

The Week of the Prodigal Son

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!

We prepare for the Great Lent. For every Christian the Great Lent is a special time for improving the spiritual life. This is the time when with all of our strength we prepare and want to present as fully as possible the Christian face that each Orthodox Christian should have. Whether we are successful in this or not, is another matter, but in any case we are more or less given an opportunity to train ourselves, to approach the kind of spiritual state that is called a Christian. The church prepares us for this with special readings.

Last week was the week of the Publican and the Pharisee. Now is the week of the Prodigal Son. With these readings, as I told you last week, the church tries to cast down and rip apart the false imaginations which are still alive for us. These are the false imaginations generally about humans, about virtues, about the good and the evil and most importantly - the false imaginations about Christianity. These false imaginations have settled into the perception of our entire nation as sort of myths using which each one of us feeds and makes himself believe that this is the True Christianity.

From the reading of the week of the Publican and the Pharisee we saw that we, as humans tend to divide people into two categories - the bad and the good. This is the way we rate those around us when we talk, chat or judge, but it's been discovered that the Publican, who with our understanding is a bad person came out more righteous before God than the Pharisee, who also with our understanding is a good person. Then we put a huge question mark - What does God want from us? We seem to live in a good way, but this good way of life that we have and the good humanity is not at all enough for God to settle into our hearts, in other words, for us to be saved.

Besides this, people have wrong, mistaken view about freedom, love and justice. We all expect justice always and everywhere. Plus, we want the truth to be on our side. With this attitude we often rate the actions of a person, as well as the approach of the Lord toward us. You often hear - If there's God, why doesn't He punish him? And they point their fingers at somebody - Doesn't he deserve to be punished? Yes, and then He should punish him! - They also add this categorically. At this time we forget that God is not a judge, but first of all He is a loving Father. If God was only a judge, I think, first of all I would not be standing here on the ambo. I wouldn't even be alive. I think, most of you wouldn't be alive either if God was only a strict judge! But He is a loving Father.

Today's Gospel reading, as well as this Sunday is called this way - The parable of the Prodigal Son, the week of the Prodigal Son. This reading, like the previous one - the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, once again convinces us that the parables of the Lord, the entire Scripture is not a product of the human mind, because whatever is described in these parables in the Scriptures, completely contradicts our human, even sensible thinking and logic. The reading of the Publican and the Pharisee has shown us how wrong and contradicting our imaginations are about bad and good people and also how wrong are the criteria that we use to rate people.

This time, in today's reading we will see how our imagination and understanding about justice contradicts its true meaning and significance. Whatever we consider fair, in reality, from heavenly perspective is not fair at all.

Any parable of the Lord has its deep symbolic, theological meaning. There are two sons and their parent Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Father, symbolically, is of course God Himself, and the two sons - two different types, categories of mankind. With one definition, the older son represents the nation of Israel, while the younger one - the pagans. With another definition, the two sons symbolize two different attitudes towards God, thus, dividing the mankind into two opposite parts. The Lord's parables are important also in the sense that each one of us may see himself. With these parables the Lord helps us to make the right choice, so that we may unmistakably take the right steps in embracing a spiritual life.

While telling a parable of the Prodigal Son, the Lord of course takes into account the traditions that existed in Israel at that time. In a Hebrew family tradition, a large part of the inheritance belonged to the older son, and the rest to the younger one. The younger son could use his share as he wished. He could stay in his father's house if he wished to, but he could also leave the house.

And we see, the younger son says to his father - "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me" (Luke 15, 12); and the father divided the heritage as this was his son's will. Father is not violent - God is never violent. You act the way you want; you choose what you want. The younger son made a choice - he wanted to live without his father and the father gave him the opportunity. From this we see that the younger son wanted freedom, but freedom in his own understanding, the way he thinks and has it imagined.

We should remember that people often don't understand the real, right meaning and significance of freedom; while looking for freedom they tend to go down the wrong path, which unfortunately even leads to their spiritual degradation. Mainly, they confuse the freedom itself with the freedom of a person's self-will or willfulness.

