did.

Yet the same law is valid even now in the spiritual life.

For a Christian who has dedicated his life to serving God the Lord, there is always a danger of losing the freshness of his feeling for Him through habit, and replacing sincere, heartfelt service with formal, mechanical, often careless performance of religious duties.

This happened to the Jewish people, on whom the Prophet Isaiah cast a heavy reproach: *Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high* (Is. 58:3-4).¹ The same thing happened to the leaders of the Jews – the scribes, Pharisees, and priests – to whom the Lord said with bitterness: *Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith* (Mt. 23:23). *Ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity* (Mt. 23:28). *I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you* (Jn. 5:42).

Unfortunately, the same thing often happens with our clergy. Becoming used to the sacraments and celebration of the divine service, they cease to feel the breathing of the Holy Spirit in them, lose all reverence for them, and begin to limit their entire service to God to soulless and hasty performance of regular church services and services on request.

This law of habit has a particularly tragic effect on our choir singers, assistants in the altar, and children of the clergy. I have never seen more ugly behavior in the church than the behavior which singers and boys helping in the altar allow themselves. This is caused by the fact that, once they become used to church, they begin to feel at home in it and completely forget about the invisible presence of the Great, Almighty, All-Righteous Creator in it.

But this loss of living faith and a living feeling for God may also happen with every believer, and the danger is especially great for those who are obliged due to their position to carry out the long

¹ The English Standard Version is used here, as it is closer to the Russian Synodal version of the Bible quoted in the text.

and tedious work of service, not having understanding about the laws of the spiritual life and not using the instructions of experienced people.

This state of spiritual coarsening or going wild is very grave and dangerous, since it is much more difficult to get out of this state on the right track again, than for a beginner to set off on this path. To relearn something which was learned in the wrong way is always more difficult than to memorize something new, still unfamiliar, because in the former case one has to first break a deeply rooted habit, which takes much time and energy. This is the ABC of pedagogy. If the hands and fingers of a student of music were trained in the wrong way from the very beginning, getting rid of this shortcoming and switching to the correct method will subsequently present extreme difficulties. Readers, whose tongue has become accustomed to quick reading and who swallow whole syllables up to a loss of meaning, often to the end of their lives cannot learn to read clearly and distinctly. It is similar in the spiritual life and in the service of God. There are unfortunate priests who have become so accustomed to careless and sloppy performance of the divine service that despite all their efforts they can no longer perform it devoutly, orderly, and reverently. A deeply rooted habit overcomes all efforts when, realizing the danger of this situation, people try to fight it. The tongue rushes forward on its own, rapidly throwing out words; thoughts that cannot keep up with it randomly jump from the fifth to the tenth word or move here and there, while the hands and body make gestures on their own which were memorized and learned by habit. It is even worse, when a person does not even realize that he has already ceased to be a priest and a man of prayer, that he is nothing more than a speaking machine. The oppression of God's damnation for negligence already begins to be felt here, for it is said: *Cursed is the man that does the works of the Lord carelessly* (Jer. 48:10).²

In this state of loss of the living feeling of God, all external activity apparently intended to bring a person closer to Him, is condemned to complete spiritual futility. First of all, prayer – one of the main means of the spiritual life – ceases to be effective. It does not reach God.

“Remember,” writes Father John of Kronstadt, “that if you do not speak idly during prayer, but say the words of prayer with feeling, then your words shall not return to you void, without power (like the husk without the grain), but shall unfailingly bring you those same fruits which are contained in the word, as the fruit is enclosed in the shell. This is a most natural thing, as natural and common as the fruit and its shell in nature....the more sincerely, the more heartily each word is pronounced, the greater will be the fruit of the prayer. Each word, like a grain, shall bring you spiritual fruit, like a ripe ear of corn....But if you scatter the words to no purpose, without faith,

² Here the Septuagint translation is used, as it is closer to the Russian Synodal version of the Bible quoted in the text. In the Septuagint this verse is Jer. 31:10.

without feeling their power, like the shell without the kernel, then they will return to you empty, in the same way as if you were to scatter the shell, the shell would return to you.”³

There is an old legend which vividly shows us how barren our prayers sometimes are.

Once there lived a holy elder who prayed a lot and often grieved for human sins. And it seemed strange to him why it happens that people go to church, pray to God, and still live just as badly. Sin does not diminish.

“Oh Lord,” he thought, “Do you not heed our prayers? People constantly pray to live in peace and repentance, and they cannot do it at all. Can it be that their prayer is in vain?”

Once he fell asleep with these thoughts. And it seemed to him as though a radiant Angel, embracing him with his wing, lifted him high above the ground... As they rose higher and higher, the sounds coming from the surface of the earth became weaker and weaker. No longer were human voices heard; songs, screams, all the noise of the busy worldly life subsided. Only sometimes harmonious, gentle sounds came from somewhere, like the sounds of a distant lute.

“What is this?” the elder asked.

“These are holy prayers,” answered the Angel, “only they can be heard here!”

“But why do they sound so weak? Why are there so few of these sounds? For now all people are praying in the church...?”

The Angel looked at him, and his face was mournful.

“Do you want to know...? Look...”

Far below a large church could be seen. By a miraculous power its vaults were opened, and the elder could see everything that was being done inside. The church was full of people. A large choir was visible on the *kliros*. The priest, in full vestments, stood in the altar.

The service was being performed. It was impossible to say which service, because not a single sound was heard. It could be seen that the reader standing on the left *kliros* was reading something very quickly, smacking and moving his lips, but the words did not reach there, on high. A deacon of enormous size slowly walked out onto the ambon, straightened his magnificent hair with a smooth gesture, raised his orarion, opened his mouth wide, and... not a single sound!

On the *kliros*, the choir director distributed the music: the choir prepared to sing.

“I will probably at least hear the choir...,” the elder thought.

The choir director knocked the tuning fork against his knee, brought it to his ear, extended his arms and gave the sign to begin, but there was still complete silence. It was surprisingly strange to watch: the director waved his hands, stamped his foot; the basses were red from straining; the

³ 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. 363-4.

tenors stretched out on their toes, raising their heads high; everybody's mouths were open, but there was no singing.

“What is this strange thing?” the elder thought.

He turned his eyes to the praying people. There were a lot of them, of different ages and positions: men, women, old people and children, merchants and simple peasants. They all made the sign of the cross, bowed, many whispered something, but nothing could be heard.

The whole church was silent.

“Why is this?” the elder asked.

“Let us go down, and you will see and understand...,” said the Angel.

Slowly, not visible to anyone, they went down to the church. A well-dressed woman stood in front of the crowd and seemed to pray ardently. The Angel approached her and softly touched her with his hand... And suddenly the elder saw her heart and understood her thoughts.

“Ah, that nasty postmaster's wife!” she thought. “She is wearing a new hat again! The husband is a drunkard, the children are ragged, but she is showing off...! Look, how she has made herself up...!”

A merchant wearing a good, woolen coat and looking thoughtfully at the iconostasis was standing nearby. The Angel touched his chest, and immediately his hidden thoughts were revealed to the elder: “...What a shame! I sold it too cheap... Now there is no way you can buy such merchandise! I probably lost a thousand or maybe one and a half...”

