

# TO MARRY OR **NOT** TO MARRY?

Priest  
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Talks on the First  
and Second Epistles  
of the Apostle Paul  
to the Corinthians

III

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*This edition is dedicated to the five-year anniversary  
of the author's martyric death.*

To be or not to be—is this indeed the question? The apostle calls all equally to pure, chaste love in Christ, to life in God. This book provides points of reference for choosing your path of life.

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But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk.

1 Cor. 7:17

## CHOOSING YOUR PATH

Whereas in the preceding chapters the apostle Paul denounced the Corinthians for their sins of which he had been informed, beginning in chapter 7 the apostle addresses the Corinthians' questions. Through Titus the Corinthians had sent him a number of questions pertaining to their lives: how to live a Christian life, how to behave properly. The apostle Paul begins his answers with the proper attitude toward fornication, which we examined in detail in the preceding chapter.

The apostle then goes on to say this: *Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband. Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency. But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment. For I would that all men*

*were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that. I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn. And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife. But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace (1 Cor. 7:1-15).*

Here the apostle answers the Corinthians' question regarding whether they ought to marry or to remain celibate; which is better or worse; and how to behave in marriage. The entire seventh chapter is dedicated to this subject. How does it begin?

*Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.*

What does this mean? The Corinthians had sent the apostle Paul a question: Is it better to marry or to be unmarried? To enter marriage or to remain free of the bonds of marriage? The apostle says that it is better to remain free. Indeed, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. This does not refer to relations within the family; it does not mean that a man who lives with his wife must live with her as brother and sister. It means that it is better for a person not to enter marriage than to enter it.

Chrysostom says this: “For if ... thou enquire what is the excellent and greatly superior course, it is better not to have any connection whatever with a woman: but if you ask what is safe and helpful to your own infirmity, be connected by marriage.” Blessed Theophylact understands the apostle similarly: “It is an excellent thing for any man (and not just for a priest, as some improperly interpret) not to touch a woman at all, and to remain a virgin. But for the infirm marriage is safer” [1, Homily 19].

This is the general principle that has always been maintained in the Church. What principle?

Not that in the world everything is either good or evil. Here the Church takes a more objective stance: in the world there is good, and then there is greater good. There is evil, and there is greater evil. There is more to the world than simply yes–no questions. It is not a black-and-white chessboard, but a rainbow of colors, in which there are all kinds of ways to serve God. Hence, in response to the letter from the Church of Corinth the apostle says directly that it is a good thing not to enter into marriage.

Incidentally, this is a very interesting point. Today people often say that everyone has to marry regardless. Whereas in the ancient Church we find hardly a single text exhorting people to marry—on the contrary, there are numerous texts, perhaps several hundred, exhorting people to enter monasticism—today there are an enormous number of books on family life. On one hand, given the complete degradation of the family that we see today, it is right and essential to give attention to the family. But to make the family the ultimate value is already a violation of the Gospel. It is extremely important to understand this, since when the family is made the ultimate value it collapses, because it has been given



a place that is not its own. The family is a good thing; it was established by God in paradise. When the Lord created Adam He created a wife for him, Eve, and He joined them together. But virginity appeared even before then, for the angels do not marry and are not given in marriage. Virginity appeared before marriage, since Adam was originally created unmarried.

What does this tell us? It tells us that there are actually two paths: the higher path and the safe path. And the Church will never renounce its conviction that the higher path is the path of virginity. With good reason the Lord's parable of the sower is always interpreted thus: the thirtyfold fruit is that produced by the married, and the sixtyfold—by those who have remained pure as widows or widowers, but the hundredfold fruit is produced by those who have preserved their virginity. This approach is natural and logical. Here the apostle Paul is not speaking of things physical. Some mistakenly think that the superiority of virginity lies in people not having certain kinds of relations—to put it bluntly, in not having sex. But this is not actually the reason.

In this same chapter the apostle will say that the wife thinks not about the Lord, but about how

to please her husband, and the husband thinks not about the Lord, but about how to please his wife. *He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife. There is difference also between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband* (1 Cor. 7:32–34).

The reason lies in the depths of a person's soul, not in any bodily functions. Conjugal cohabitation is not inherently sinful. As the apostle Paul said, *Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled* (Heb. 13:4).

Hence, there is no sin at all in wedlock itself. On the contrary, God Himself gave us the ability to beget children.

But there is also a higher path, where a person renounces these God-given gifts for the sake of a higher gift: the gift of complete, absolute service to the Lord.

*Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband* (1 Cor. 7:2).

What does this mean? It does not mean that everyone must marry, but rather that anyone who marries will have to live with a spouse. For this reason Theophan the Recluse explains this passage thus: “The apostle says: Let every weak man or woman marry. For what cause? *To avoid fornication*, so as not to fall into fornication through intemperance” [2].

There are a great many different sins of fornication, and the apostle says: Let those who are weak marry, so as not to fall into various kinds of fornication. Naturally, it is easier for people who live in wedlock to preserve themselves from fornication than for those living outside marriage, in a state of freedom. This is the more true when the whole world is abuzz with talk of carnal relations.

Scripture actually describes several purposes for marriage. These include praying together, having children together, and mutual help. As Scripture says, if one person falls, the other helps him up, and it is easier with two. It also includes delighting in each other, as King Solomon says. But here the apostle is speaking of one particular purpose of marriage, the very basest: the prevention of fornication. The truth

is, with God everything has several purposes at once. Some people become indignant in reading this phrase: “What?! Discussing something so great as marriage solely for the purpose of not committing fornication?!” But Christianity is a pragmatic faith: it knows that sin exists, and that there are ways to avoid it. And for one who is weak it is naturally better to marry. It has long been known that if a person is burning with various passions it is better for him to restrain himself by marriage than to completely let himself go.

“It is better, he says, to be free from marriage. But whoever cannot bear this condition as he ought, it is better to marry. He introduces two states into Christianity. In both one may please God and be saved, but in the first it is easier to do so, and in the second it is not so easy. To this may be added that the married person cannot achieve the same spiritual perfection as the unmarried person” [2].

Of this John of the Ladder also says, “For who amongst the married has worked miracles, except for the martyrs? Who among the married has raised the dead? No one, for all this is the domain that God has given only to monks and

martyrs.”<sup>1</sup> Married people who were martyrs had these abilities; all others did not.

Theophan goes on to say, “Marriage is for the infirm. This infirmity is physical and spiritual. There are constitutions that incline a person toward lustfulness, and then there are cooler, more sober constitutions. Similarly, there are strong spirits of zeal, and then there is weak zeal” [2].

There are people whose bodies burn hot, but whose spirits burn even hotter. These people can remain virgins. But for those whose flesh burns strongly and who have a weak spirit, the apostle says it is better to marry.

“One who is zealous [i.e., one who cares or is concerned] for the salvation of the spirit can even overcome nature, through the grace of God that bestows this zeal. But one who is lacking in zeal will not succeed even with a sober constitution. Good sense and self-awareness will have to make the choice” [2].

This raises a very important point: who chooses a person’s path? Is it the priest who

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<sup>1</sup> *Editor’s note:* This is a paraphrasing of the original text from *The Ladder*, which makes no direct mention of the married or of martyrs.

chooses? No, it is the person himself. This is why he says “self-awareness.” It is no surprise that based specifically on these words of the apostle, and the explanations of Chrysostom and Theophan the Recluse, in 1998 our synod categorically prohibited priests from forcing their spiritual children to marry or to enter monasticism.<sup>2</sup> A priest may give advice, but he has no authority to force a person. He may not force upon a person his blessing for one path or the other.

DIVINE INSTRUCTIONS  
REGARDING MARRIAGE

The apostle continues: *Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband* (1 Cor. 7:3).

What is “due benevolence”? This may alternatively be translated as follows: let each duly favor the other. On the one hand this is referring to marital fidelity: the husband must be faithful to the wife, and the wife to the husband. Here

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<sup>2</sup> Meeting of the Holy Synod on December 28, 1998, His Holiness Patriarch Aleksei II presiding.

the apostle is introducing a rule that did not exist in the ancient world, and which does not exist in the world to this day. Even today people think it a terrible crime if a wife is unfaithful to her husband, but if a husband is unfaithful to his wife they shrug: “Who doesn’t fool around these days?” The apostle rejects this rule: he says that the husband must be faithful to his wife, and the wife must be faithful to her husband. Here the rule is the same for both men and women.

Blessed Theodoret says this: “The apostle introduces this law of chastity [within marriage, i.e., fidelity], commanding husband and wife equally to bear the conjugal yoke (Ecumenius says that *πιστιν* means fidelity), and not allow their eyes to wander, not breaking the bonds, but nourishing due love for one another. He first gave this law to the husband, because the husband is the head of the wife. Human laws require that wives be chaste [faithful], and punish those who break this law, but do not require equal chastity [fidelity] from husbands. For as the lawmakers were men, they took no care for equality, but rather made concessions for themselves” [2]. An interesting explanation indeed! It turns out that men wrote this law for themselves!

“But the divine apostle, inspired by the grace of God, gives the law of chastity [fidelity] first to men. But since it sometimes happened that husbands or wives, through love of abstinence, would abstain from marital relations without the consent of those living in wedlock with them, he rightly gives commands regarding this as well” [2]. The apostle is saying that those who live together (married couples) have no right to arbitrarily undertake the labor of abstinence.

And the apostle gives this commandment: *The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and [then] come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency* (1 Cor. 7:4-5).

This means that the wife must not abstain from conjugal relations against the will of her husband, and the husband must not abstain against the will of his wife. This is a very important rule, one that many people today unfortunately break, resulting in quarrels, conflicts, fights, and divisions, all because out of mistaken piety people begin imposing on themselves burdens



beyond their endurance. According to the church canons, if a person breaks the dietary fasts he is barred from Holy Communion, but with regard to marital relations the church rule states that a person's own conscience is his judge. This is a very interesting distinction. Here no external regulations of this aspect of life are permitted, and a person's own conscience is his judge. This is extremely important, because people today often blackmail each other—"I won't let you," "I'm going to punish you"—and it ends in marital infidelity, for which both sides will naturally be at fault.

*Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and [then] come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency (1 Cor. 7:5).*

What does this mean? Saint Theophan quotes Chrysostom: "Let not the wife,' says he, 'exercise continence, if the husband be unwilling; nor yet the husband without the wife's consent.' Why so? Because great evils spring from this sort of continence. For adulteries and fornications and the ruin of families have often arisen from hence. For if when men have their

own wives they commit fornication, much more if you defraud them of this consolation. And well says he, *Defraud not. ... For that one should practice continence against the will of the other is defrauding; but not so with the other's consent* [2].

If there is a mutual agreement, that is one thing. But when there is no mutual agreement this is a crime against the will of God. This is precisely what is said regarding all the fasts. The apostle's words are completely unambiguous. Unfortunately, many people took the apostle's advice and made it into a harsh law. Several 16<sup>th</sup>-century Russian editions of the Book of Needs actually say, "Have you fornicated with your wife during the fasts?" This is naturally a violation of the Holy Gospel, an outright violation of God's commandment.

Saint Theophan quotes Chrysostom: "If you take something from me with my consent, this will not be defrauding me. He defrauds who takes something without consent and by force. This is a thing which many women do, working sin rather than righteousness, and thereby becoming accountable for the husband's uncleanness, and rending all asunder. Whereas

they should value concord above all things, since this is more important than all beside.

“We will, if you please, consider it with a view to actual cases. Thus, take a wife and husband, and suppose the wife is continent, without consent of her husband. Well then, if hereupon he commit fornication, or though abstaining from fornication fret and grow restless and be heated and quarrel and give all kind of trouble to his wife, where is all the gain of the fasting and the continence, a breach being made in love? There is none. For what strange reproaches, how much trouble, how great a war must of course arise! For when in a house man and wife are at variance, the house will be no better off than a ship in a storm when the master is upon ill terms with the man at the head. Wherefore he says, ‘Defraud not one another, unless it be by consent for a season, that you may give yourselves unto prayer.’ It is prayer with unusual earnestness which he here means. For if he is forbidding those who have intercourse with one another to pray, how could ‘pray without ceasing’ have any place? It is possible then to live with a wife and yet give heed unto prayer. But by continence prayer is made more perfect. For he did not say merely,

‘that ye may pray,’ but, *that ye may give yourselves unto it*, as though what he speaks of might cause not uncleanness but much occupation.

“*And may be together again, that Satan tempt you not.*” Thus, lest it should seem to be a matter of express enactment, he adds the reason. And what is it? *That Satan tempt you not.* And that you may understand that it is not the devil only who causes this crime, I mean adultery, he adds, *because of your incontinency*” [2].

That is, the fault lies both with the devil and with our own incontinence. Inappropriate abstinence has vile consequences. The church canons strictly require one thing only: marital relations are not permitted if you are receiving holy baptism (on the night before your baptism) and when you are receiving Holy Communion. The ancient canons said that one ought not to have marital relations on the eves of Saturday and Sunday, because the ancient Christians received the Holy Gifts every week on Saturdays and Sundays. Today there is a strict law prohibiting relations on the eve of Sunday, because the standard is to receive Communion every week. The rest of the fasts are observed by mutual consent.

Saint Gregory the Theologian, in his fortieth oration addressed to catechumens, writes that he “asks not as a law, but from a desire to bring great benefit, that during the fast [i.e, Great Lent—*Auth.*] spouses abstain from one another, but that this be done by mutual agreement, not as something required by law.”<sup>3</sup>

Such is the request of Gregory the Theologian. Do you sense the difference between this and certain modern textbooks? The biblical standard always remains the same, as do the requirements of Holy Scripture. Abstinence by mutual consent is extremely beneficial. How so? Because a person does not become hyperfocused on his sensuality: he can spend the whole night in prayer, he can exhaust his body during the fast (a difficult thing to do while having marital relations), and this is naturally of tremendous benefit. But only if this is done by mutual consent, and not merely because “that’s the way I want it.”

The apostle continues: *But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment* (1 Cor. 7:6).

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<sup>3</sup> *Collected Works of the Holy Fathers*, Vol. 1. Works of Saint Gregory the Theologian, book 1. Moscow, 2010.

Literally, this reads: “I say this to you out of sympathy, and not as a command.” In other words, the apostle Paul sympathizes with those who are married.

*For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that (1 Cor. 7:7).* The apostle Paul explains: “For me it would be better if everyone were unmarried, as I am. But each has his own gift—one this, another that.”

In commenting on this, Theophan says, “I would prefer this, but I do not force you; rather, each of you decide for himself what is best. Each has his own gift from God. The gift here is not natural inclination, but the measure of grace-filled awakening and arousal of spiritual life, though the latter is not unrelated to nature” [2].

This is a measure of your warmth of spirit—how strongly your spirit is aflame and how strongly your heart is burning. Naturally, however, this is on the condition that you are familiar with how your body works, the hormone levels fluctuating in your blood, if you will, and how able you are to restrain them.

“In one person the spirit is so aroused and fortified by grace that he forces all demands of

the flesh and the senses to fall silent. In another person, though the demands of the spirit are strongly evident, the baser needs also clamor for attention, and he will have to fight to give himself over completely to spiritual life. In a third both are equally strong, and all he can do is to make it so that the demands of the spirit take the fore and take charge of everything else, permitting the senses and the body their measure of gratification” [2].

Sometimes the spirit and the body are equal in strength, sometimes the spirit is stronger than the body, and sometimes corporeality suffocates the spirit, in which case the spirit must be ignited. But one should not become overexcited and rush headlong into heaven knows what. Incidentally, these words of the apostle have given rise to a firm rule: people may not be tonsured monastics until they have spent at least three years in the novitiate. That is, a person is given three years to test himself in this regard, and only then is he tonsured into monasticism. For this reason the Church takes a sharply negative view of compulsory monasticism.

There was an incident when Basil Shuisky was tonsured as he was shouting, “I don’t want

to!”—while a boyar spoke the vows for him. In the middle ages in Russia it was believed that dressing a person in monastic garments unquestionably made him a monk. But Patriarch Hermogenes said that the boyar, and not Shuisky, was now a monk. Such things cannot be done by force. Each has his gifts from God, which cannot be mechanically imposed on other people. It should be remembered that there have been instances of negative attitudes toward both marriage and celibacy. Today marriage is frequently rated more highly than monasticism, in direct contradiction to Scripture. But there have been instances when monasticism was esteemed so much more highly than marriage that people were tonsured by force, and such tonsures were considered valid, which naturally contradicts the very essence of monasticism as a voluntary vow.

Interestingly, the same problem existed regarding marriage. In the 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Russia it was believed that if you were married by force you were under obligation to be married. A classic example is Pushkin’s novel *Dubrovsky*. But in actuality according to the church canons such is not the case. How can



you make a person remain faithful thereafter if the person never wished for this and made no promise? How can there possibly be any kind of fidelity? This is a very important point, which applies to both monasticism and marriage: in both cases the person must have voluntarily made his own decision. All other opinions, including those of one's parents, are no more than recommendations. I repeat: these are recommendations, not obligations! Nowhere in Holy Scripture does it say that a person's parents may, for example, forbid him to enter monasticism. Furthermore, the saints have given a number of sermons directed against parents who forbade their children to enter monasticism. People naturally need to understand that these things are done voluntarily, and thereafter a person is answerable for himself. We know that Theodosius of the Caves fled from his mother, but that she caught him and shackled him to keep him from running away to a monastery.

*I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I (1 Cor. 7:8).*

Here the apostle is speaking of the unmarried or celibate. He is referring not only to virgins, not only to those who have not yet

married, but also to the divorced—people who for one reason or another have found themselves free of the bonds of wedlock. To these people the apostle says, “It is good for them to remain as I am.” He could have said, “It becomes them to remain as I am.” The apostle Paul himself was never married, and for this reason he dedicated his entire life to the Lord God and preached the Gospel to the whole world.

Hence, “the purpose of the apostle’s words is to exhort those who are outside wedlock, after having exhorted those within it. These are of two classes: those that have never married, and those who have been widowed after marriage. What does he say to them? ‘It is good for them to be as I am’—i.e., for the former not to marry at all, and for the latter not to remarry after having been widowed. The apostle again shows us that he is one of those who has never married, for there would have been no reason for one who was vouchsafed the calling [to apostleship] in his youth to include himself with the widows. Let no one think that he authorizes celibacy for men and abstinence after marriage only for women. For he teaches both to both genders (Theodoret)” [2].

The apostle recommends that men and women alike live in pure, chaste love for God and dedicate their whole lives to the Creator. What modes for this exist? The most well-known is monasticism. But here the apostle Paul is referring not only to monasticism (in the form of strict vows), but also to simply living a life of celibacy.

We know that in Rus' in the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries there was a unique righteous lifestyle: the *chernetsy* and *chernitsy* [from *cherny*—“black”], so called because they customarily wore black. They lived near churches (usually in their own houses), and each day would come to the church of God, pray, help around the church, serve in the altar, help the poor, and study the Word of God, and naturally in this way they saved their souls. In my opinion this would be an ideal solution for us in Moscow today—for those who live near churches and who are already retired to live this way. Prior to the revolution this was practiced even by those who were not yet retired. They simply did not marry, and instead lived a bachelor lifestyle in purity, studying the holy Word of God. Why did they do this? The reason is that before the revolution monks were bound

by a number of limitations: they were assigned to a specific monastery, and each monastery had its own order. It was very difficult to transfer from one monastery to another, and many monasteries were far from ideal.

The apostle continues: *But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn* (1 Cor. 7:9).