Freedom is one of the most important abilities that God has granted us, by which the humanity is measured in human beings. A human being has an ability to distinguish between the good and the evil, to make a choice. Tertullian says, "Every soul is a Christian even from birth"; every soul strives towards God from birth - This is a natural inclination that each person has. This is an inclination and

also a right to be with God. But our nature, with which a human person exists, is fallen and due to this the perception and the real meaning of freedom have been ruined and degraded. According to the teachings of the Holy Fathers the will of a person is a characteristic of the nature and not of the person. Because of this, with the so-called freedom of the will, in other words, the self-will, the human nature dominates over the human person. But as we said, the sin has made the human nature fallen and this fallen nature dominates over the human person, if we obey to this kind of self-will or this kind of "freedom"

What is the fallen nature and what does it mean? The separation of a man from God, when he can no longer be with God; at this time, he only wants what is against God. Since Adam sinned in heaven, he no longer wanted or even had the ability to be with God, he was afraid to be with Him and he was suffering. The same thing happens to our fallen nature. We run away from God, we act against God's will, we do whatever we want and we like whatever is not pleasing to God. This is in fact the freedom of our will which we think of as the true freedom. At that time we think that we strive towards real freedom. In reality, this kind of freedom has nothing in common with the personal freedom, because it is just the expression of the will of our fallen nature and not the personal freedom.

A person accustomed to the sweetness of this kind of false freedom gradually separates from God. He doesn't like the divine justice anymore, because God's standard of justice opposes the freedom chosen by him. And this is the exact reason why the younger son decided to be free, but free - in his understanding, in other words, according to the desires of his fallen nature and his will. The satisfaction of these kinds of desires in the end is ferocious.

So, the younger son went away from his father: "took a journey into a far country", in other words, he was very far away from God, he separated from God. In "a far country" he "squandered his property", whatever belonged to him by the grace of God, he squandered with "impurity" and "in reckless living", - as later his older brother says, with prostitutes, in dissolute living.

Today's Apostolic reading points to this matter. St. Paul the Apostle defines what it means when a person starts this sort of life. The Holy Apostle says that: "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (I Corinthians 6, 12). Yes, I can do everything, I am a human - I do what I want; But not everything I want and I do is favorable or good for me.

The Holy Apostle touches upon the sins of gluttony and fornication, and says: "Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats: but God shall destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body" (I Corinthians 6, 13). The natural needs of a person, such as food and the ability of carnal love are not in themselves sinful. Just the opposite, with these natural inclinations a person can glorify God. Can God be glorified by eating food? Of course! We know the church teaches us to pray before and after eating. Why is this needed? Animals eat too and so do humans. But if you take food with gratitude and the glorification of God, then eating is also a service to God. Let's say, an animal takes in some food. The animal does not know that this food is

given from God. Any food, whether it be fruits or other things, is given to us from God, with a great mercy of God. Isn't it a miracle - you put the sticks into the ground and it bears fruit. It's amazing, of course! And how can you not glorify God?! See if you on your own can create a stick that you put into the ground and it bears fruit? Can you really be taking this miracle food and not be thankful of God? If a person eats with this kind of attitude, of course the food is blessed by God. For you, receiving food this way will become a service to God. See, how we can glorify God with food. With gluttony on the other hand, we lose God.

Gluttony that has become an end in itself is eating - for eating! Fasting protects us from gluttony, but this is fasting, not a diet which is nothing but going hungry for the sake of external beauty or physical health. A person is usually more eager to go on a diet. When the church offers a person to start fasting for the glorification and love of God, he refuses to do so, "How can I go without eating meat? I will become weaker," and so on. He will not run out of excuses. This kind of person of course loses God because of food, while a person glorifying God glorifies Him even with food and gains God.

As for the words of the Holy Apostle, "the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord", we should say that the ability of carnal love is also animalistic. But when a man and a woman love each other, they have the opportunity to create a family. They should make their choice and decision before God, with love towards God. This kind of family is holy and pure. The words of St. Paul the Apostle, "Holy is the family, which is blessed from God" were said about the family built this way.

The Lord himself attended a wedding and sat at the feast table with the people invited there. This is the evidence that marriage is blessed by God and thus, the family is sanctified and holy. Holy Matrimony is the mystery leading to the Lord. One of the theologians says that the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony served by the priest, Holy Crowning is just the beginning of this mystery. The Holy Mystery of Marriage is the relationship itself between husband and wife. During the Marriage Service the future husband and wife are given the blessing that by helping each other through moving their marriage yoke together, they can facilitate walking on a narrow path leading to the Lord. At this time, a person is freed from egoism, learns selflessness, obedience, living not for his own sake but for someone else (spouse, children). This is why marriage is a great good.