Next there was a young peasant man. He hardly prayed, but all the time looked to the left where the women were standing, was blushing, and shifting from foot to foot. The Angel touched him, and the elder read in his heart: “Oh, Dunyasha is such a beauty! She's got it all: a nice face, fine ways and gets things done... That's my kind of wife. Will she marry me or not?”

And the Angel touched many, and everyone had similar thoughts – empty, idle, and worldly. They stood before God, but were not thinking about God. They just pretended to be praying.

“Now do you understand?” asked the Angel. “Such prayers do not reach us. That's why it seems like they are all unable to speak...”

At that moment, suddenly, a child's timid voice spoke distinctly:

“Lord! You are good and merciful... Save, have mercy, heal my poor mother...!”

A little boy stood in the corner on his knees, clinging to the wall. Tears shone in his eyes. He was praying for his sick mother.

The Angel touched his chest, and the elder saw the heart of the child. There was sorrow and love.

“These are the prayers which are heard by us!” said the Angel.

Thus, our hypocritical, purely external prayers do not reach God and bear no fruit.

This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, says the Lord, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me (Mt. 15:8-9).

Moreover, such prayer provokes God's anger.

"Many of us..." writes Fr. John, "celebrate the service and sacraments, the reading of the prayers unwillingly, indolently, negligently, hurriedly, with omissions, wishing to finish the holy work quicker, and hasten after worldly vanity. What a fearful temptation, and what a grievous sin! Involuntarily one remembers the terrible word of God to the neglectful fulfillers of His works: *Cursed is the man that does the works of the Lord carelessly!* (Jeremiah 48:10).⁴ I said: what a fearful temptation! Yes, it is a fearful temptation, because, through blindness, we treat with neglect the words of the Holy Ghost, breathing in the prayers of the sacraments and services — we treat with neglect that which itself would be the source of the sweetest peace, of joy in the Holy Ghost, and even the source of our own bodily health, did we serve with true zeal and attention; for the words of the prayers connected with the services and sacraments read with faith, reverence, and the fear of God, calmly, with a fervent spirit, have the indubitable and wonderful property of vivifying, strengthening, and healing our body itself together with the soul. This I know from experience. It is a grievous sin, I say, because by celebrating the sacraments carelessly we, through this, mock at the Lord's holy things....Do the Christian hypocrites of the present day think that they pray and live hypocritically? They do not think so. They pray daily perhaps long; they pray out of habit with their lips, but not with their hearts, without hearty contrition, without a firm desire for amendment, and only in order to fulfil the established rule and 'think' that they do *God service* (Jn. 16:2), whilst by their prayer they only incur the wrath of God. We all more or less sin in praying hypocritically, and shall be greatly censured for this."⁵

But if long time service to God leads to habit, and habit may cause formal, purely external and hypocritical fulfillment of religious duties, an important question is how to avoid this danger. For if we fail to do this, it is inevitable that our spiritual life will come to a sad end.

The answer to this question is partly in the above words of Father John of Kronstadt: with true diligence and attention, the sacraments, services, and prayers are the source of peace, joy in the Holy Ghost, and even the source of bodily health.

Thus, for some they serve as a blessing, but bring a curse on others. It all depends on a person's attitude towards them.

If a Christian does not invest all attention, all zeal, all warm-heartedness which he is capable of into his service to God, a habit of careless and superficial fulfilling of religious duty will soon begin to emerge in him. A person does not reach this suddenly, but gradually. Maybe at first he had

⁴ Here the Septuagint translation is used, as it is closer to the Russian Synodal version of the Bible quoted in the text. In the Septuagint this verse is Jer. 31:10.

⁵ Ibid. p. 348-9.

prayed from his heart, but later, since constantly praying with the heart is major work to which one must always force oneself, for the Kingdom of Heaven is said to be taken by force (Mt. 11:12), he began to pray more with his mouth, superficially, and not from the depths of his soul since it is much easier, and finally, with an intensified struggle of the flesh and devil, he began to pray only with his mouth, not bringing the power of the prayerful words into his heart. What has been said about prayer should also be said about taking communion with the Holy, Immortal and Life-giving Mysteries. It often occurs that a person at first takes communion with living faith, with a feeling of love and reverence, but later, with constant opposition to the truth of God from the flesh and devil, he yields victory over himself to them and takes communion hypocritically... This also happens with the sacrament of repentance. The same thing happens with all manifestations of the religious life, if a Christian does not force himself to exert his spiritual powers.

A fatal habit is created in this way. However, one can get used to both bad and good things. One can get used to negligence, and then one's entire religious life becomes cold, lifeless, and formal. The life-giving spirit hidden in the holy words of the prayers, in the sacraments, and in other religious forms, does not manifest itself to a negligent, lazy, and cold soul, and does not act on it. However, on the contrary, one may create the habit of reverent, ardent, heartfelt fulfillment of all religious duties, and then the inexhaustible spring of grace-filled power, revitalizing and strengthening the spiritual life, will open up for us in them. Hence the conclusion: if we want to avoid spiritual coarsening, if we want prayers, sacraments, and rituals, and the entire rite of religion not to lose the Spirit of life for us from frequent repetition and not to turn into an empty formality, saying nothing to the soul, if at last we want our virtues, if there are any, to not turn into hypocritical religiosity, the remedy against this, first of all, is to fulfill everything required by the Christian duty from the very beginning of the spiritual life with the greatest diligence and attention, with exertion of all spiritual and physical forces, not allowing ourselves any laziness or negligence.

There are no small things unworthy of attention, for these small things make up the overall picture, the whole tenor of our spiritual life, and therefore every detail requires careful and accurate fulfillment. *God is not mocked* (Gal. 6:7), and the slightest negligence in relation to Him will certainly be reflected through damage to your spiritual life. Therefore, whatever you do in the act of serving Him, do your best; that which is done carelessly is never done right. It is necessary to act in good faith.

And in order to maintain this fervour in yourself and not to weaken, one must always have living faith that our God worshiped in the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is always with us, is watching over us, and in response to the first word of our sincere prayer for help is ready to help us in this holy work. Bearing in mind that the Almighty is always with us and having Him in deed in our thoughts, rejecting from the heart all sorts of evil thoughts, earthly doubts, cares, and

attachments, we will always worthily do God's work. The most striking examples of such conscientious work are the disciples and Apostles of the Lord, as can be seen in verses 8-9 of the Sixth Chapter. Leaving for preaching, they would take nothing with them except for a staff only: neither bag, nor bread, nor money in their purse, nor two coats; they wore simple footwear. Nothing should hinder them; nothing should tie them down or distract them from that work which the Lord sends them on. All attention, all strength, all their being is given exclusively to God and God's work.

We must constantly have this example before our eyes and remember the dreadful warning: *Cursed is the man that does the works of the Lord carelessly* (Jer. 48:10).

Chapter 6, verses 14-29

The tragic figure of Herod, the murderer of the Great Prophet, is drawn before us in the account of the execution of John the Baptist, described by the Holy Evangelist.

This was not the Herod who killed the infants in Bethlehem with the vain hope of killing Jesus. That one, as we know, died while the Holy Family was in Egypt.