Do you understand the apostle Paul's approach? If there is no way a person can abstain, let him marry, because it is better to marry than to burn with lust, fall into sins, and indulge in sexual fantasies, to say nothing of sexual sins.

Here Chrysostom says, "He is expressing the greatness of the power of lust. And the meaning of his words is as follows: if you feel a strong pull and a burning, deliver yourself of the yoke of abstinence, lest you be corrupted." And Theodoret adds: "Both for you who are foreign to marital intercourse and for you who have wedded, but have then been freed from wedlock by death, it is better to prefer abstinence. But if you cannot endure the provocations of lust, and your soul is too infirm for this labor, since it lacks ardent zeal for good, no law prevents you from marrying" [2].

Here the apostle Paul again emphasizes the relative merits of marriage and celibacy: *And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife* (1 Cor. 7:10–11).

The apostle cites the Lord's explicit commandment: if you have married, do not divorce; and if you have divorced, remain single. Here in the Lord's name two options are given for married people: either do not divorce (which is better), or if you have divorced either remain single or be reconciled to your husband. The apostle repeats the words of the Lord, Who said that one may not divorce except in cases of adultery.

*But I say unto you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery* (Mt. 5:32).

Blessed Theodoret writes, "The apostle is working to preserve the bonds of marriage indissoluble. For by prescribing abstinence for one who separates from his spouse he thereby restrains him from dissolving the marriage. By

forbidding marriage to another he obliges both parties to return to the former marriage. He limits their freedom so that, though there may have been reasons for parting, they might more readily make every effort to be reconciled rather than rush into divorce. Even the word adultery is not excluded here, provided of course that the guilty party has sincerely repented” [2].

That this was how the matter was originally understood may be seen from the words of Hermas, who in the fourth mandate says that if a husband who knows that his wife is unfaithful remains with her, he sins; but he sins equally if he does not take her back again if she repents and gives her word to be faithful. There is no strict obligation, however, since the Lord laid people under no obligation to take back unfaithful spouses. Hence, when divorce is discussed it should be understood that divorce is possible, but it is highly undesirable. And if a divorce has occurred one must remain single and not marry. The Church maintains this stance to this day, except in cases when adultery has been committed, resulting in the divorce, or if there is a risk to one’s life (e.g., attempted murder, alcoholism combined with physical abuse, drug

addiction, or fatal illness). In these instances separation is a necessary measure.

*But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife? (1 Cor. 7:12–16).*

Here the apostle is speaking on his own behalf, because he has no direct witness from the Gospel, from the Lord's words, on what to do with unbelievers.

He gives advice, but goes on to add, *I think also that I have the Spirit of God* (1 Cor. 7:40).

In other words, he gives this advice by his authority as an apostle, and the Church commands that it be followed. This concerns the issue of unbelieving spouses—of marriage

outside the Church. If any Christian has an unbelieving wife and she is willing to live with him, let him not leave her. What does “willing to live with him” mean? It means not demanding that he renounce his faith. It means her saying, “If you want to be a Christian, by all means do so! I want to live with you”—or, conversely, the husband saying, “I love you anyway, even if you are a Christian. You can do as you like; I want to live with you!” The apostle Paul says that one should not leave a husband or a wife such as this.

The apostle proposes that people not create widespread divisions; rather, he advises people to live in peace among themselves. But this is true only for couples who had been outside the Church, and then one of them converted. It is not true for people who, while Christians, decide to enter marriage with unbelievers. Of these the apostle goes on to say that if anyone wishes to marry, he must only marry in the Lord. Entering into marriage with an unbeliever is a gross violation of God’s laws, and it results in excommunication from the Church. If a Christian marries an unbeliever he is barred from Communion until the lawless union is



dissolved. According to the [72nd] canon of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, a sheep must not be united to a wolf: “For it is not fitting to mingle together what should not be mingled, nor is it right that the sheep be joined with the wolf, nor the lot of sinners with the portion of Christ.”

Theophan gives this explanation: “When an unbelieving husband or an unbelieving wife wishes to live with a believing wife or a believing husband despite his or her faith in Christ the Lord, though they may show a concealed benevolent disposition or a benevolent condescension to the faith, nevertheless this may be perceived to be only the germ of personal faith to come and the resulting enlightenment to follow, and not as enlightenment itself. What does ‘is sanctified’ mean? It means that the husband is sanctified as a husband, and the wife as a wife, i.e., with respect to marriage” [2].

This does not mean that the individual is personally sanctified through marriage with a believing spouse. *For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband*—this means that the marital union is sanctified by virtue of the fact

that one of them has received holy baptism, and has thereby sanctified the existing marriage.

The Lord makes this marital cohabitation sinless, but it is naturally unequal and dissimilar to marriage in the Church, since in this kind of union the husband cannot be the image of Christ and the wife cannot be the likeness of the Church. How can this be demonstrated? The people are sanctified in their roles of husband and wife, not sanctified personally. By this the blessing of paradise is restored, and the marriage is made a marriage, rather than sinful cohabitation. This is the basis for the church decree that if a person's civil marriage was enacted before he entered the Church, it is recognized as a marriage and not deemed sinful cohabitation.<sup>4</sup> It is impermissible to bar

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<sup>4</sup> Decree of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church on December 28, 1998, declaring the impermissibility of the practice of barring from Communion those living in marriage without benefit of a church wedding, and of equating such a marriage with fornication. Marriage without benefit of a church wedding is recognized by the Church as lawful if it was performed prior to the spouses' conversion to the faith.

a person from Communion whose husband or wife is an unbeliever, meaning that they have not had a church wedding. But if a believing husband or wife has married without benefit of a church wedding they are naturally to be barred from Communion, albeit for a different reason: for disdainning the sacrament of holy matrimony.

This is why the apostle goes on to say that *else were your children unclean; but now are they holy* (1 Cor. 7:14).

What is meant by “else were your children unclean”? It means, primarily, that the children are not illegitimate. Secondly, and more importantly, it means that if a spouse has married he will baptize his child without fail. Some say, “I was an unbeliever when I married a Muslim. What am I to do with our children? He is against it!” What if he is? What difference does it make? In this regard one must not obey an unbelieving spouse. The future eternal life of your children is at stake. And they must be raised as Christians, regardless of what your spouse wants!

*But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace* (1 Cor. 7:15).

This is not slavery, where the unbeliever is in command of the believer. A Christian is a child of the heavenly Father, and he must not be enslaved by a union that could distance him from God.

For *God hath called us to peace* (1 Cor. 7:15).

For the apostle, this kind of divorce is a desire for peace. When an unbeliever asks you for a divorce, you must be divorced, because in this way you will obtain the peace you need. You will find no peace with God when there is incessant fighting in your home. But the most important thing being said here is that if a person delivers an ultimatum—“Either me or the Church!”—you must unhesitatingly choose the Church.

“If an unbelieving spouse commands you, by his authority as your spouse, to offer sacrifices and participate in his wickedness or else leave him, it is better to leave the marriage than to choose wickedness. If an unbelieving spouse regularly abuses you and instigates quarrels, it is better to separate, *for God hath called us to peace* (1 Cor. 7:15). The unbeliever himself has given cause for this” [2]. The apostle calls us to maintain the status quo. If the spouses are living together in peace, let them continue to do so,

except for cases when the marriage requires that one violate God's commandments, and cases when it causes constant fighting and quarrels. One should divorce a spouse like this without hesitation. It should be remembered that the restrictions that apply to church marriages do not apply in these instances.

“The words of the apostle do not contradict the Lord's teaching, but rather explain it. For the saving preaching does not bring troubles into one's life, but on the contrary strives for true and God-loving peace. He first dissolves the harmful concord (in wickedness), and through discord achieves praise-worthy oneness of mind. For those who received the divine preaching and became teachers of the unbelievers produced a wondrous upheaval beyond all expectation, and brought families that were at variance into most amiable concord. This is what the apostle now expresses” [2].

What is meant by this? A believing husband or wife must undertake to convert his or her spouse to Christianity. This is why they remain together: to save the husband or the wife.

This is why the apostle says, *For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or*

*how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?* (1 Cor. 7:16). “Whether thou shalt save” him or her in what way? Naturally, by converting the spouse to Christianity. If one gradually describes to a person the beauty of Christ, the beauty of God, that person will either begin to hate God or will accept Christ. If he begins to hate God the marriage will collapse on its own, and we will be free. But if he comes to love God that unity will be completely different. It will be a unity in God, not in something else.

For this reason Theophan quotes Chrysostom: “If your husband does not disturb you, remain with him, he says; for there may be benefit in this. Remain and exhort, counsel, and persuade him. No teacher can persuade so well as a wife. At the same time the apostle does not compel her, and does not make this an absolute requirement, so as not to place too heavy a burden upon her. He counsels her not to despair, and leaves the matter unresolved, out of ignorance of what the future holds. Grace accomplishes the work of conversion to the faith, but how it does so is a mystery. Grace has many tools, but none can tell which of them it will use to enter the sinful or unbelieving soul. For here

freedom enters the picture with its prerogatives, and its inclinations are not dictated, but rather are taken into full account by God, Who in all things acts for good. This is why the apostle says, *What knowest thou, O wife?* and, *How knowest thou, O man?* (1 Cor. 7:16) [2].

This is precisely how you must act if you are living with an unbelieving husband or an unbelieving wife. If they want a divorce, why force them to remain? The apostle does not command us to force them thus. But if they do not wish this, on the contrary one must gently, lovingly encourage the person toward the knowledge of God—not setting conditions, not blackmailing, but rather proclaiming the truth. As the apostle Peter says, many wives have converted their husbands without words by their gentle, God-loving life.

*Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation [i.e., the life] of the wives; while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear (Pet. 3:1–2).* Here careful witness to the Lord is needed. For the Lord does not wish to work chaos and destruction in the world. He wishes for there to

be peace and tranquility. But if your family with an unbeliever is a constant cause of fighting, the apostle says it should not be preserved. But this refers specifically to one's family with an unbeliever. If your spouse is an unbeliever you may separate, but you must then live alone. This is the standard of the holy apostle, which is grounded in the words of the Lord.

CHRISTIANS  
AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION

Thus, verse seventeen continues the subject of marriage and celibacy—a most contemporary topic, and highly pertinent to our time. But here the apostle not only touches on matters of marriage and celibacy, but also examines the question of whether our external status—married or celibate, having or lacking social standing—has any effect on our spiritual life. This is very important today, because people frequently say, “We must fight for our rights and our freedom, or else they will take away our divine gift of freedom. If a census is taken, if they find out how much money we make, if they track what we do, we will lose our divine



gift of freedom, and then we will be violating the commandment.”

Regarding this the apostle Paul says, *But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches. Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God. Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called. Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant. Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men. Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God* (1 Cor. 7:17–24).

Our external circumstances have no bearing whatsoever on the matter of our salvation. This is a very important point, because there is all kinds of talk about how if we do not oppose this or that we will harm our souls ... No, we will not! Or people say, “Why doesn't the patriarch speak out against this law or that law?” But does our patriarch have any civil authority? No. He can

criticize laws that obviously contradict the Lord's commandments, laws that require Christians to clearly violate the commandments of the Lord. The patriarch may and must denounce laws such as this. In cases where one person is treating another unjustly the patriarch may appeal to the authorities to consider the matter (and this he does), but he is under no obligation to fight this.

To pensioners who clamor that the state has a duty to provide for them properly in their old age, I say: To provide for you properly in your old age is the duty of your children. The state has a duty to provide justice and safety, nothing more. If the state undertakes to provide for people in their old age, this is a good thing and a credit to the state, but it is not one of the state's essential functions. For example, the holy tsar-martyr Nicholas II paid no pension, large or small, to anyone. There was no pension whatsoever. Throughout the history of mankind children have fed the elderly, or not fed them (as in the case of the pagans), or fed them to wolves (as in the case of the Yakuts). But entrusting the state with payment of pensions is an innovation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will not say whether it is good or bad, but it does show that the Gospel

has permeated the hearts of many people, regardless of their faith. The light of the Gospel and its influence have proven so strong that even people who have formally turned away from it consider it necessary to care for the aged. This is a credit to our society. Even among communists and liberals the concept of the need to provide for people in their old age and protect the aged has survived. This is a Christian idea. But when God originally gave this commandment He was nevertheless speaking to the children.

Frequently poor quality of life in old age is due to the number of abortions a person has had. This makes perfect sense. If mommy bumped off five of her children, what else can she expect? Especially if she never repented of it. Incidentally, in tsarist Russia a woman who did this would not have to worry. Not only would she not have a pension, her children would not take care of her either, because she would be doing hard labor. In tsarist Russia both a woman who had an abortion and the doctor who performed it were sentenced to seven years hard labor. The overwhelming majority of pensioners today would have done time tsarist Russia, and the question of pensions simply would never have come up. All this

indignation is therefore completely out of place. If you have a pension, glory to God! It is certainly no cause for indignation.

As you may know, there is an interesting phenomenon where people cry, “The free constitutional rights of people who don’t own DVD players are being trampled!” This begs the question: Where were that person’s constitutional rights before DVD players were invented? “Pensions are a free constitutional right!” All well and good. But where were those rights before pensions were invented? The great Christian monarchs paid no pensions, yet some people lived to be a hundred years old. I say this because there is one thing we need to understand: we must require of the government what it was intended for by God. We may require justice and safety of the government. If the government does not provide these things, it is a band of robbers with no grounds for collecting taxes. If the government does do anything beyond this it does only so much as it sees fit.

But let us return to the apostle, who says, *But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches* (1 Cor. 7:17).

Thus the apostle decreed that a person should retain the status in which he entered the Church. In what sense? In the sense that a person must not use the Church as a front for revolutionary activity. Here the apostle simply gives the decree *in all the churches*. If one is married to an unbeliever and the unbelieving spouse demands a divorce, be divorced, because *God hath called us to peace*. But this pertains to everything else, as well. If you are called as a Jew, do not hide your Jewish blood. If you are called as a pagan, do not hide your pagan ancestry.

This is why the apostle says, *Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? let him not be circumcised* (1 Cor. 7:18).

This is because in Rome a surgical operation was performed (one still used today) that disguised circumcision by grafting a foreskin to a person. The apostle says that this should not be practiced. Many feared that people would think them Jews, and were embarrassed of their Jewish blood. But the apostle says, “No. Do not be embarrassed that you were called as Jews. The Lord has given you this gift; live in peace.” It is very important that we who live in Russia today

should hear this. For we have a tremendous number of Jews who have entered the Church. The largest religious community that the Jews have is the Russian Orthodox Church. It is my understanding that up to 70% of Jews are part of the Russian Orthodox Church: the majority of Jews in Russia have become Orthodox. These words of the apostle are important for them: “Do not be embarrassed of being a Jew! Do not!” All these tales about how Jews are not ordained up to the seventh generation are nonsense. And not just nonsense, but the heresy of ethnophyletism,<sup>5</sup> which was condemned at the Local Council of Constantinople in 1872. In the Church there is no difference between Jews and non-Jews. It does not matter whether you are Russian, Chechen, Jewish, or Tatar: you can equally be ordained, and you can equally receive the priesthood.

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<sup>5</sup> *Editor’s note:* Ethnophyletism (from the ancient Greek ἔθνος *nation* + φυλή *kind, tribe, race*)—preference of national, political, or racial interests over the interests of the whole Church. Condemned as a heresy at the Local Council of Constantinople in 1872. This concept arose in the Orthodox Greek-speaking community with regard to the movement for church independence in Bulgaria on a nationalistic basis.

For this reason the apostle says, *Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised*—i.e., do not attempt to hide your Jewish blood. This is extremely important today, because people say all kinds of foolishness. Furthermore, experience has shown that the worst anti-Semites are Jews themselves. This is an indication of the fact that people have not assimilated the most important fact of all: salvation is given not based on one's nationality, but based on faith in Christ the Redeemer. Nationality has absolutely nothing to do with it.

It is true that there is a church canon that calls for particular care in baptizing the children of Jews. But this is due not to their nationality, but to the fact that in Byzantium and Western Europe there were instances of crypto-Judaism, when a person pretended to be a Christian while secretly practicing Judaism. The Church worked hard to combat this. In the West the Roman Catholic Church (especially after the schism) began using the Inquisition to combat this, but in the East the Church simply required a clear choice of confession: if you practice Judaism, be a Jew; do not pretend to be a Christian.

It was in order to prevent this feigned adoption of Christianity that at the Seventh Ecumenical Council a canon was adopted that required careful, detailed questioning of a person from among the Jews who wished to accept Christianity. On the basis of this canon we have a rite of unification for a person coming from Judaism to the Orthodox Church. The person renounces the false tenets of Jewish doctrine that separate him from God. In the same way when Muslims come to the Church they renounce the false doctrine of Islam. A pagan renounces paganism. Any false teaching must be renounced at the threshold of holy baptism. This was done specifically to prevent intermingling, so that Judaism would not be taught in the guise of Christianity. But here the question is naturally not one of nationality, but of attempts to cross Christianity with Judaism. This is why the apostle says, *Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised.* If God has called you from among the gentiles and you have not been circumcised, you should not be circumcised. This does not mean that the apostle Paul prohibits the surgical operation as such, but rather that he prohibits circumcision as a religious rite.



We know that in the first century one of the most serious threats for Christians was the heresy of the Judaizers, who claimed that, in addition to the Gospel, observing the ritual portion of the Mosaic law was necessary for salvation. In other words, not only the commandments that God gave through Moses had to be kept (which we naturally do to this day), but one had to abstain from certain kinds of food, such as rabbit meat (which the Old Believers do not eat to this day) and shrimp. During Great Lent I was approached and asked, "Father, may Orthodox Christians eat shrimp? After all, the Law says eating them is forbidden." The Law says eating them is forbidden to Jews. It was forbidden until they entered the Church. Now all these prohibitions have been abolished for Christians. The Judaizers claimed that unless a person was circumcised he could not be saved. And so the apostle says specifically, "Do not! There is no longer any point in circumcision as a religious ritual."

*Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God (1 Cor. 7:19).*

Note that the apostle emphasizes that neither of these has any significance. He says

this to prevent arrogance on the part of both. We know that there are two kinds of arrogance. There is the arrogance of the Jews, who claim that the Jews have a special role, that they must be the governing, directive force in the Church of God. This is the view held to this day by many disciples of Fr. Alexander Men. This is, of course, an error. But there are also many who say that the Jews must repent for their forefathers' murder of Christ, up to the seventh generation. Metropolitan Antony of Sourozh recalled how he was once approached by a Jewish woman, who told him that when she was baptized the priest told her, "And now you must weep for the rest of your life, because it was your ancestors who killed Christ." She had not been to a church since then. This was certainly a crime on the part of that priest. For if she had been guilty of shedding the blood of Christ the Lord would not have called her to baptism. Furthermore, the priest violated the Symbol of Faith, which states: "I confess one baptism for the remission of sins." No sin can pass through the water of baptism—neither the murder of Christ, nor the murder of the tsar, nor any other sin. Nothing can pass through the water of baptism—all sins are washed away!

*But the keeping of the commandments of God* (1 Cor. 7:19). The most important thing is to keep the Lord's commandments—to be faithful to Christ and to keep the laws of the Lord.

*Let every man, the apostle continues, abide in the same calling wherein he was called* (1 Cor. 7:20).