Then what's fornication and adultery? You should know that adultery in action is not at all a passion. Anybody can have the passion. Passion is one thing, but adultery itself is another. Fornication and adultery carried out in action is a criminal act. First a passion arises in a person, it bothers him, then he starts thinking about how to satisfy this passion, he looks for the opportunities and ways for it and finally he completes the action itself. Therefore, someone who has sinned with adultery won't be able to say, "Oh, how could this happen to me?" A person may involuntarily end up killing another person while under the stress of emotion, say while fighting, he didn't want to, but he was defending himself or a friend and he ended up killing someone. Adultery on the other hand, in most cases is a pre-planned evil action against God, against one's neighbor and against oneself, against the one with whom he is falling into sin. This is why this sin is so heavy, even the heaviest, leading so many people to death. This is why it is so important to understand and realize it.

Often, the newcomers to the church don't understand the heaviness of the sin of adultery, saying, "So what? Why is this sin so serious? This is a natural need." See, St. Paul the Apostle first of all tells us in general that "body is not for fornication, but for the Lord", therefore, let no one think that this body belongs to us and that it is given to us only for our carnal pleasures. It belongs to us when it is virtuous for God, with His blessing. But when we can't control it and when we, controlled by our instincts, we treat our God-given body the way we want, then it no longer belongs to us. Instead of our body being for the Lord, it becomes a part of the prostitute and a part of adultery, as he says.

Then St. Paul the Apostle asks us, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" (Corinthians 6, 15). Moreover, we should listen to this message of the Holy Apostle, since we are already baptized and communicants. During the holy mystery of baptism, our flesh is also sanctified from the original sin. What's the point of being baptized if you do not unite with Christ? The primary calling of us, Christians is to be united with Christ. The Holy Apostle asks us the same, "Don't you know what is that body of yours for? - For the unity with Christ". You probably remember, in a different place, St. Paul the Apostle says, "body is a temple of the Holy Spirit", and since our body is the temple of God, temple of the Holy Spirit, defiling it is of course a much bigger sin than defiling and insulting an ordinary stone temple. No one will get away with this heaviest sin of fornication and adultery, with Godly justice - not even one fornicator or adulterer will get away from the punishment of the Lord, if he doesn't repent.

St. Paul the Apostle continues, "Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!" (I Corinthians 6, 15) - Should I make the body of Christ the body of a prostitute? - Apparently troubled and astounded, the Holy Apostle asks this question and he himself adds the answer: "Never!" When there's something unacceptable or hard to tolerate in the definition of the Scripture, the exclamation of the Holy Fathers is heard - "Never!" - Let it not be this way! For St. Paul the Apostle the idea of sharing a body with a prostitute, the body which belongs to Christ, is so terrifying that he exclaims, "Never!" let it never happen and let nobody do this, that the body which should be of Christ, become the body of a prostitute.

St. Paul the Apostle himself explains why this sin is so terrible, "Do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, 'The two will become one flesh'. (I Corinthians 6, 16)." One reason why this is so terrible is that you should be a part of Christ and you become a part of a prostitute, meaning you make the part of Christ the part of the prostitute. Unfortunately, it happens that communicants then commit adultery. This is a much heavier sin and unfortunately, there are plenty of cases of this in our clerical practice. This is an outrageous tragedy for these people, because a faithful, a confessing and a communing person does this. They do this with all of their consciousness: First the idea, then they had the desire, then they sinned with their eyes, then the passion arose in their heart, then they set the plan and carried it out. This takes time. Therefore, this is conscious evil-doing, because a communicant knows that his body is soaked with the Holy Body and Blood of Christ, it has been communed with Christ, but he still makes it part of the prostitute and with all of his understanding desecrates it.

This is one reason why this is a terrible sin for a Christian. Second of all, we have a great commandment that we should not wish for others what we do not wish for ourselves. They often say, so what? She's a prostitute, she harms herself, she puts herself in this sin. But is it really like that?

Tell me, would any man want his mother, sister, wife or daughter to be a prostitute? The prostitute also has a father, a brother and some of them - a husband and a son; and when you share your body with the prostitute, you do to this man what you don't want for yourself. Certainly, by breaking this commandment you insult Christ, you're an insulter of God.

And one more thing, if you think of yourself as a faithful, you should remember that for every person you should be an Apostle of Christ, bringing to them the commandments of the Lord, care for them and try to make them also see the Lord, so that they can come to the Lord. Instead of feeling sympathy and delivering the image of Christ from this heavy sin, you the co-servant of the Lord, who for certain reasons lives with this heavy sin, instead of this, you use her and then you throw her away like a useless object - who gave you the right to do this? She is the image of Christ!