Herod who killed John the Baptist was the so-called Herod Antipas the Tetrarch, or the Tetrarch of Galilee – a man perhaps not so much corrupt as weak in character. The crime he committed tormented him. He could not forget John. But due to his weak character, he felt not remorse but an irresistible feeling of fear. The bloody phantom of the beheaded Prophet haunted him. When he heard about the Lord, Who was the subject of heated debate among the people, his first thought inspired by fear was that it was the murdered John who was resurrected. In the person of the newly appeared Prophet, he feared to find an avenger for the blood he had shed, and this fear was even stronger because he was fully aware of the injustice behind the execution of the Baptist. Only a fatal line-up of circumstances led him to this crime, which he committed against his will. Despite the stern and accusatory speeches of John directed against Herodias and the Tetrarch, the latter deep in his soul respected his accuser since he knew that he was a righteous and holy man. Therefore, even while imprisoning him upon the insistence of Herodias, he protected him, listened to him with pleasure, and did many things following his advice. When Salome, the daughter of Herodias, demanded the head of John the Baptist from him, the ruler was exceeding sorry. How did this happen? How did Herod allow this murder? How could he have reached such a state that despite his heartfelt inclinations, he was forced to agree to the terrible demand of Salome and behead the Prophet upon her order?

Let's try to look into this dark soul and see how the crime caused by passion gradually grew there, and how the passion flared up and became entrenched. It is very important for us to clarify the laws of development of sin and passion, for in the soul of each person they act in approximately the same way, and using the example of Herod we may find out the circumstances of our own falls.

It all began with lust, with unclean love for Herodias, the wife of Herod's brother Philip. Not concerning himself with an attempt to stop the sinful passion which was developing, Herod soon got down to business, easily stepped over the first obstacle, and made his brother's wife his own wife. This first step already shows quite clearly to what degree the passion had developed in his soul, since the power of passion is measured by the magnitude of the obstacles it overcomes; in other words, the more difficult the obstacle conquered by passion, the greater the power of the passion it reveals. But, after defeating the first obstacle, Herod immediately meets another – the accusatory preaching of John the Baptist who told Herod: *It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife* (verse 18). These reproaches undoubtedly mattered to Herod more than uneasiness before his brother and fear of public opinion which, thanks to the servility of his leaders – the Pharisees and Sadducees – was easy to silence. It was not possible to silence John, who was unbribable, or make him soften the straightforward tone of his reproof. In addition, these stern words should have had a great influence on Herod's conscience, for Herod had unwilling respect for the Prophet and undoubtedly took his opinion into consideration. Nevertheless, even this new obstacle could not force him to break off his passion. Moreover, he not only did not back down before this obstacle, but provoked by Herodias, arrested the Prophet whom he respected, and put him in prison – a vivid indicator of how far his passion had gone. Finally, in the scene with Salome, he almost completely lost control over himself. Intense lust to the utmost degree cast a cloud over him and he gave his insane oath. He was already a complete slave of passion! Thus, in the absence of resistance, passion intensifies, capturing the human soul into its despotic power. Along with this, we may notice another phenomenon: one type of sin permitted causes many others. In this case, lust leads to treachery towards his brother, incestuous adultery, injustice, cruelty, violence towards John, making a vain oath, vainglory before his guests, false self-love, and finally murder. It is as if behind the first snake of awakened passion, conscious of its own power, a whole den of other snakes immediately began to hiss and stir, which previously peacefully dozed in the soul. Finally, one cannot ignore the circumstance that the temptations which Herod faced became more and more serious, and the crimes he committed became more and more grave. It was as if a test was being made, to what degree the fall of this person who submitted himself to vice could reach.

Thus, we can see how gradually the loop of sin is drawn tighter and tighter, and how less and less hope remains that the person who has gotten into it will be able to free himself from it. The situation becomes almost hopeless when the last strength and even a desire to break this loop disappear from the soul, and murder or another no less grave crime becomes then only a natural consequence, the inevitable final chord of unbridled passion.

Looking closer at the process of evolving temptation as described in the Gospels' story of Herod, one can find there a triple law to which this development is subjected if it does not encounter opposition in the conscious will of man.

The first law can be called the law of amplification. This law is that the strength of passion, its intensity and power over the soul, grows progressively as concessions are made to it. The concessions do not calm it down, but only make it more demanding and domineering. The person who one time has committed sin morally weakens, and with repeated temptation commits it with greater ease than a person who held his ground in the first struggle. Man's will is strengthened by his victories and is weakened by defeats – this is the law of psychology. The moral leak trickling once into the soul, soon turns into a furious stream and destroys the entire dam of the moral law of the conscience, if it is not fought against.

Dr. Matt describes a student who suffered from the vice of masturbation. The student admitted to him that during the first year he permitted this vice once; the next year three times, and then he began to repeat it every week. This is a common thing. We often observe it in the development of addiction to alcoholism. As the proverb says, "the first drink goes down like a stake, the second goes down like a hawk, but the rest go down like tiny, little birds." Concessions and falls here are like the role of dry brushwood which you throw onto the fire. The more you throw, the greater and brighter the greedy flame becomes. The more you sin, the more passion flares up.

The second law is the expansion of passion. One sin inevitably is followed by a series of new sins. One passion, flaring up in the soul, brings to life other passions, as if there is some invisible mysterious connection between them. It is as if the success of one passion serves as a signal for other passions, and all of them at once or one after another hurry to fall upon the unfortunate soul, as if wishing to finish off the weakened adversary. Lust is inevitably followed by jealousy, mistrust, lies, envy, anger, etc., etc. It is like in a war: if the front is broken in one place, the enemy rushes in masses into the break to expand and finish the defeat.

Once many years ago a ship was being built at a Dutch shipyard. The workers had to find a good, long, and strong log for the keel or the main beam to which the ribs were attached. In the piles of timber kept in the shipyard, two workers found one log that at first glance seemed suitable.

"Here is a good log!" said one of them. "Let's take it..."

But the other one carefully examined the log and shook his head.

"No," he objected, "it is no good!"

"Why?"

"Do you see the little wormhole here? This is a sign that worms already live here..."

"That is not important... What does such a small wormhole mean for such a huge, solid log. You can barely see it... Let's take it!"

They argued a bit. Finally the more cautious one gave in. They took the log and made the keel of the new ship out of it.

The new ship sailed safely across the seas for several years. It was lightweight, sturdy, and not afraid of storms. Everyone admired it. But one fine day, in the midst of completely clear and calm weather, it suddenly sank without any apparent reason. When divers descended into the sea to inspect it, they found that the bottom of the ship was consumed by worms. Over the years of navigation, the worms multiplied and gnawed through all the timber. One small wormhole proved fatal for a huge ship.

It is the same in the soul. One little worm of passion, if not destroyed in time, may multiply in huge numbers, generating new vices, capturing all sides of the soul, and destroying its healthy tissues.

The reason for this is weakening of faith. Defeated by one sin, the will loses the power of resistance and easily yields to other sins. Sin always exists in the depths of the human soul in the form of a wide variety of vicious inclinations and passions. These passions boil and seethe as if in a cauldron seeking the way out. Yet if a person does not concede to them, his will then plays the role of a heavy, lead cauldron lid which does not release the raging steam. Yet once the lid is lifted slightly – all the passions existing in the soul rush with force into the opening, no matter how small it might be. Conceding in this way, the person thereby unbridles other passions and becomes almost incapable of controlling them.