This means that whatever way of life you had, whatever your class in society, whatever your status was when you came to the faith, in this remain. This is very important to remember today, because a great many people think that if they have left the world and been baptized, and have become church-ed, they must absolutely find work at a church. Working for a church is a wonderful, beautiful thing, of course, but the apostle says that not everyone needs to work at a church. Whatever walk of life you were in when you were called, in this remain. You should not use Christianity as an excuse to forsake everything—this is completely unnecessary. It is one thing if you want to give up your job for the sake of something higher, e.g., monasticism or the priesthood. Then you will be moving upward, growing in your new life in the Church. But it is another thing when you think Christianity

forbids you to remain in the walk of life in which you were called.

Some think a Christian has to dress like a homeless person. Some think a Christian must absolutely be a failure in life. Some think a Christian is obligated to make no more than a hundred dollars a month. Some think a Christian has no business driving a car. Some think a Christian has no business living anywhere but a crowded communal apartment. The truth is, you can live wherever you want, whether a communal apartment or a luxurious mansion. You can drive a Mercedes S600 or you can drive a clunky Zaporozhets. You can do whatever you wish. The only thing you may not do is evil. The list of jobs forbidden to a Christian is very short indeed—naturally, one may not work as a hit man or a prostitute. Except for this very short list of forbidden jobs you may hold any job you please.

For the Lord says, *Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called* (1 Cor. 7:20). The apostle goes even further in his admonitions: *Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather* (1 Cor. 7:21).

This phrase may be translated as follows: “If you were called as a servant, what does that

matter to Me? It matters not to Me that you were called as a servant; let it matter not to you as well. I care not whether you were a slave or a free man.” For you are already free to Christ: Christ has set you free.

The apostle continues: *But if thou mayest be made free, use it rather.* The Slavonic translation takes a descriptive approach, saying, “rather enslave yourself.” *Were you called as a servant? Care not for this. But even if you can be free, rather enslave yourself* (1 Cor. 7:21 — Church Slavonic text). *This interpretation is based on Chrysostom.* There is another explanation, of Ephraim the Syrian, who says that if you are able to purchase your freedom from slavery in order to go and preach the Gospel, take advantage of the opportunity.

Saint Theophan quotes Chrysostom: “Astonishing! Where has he put slavery? As circumcision profits not, and uncircumcision does no harm, so neither does slavery, nor yet liberty. And that he might point out this with surpassing clearness, he says, *But even if you can become free, use it rather* (1 Cor. 7:21), that is, rather continue a slave. Now upon what possible ground does he tell the person who might be set free to remain a slave? He means to point out

that slavery is no harm but rather an advantage. Now we are not ignorant that some say that the words, “use it rather,” are spoken with regard to liberty: interpreting it, “if you can become free, become free.” But the expression would be very contrary to Paul’s manner if he intended this. For he would not, when consoling the slave and signifying that he was in no respect injured, have told him to get free. Since perhaps some one might say, “What then, if I am not able? I am an injured and degraded person.” This then is not what he says: but as I said, meaning to point out that a man gets nothing by being made free, he says, “Though you have it in your power to be made free, remain rather in slavery.” Theodoret writes, ‘Grace knows no difference between slavery and mastery. Do not then flee slavery as though it were unworthy of the faith; but rather even if you can obtain freedom remain in slavery, and await your reward. He exhorts men not to avoid slavery on the pretense of piety’” [2].

What is meant by this? Naturally, we know that the concept of slavery as such, as Chrysostom emphasizes, is the result of sin. Chrysostom says that the pride and arrogance of men led some people to enslave others. But the enslavement

as such does not matter to the slave. It matters to those who invented the institution of slavery. But the Church and the apostle Paul spoke out against emancipation of slaves by force. By what kind of force? By revolt. The apostle Paul does not approve of the Spartacus approach. The apostle rejects outright slave rebellions and other attempts to forcibly change society, deeming them not beneficial to the soul. And we see just how right the apostle was. All these rebellions and revolts benefited the souls of no one, causing nothing but harm and animosity.

How did the Church go about abolishing slave ownership? For it was specifically the Church, it was Christianity, that abolished the ownership of slaves! Both the Orthodox Church and Christian communities in the West were successful in abolishing slave ownership because people came to realize what mattered most: a difference in status—slave or free—by is no indication of a difference between people. For the pagan world this was something new. The pagan world was convinced that there are people, and then there are walking, talking tools. In Rome, for example, if a master killed a slave there was no penalty, because the slave

was his personal property, and he could do with him as he pleased. But Christianity asserted that the slave and the free man both belong to the Lord. They are both created by God, and they are both people! On this basis the Church gradually softened men's attitude toward slavery by changing them, not through revolts.

Why did the Church not call for revolts? Why did God not call for revolts? Do you know what the rebellious slaves did during the insurrection of Spartacus? They enslaved their masters. Nothing had changed: some were masters while others were slaves! But the Church introduced a new dimension by saying: It does not matter whether you are a slave or a free man—you are the Lord's! After this it became very hard for masters to treat their slaves like living tools. Imagine a Christian slave owner going to venerate the relics of a martyred slave! Will the slave owner be able to treat his slaves like walking, talking tools after that? No, he will not. This is why, when the empire became Christian, slave ownership virtually disappeared. The only slaves left were the ones we call bondsmen, who did the work on the homestead. The majority of the slaves became freedmen. In Russia in the person of



Saint Philaret of Moscow it was the Church that drew up the act of emancipation from serfdom.

As you see, even the status of slave does a person no harm. It is important that we remember this today, when people say that things like having a taxpayer ID number can harm us. If outright slavery does not harm the soul, how can it be harmed by mere tax registration? This principle of the apostle is of the greatest importance: nothing external can harm a person! The most evil aspect of the mark of the beast is not that it is external, but that it is internal. The chief essence of the mark is that a person renounces God and worships the Antichrist.

The apostle explains why this is so: *For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant* (1 Cor. 7:22).

In Christ every slave is already a freedman of the Lord. He is free in the Lord, free from the most terrible slavery of all: the slavery within. Furthermore, any free man is a slave of Christ; hence the term “servant of God.”<sup>6</sup> A person must do good works because he is not free from good,

<sup>6</sup> *Translator's note:* In Russian in the context of this passage the word for *servant* and *slave* is identical.

from the commandment to do good. At the same time he is a freedman of the Lord, and hence he can be inwardly free of all that is in this world.

Theophan says this: “One who has converted to the Lord and been mystically united with Him is already a freedman of Christ. Such is the mystery of our faith. But he obtains this freedom through complete dedication to the Lord and absolute submission to His will, which he manifests first by his decisiveness, and later, throughout his life, by all his works” [2]. As you recall, in the sacrament of baptism a person renounces Satan, confesses faith in Christ, and then bows down to the ground before God, thereby making himself a slave of God.

Theophan the Recluse quotes John Chrysostom as follows: “At that very moment when he wholeheartedly gives himself over to slavery to the Lord in this manner, the Lord in His grace frees him from his former moral slavery. The enemy is driven out of his heart, the charms of the world are unmasked and revealed in all their repugnant ugliness, and power is given to trample the sin living within him and step upon its neck each time it rears its head. This occurs with every man, whether outwardly slave or free.

It matters not even if he is the king. For, says he, in the things that relate to Christ, both are equal: and like as you are the slave of Christ, so also is your master. ... But how is the slave a free man while continuing a slave? When he is freed from passions and the diseases of the mind: when he looks down upon riches and wrath and all other the like passions” [2].

The apostle continues: *Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men* (1 Cor. 7:23).

To what is this referring? You are bought with the price of the blood of Christ. Therefore do not become servants of men; do not give in to evil when people demand this evil from you. Here the apostle is again taking everything beyond external relationships (slave–master, overseer–underling, president–pauper) and making them internal. He says that since you have been redeemed with the blood of Christ, do not be slaves of men—not in the sense of your outward status, but of that which is within. If your master demands that you break the commandments, disdain his command. If your friends demand that you commit some lawless act just to be sociable, ignore your friends. It is in this that you must not be slaves. Chrysostom cites

the example of Joseph the Fair, whose social status was that of a slave. But when his mistress demanded that he commit fornication with her he showed himself to be free. This is an example of the things in which we may be slaves or free. In what must we absolutely be free? In what must we be slaves of Christ? When there is a question of violating God's commandments, we must absolutely be free: we must be subject to God and free from men. But when it is a question of external relationships, this is of no consequence.

“Joseph was a slave but not a slave to men: wherefore even in slavery he was freer than all that are free. For instance, he yielded not to his mistress; yielded not to the purposes which she who possessed him desired. Again she was free; yet none ever so like a slave, courting and beseeching her own servant. But she prevailed not on him, who was free, to do what he would not. This then was not slavery; but it was liberty of the most exalted kind. For what impediment to virtue had he from his slavery? Let men hear, both slaves and free. Which was the slave? He that was entreated or she that did entreat? She that besought or he that despised her supplication? In fact, there are limits set to slaves by God Himself;

and up to what point one ought to keep them, has also been determined, and to transgress them is wrong. Namely, when your master commands nothing which is displeasing to God, it is right to follow and to obey; but no further. For thus the slave becomes free. But if you go further, even though you are free you have become a slave” [2, Chrysostom, Homily 19].

The apostle repeats once again: *Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God* (1 Cor. 7:24). Then the apostle moves on to another topic. After speaking on the indifference of a person’s social standing the apostle returns to marital status. He asks, “What do you think: is it all the same to God whether a person has a family or not?”

*Now concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful. I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be. Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you* (1 Cor. 7:25–28).

## WHY REMAIN SINGLE?

The apostle says, “Yes, both the married and the unmarried can be saved. But there is a difference. The difference is not one of good and bad, but of good and better.”

The apostle begins fairly mildly: *Now concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful.*

He says that he has no commandment from the Lord to give orders to everyone. That is, the commandment of virginity is not given to all Christians as an obligatory standard. This is a very important point, because the Manicheans and certain other heretics claimed that marriage is wrong because it is sinful. No, this is not a question of sin. Marriage is established by God: it is a sacrament of God, and to deny it is to blaspheme the Creator. Regarding virginity the Lord does not give a command or an order, but rather advice.