In Israel, the committers of the sins of fornication and adultery were put under a very big punishment - the adulterer and the prostitute were stoned. Wherever they found the adulterers on fact, both man and woman, they were grabbed by their necks, taken out of the city and stoned. It's a harsh behavior, isn't it? Yes, it's harsh, but there was no other way out. If not this harsh treatment, otherwise the nation of Israel wouldn't be able to maintain their chastity and sanctity. Around Israel, in heathen environment, among the people full of terrible sins, the sins like fornication, debauchery and adultery were fierce. And if Israel also fell into the abyss of sins, then how would it be possible for the Most Holy Theotokos to be born in this kind of nation, how would the messiah, Jesus the Savior be born there? Imagine it's been ten to twelve years since the television fiercely, with great effort spreads dirtiness on our nation and in these ten years what has happened to our people! I'm talking precisely about this sin - fornication and adultery. Our current spiritual state of being cannot be compared to the one ten, fifteen years ago; the way people are nowadays and the way they were back then... television has a big part in this matter.

Israel managed to maintain the sanctity not for ten or twelve years but over the centuries and one of the stopping methods was the harsh punishment, that the committer of this sin and the partaker were stoned without any justification, without any democratic institutions, right there, on the spot, wherever they were caught. This is a plague that cannot exist in a spiritually healthy nation. This puts an end to the nation. In every family we have one of the sources of this plague - Turn it on, sit down and watch it as long as you want! - You will catch the plague without even going outside.

It should be said that today's television, modern culture, civilization, any field of art - artistic literature, film, theatre, poetry, they are all soaked in the sin of fornication and adultery, and they propagandize this sin. Everything breathes with this, almost everything around us. The "rise and bloom" of this sin dates back to the Renaissance in Europe, when they took out the icons, made saints into nude figures and painted God's temple with the carnal, naturalistic manner of the body. How can one pray in front of these fleshy saint-like figures? It's beautiful - they say; but what kind of beauty is this? This is carnal beauty where spirituality cannot be seen, felt or experienced. This is why the whole western world and culture is soaked only in corporality, nourished by the cult of the flesh. This is too dangerous for our souls, for our children.

Fornication has two other characteristics. A person practicing fornication and drawn into it, goes down by two down-going steps - to complete fall and loss of his soul. First step - the complete fall, turns a human being into an animal. If a person has the relationships without marriage blessed by God and lives with this sin, then how does he differ from an animal? Man, animal does the same thing! There are rare exceptions even in the animal world. Let's say, the loyalty and the sacrifice of the swans. But this exception also points to the same thing - how can a swan have more innocence and bashfulness?

Among the animals the notion of a family as a rule doesn't exist, neither does the idea of close relatives. When a person starts living an animal-like way of life, when for him the betrayal of his wife doesn't mean anything, when even incest doesn't mean anything, which unfortunately is spread in the United States in a high percentage, and let me tell you, that the cases of the incest are also very frequent in Georgia, the relationship between relatives - what could this be called if not bestiality? Some of them regret it and repent. May God forgive them who repent with their heart but how many are there who don't repent and continue to commit this terrible sin. There are plenty of cases of this, plenty of them. There are children standing here and I will not specify how close are related to each other the people doing this... This sort of a person is an animal of course! He fell, he went down to that first step called bestiality, but a human goes down even further to the step that animals cannot even imagine. This is Satanism.

The imagination of a human being, with the inspiration of the devil, reaches the level of filthiness and defilement that is impossible to express and describe in words. It's not a coincidence that in satanic sects they have extremely dirty orgies and out of control fun. Indeed with this outrageous, reckless acts and horrible relationships they serve the devil. This is a service to the devil, in their understanding - freedom. These orgies are necessary for them to become free. But let us also ask what do they want to free themselves from? - From humanity. We no longer want to be humans - we could formulate the statement in this way. You don't want it, that's your choice but when you try to impose your freedom on me, then sorry! The church should raise its voice on this.

