

4-14-19 Self-Examination Brings Repentance

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In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are well into the fast of Great Lent. It is a time when we enter into the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Of course, this is not restricted to Lent alone. All of the Orthodox life is centered upon and revolves around the resurrection. Nevertheless, Lent is a time when we go deeper. Work harder, contemplate more the realities of purifying our heart, having our minds enlightened with spiritual truths and liberating our souls and bodies from sin.

It is also a time of spiritual boldness. A time of courage. It's not an easy thing to honestly scrutinize ourselves, to evaluate our lives against the standard of the Holy Gospel, the high mark of unconditional love. We look at ourselves, ourselves, not our brothers and sisters. We look at ourselves and contemplate where we are spiritually. Help me to see my own sins and not judge my brother, we say. Every time we say that line from the prayer, I express a sense of judgment that I know that I am in need of repentance.

As we look deeper, as we look deeper, contemplating our own spiritual personalities, our relationship to Jesus Christ, we may find that we are confronted with many questions. What are my motives for the things that I do? In Proverbs we read there is a way that seems right in her man's own eyes, but God waives his motives or his heart.

What are my thoughts? You know, most of our thoughts are the beginning of our sins. Do I judge others? Do I gossip? Am I jealous or envious of others? Do I desire wealth or power or acknowledgement? Am I playing with self love, vanity and ego? What efforts am I consciously making? Whatever efforts am I consciously making to live the life that Christ has commanded me to live? Have I looked at everyone that God brought into my life to see if there was anything that they needed, anything that I could do for them, anything that I could do to make their lives a little bit better? Have I even looked for these opportunities?

This is the work of Lent. We don't fast for the sake of fasting. You remember Father John Takahashi's analogy of the bun and the burger? You do remember. Well, to take it a step further, fasting from food is the bun. Fasting from sin is the burger. You might argue a delicious hamburger and fascinating don't really go together and you would be right.

The Lenten fast in the Orthodox church is not designed to be a weight loss program. It is designed to bring us closer to Christ, closer to a pure heart, closer to loving our fellow man. Saint Gregory [Phalonus 00:03:40] says that the fast was established by the church for the purification, for the purification of our soul. The reach of the fast are a time of personal contemplation. Examining our lives, looking deeply within ourselves, identifying the passions that stunt our spiritual progress.

There's a time when we ask God to help us, to lift us up, to cleanse to make us new again, to give us a fresh start. This Sunday we commemorate Saint Mary of Egypt. Most of you are already quite familiar with the life of Saint Mary. We read her story this Thursday morning, this past Thursday morning, along with a Great Canon of Saint Andrew. It is by design that the church has us read the story of Saint Mary this week of Lent, for it is the story of ultimate repentance. It also a story of hope, a story of hope.

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Whatever sins we have committed, in whatever manner we have defiled the image of God within us, this story reveals God's love, his mercy, his compassion, his long suffering, his forgiveness, is infinitely greater than our sin.

Christ always knocks at the door of our hearts, patiently waiting for an invitation to answer, to embrace us, to forgive us, to lift us up from the big pen of sin and lead us back to the house of the father. Reading the life of Saint Mary of Egypt and the reading the Great Canon always has a profound effect upon me, a very necessary profound effect.

It is as if a powerful microscope is placed over my soul and everything is visible. Nothing is hidden. All the passions are exposed. I am forced, I am forced to look more honestly at my own life, my own son, my own shortcoming, my own lack of effort, my own faithlessness to God. When I say that I want God, I want communion with God, that's a good thing. We should all want that. But it requires something from us.

First it requires our consent, our desire, our will then requires a change of direction. The spiritual life is not static. We're either moving towards God or we are moving away from him.

So I must direct my life towards God. I must move in a heavily direction. Our flesh rebels against this. You know that. Anyone who has entered the struggle knows the flesh rebels against this. Pride doesn't like humility, gluttony doesn't like fasting. Avarice doesn't like generosity. Gossip doesn't like silence. The flesh rebels.

So what do we have to do? If we really want victory over the passions then we have to take action, we have to do something. Our words are important for sure, but for those words to have real meaning, they have to result in real action. We have to do something specifically directed towards our goal. And what is the action of the Christian?

In the very beginning, from the very beginning, God gave us fasting as a guardian of our life. Moses fasted on the mountain. Elijah fasted, Daniel fasted. In the incarnate word of God Jesus Christ himself fasted. The Lord even told his disciples as certain demons only come out, only cast out through prayer and fasting. Prayer and fasting have always been a medicine against evil, against the passions.

Saint Mary of Egypt lived a sinful life, a very sinful life as a young woman. But when she came face to face with the reality that her sin was a wall, it was a wall that separated her from God, that she could not pass over the threshold into the church because she could not both live the life that she was living and at the same time have communion with God. She couldn't willfully, intentionally and purposefully pursue a sinful life at the same time have an honest, meaningful relationship with God. It is impossible to move in opposite directions at the same time.