The third law is deepening of the passion. Its action, first of all, is that the ways of satisfying the rising passion which has gripped the soul become worse and morally uglier. The passion becomes more demanding, more capricious, and more grotesque. It is no longer satisfied with usual forms of sin, but looks for new, more refined forms which are more capable of exciting one's frayed and dull nerves. Thus the passion of lust is often complicated by cruelty, turning into sadism. Gluttony requires more and more new, refined and intricate foods. In addition, the same law of deepening is sometimes also manifested differently. In order to satisfy the growing passion, the person begins to commit more and more serious crimes. He sacrifices everything for its sake, all moral values which are still preserved in his soul.

Everything which interferes with passion – moral habits, beliefs, and principles, instructions of duty and religion – is thrown overboard in life. Everything flies away, starting with less important things and ending with the greatest values. Thus, an avaricious man obsessed with the passion of greed for money does not spare anything in acquiring more money: first he stops charity, then he plunges into stinginess, refusing to help even the closest people; then he embarks on dishonest scams sacrificing truthfulness and decency, and often comes to theft, sometimes to murder, etc. The soul gradually becomes empty, losing everything which was valuable in it, for the sake of passion. Man

descends lower and lower to the very bottom of sin and vice. Considering the laws acting in the process of development of passion, we can easily notice that the common, main, and basic condition on which the whole process depends is the absence of firm moral rules, and exclusive service to one's egoism, one's "self."

Why did Herod fall so low? Undoubtedly because his self-love, his personal "self" was the main idol for him, whom he had served all his life; he did not recognize another higher will above himself beyond his own whims and desires. One can see no moral principles in his activities, and if he listened to John the Baptist, this certainly was not because he valued the moral height and purity of his advice, but most likely because he discerned a clairvoyant in him, who better saw the paths of life, intertwined in the haze of the future.

We have dwelt in detail on clarifying the ways and paths on which the development of passion moves, and the conditions which support and nourish it, so with the help of this analysis it would become easier to resolve the issue essential for Christian life – fighting against passions. For successfully fighting the enemy, one needs to know his tricks, devious means, and methods. Of course, in this case, the issue is so vast and complex that it cannot be resolved in its entirety in one brief instruction, and therefore we will have to confine ourselves here only to several practical pieces of advice.

First, as can be seen from all of the above, one primarily needs to have strong moral and religious foundations for successfully fighting against passion. Without this, struggle is completely impossible. Where else can a man find a foothold and in the name of what will he fight? In his own person? In the name of the desires of his own "self"? But this is where the very center of passion lies, and relying on one's own desires and inclinations in fighting against it is like fighting against fornication while making friends with prostitutes and seeking moral support from them. Trying to find these foundations in the usefulness or benefit of society is also futile, because "public benefit" is a concept too shaky and vague. It is understood by different people in different ways and is subject to endless changes depending on the circumstances and conditions of the time.

Moral laws become unconditionally binding and immutable for a person only when he is aware of their transcendental origin and hears the voice of God in them. Only in this case do they have absolute solidity and unquestioned authority. In the language of the Church, such a disposition which binds the moral law is called "the fear of God." The fear of God is therefore the basis of morality and support in fight against passion.

But if this disposition, which forces the soul of a person to obey moral rules, is possible to a certain extent in every religion, another condition strengthening a person in the fight against passions in the name of the moral law is only present in Christianity: this is that grace-filled power, that

invisible but constantly perceived help which the Lord gives to a struggling sinner who calls on His Holy Name.

I do not know who formulated the metaphorical and vivid depiction of the relationship of various religions to a person who has fallen into the dirty pit of sin and vice and wants to get out, what the various religions say to the perishing, miserable person, and how they try to help him and console him.

Confucius, the founder of the Chinese religion, utters: “Let experience teach you from here on!”

Brahmanism: “You will be happier in the next reincarnation!”

Mohammed: “Allah does whatever He wills!”

And what about Christ? Christ says: “Take My hand!” How higher is this relation to a sinner than the relationship of other religions! How much more love is in it and how much more fruitful and useful it is for a person than those consolations which do not go beyond the realm of an empty phrase! Do you want to get out of the quagmire of passion that sucks you in? Take the hand of Christ! When your strength gives in and the last ray of hope for spiritual liberation falters, turn in person to the Lord. Turn to Him with warm, heartfelt prayer and, believe me, your call will not remain unanswered. The help that you ask for will not be delayed!

Thus, the first rule for fighting against passion is that this struggle can be waged successfully only on religious grounds under the banner of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. The main support and strength of a Christian is in this hope!

Second, it is better to start the struggle when the passion has not yet left its first stage of development – the realm of thought. Fight it as soon as you feel the first call of any passion, as soon as the first thought passes through concerning it. When passion begins to be carried out in practice and when, submitting to it, you have already done something to satisfy it, it is immeasurably more difficult to stop it. Yet, even if you have already fallen, committing sin in deed, even if you have begun to get used to it, still in the future a most energetic struggle should be waged in the realm of thought. Push from yourself the very image of sin and the urge for it as soon as it appears in your thoughts. Learn to conquer passionate dreaming, for here is the root of sin. *From within, out of the heart of men, says the Lord, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness* (Mk. 7:21-22). We cannot stop sinful thoughts so they would not bother us at all. It does not depend on us, because they are often inspired by an extraneous, hostile evil force which does not spare the most holy moments and the most pious moods. They are possible even during the most ardent and intense prayer.

Once, a young disciple came to his elder, a hermit, complaining that sinful thoughts overwhelmed him. The elder brought him out into the open field.

“Open the flaps of your coat... Open up your chest!”

The disciple obeyed.

“Can you stop the wind so that it will not blow under your clothes?”

“I can’t, Abba...!”

“So are thoughts... We cannot stop their raid. We can only fight them, not allowing them to linger in the soul...”

What is the best and most appropriate way to do this? It is better to fight thoughts not with negative but with positive methods. It does not help much to repeat to yourself: “I will not think about that! I do not want to! I will not allow it!” It is better to try to think about something else and replace bad thoughts with good thoughts. It is useful to have something ready in this case: images from Holy History, questions of faith and morality, or simply a noble dream in the Christian spirit. In this case, the Holy Fathers usually used brief prayers, most often the Jesus Prayer, to distract their thought from temptation. Sometimes they brought to memory texts of the Holy Scriptures directed against temptation which would break its whispering. As we know, the Lord also used texts of the Holy Scripture to repel the attacks of the devil when he approached Him with the temptation in the wilderness.

Third, begin the fight immediately, without delaying an instant and without making any concessions. Compromises usually lead to defeat. If a thief begins to reason like this: “I will steal 10,000 this year, 5000 next year, only 1000 the third year... and then I will completely stop stealing,” you can certainly say that he will remain a thief. Chronic smokers who try to quit smoking by gradually reducing the number of cigarettes smoked every day, rarely succeed.