Wasn't there an attempt of this in the schools? I don't know if you have seen it, but I looked over a textbook which they were planning to use to teach the 7th graders. This was absolutely disgusting, unacceptable even from a medical point of view, the so-called textbook. Like one of those indecent caricatures you see in the streets or even unseemly and inappropriate advertising boards - these sorts of illustrations they wanted to pass to the children in an entertaining manner, and convince them and make them believe that this is good and enjoyable. In this book, from a caring position, they also warn children that all of this, the "good and enjoyable", may lead to some problems, but these so-called caregivers take tremendous care of them and diligently teach them how to prevent themselves from these problems. And they teach all of this to the children!

I am a priest. During confessions, both men and women talk to me about this, but since I am a priest, I don't have a complex of this, just like a doctor who is at the time neither a man nor a woman. Despite this, when they handed the book to me, there was a female teacher present and I found myself in an awkward position while looking over this book. Now tell me - what will happen to a little child or an adolescent? This is what they wanted to bring in using violence. Unfortunately, there were people working in the field of education who approved this. As it seems, they don't

remember (or don't know) the words of St. Paul the Apostle, which we already recalled. The Holy Apostle reminds us that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and certainly, we don't have the right to defile this temple, to insult the Holy Spirit because "you were bought at a price" - we are purchased with the most precious ransom. This ransom is the Blood of Christ. The crucified Lord has ransomed us both with his Blood and Body. Because of this we should glorify the Lord "with all of our heart and all of our soul", and with body as well, with the chastity of the body.

Some say, "I believe in the Lord in my heart, I confess Him in my heart." So you mean that the heart and the soul are yours and the body is not? Then shouldn't you glorify God in your body? The glorification of God in your body is first of all keeping your body pure. Whoever keeps his body pure, he may say that he has started glorifying God in his body. The soul is more important than the body but the body isn't unimportant either. The human is the unity of soul and body. The soul is the most important of all but the body is not without importance either. I love my body also. If someone doesn't understand this, let him imagine his own child. Do you think he only loves the soul of his child (or of a parent or a sibling)? When his child hurts his finger he won't think, "so what, it's just a finger". Don't we raise the bodies of our children? Don't we care for them? Aren't we all over them? Don't we caress them and don't we love them? God also loves the bodies of His children, of each one of us.

Regardless of the depth of your faith, you can't love death. The passing away of a loved one usually causes great pain because you love his body and soul equally. The death separated his soul and body, now his body will be put into the ground... this causes a terrible feeling and fear for death. Merciful Lord allows our bodies to be raised, so that we may again have ourselves clothed with the body. But if here, in this life we defile our bodies, the body that we will receive "there" will also be defiled and horrible to see. Yes, during the universal resurrection we will have ourselves clothed with the bodies according to the kind of soul we have. Therefore, the body was given to us to glorify God and its sanctity is the necessary requirement for glorifying the Lord with our body.

Let us get back to the parable of the Prodigal Son. We already saw what kind of terrible sin the younger son has fallen into, what a terrible destiny has this person prepared for himself. This reminds us of the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, where the Publican was a bad person but the Lord justified him. The same here, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, we're facing the same contradiction. The younger son did not manage his belonged property properly. But this was his father's property. He had received this property from his father. He took this property and spent it on the prostitutes. Then he fell into a deep poverty - he became the shepherd of the pigs inherited from his father, he even longed for the food that the pigs had and was not even given this.

The "pigs" in this parable represent the demons; meaning that his soul was filled with demons and became worse than an animal. The pigs lived a better life because at least they were fed on time by their owner. He, on the other hand didn't even have the food of the pigs. Same thing happens to the person who is given to debauchery and becomes worse than an animal. Sometimes God's great mercy falls on such person bringing him back to repentance. When did the feeling of repentance arise in the younger son? - When he reached the most extreme boundary. First, when he found himself in trouble, a son of such father - wealthy, raised in luxury, became a shepherd of the pigs, and he even longed for the food that the pigs had - at that time he still didn't regret. When he

became extremely hungry and remembered his family, the house of his father where nobody is hungry, not even the very last servant, that was the time when he “came to himself”, meaning that he awoke.

The awakening – is the mercy of God. The temptations are the looking of God over us. God, with our temptations offers His hand for our own awakening and says to us, “I have chosen you; you lived the wrong way and because of this you went through this terrible trouble; maybe through this temptation you’ll be able to see me, feel your Lord. And when we are brought back to repentance, then we see the Lord. But let us not fall into despair, this way we will move even further away from the Lord. Despair destroys repentance. A repentant person will never lose hope. This exactly is the dignity of the younger son. He says “I will rise and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned before heaven and before thee”; This means that the Prodigal Son confesses his sin and doesn’t even think of himself as being worthy to return to being the child, the son of his father. He only thinks that maybe he could be received as one of the farm-laborers in the house of his father. This means that the repentant son has also gained humility, has abased himself. His repentance is synergized with his humility, there’s not even a sign of despair. He confesses with all of his heart that he has sinned before God and before his father.