So what did Saint Mary do? She made a commitment to follow Christ wherever he would lead. She made a commitment to abandon her former way of life. So she crossed the Jordan River. She went into the wilderness and she began to do battle with the passions. She struggled to the point of exhaustion, almost to the point of death. Every desire, every passion to which she has so freely given herself over to for so much of her life, every passion, every simple thought reared

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up and demanded, demanded to be satisfied, to be let back in to her heart, but she refused. She refused to give up the struggle.

She prayed and fasted. She turned to the Theotokos who had led her to repentance. She turned to her for help. She was tempted to go back to Egypt where there was food. There was no food in the desert. There was wine and music, which she had loved so much, but she persevered. She persevered in repentance, in prayer and fasting. She had found the pearl of great price and she's sacrificed everything, every comfort, every leisure that the world had to offer to keep this great pearl.

This is how it works with us, brothers and sisters, to one degree or another. We come to faith. We choose to follow Christ. We join his holy church. We commit to follow him.

But the devil and his demons protest this change of allegiance. They demand to be allowed back into our life. They tempt us, the reminders of the pleasure of the passions. They try to lure us back to betray Christ and his church. There is no trick. There's no deception to which they are not masters.

So how do we defend ourselves against these experienced veterans of evil? What do we do? We do what Adam and Eve failed to do in the garden. They were commanded to fast and they didn't do it. We pray, we fast and we repent. Fasting from food is a very important part of the struggle, but we must also fast from vanity, from pride, concede hypocrisy. We must fast from gossip, envy, hatred, lying, jealousy and all the rest. We need a starting point in this struggle and fasting from food is a powerful first line of defense. It is an early blockade against the attacks. The stomach wants to be satisfied. We all know what this is like. We're hungry. We want to pacify that. We immediately have the inclination to give in to the appetite.

But then we remember, this fasting is a legalistic exercise. We remember that we are fasting for a purpose, for a reason. This sinful passion in my life that has ruled me, controlled me, tormented me for so long that has been so hard to resist, so destructive to my spiritual progress, it must be challenged. It must be stopped with hope and faith in Jesus Christ.

I hate these passions in my life. I'm embarrassed that I have to confess them every time I go to confession, but I keep stumbling and falling down. The Holy Fathers of the church tell us that this medicine of fasting coupled with fervent prayer, it is the healer, is the heavenly medicine, the medicine that draws down grace from God and defeats the sins that have been our masters for so long.

The gospel reading for the commemoration of Saint Mary of Egypt, but we also have the story of another sinful woman. She went to the house of a certain pharisee knowing that Jesus was going to be there. She got a container of fragrant oil. She knelt down at the feet of Jesus and began to weep. She began to weep for her sins. With her tears she washed the feet of the Lord. With her hair she wiped his feet. Then she poured a fragrant oil upon the Lord's feet.

The pharisee, looking down on this woman judging her harshly, thinking within himself if this man, Jesus, we're really a prophet he would know what kind of woman this is, that she is a

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sinner. But Jesus, knowing his thoughts responded. He said to the pharisee, Simon, I have something to say to you. There was a certain creditor who had two debtors, one owed 500 Denari and the other owned 50. When neither could repay he forgave them both. Which one of the two will love him the most? Simon said I suppose the one who owed the most. The Lord said you have answered correctly.

Then he turned to the woman. He turned to the woman. He said to Simon, do you see this woman? Do you see this woman? I entered your house. You gave me no water for my feet, but she has washed my feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave me no kiss. This woman has not ceased to kiss my feet since I came in. You did not anoint my head with oil, but this woman has anointed my feet with fragrant oil.

Therefore, I say to you, her sins, which are many are forgiven, for she loved much, but to whom little is forgiven the same loves little. Then he said to her your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.

Both of these stories, both of these stories should give us a sense of hope, hope in our own salvation, not because we have reached any level of spiritual perfection, but because of the immeasurable love and desire of our Lord to save us, to bring us into paradise. He does not desire that any should be lost, but that all should come to the knowledge of the truth that'd be saved. Both of these women were sinners and their sins that were many, but however many seconds they had committed or however bad their sins were, it was never an obstacle to God's love, never an obstacle to God's love.

Our sins, our sins, yours and mine, no matter how ever many they are or how bad they are, they are never an obstacle to God's love for us, for each and every one of us. Seeing ourselves more clearly is not always a pretty sight. This can be disheartening. It can be disappointing, but we can never allow it to be a cause for despair. God's love is infinitely greater than our sin. So let us all arrive at the great feast, victorious, triumphant, full of joy, rejoicing in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. May it be blessed. Amen.