There is an old children’s story from Dutch life about a boy who saved his native country from flood. The Netherlands is below sea level and is protected by dams. Once the whole country constituted the bottom of the sea and was covered with water. Only step by step, with incredible tenacity and perseverance, did the Dutch people push back the sea with the help of dams and made their fields on fertile polder soils covered with rich silt. In this situation, Holland is always in danger of flooding if the dams break somewhere. All the residents know this and the dams are carefully guarded.

One night a little boy was walking on the seashore. He knew his way home well, and the night did not scare him. Suddenly, an unusual noise caught his attention: there was a splash and gurgling of water as if a stream was flowing. He stood, listened, and rushed to the dams. What horror did he feel when he saw that the dam had started to leak in one place and a brisk stream of water, continuously increasing, was pouring forth from there. What could he do? The boy

understood the danger and knew that if this stream was not stopped, by the morning it would turn into a devastating outpour which would wash the dams away and flood the country. He looked around. The deserted coast on which at this hour there was not a single soul stretched far to the right and left. There was nowhere for help to come from. The nearest houses were quite far from the shore, and before the boy could reach them, the danger might increase immeasurably... Then without thinking twice, he took off his jacket, tightly wrapped it around his right arm and plugged the hole, sticking his arm in almost up to his shoulder. The leak stopped. The night was cold and foggy. In the air hung a permeating dampness. The boy soon became chilled. His old, patched shirt barely warmed him. He turned blue; his teeth chattered; his hand fell asleep and became numb. But he courageously remained at his post. He knew that if he removed his hand, the water would rush with renewed vigor and – who knows? – maybe his parents, his little sister, his friends would die...

He could not leave, even if he would die... When the morning guarding patrol noticed a small figure under the dam, the boy was almost unable to move – he was so numb with cold.

“What are you doing there, boy?” one of the watchmen shouted to him. The little boy looked at him and barely able to unclench his jaw said quietly: “I am holding the sea.”

It was the literal truth. The little hero was saving his homeland from flooding of the sea and inevitable destruction. But if he had delayed slightly, the sea waves would have probably buried the whole country with its hardworking population and blooming fields in its cold abyss. “Protraction can be fatal,” Peter the Great would say about military tactics. The same can be said of spiritual struggle. Hesitation here is often tantamount to spiritual death. There is a widespread belief that turning to God is possible after the most dissolute life and in any period. Therefore, calculating sinners at the moments of rare remorse sometimes console themselves with this consideration, “We will live a bit longer for our own pleasure: we need to sow our wild oats! In our old age we will repent and pray! God will forgive us!” This consideration is only partly true. It is good if despite all the debauchery of one’s life, a person can preserve a living faith and love for God in his soul. In this case salvation is still possible for him. But if, falling lower and lower, he will come to the state about which the Lord says: *My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh* (Gen. 6:3), rebirth for him is possible only as a special miracle of God’s mercy, which no one has the right to count on. There are many people who have turned almost into animals, for whom spiritual experiences are completely inaccessible and who have lost all sensitivity to spiritual influences. This is spiritual death.

In any case, the fight against vice and passions becomes incredibly difficult after prolonged exposure to them. The devil and sin do not so easily give up their victim, and memories of the turbulent past, bad habits, and regrets about lost pleasures excite and inflame the blood for a long time, luring one back and often leading to despair. It takes almost ascetic efforts to erase these dirty

stains of the past from the soul. But asceticism requires a strong will, and by that time the will is usually already relaxed by constant concessions to sin. We should add that the longer the person is in the haze of a sinful life, the stronger he becomes tied to it and the less is his desire to break with such a life and start a new life, pure and pleasing to God. That is why those “sages” who count on repentance in old age are usually mistaken, and reaching the fateful threshold, they are horrified to see that their soul is hopelessly infected with sin, their will is shaken, there is no energy and desire to start a new life, and repentance is impossible... A tragic ending is inevitable.

Thus, the sooner you start the fight, the more certain the victory will be. The sooner, the better. After entering the struggle, one needs to wage it resolutely, without hesitation. “He who hesitates is lost,” says the English proverb.

Throw aside all self-pity and do not make any concessions to egoism. Concessions will not save you anyway and you cannot buy peace with the devil in this way. On the contrary: he intensifies the attack wherever he notices weakness. New temptations, even more serious ones, will immediately follow and require new concessions. Therefore, do not pacify yourself with the usual sophistry, “What’s the problem if I succumb in a small thing! I won’t do serious things!” There are no trifles in the spiritual struggle, for they usually produce serious consequences.

“The mode of curing spiritual sicknesses (the passions),” says Father John of Kronstadt, “entirely differs from the mode of curing of bodily sicknesses. In the latter case, attention must be fixed upon the malady; the tender part must be treated by softening means—warm water, compresses, etc. But it is not so in the case of spiritual sicknesses; so if you have fallen spiritually sick, do not pay attention to it, but strike the malady, crucify it; do not in any way indulge it, do not cherish it, do not warm it, do quite the reverse to that which it asks you to do. If you feel hatred for your neighbour, crucify this passion quickly, and immediately begin to love your neighbour; if you have fallen into avarice,⁶ try to quickly become generous; if you have grown envious, try to quickly become benevolent; if you have fallen into pride, quickly humble yourself to the ground; if you have fallen into covetousness, praise those who are disinterested [in money], and endeavour to become like them; if you are tormented by the spirit of enmity, strive after peace and love; if you are overcome by gluttony, quickly strive to be abstinent and keep fast. The whole art of curing the diseases of the spirit consists in not paying attention to them, and in not in the least indulging them, but in immediately cutting them off.”⁷

Two more pieces of advice: do not play with temptations, try to avoid them, and do not approach them even out of curiosity. Those who hang around on the boulevards, go to parties or

⁶ Stinginess.

⁷ 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. 350.

shows, listen to loose talks and obscene jokes, and at the same time imagine that they will be able to keep their purity of thoughts and heart, are deeply mistaken. This is like playing with fire in a gunpowder magazine: an explosion could occur at any moment. Finally, use those moments of ceasefire which the evil power gives you to strengthen your will in the right direction. Temptations do not always overwhelm a person in a continuous wave. At these moments, you need to prepare in advance for fighting them through prayer, reading, and reflection. He who begins to learn how to shoot only on the battlefield is a bad soldier. He will certainly be defeated. But the alpha and omega of the struggle still lie in hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. *For there is none other name under heaven...whereby we must be saved* (Acts 4:12).

Chapter 6, verses 30-56

We will not dwell on proving the possibility of the miracle of the multiplication of bread. Non-believing skeptics will not accept any proofs anyway, while for believers it is enough to reflect on the fact that such miracles happen every summer when every grain in the fields turns into a ripe, magnificent ear of wheat sometimes containing up to a hundred or more grains. Is not this the same miracle of multiplication of bread? And in no way does it cease to be a miracle from the fact that the multiplication here occurs regularly, every year, at certain periods of time, with certain gradualness. For who can understand and explain the effect of the forces which produce this process? Science can only describe how it happens, but it is powerless to answer the questions “Why? Wherefore?” If we are not surprised by such miracles scattered everywhere in God’s world, it is only because we are too used to them. If the power of God’s omnipotence works such miracles continuously, what is surprising in that the Lord did the same with His blessing and prayer, though in different circumstances and under different conditions, but with the same omnipotent power inherent in Him as God?