The apostle himself says, *I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful to Him.* That is, my opinion is based on the fact that I am

faithful to the Lord: the Lord Himself has called me to faithfully convey His preaching.

In fact, this is directly linked to the words of the Gospel. Do you remember how, when the Lord told the apostles how a person should conduct himself in marriage, the apostles said that in that case it would be better not to marry? The Lord replied that not everyone can receive this, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs that were castrated by men, there are eunuchs that have been castrated since birth—those physically incapable of having physical relations—and there are eunuchs who have castrated themselves for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever wishes to receive it, let him receive it.

*The Pharisees also came unto Him, tempting Him, and saying unto Him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And He answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto Him, Why did*

*Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery. His disciples say unto Him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry. But He said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it (Mt. 19:3–12).*

This refers not to physical castration, to cutting off a bodily organ; God naturally does not command this. It refers to virginity, when a person gives up this ability for the Lord's sake. But the Lord Himself emphasizes that this is for those who are able to receive it—for those who would be perfect, who are able to ascend higher.

Saint Theophan quotes Theophylact of Bulgaria: “Nor do I dare to legislate, for this is



a great matter, and fraught with much difficulty and danger” [2]. Hence, the apostle says, I call to virginity only those who wish to be great and strong. I do not call weaklings. This idea is one the apostle consistently repeats: marriage is for the weak, monasticism is for the strong. Married life is for the weak, but battling and overcoming the devil is for the strong.

The apostle goes on to say, *I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be* (1 Cor. 7:26).

Right now, due to the present distress or necessity, it is better for a person to remain a virgin. What does “the present distress” mean? The apostle is writing to the Church of Corinth, and being a prophet he is warning them of the coming persecutions, during which it would naturally be easier for the unmarried than for the married. The unmarried person has no children to care for, he cannot be blackmailed by threatening his children, and he does not face the terrible danger that his children may renounce God.

Look what happened in Russia: a tremendous number of people had grandmothers who were believers. But though the grandmothers

were believers, the children were not. That is, the grandmothers failed to pass their faith on to their children because of the persecutions. What a terrible thing this is for a person! In many instances this occurred due to cowardice, while in others it was due to the corrupting influence of the Soviet school system, the corrupting influence of the Komsomol (the communist youth organization) and the Young Pioneers, those institutions of blasphemy and antitheism; the corrupting influence of the army, which broke people down; the corrupting influence of the Soviet educational system as a whole. All of this caused people to lose their faith. The most terrible thing for family members is naturally that their children may lose their faith.

This is why the apostle says, *I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be.*

The apostle knew that persecutions would soon begin. For this epistle was written in the year 54, and ten years later, in the year 64, the first great persecutions began under Nero. It was literally ten years later that a wave of persecutions came crashing down on the Church of Corinth. The apostle knew perfectly well where things

were headed, for he had received a prophecy from the Lord concerning this. For this reason the apostle says that due to the coming persecutions it is better to remain as one is. It is “better” for practical reasons. Note that this is not a moral question, but a practical one. It is easier for the unmarried to serve God, especially in times of persecution.

Saint Theophan also quotes Blessed Photius: “By the present distress I understand the apostle here to mean persecutions directed by unbelievers against believers, and all oppression and rancor on their part. In appointing so lofty a rule the apostle did not think it superfluous to dwell on these points, giving the impression that he is obliged by the circumstances to give this instruction. He says, as it were: Virginité is a very good thing in and of itself, and it is also good due to the impending trials. For it is not so hard for a single person to endure them as it is for one constrained by a wife and children. A person’s heart is as though torn to pieces at this: he is both hard pressed himself and he pities his family, and this weighs him down with the unbearable weight of evil. But the single man, unafflicted by the sufferings of those so dear to

him, is better able to endure the tribulations of these adversities” [2].

The logic is clear: it is indeed easier for the unmarried man. He acts as one faithful to the Lord, who wages war with Satan directly. We know that monks have frequently been a bastion of Orthodoxy during persecutions, and they proved the chief defenders of Orthodoxy during the iconoclast heresy. A great many of the martyrs of old were virgins or celibate, though there were also many married martyrs.

The apostle continues: “Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek a divorce.”<sup>7</sup> *Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed* (1 Cor. 7:27).

Note that the Church Slavonic text does not contain the word *divorce*. The apostle calls this a *loosing* or *unbinding*. “Are you unbound from a wife? Do not seek a wife.” *Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife* (1 Cor. 7:27).

Chrysostom notes the words the apostle Paul chooses. He says that the married are in bondage, and implies the question of which is easier for a man: to be fettered or to walk about

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<sup>7</sup> A literal translation of the Russian Synodal Version.—*Trans.*

unfettered, on his own two feet? This hint of the apostle Paul is fairly transparent. To this day we speak of “the bonds of marriage.” The betrothal ring is the first link in these marital bonds. The apostle goes on to explain the reason for this in detail. Once again, these “bonds” are in no way sinful. They simply make it hard—often impossible—for a person to dedicate his whole life to God.

This does not mean one should go looking for an excuse to divorce. It means that if you have been widowed or a divorce has occurred through no fault of your own, simplify your life: do not seek a wife!

The apostle goes on to add: *But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned* (1 Cor. 7:28). That is, there is no sin in marriage. Marriage is honorable, and the bed undefiled. *Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled* (Heb. 13:4).

Note that sexual relations are not the cause. Many make the mistake of thinking that sexual relations in marriage are the problem. But they are not. On the contrary, the apostle speaks of them quite positively. As you recall, at the beginning of this chapter he did not recommend

abstaining for long periods of time, lest Satan tempt us by our incontinence: *Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and [then] come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency* (1 Cor. 7:5).

Here what the apostle is saying is that busyness devours a person. Hence he says, *Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you* (1 Cor. 7:28). Or, literally, “These will have vexations for the flesh, but I pity you.”

What does “vexations in the flesh” mean? First of all, it means that the apostle is warning: you will encounter difficulties because you will have children. As the saying goes, “Little children, little troubles; big children, big trouble.” Furthermore, spouses frequently experience conflicts in their physical relationships, when one refuses to be understanding of the sexual needs of the other. What other vexations in the flesh are there? Quite simply, the flesh wants to devour the husband! For this reason the apostle says that wives will offend their husbands over money matters, the husbands will take offense, the wives will get upset, there will be conflicts in their sex lives, and problems with raising

children: having children is a problem, raising children is a problem, sending the children to school means even more problems, getting the children married is a humongous problem! And so it goes, problem after problem after problem. And so the apostle says, “I just feel sorry for you! I’m just sparing you!”

Regarding this Theophan also says, “Why did he not mean here first and foremost the pains of childbearing? Both husband and wife suffer then—he in spirit, she in body. And then there are the troublesome cares of maintaining a house, raising children, maintaining relationships outside the family, privations, failures, vagaries, attacks, and devastations” [2].

For the Church as a highly pragmatic organization, marriage is also mutual housekeeping. We are accustomed to think that for the Church marriage is something lofty. In actuality, the first definition the Church gives to marriage is shared life and property, i.e., mutual housekeeping, a sort of commercial enterprise even. Consequently, marriage has its problems in this regard as well. One may have many children and not enough living space. Many people today still live in Khrushchevkas—Khrushchev-

era apartments. If you are unmarried it makes no difference: if you live in one of these apartments, glory to God! But just try living with a wife in a Khrushchevka or a communal apartment! These are the “sorrows in the flesh,” and the apostle is regretful: “I pity you; it is hard for you to live in this kind of situation!”

The apostle continues: *But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away* (1 Cor. 7:29–31).

The apostle is saying, literally, that now the time is drawn short. You may say that there is great comfort in a family. There may indeed be comfort in a family, the apostle observes, but how are you to enjoy it? The time is diminished; it is brief, drawn short. The last days, says the apostle, have arrived. Soon the Lord will come! We need to prepare to meet the Lord! There is no time now for thinking overmuch about one’s family life. If you make family life your priority, you will forget that the Lord will soon come to



pass judgment. And the time is short: we must prepare to meet the Lord. Hence, the joy that the family holds is also very fleeting. The apostle emphasizes that marriage is a good thing, but he constantly impresses on us that virginity is better, celibacy is better. The apostle deliberately and constantly emphasizes this in order to show that there is good, and then there is better. “We are commanded to go from hence and prepare for departure, yet you are inclined inward [i.e., you withdraw deeper into this life]. Even if marriage were not coupled with any sorrows we ought to be inclined toward the future. But since it is indeed coupled with sorrows, why take upon you this burden? What need is there to take on you this burden which, having taken, you must then bear as though you had not?” [2].

Chrysostom was a vehement supporter of monasticism. He was even visited by delegations of noble matrons who expressed their indignation that he, that bad man, was urging handsome young men and women to enter monasteries. Chrysostom has a sermon directed specifically at parents who became indignant at his preaching of celibacy. Yet this is a recurring theme in all of Orthodox preaching from the apostle Paul to

the new martyrs. This stems not from a disdain for marriage, but from the extraordinary gifts given to virgins.

This is why the Lord also says, “Watch, for you do not know when the Lord will come!” *Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of Man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch (Mk. 13:33–37).*

It is essential that we live in this state of watchfulness. This is why all the good things that marriage can provide, and the most important of the good things in marriage is the sense of having a home front. But this sense of a home front proves meaningless. For in actuality there is no home front at all: the Lord will come at any moment.

If we Christians are strangers, wanderers, we can have no home front. Here we live in tents, but our homeland is in the heavens. Hence the apostle says that those who live in marriage must

always remind themselves of this. He deliberately emphasizes this for those who are married: “You must not forget that your marriage will not last forever. You are to enter a Kingdom where there is no marriage and where people interact with each other as pure beings, not bound by the slavery of the flesh.”