We often have a wrong understanding of repentance. Some think that repentance is just admitting the sins. This is confessing, not repentance. If confession is not accompanied by repentance, it is worthless to confess one’s sins. It will not give us anything. In my clerical practice I have had a case of a dying person who confessed his sins to me but I couldn’t commune him, because he didn’t have the repentance. The church warns us that there are sins, for which the committers of these sins cannot receive communion until death – only just before death, but only in case if the dying person regrets, repents his sins. If he doesn’t repent, the communion has no meaning, it’s not allowed. You cannot go to God without repentance. Even with formal confession and formal communion you cannot approach God. On the contrary, this will count as a sin and you won’t escape the punishment.

Often a person has a fear because of his sins and he gets the desire to repent. It is very good when there is fear present. Like the Holy Scripture teaches us, this is the beginning of wisdom. But people do not take into consideration one circumstance and they think that the repentance will free them from any sin, no matter how heavy it may be. They also think that through repentance they will escape the awful results of the sins. This is a mistake. A person commits a grave sin. Let’s say, he demolished a church or made someone’s life miserable or oppressed a weak person, or robbed someone. And if he goes back to repentance, he thinks he will repent and that’s it –he’ll be saved.

Remember, when the Lord went to Zacchaeus the Publican, what does the sinful man say? “If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” He didn’t say “forgive me, Lord.” When you do something bad and take something away from somebody or oppress someone and then you go to the pastor for a confession saying, “Forgive me father!” – You think that is enough? Don’t you think your repentance should be revealed by your actions? St. John the Baptist says, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Matthew 3, 8) – Show us the fruit of repentance – he says. Who needs empty words if there is no “fruit”, or deeds?

St. David the Psalmist committed the heaviest sin of murder. He also committed adultery and then repented. The fruit of his repentance is of course his psalms. While reading them you can feel the gratitude and love towards God that the repentant psalmist was provoked to, since God forgave him. But do you think that in his everyday life he was completely freed from punishment? No, St. David the Psalmist carried this pain his entire life in form of existing problems, like being persecuted and banished from the city, his son launching a coup against him and many others. He spent his whole life on a saddle instead of living it peacefully. He truly deserved it because of his lofty nature and spirituality, his humility and obedience. But because of the sin which God forgave him, David spent all of his life undergoing temptations.

Therefore, let no one think that he can be set free from the results of the grave sins all at once. Repentance is necessary. God will forgive us, the repentant. But certain justice requires that we have pain because of the sins. On the one hand, never to forget our sins and sanctify our souls on a daily basis, like fire tempers and cleanses gold; on the other hand, we shouldn't fear temptations and we should remember that this is from the Lord, with these temptations our heavenly Father cares for us and since this is from God, therefore, it is for us to be saved, for our own salvation. Whatever we think of as punishment, is in reality the revelation of God's unconditional love towards us. Therefore, the repentant should not be running away from punishment. The main aim of repentance is not avoiding the pain. The repentant should set a goal of going to God and approaching Him. Striving towards the Lord is the most proper definition of repentance. Both, striving towards the Lord and abhorring godlessness is repentance.

The mercy of the Lord towards a repentant person is incredible. This can be seen well in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Look at the way the repentant younger son moves forward, step by step. When the temptation has reached its maximum and he couldn't hold it, first he repented in his heart, without any despair or pride; then he moved towards his father immediately, so that he could express his repentance before him, to say a confession. As soon as the father saw his son coming for a confession, he himself instantly moved towards him. Therefore, God sees our hearts, he sees whether we repent with our heart or we just confess our sins with our lips. People have said, "Father, it's been so long, I want to come for a confession, it's been months, years already, I want to come and I couldn't do it. You couldn't come because, you don't have the repentance. Whenever you have the real repentance, even the devil will not be able to hold you - You will head to the church right away.