We are interested in another question: how did this miracle happen? Under what conditions? And what is the share of His disciples’ participation besides the divine power of the Lord? How are great deeds accomplished in Christianity, and how can human participation be manifested in them? Great deeds...! Who has not dreamed of them? Do you remember the golden dreams of your youth? How you wanted to change the whole world so there would be no more malice and filth, human vices, but only love and truth would reign, bright as the sun! How much the soul longed to do something great, unforgettable, something from which life would become brighter and happier! Sometimes it seemed so easy and possible! But years passed. You entered real life and encountered harsh reality. Its cold breath immediately convinced you that your rose-colored hopes were not so easily fulfilled. Your impulses met a blind wall of immovability, ridicule, and distrust everywhere. You felt like this wall was stronger than you... And the bright dream faded; the petals of rose-

colored hope also faded and fell off. Cold reason with sarcastic and cruel mockery whispered, “You can’t! You will not change the world! This task is beyond your power! Leave your ridiculous, childish dreams! Many fools have already smashed their heads against this wall!” And you retreated. At first, your young, inexperienced heart tried to rebel; then it became reconciled, and little by little it became used to the abnormalities of life. And everything resumed its natural course.

And now often, when we face great tasks in life, we have the habit of losing heart and hopelessly sighing: “What can I do...? I, alone...?” Alone – yes...! But you forget that Christ is with you. And *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me*, says the Apostle Paul (Phil. 4:13). You just need to know under what conditions His Divine help is given and know how to use it. Of course, the first prerequisite of every truly great deed is that it should have a Christian purpose and be built on Christian principles. Any activity, no matter how spectacular and grandiose it may be and no matter how much visible success may accompany it, cannot be called great if it pursues the goals of vainglory, love of fame, or the benefit of an individual person.

Not a single person, even if he was called “great” by flatterers from history who admire the din and glitter of his career, really deserves this name if he sought to make only a pedestal for his person from the circumstances and people around him. The Lord Jesus Christ does the great miracle of feeding five thousand people with five loaves not for crowning Himself with the laurels of a miracle worker in the eyes of the crowd, but because He felt sorry for the people who were hungry. The same pity compels Him *to teach them many things* (verse 34), forgetting about His own fatigue. *Jesus, when he came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd* (verse 34).

Compassion and love are the Christian motives of every truly great deed. The greatness of each person and each deed is measured by how strongly and fully they are imbued with these motives. The longevity of a great deed also to a large extent depends on these. A deed whose purpose is to satisfy the petty pride of its author is never lasting and despite occasional, astounding successes, it soon crumbles like the bright flare of a rocket, leaving only the soot and stench of its smoking cartridge. But even if a person is guided in his activities by apparently altruistic motives, that is, care for his neighbors, but does not take the Lord and His teaching as a foundation, usually his activities do not create true happiness for people, lead to many disappointments, and will never stand the terrible test which awaits every person and his deeds at the future Judgment of God. Truly, *other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ* (1 Cor. 3:11). Great Christian goals require Christian means for their implementation. Christianity does not know the principle “the end justifies the means.” Honest goals can only be achieved by honest means, and if a person allows deception, lies, and violence for achieving lofty goals and great plans, it can safely be said that nothing great or even good will come out of his work. Either he will disgrace his work in

the eyes of people when his deception is revealed, and his undertaking will be destroyed no matter how well-intended it was, or his lie will only originate a new lie that does not contain anything lofty, while violence will cause only violence in response. In vain some naive Christian does think that in order to achieve supreme, spiritual goals one can sometimes resort to a crafty trick, cunning, “innocent deception,” as it is called. This is totally unacceptable in God’s work. The commandments of God are obligatory always and under all conditions, and if the Lord sets any task before you in the general order of building the Kingdom of God, this means that there exist means for fulfilling this task which are consistent with His commandments, for He cannot require activities contradicting them from a person. We should not forget the words of the wise Joshua, the son of Sirach: *say not thou, It is through the Lord that I fell away...for he hath no need of the sinful man. The Lord hateth all abomination; and they that fear God love it not* (Sir. 15:11-13).⁸

In the Lord’s activities there is not a shadow of deceit, or treachery, or crafty flirting with people in order to attract them to Himself. We do not see this in the miracle He performed either. Everything is done directly, simply, and openly. *And when he had taken the five loaves and the two fishes, he looked up to heaven* (that is, making an inner prayer), *and blessed, and brake the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before them...* (verse 41). Prayer and invocation of the blessing of God are the source of power and the main means for carrying out a great deed in the Christian spirit.

Thus, if self-loving dreams cloud your mind, if you want to be a brilliant hero on the stage of history in the intoxicating atmosphere of worship by the servile crowd, you will never accomplish anything truly great. Throw this out of your mind. Even if you achieve temporary success, nevertheless, the recognition of the pettiness of your goals will gradually emerge before you more and more clearly, and joy of success will soon fade before the bitterness of the thought that you wasted your energy and talents on trifles. Only from afar does it seem that certainly something truly great is hidden behind the clouds of success and glory. Stepping closer and testing it by experience, you will almost always discover that it is nothing more than an optical illusion. All attempts to create something great and lasting while breaking all ties with the Lord Jesus Christ and His Gospels are hopeless and are doomed in advance to a more or less quick failure, since building the Kingdom of God, which is the essence of the whole world process, is accomplished directly by the power of God the Word according to the laws set forth in the Gospels. Therefore, you always have an alternative: either take part in this building under the guidance of the Lord and in the light of His teaching, and then you will contribute a share of your labour to the eternal future, or act according to your self-will

⁸ *Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach*, English Translation of the Greek Septuagint Bible, trans. Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton, 1851; <http://ecmarsh.com/lxx/Sirach/index.htm>, accessed 30.03.2021.

contrary to this plan of God for the future constitution of the universe, and then your labours will be inevitably crushed to dust by this irresistible process of building up the Kingdom of God.

Therefore, only that work can be great and long-lasting which moves the building of the Kingdom of God forward. In this sense, it always has two sides: subjective and objective, or, speaking without foreign terminology, working on oneself and working on social relations. If every Christian should be like a brick in the future building of the Kingdom of God, his first duty is to fire this brick thoroughly, to make it the best material for construction; in other words, to cultivate himself and perfect himself in the spirit of the Gospels.

The second part of the work will be to bring this Gospels' spirit into the practical life of society. Admittedly, both tasks are immeasurably difficult. That is why in facing these tasks many hopelessly give up, and moments of cowardice, doubt, and weakness emerge even in the hearts of deeply religious believers. In view of this, it is important for us to clarify the psychological attitude of the disciples and Apostles of the Lord toward the great miracle which occurred before their eyes and through them. In their souls, we may find the answer to the question of the conditions needed for a person so a great deed could be accomplished, and which facilitate this accomplishment of great tasks for him. Of course, the miracle is performed by the Divine power of the Lord, but He willed to call upon His disciples to participate in it. *Give ye them to eat* (verse 37), He says. Then he commands the disciples to make all sit down by companies on the green grass and gives the bread which was blessed to the disciples for distributing it to the people.