Remember the words of the Lord: *For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven* (Mt. 22:30).

Monks live a paschal life, the life of the resurrection, here and now on this earth. This is why good monks are always cheerful: for them it is always Pascha.

Here Theophan says this: “When the memory of [the coming of Christ] has taken root and encompassed the consciousness, in particular falling upon the senses, it alters one’s view of all that exists and all that occurs, to the point of reversing it entirely” [2].

What seemed perfectly reliable to a person proves unreliable, and what seemed a mere phantom proves the strongest thing in this world. The Lord’s commandments are what is strongest. For this reason the apostle goes on to

say that *they that weep* must be *as though they wept not*. At times a person may be sorrowing over various earthly things, but then he remembers that Christ is drawing closer—and why then should he weep? What of it if he has lost this thing or that? He could not have taken it with him to the grave anyway. All the sorrows of this world must be cut off. A person must not be stuck to the earth, and must not forget that everything that happens—all earthly joys and all earthly sorrows—passes away. Hence, one ought not to cleave to this world.

What then is meant by *they that have wives [must] be as though they had none?* (1 Cor. 7:29). It means that a person must remember that though he is living in marriage, he gives his whole heart to heaven. That is, the person is living in marriage—the wife caring for the husband, and the husband for the wife—but the person's whole inner disposition is toward his meeting with the Lord and the coming judgment. He spends his whole life in preparation for the judgment of God, before which he may appear at any moment. It is not only the old who die ... The young also die, and they die suddenly. This is why the apostle said that those living in marriage

must be like those who are not. We must lose any sense of the dependability of this world. Why do people recall the Soviet Union with such nostalgia? Because it seemed dependable. But this was an illusion! The same is true of families: this too is an illusion. You know for yourselves how unreliable the family truly is.

This is why the apostle says that we must remember: *They that weep [must be] as though they wept not; and they that rejoice [with earthly joys] as though they rejoiced not ... for the fashion of this world passeth away* (1 Cor. 7:31).

What is meant by *the fashion of this world passeth away*? This is the way of life in this world, what is considered important and valuable in it—all this passes away, and will have no meaning whatsoever. It is not the world that will disappear, but this world's system of values. Hence the tense expectation of the end of the world in the ancient Church.

As the akathist to Saint Sergius of Radonezh so beautifully says, "Seeing that all things in the world are vanity and subject to corruption, the venerable Sergius hastened to please the Pre-eternal God with his whole heart, and truly he did not labor in vain: for

having exchanged things corruptible for what is incorruptible, he became especially vouchsafed to stand before the dread throne of the Master in eternal glory.”

That is, Saint Sergius saw that all the things of this world were vanity and subject to corruption, and he hated them for the sake of the incorruptible Kingdom. Note that one ought not to renounce this world for some insignificant cause. People err greatly when they say that we need to simply renounce everything. No, we must seek what is greater, and through this everything superfluous will fall away from us on its own. Our task is not to artificially cut off something within us. Our task is to seek the Kingdom of God, and then all that is superfluous, all the sorrows and joys of the world, will fall away like a shell from the seed of eternity that is sprouting up in the heart.

The apostle then goes on to explain why he recommends celibacy: *But I would have you without carefulness*, i.e., without cares (1 Cor. 7:32).

The apostle is saying, “I wish for you to be without cares, so that you will not be so stuck to this life.” When you are stuck to a marriage you have a vast number of responsibilities that simply

devour you. It is no accident that some married people say, “There’s not even any time to pray! You spend the whole day running around like a hamster in a wheel!” Life simply ends up in a rut. And the apostle says, “I feel sorry for you! Why should you be so caught up in these cares?” He wants for people to live in peace, to serve God and rejoice.

Theophan the Recluse says this: “Cares, sorrows, constant busyness—these are the defining characteristic and the driving force of life in the spirit of the world. Not one passion is so attractive as this one in appearance, and not one inflicts such evil on a person in his Christian life as this one. It dizzies and darkens the mind, crushes and desiccates the heart, and gives a person no chance to collect himself, driving him from one affair to the next without letting him see any end to them” [2].

Is this not the case? Observe: there are feasts that we celebrate. We need feasts in order to collect ourselves somewhat. Suppose the feast arrives, and we begin to think: we have been so busy all week long, but how much have we really done for eternity? Have we done much at all? Some have done a tad, others a smidgen.

But how frustrating it will be on the day we die: we worked so hard, so very hard, and we have zero to show for it—zero! This is the danger of constant busyness. Note that it is not the family that is dangerous, the apostle emphasizes, but over-busyness, which enters a person in the guise of the family. These works of straw of which the apostle speaks are dangerous!

“Yet the person who is being spun, crushed, and driven about appears perfectly fine, so long as he does not employ overtly harmful means to achieve his goals, and so long as he maintains the requisite relationships with others” [2].

A person whom the devil has whipped into such a frenzy appears outwardly to be a perfectly good person. But his heart is damaged, he himself is desiccated, he is unable to love, his soul is broken, and he has overtaxed himself. How many of these overtaxed souls there are! Family life devours the person, and only a shell remains—a person devoured and good for nothing, neither for the Kingdom of God nor for the family.

“Thus, his soul is in pieces, yet he thinks of himself as a model person, and lives his life in transparent self-delusion. He has no time even



to think of salvation, of eternity, of pleasing the Lord. He is entirely wrapped up in the things of this life and of this world, while his spiritual side, which yearns for God and eternity, is completely closed off. In saying, ‘But I would have you without carefulness,’ the apostle is requiring that people not burden themselves exclusively with the cares of this world and this life, and that they might exchange carefulness with the things of this age for carefulness with the things of the age to come” [2].

The apostle warns against this terrible trap, this terrible pit that is yawning to devour a person. The truth is, even a married person may in theory escape all this if he lives in the family as one who has no family, in the sense that the person must give his heart not to his family, but to God. This is to say, he must not allow himself to be devoured with cares and concerns. The simplest means of doing this is to do all things with prayer: the cleaning, the washing, the dishes—all this is done with prayer. This will keep constant busyness at bay and remind a person of heaven.

*He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But*

*he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife (1 Cor. 7:32–33).*

Here the apostle makes a direct comparison: “What cares does the unmarried person have? He can give all his time to the Lord. But the married person cannot have constant care for the Lord even if he wishes to.”

“The celibate person, too, may not care for the things of the Lord,” says Theophan the Recluse. “But the married person, even should he desire to care for them, cannot, however he may wish it; for he is hindered by his wife, children, and house, all of which require care and attention. *But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife.* Where there is a wife, there is a family and a house, and this is an arena of cares. The wife herself has not a few actual necessities, and if these are compounded by busyness and a desire to stay abreast of the times they will be past counting” [2].

A person’s natural cares are already numerous, but if he also wants to live like everyone else, keeping up with the times, he will run like a donkey after a dangling carrot, without ever achieving a thing.

“Celibacy releases a person from all these cares and frees his hands to do works pleasing to God—naturally, provided he himself wishes this. If you wish to please God, he says, celibacy is the most convenient state for this. A person’s own needs are easily met, and all the time that remains he can dedicate to the Lord. But for the married person the better half of his time is taken up by cares, vanities, and the world, even in the best cases of married life. Hence, married people can never reach the same level of spiritual perfection as the unmarried” [2].

This is why the Lord mentions the thirty-fold fruit, not the sixtyfold or the hundredfold. Note that the purpose of celibacy is not to live for oneself (remember the words of Schwartz: “I will enter a monastery and live for myself!”), but for a person to dedicate his whole life to God. Even wider of the mark is the case of the confirmed bachelor who does not marry, does not serve God, and lives as he pleases. This kind of person is far from God indeed. It is better for him to marry. In this way he will draw closer to God, and at least will forcibly crush his egoism. As Father Artemy has said, “The best elder for humbling a person is his wife.”

The apostle now switches from men to women.

*There is difference also between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband (1 Cor. 7:33-34).*

He describes the difference between a married woman and a maiden. A maiden may dedicate her whole life to the Lord, being completely free. But the married woman is bound: she must please her husband, because if she does not please him she is directly violating the Lord's commandments, and is an outright lawbreaker. *There is difference also between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit.* Do you see the goal of the unmarried woman? To be holy in body, to preserve her body in purity, and to be holy in spirit, i.e., to dedicate her whole spirit to prayer, pleasing God, holiness, and righteousness. *But she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband.* Here the apostle again uses that derogatory term—*world*.

Incidentally, Theophylact of Bulgaria makes an interesting observation, as quoted by Saint Theophan: “Behold—cares once again! But, he says, these cares are not at all that which is called marriage. Cares for the things of the Lord, cares for how to please the Lord, are salvific and sweetly nourishing, but cares for things of this life and of this world because of marriage are destructive to the soul and burdensome” [2].

This we also know from experience. The cares of marriage are literally draining.

*And this I speak for your own profit; not that I may cast a snare upon you, but for that which is comely, and that ye may attend upon the Lord without distraction (1 Cor. 7:35).*

The apostle is saying, “I do not want to force virginity upon you; I do not want to put chains on you; I do not want to drag you into virginity by force.” As Chrysostom said, “Why cannot the apostle speak here of force and of bonds? Because no one drags a person to a marriage feast by force.” People are dragged by force to prison, not to a marriage feast. Hence, the apostle says that he does not want to place people in bonds, since, firstly, these bonds are not for everyone: there are people who simply cannot

bear them, who would overstrain themselves in the attempt; and, secondly, if a person has the strength he must run of his own accord to the freedom of monasticism, to this beautiful way of life. He will not have to be dragged. A normal person, if he has the spiritual and physical strength to preserve himself in purity, will realize on his own that this, naturally, is the best thing of all.