See, what happens in the parable: the son was still far away when the father saw him from a distance, he didn't wait for this bad son to reach the house but instead, he met him, he ran and "he fell on his neck and kissed him." So, he himself fell before his son, he was the first and he received him by kissing him. See, how much humility the father showed and how he forgave him. But this is not the end of the growing repentance and forgiveness in this parable. Though the younger son saw the mercy of his father, the mercy of God on him, he still has to confess his sin. And he does: "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" Whatever he repented of in his heart, he confessed it too, even though the father didn't seem to need this confession, he himself ran to the son as a sign of forgiveness! By this the Lord teaches us that the Father is always ready to fall on your neck and to caress you, if you have the repentance for your sins and if you yourself confess them.

After this, the father gives back to truly repentant son the complete glory that belonged to him. Father had this glory ready for his son and he just waited for the son to take it. Father puts "the best robe" and a "ring" on him, which means that he receives him back as his son who is already saved. This is the most meaningful and significant thing in this parable! This bad son spent all the property of his father uselessly, but as soon as he said one word from his heart - "forgive me", the father forgave him instantly.

Just the opposite of this, the older son which is a good son living with his father, has never left his father's house, with all of his physical or spiritual abilities he serves his father, he works all the time, honestly and chastely keeps the family traditions - in the parable the father does not favor this good son. It is really strange. The father is glad about the return of his younger son and kills the "fatted calf" for him. The family along with the guests is in a great delight. We find out the reason of this too. The father says: My son was dead and is now revived - this is what makes the father happy! The older son comes up and when he hears the sounds of joy, he asks what is going on; and when he is informed of the reason, he becomes furious, the Lord says about him that "he would not go in" - he was so upset. Therefore, for this reason he rejected the house of his father and the father himself.

The father shows humility towards his older son as well: "therefore his father came out and pleaded with him", - he begged him. See, the kind of humility that the Lord has! Let's take a close look at the behavior of the older son - Don't we tend to behave this way? Here, someone behaved unjustly but this person who is bad in our opinion, is still exalted - exalted undeservingly. This as well is the conclusion derived from our own thoughts. We don't even know the reason, why is he exalted, but that's not important. And because he exalted unworthily, there is an instant eruption of rebellion in our hearts, rebellion against everything and everyone - even against God. We start to complain: if God exists why doesn't He punish him or why did He favor him? Why should he have this and I should not? And so on.

The rebellion starts because we judge everything based on our own truth. Yes, we have our truth and we call it justice. We measure and weigh everything using this justice. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, this kind of justice, the humanly justice is indeed infringed, just like it is in the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. I repeat, this is why these parables are not the product of the mortal human mind. In these parables we cannot look for our kind of justice, our understanding of good and evil. Yes, the justice is indeed infringed. But why is this justice infringed, what has replaced this justice? - Love, Divine Love has replaced it! God is Love, Truth, Justice and the Judge at the same time, but He loves us so much that He doesn't remain as a just (in our understanding) judge towards us. In other words, God- the Love and God- the Just Judge, seem to contradict each other, and it is because of us that the Lord our God is a loving judge because of his Love towards us.

I would like to recall the words of St. Isaac of Syria. They will astound every faithful. The Holy Father says: God is not a just judge, He is a Loving Father; If God was just, if He treated us only according to the Godly Justice, we would have been sent to hell forever a long time ago. So, we should try that our conceptions, our perception, our entire mindset, our spirituality, heart, feelings - all and everything was filled with the Holy Book - the Holy Gospel. Once and for all, we should cast down the false perceptions about love, goodness, justice, Christianity. We should learn the type of thinking that the Holy Gospel teaches us. Our entire being should be filled with the Gospel. This is

what the church prepares us for and it uses the fast for this preparation.

If we want to more or less become similar to the True Christians, in this fast, and after it certainly, when the Great Lent is over - we should somehow maintain what we have gained during the Lent. Finally, we should be filled with the true perception of Christianity! You see, in these weekly readings there's not even a mention of the fast or the diet. These readings teach and preach us fixing our perception, keeping the sanctity, because the greatest tragedy is self-will and pride, when your truth is still the authentic truth for you, and you think your love is the standard of love. The church once again makes us think of this and warns us that scolding others will make us like the Pharisee and the older son. Neither one of them is right with the definition of the Lord, they're even worse than those two sinful people! Yes, worse than the Publican and the younger, Prodigal Son, because both of them, with their great repentance gained the mercy of God and the salvation of their souls. Repentance is the basis and the key to all the goodness and most importantly, the salvation. Amen!

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you, Amen!

February 8, 2004