In this way, it is as if the Lord in this miracle makes the Apostles His assistants and miraculously feeds the people through their hands. This was done with the purpose of making them recognize from their own experience that they were the intermediaries of the grace-filled power acting through them, and subsequently, going to the great work of preaching the Gospels, they could find support and strengthening in the hardships of the Apostolic ministry, and confidence in achieving the assigned tasks from this experience. What was the attitude of the disciples which made it possible for them to be the mediators of the Lord's Divine power, which did great work through their hands? When they returned to their Divine Teacher after their first journey preaching, they were joyous, but hungry and tired. Taking pity on them, Jesus said to them: *Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat* (verse 31). But as soon as they sailed in a boat toward the other side of the lake, the people rushed after them on the shore around the lake to the place where the boat was to arrive. When they landed, a huge crowd awaited them. They could not even think about resting. The Lord again began to teach the people, and much more time passed in doing so (verse 35). The hunger and fatigue of the disciples must have increased to an utmost degree. And at that very moment, the Lord suddenly demanded that they give the last five loaves and two fish which they had

to the people. This demand would have probably provoked a feeling of indignation in each of us. “Have mercy, we are also hungry! Give us something to eat too. And is it conceivable to feed such a crowd with five loaves of bread! They will each eat a tiny bite and will not feel anything. They won’t be full, but we will probably starve to death! It would be much better to let them go so each of them could buy as much bread as he needs!”

We would think such or in a similar way. The Apostles act differently. Tired, hungry, forgetting about themselves, they unconditionally give all their bread to the people. They are certain that if their Teacher asks them to do this, it should be done. Not a word of complaint, doubt, or protest! And the miracle was performed. Thus, in their relationship to the Lord the disciples reveal with all certainty three features due to which they could become Apostles and the successors of His work: 1) complete self-denial; 2) unconditional trust in the Lord; 3) unquestionable obedience to their Divine Teacher. These are the elements of Christian hope – that compelling force which has done great deeds in the Christian life. In the same way, presently, everything great in Christianity is created precisely through people who possess these qualities to the highest degree. These qualities are therefore needed for every Christian who wants to work on building the Kingdom of God.

1. Self-denial or complete oblivion of one’s personal interests and gains is needed for defeating mainly external obstacles which are always numerous on the path of social Christian activities. We should not forget that the cruelest struggle with the spirit of malice, which will use all means to pile up a mass of the most unexpected and difficult obstacles in front of you, will be inevitable on this path. He mostly tries to act on your egoism, arousing a feeling of self-pity in you, which can only be defeated by self-denial. First of all, obstacles arise in the external environment of your work: opposition of people who do not understand you and are hostile towards you, inability to get the needed funds for the work, difficulties in creating the right environment, privations in your personal life, often need, hunger, or lack of the most basic conveniences. One needs to be prepared for all this. If you expect to work in complete comfort and with all conveniences, you must abandon these expectations once and for all. Such workers in the field of God are not needed, and they will not create anything. Always have before your eyes the great images of those servants of God who *had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned...were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about...being destitute, afflicted, tormented; Of whom the world was not worthy: they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth* (Heb. 11:36-38). But in this they gained a great victory over the world and forced it to recognize their ideals, their faith, and their hopes.

Then will follow temptations from people. You will be slandered, thrown mud at, ridiculed, and they will *cast out your name as evil* (Lk. 6:22). It is inevitable. For the devil, it is infinitely easier to stir up people against you and malign your intentions in their eyes than to create external

physical obstacles and difficulties for your work, for he is not in control of the circumstances of life, but he is the first expert in slander and lies, for he is essentially *a liar, and the father of it* (Jn. 8:44), and he widely and mercilessly uses this tool. The Lord warns his followers about this bitter fate: *If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, 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. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you* (Jn. 15:18-20). A rather high degree of self-denial is required in order to overcome this temptation, the caustic bitterness of resentment and injustice, which will be the inevitable reward from people for your best and selfless impulses, and to not become embittered and completely disappointed, and not quit your work despite everything. The love of work in the name of Christ and awareness of Christian duty should infinitely prevail over personal pride. “Work is first and above all! It has to be done! But I...I am only the smallest of the servants of Christ, and if I am ground into powder, no great harm, if God’s work can be gained for this price!” should be the mood of the worker in the field of God. Why do we have so amazingly few truly useful church-public figures? Mainly because none of them consider it necessary to suppress self-love and place God’s work above petty egoism. When undertaking some work, they most often view it as a burden, as a sad condition for gaining honor, praise, and respect from people. Therefore, they do it badly, without investing their soul into it, and immediately quit as soon as they see that they were mistaken in their calculations and instead of praise they received only reproach, although it might have been justly deserved. Finally, the most difficult test requiring self-denial to an almost limitless degree happens when you find enemies and traitors among the people whose benefit you are concerned with and whom you work for. It is always hard to receive insults and reproaches, but getting them from the people whose benefit you are concerned with and whom you love, is almost unbearable. Meanwhile, it often happens that you get the most powerful blows from those people you love the most. Apparently, this is inevitable. Do not forget that Judas was among the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Under such circumstances, one needs enormous courage and complete abandonment of one’s own personality to remain in one’s position and continue to love, care for, and serve people who curse you, denounce you, and cause you all sorts of troubles. And this is only possible with deep, inner conviction penetrating your whole soul that you are working not for people, but for God, that you will give Him the final account, and only in Him will you find an impartial, omniscient judge. Only the hope of being justified before Him gives you the strength to endure what seems impossible for an ordinary person.

2. The second quality which makes the Apostles an obedient tool in the hands of the Lord is their unlimited trust in Him. Ordinary people would probably object to the Lord’s demand to give

the loaves, “Nothing will come of it: there is too little bread, and everyone will remain hungry! So, at least let us be full!” And of course, they would be mistaken in their calculations. It turned out just the opposite, and with their stinginess they would have remained hungry, for five loaves of bread would have been completely insufficient even for a small group of twelve disciples, and would not have fed the others. But the Apostles trusted in their Great Teacher. They still did not know what He wanted to do, but when He demanded to bring the bread and fish, they were already certain that He would feed everyone by His miraculous power which He had manifested to them more than once. Their trust was justified! This trust in Christ and His divine help is absolutely necessary in Christian work. The tasks which one has to face in this work are so enormous, vast, and varied that it is impossible to deal with them on one’s own. When a person comes closer to them and sees all their difficulty, he may fall into complete despondency realizing his own powerlessness, if it were not for life-giving hope! Only this hope maintains energy and makes every great work possible. *Hope maketh not ashamed* (Rom. 5:5). “The passions assault your heart, their attack is violent, it is difficult to withstand them, not to succumb to them.”⁹ You should say, “Many passions have warred against me, O Lord, but do Thou Thyself defend and save me, O my Saviour. From my youth hath the enemy tempted me, causing me to burn with pleasures; but, trusting in Thee, O Lord, I vanquish him.¹⁰ Only in God does my soul become calm! For my hope is in Him! He alone is my stronghold and my salvation. My salvation and my glory, the firmness of my strength is in God and my hope is in God. People! Hope in Him and at all times pour out your hearts before Him; God is our refuge! Those who fear the Lord! Trust in the Lord! He is our help and shield!” Whatever difficulties and trials stand in your way, hope in the Lord, believe that if He entrusts you with some work, He will give the strength needed for its completion. The Lord hears all those who call on him in need and invisibly helps them. *I waited patiently for the Lord;* the Psalmist David exclaims, *and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings....Blessed is that man that maketh the Lord his trust* (Ps. 39:1-2,4).¹¹ Truly, there are hours of hopeless sorrow and illness in the life of a Christian, in which it seems that the Lord has completely abandoned and left you, for there is not the slightest feeling of the presence of God in the soul. Sometimes the circumstances are so difficult that they seem hopeless. Sometimes the furious waves of the storm of life are so fierce that it seems in one moment they will drown you and destroy the work on which you have labored down to its foundations. And there is no help. The Lord delays. Yet, you should still hope! Hope until the last minute. For the Lord sees both your sorrow and the difficulty of your situation. Help may come at

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. 482.

¹⁰ First Antiphon from the Hymn of Ascents (Tone 4 and 8), from the service of Matins.

¹¹ Psalm 40 in the King James Version.

the very last moment. Jesus *constrained his disciples to get into the ship, and to go to the other side... And when he had sent them away, he departed into a mountain to pray. And when even was come, the ship was in the midst of the sea, and he alone on the land* (verses 45-47).

The Lord sometimes leaves His servants to manage on their own. Sometimes it seems that He moves away from them, leaving them alone and without help. But it only seems like that. He does not turn His caring, loving look from them, and is always ready to help. *And he saw them toiling in rowing; for the wind was contrary unto them: and about the fourth watch of the night he cometh unto them, walking upon the sea, and would have passed by them* (verse 48). He waits until the person, overwhelmed by the waves, turns to Him and calls Him. And finally, through the whistling and howling of the storm, when the raging abyss threatens with perish, quiet, gentle words are heard: *Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid. And he went up unto them into the ship; and the wind ceased* (verses 50-51). Let us not forget this picture. This is life itself. When a storm of hostility and hatred heaves waves above your head threatening to devour you, when the whistle and howl of wild malice become deafening, when your plans collapse with a roar and the cords of your projects tear like rotten ropes, when strength fails you and the rudder has been already knocked out of your weakened hand, then remember that the Lord is watching you, that He has not forgotten you. With fervent supplication call upon Him, and you will hear quiet, tender words: *Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid*. He will enter your boat and the wind will grow calm. Why does the Lord allow for such moments of trial and temporary abandonment? They are needed for us, for the reinforcement of our strength, our faith, and our hope, for cultivating our independence and firmness in the struggle. Have you seen how a mother teaches her child to walk? First, she supports him, teaching him to confidently move his legs; then she leaves him on his own somewhere near a chair, moves three steps away, and calls to him. The baby is scared. There is no support. You need to leave the chair and take three steps on your own. Three whole steps! It is true that Mom is nearby. If you stumble, she will immediately take you in her arms and will not let you hurt yourself. But three steps! A huge amount! The baby hesitates in indecision. But it is boring to just stand there. Mom is calling. You need to get to her. He carefully places one foot forward. A moment of hesitation. Then suddenly a great effort, two irresolute, swift, stumbling steps, and with full force he falls into his mother's lap. What joy! What delight! In the same way the Lord teaches His children like a loving mother. Sometimes it is necessary to leave them alone in order to force them to make the needed effort, to teach them how to stay firm on their feet and with their own will walk on the paths of life in God. The soul is strengthened by storms and temporary abandonment.

“What means the heavy sleep of slothfulness and hardened unfeelingness of heart during prayer...? It means that the grace of God is leaving us, by God's wise and good intention, in order to strengthen our hearts for our own free spiritual exertions. Sometimes grace carries us like children or

guides and supports us as though by the hand. Then it is twice as easy for us to do works of virtue; whilst sometimes it leaves us alone to our weakness, in order that we should not become slothful, but should labour, and by our labour become worthy of the gift of grace. At such times we ought, as free beings, to spontaneously show our amendment and zeal to God. It would be foolish to murmur against God for depriving us of His grace; for when the Lord pleases He takes away His grace from us, fallen and unworthy creatures. At such times we must learn patience and bless the Lord: 'The Lord gave [His grace], and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord'¹² (Father John of Kronstadt).¹³

3. Christian hope is inextricably linked with Christian obedience which is also shown by the Apostles in the Gospels' story and is needed for any great work as a condition for receiving divine help.

Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass. And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday. Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him (Ps. 36:5-7).¹⁴ Thus teaches the Prophet David. In order to have the right to hope in God's help, one has to surrender to Him in obedience. Only those things which are in accordance with the will of God and His commandments make use of His assistance. The Lord cannot help a person when he violates His will and His laws by acting according to his self-will. On the contrary, the fuller one's obedience, the more certain and powerful God's help and support will be. But obedience is needed for a Christian not only because it attracts the support of God's power for his work. It is needed psychologically.

Self-willed activities of a person who burns with religious zeal, but seeks approval for his plans in himself, and not in the will of God, usually lead to demonic spiritual deception or fanaticism, when the person begins to consider his personal views and desires as revelations and decrees of God. The evil one often uses such people to destroy the work of God. Taking advantage of the fact that the person does not seek the will of God as the highest law for his activity with all of his heart, the tempter begins to whisper to him goals and projects which are good in appearance, but in fact there always hides an insidious calculation leading the matter to destruction. If the person seeks motives for his activity in himself, he usually takes these devilish whispers for his own thoughts and feelings, follows them, and ruins both the cause and often himself. And the more he shows diligence, zeal, and ardor, the worse it will be for him, and the more certain and sooner the ruin will be for him. The only salvation from this danger lies in a sincere search for the will of God and unconditional submission to it.

¹² Job 1:21.

¹³ 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. 544.

¹⁴ Psalm 37 in the King James version.

Obedience is also imperative and useful at the times of failure and frustration. Without it, despondency is easily born in the soul when a person sees that the fruits of his labors, sometimes difficult and protracted, are destroyed without a trace. This despondency is impossible in an obedient soul which has completely entrusted himself to the will of God. Firmly knowing that life represents the eternal struggle of good and evil, and that the fruits of this struggle are entirely in the hands of God, the person devoted to the will of God sees the collapse of his plans and results of his labors as one of the countless episodes of this struggle in which the power of God is manifested. If his work fails, this means for him that it was either displeasing to God, or it was not done in the way it should have, or finally, it was destroyed by the permission of God in order to test or strengthen his faithfulness to Him. In all these cases, he can only thank God. There is no place for bitterness and despondency here.

“Duties are yours, while the consequences are of God,” said the ancient sage. With this understanding of obedience, one can always be active and remain calm. Therefore, when enormous and difficult tasks appear on your Christian path, which seem insurmountable and overwhelm you with cowardice and doubts, give yourself over to the Lord Jesus Christ with complete trust, obedience, selflessness, and you will see that your talents, powers, and capacities will increase indefinitely in His hands, as the five small loaves of bread multiplied, and your difficulties will be overcome.