The apostle continues: “I call you to attend upon the Lord in a comely manner, without distraction.” *This I speak ... for that which is comely, and that ye may attend upon the Lord without distraction* (1 Cor. 7:35).

The word that the apostle uses here is not *bonds*, but *snares*. “I do not wish to ensnare you. I do not wish to drag you anywhere by force to make you behave in a comely manner, i.e., in a manner worthy of your calling as Christians, and to attend upon the Lord.” What does the apostle mean by the expression “attend upon the Lord”? It means for us to sit constantly beside the Lord, like Mary, who unlike Martha, who was concerned with serving dinner, sat the whole time listening to the words of the Lord and did not wish to leave Him for a moment. “But

I wish for you to attend upon the Lord without distraction,” i.e., for you to not be drawn into the amusements and distractions of the vanities of this world.

Theophan the Recluse interprets this as follows: “I recommend virginity to you so insistently, albeit without compulsion, because it gives a person the opportunity, the convenience, and the ease of constantly sitting in the Lord’s presence without any distraction. Virginity is not distracted by any cares or thoughts; its attention is wholly fixed upon the Lord, and nothing tears it away from Him. So will virginity always be with the Lord, and the Lord with it: it is as a bride, and He is as a bridegroom. This spiritual marriage is indissoluble. The conclusion from this is plain for all to see. The words of the apostle are quite decisive” [2].

The words of the apostle leave no room for those who attempt to equate marriage with virginity. While showing that marriage is a beautiful thing, he describes how much more beautiful, salvific, and conducive to the heights of salvation virginity is than marriage. In marriage one may easily be saved, but achieving the heights of salvation is possible only in the state

where a person dedicates himself wholly to the Creator. This is the wondrous, unimaginable state to which the apostle calls all men. He has examined all objections to virginity and explained that in actuality a person finds no true happiness in marriage, since the joys of marriage are short-lived, and the grief in marriage is considerable.

Hence, the apostle says that it is better to be a virgin—a virgin not merely for one's own sake, but for the sake of Christ. In marriage one may attain the Kingdom of God, but it is impossible to achieve the heights of perfection. The heights of perfection are for those who have dedicated their whole lives to God. Our ancestors who in their old age would enter monasteries did well, but it is a still more beautiful thing when people enter a monastery in their youth. This is the most beautiful thing that can be: a person who dedicates his whole life to the Lord, serving God so as to be completely holy in mind, will, senses, heart, and body.

Incidentally, if a person in a monastery does not dedicate his life to this goal, his efforts are for nothing, and he labors in vain. If he is in the monastery merely as a worker—digging the



ground, planting a garden, or doing some sort of social work—but takes no care for his soul, he has entered the monastery in vain. He will not benefit from it; it would have been better if he had married. The most important advantage of virginity is that when a person is a virgin he can completely dedicate his whole life to the Creator and “attend upon the Lord without distraction,” as Theophan the Recluse says. To always sit at the feet of Christ, to hear His holy words, to commune with Him in prayer, to serve Him day and night, to learn to combat the passions, to receive spiritual gifts, to rise ever higher toward the heavens—this path that the Lord offers to virgins is best taken from the very beginning.

*But if any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely toward his virgin, if she pass the flower of her age, and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let them marry. Nevertheless he that standeth stedfast in his heart, having no necessity, but hath power over his own will, and hath so decreed in his heart that he will keep his virgin, doeth well. So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better. The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but*

*if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 7:36–40).*

Thus concludes the seventh chapter of the epistle. Our Russian translation is not entirely correct here, so we will turn to the Greek original for a more correct understanding of certain words. The apostle says, “But if anyone thinks he is behaving wrongly”—*behaveth himself unseemly*. Literally, “if any man thinks it wrong to go against the format of this life”—or, in the Slavonic translation, “if any man thinks it a disgrace”—for a girl to be grown up, mature, yet still unmarried, and decides to give his daughter in marriage, he commits no sin. *But if any man thinks that he is acting disgracefully toward his virgin, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin if she marries* (1 Cor. 7:36; literal translation of the Church Slavonic text).

But once again, note how the apostle Paul characterizes such a person. The apostle Paul calls this person “enslaved to the format of this world.” Indeed, how do ordinary people think? The child is grown, they say; it is time for him

or her to marry—no sense fooling around! Certainly, given a choice between fornication and marriage one should choose the latter. This goes without saying. But the apostle says that a person like this proves himself a slave to the ordinary course of life: everyone else does it, and so will I.

This enslavement remains highly visible to this day. How many times have we seen this touching scene: a crowd of people at the civil ceremony, but the next day far fewer people at the church wedding—many of whom would have best stayed away, considering how unsteady they are on their feet. Why, you ask? “It’s just what’s done!” you are told. If a couple gets married, drunken revelry must promptly follow outside the civil registry office. This is a terrible tradition—holding the wedding banquet after the civil registration instead of after the church wedding. The wedding feast is a perfectly normal practice, as long as people do not drink themselves senseless and behave disgracefully. But to hold the wedding feast before the church wedding is a complete, utter disgrace! Yet a vast number of people do this, simply because “it’s what’s done.”

This is a terrible practice, perpetuated by evil customs, perpetuated by vainglorious parents and things that are perfectly indecent. Parents would do better to take the insane sums of money that they spend on the wedding and spend it on a place for their children to live. They could at least rent a place for them to start out, so that they could have their own space. But instead they spend three years' salary on a wedding, they go into debt, and the newlyweds are left to make do with whatever shelter they can find.

Why does this happen? It happens because people follow the format. This is not a Christian format, it is a Soviet one: once you have registered you are husband and wife, so bring on the drunken revelry! But the real marriage is naturally the church wedding. Civil registration is important, of course, but it is important for the purposes of maintaining certain legal standards, for convenience in joint housekeeping, inheritance matters, etc. Civil registration resolves a number of practical issues. But the real marriage does not happen at the civil registry office. That sort of marriage is only valid for unbelievers. For they are unbe-

lievers, and they do not know the grace of the sacraments. But when people who call themselves believers behave this way, they are simply disdaining the sacrament of matrimony out of vainglory and pridefulness.

I have heard people say, “But why? Many of our relatives are unbelievers. How can we not have a celebration for them?” Pardon me, but the celebration should be held first and foremost for the newlyweds. After all, the most important people at the wedding are the husband and the wife! And this catering to one’s relatives is an absolute disgrace. It means that the couple will not be properly prepared. How should one approach matrimony? Ordinarily on that day the couple should commune of the Mysteries of Christ. But can a person commune who has spent the previous evening carousing in a restaurant? No. And so for him the wedding is divorced from Communion. This is simply not good. Whom do people invite to a wedding in our time? People whom they will never see again in their lives! Weddings like this often end with an ambulance or the police being called—a fine way to celebrate, indeed! This is naturally not

the work of God, but of the devil. These kinds of false formats must be broken.

But here the apostle is talking about a different format: one where marriage is considered the only normal way of life for a person. This format has burrowed so deeply into peoples' consciousness that today it is hardly even discussed. What does the average person think? He thinks that only people who suffer from unrequited love enter monasteries. In the days of the Corinthians people thought exactly this. But here the apostle introduces a new standard. He says that marriage is inferior to virginity. Marriage is superior to fornication, because marriage is good and fornication is evil, but it is of course inferior to virginity. The apostle says that if anyone does so, thinking himself obligated to follow the format, let him do so. He does not sin by giving his maiden daughter in marriage.

Why is the father mentioned here? Firstly, we should remember that in the days of the apostle Paul, both in Greece and throughout the world in general, except for Rome, the father's authority in the family was absolute. According to Roman law the father of the fa-

mily also had the right to execute his own wife or children and answer to no one for it, but by then this law had practically become obsolete. In the smaller towns, however, the matter of marriage was still decided by the parents. The same was true in villages in Russia before the revolution.

Today there is a tendency to either extol or vilify this tendency. The apostle simply accepts it as a fact. Why does the apostle take such a neutral stance? Quite simply because, firstly, he does not wish to destroy established customs that are not pure evil. Secondly, he knows the advantages and disadvantages of a person marrying of his or her own accord versus being married or given in marriage by someone else.

What are the advantages of a person marrying of his own accord? Here the person himself is responsible for his choice, and can choose a person for himself. What are the disadvantages? A young person frequently does not have his head in the right place, giving rise to our 20<sup>th</sup>-century expression: "If at first marriage you don't succeed, try, try again!" A tremendous number of hormones are at play in a young man. Frequently he ends up in a state where "love is

blind,” and there is no telling whom he will fall for—a dangerous state indeed.

What are the advantages of being married by one’s parents? They can take a more objective, clear-headed view of the future couple. And the disadvantages? They may not be looking from a divine standpoint, but from a financial one, as is most often the case. The result is that the children’s lives are sacrificed for the sake of their parents’ financial prosperity. There was even a Russian song, a wedding song in fact: “They married me off, but not to my beloved: they married me to one I love not for the sake of a—sable fur coat. The fur coat hangs on a nail, and my unloved wife hangs on my arm: she hangs on my arm and tells me to kiss her. But—oh, my friends!—I have no wish to kiss her!” Frequently for the sake of such “sable fur coats,” for the sake of S600 Mercedes, for the sake of “useful connections,” lives have been ruined. These problems have indeed existed, exist to this day, and will exist for all time, because even today there are parents who are very difficult to stand up to!

But the apostle simply says that at the time the norm for the inhabitants was that the



father would give his daughter in marriage or marry off his son. Note also that, since the first century, Christian history abounds with numerous instances when people left their families for the sake of virginity. They did not obey their parents, and ran away from families that intended to marry them or give them in marriage, in order to serve God. There is the example of Saint Thecla, who under the influence of the preaching of the apostle Paul left her suitor and became a bride of Christ and a protomartyr. Or take Alexis the Man of God. Many secular people who read his life are indignant at his behavior: a man leaves his wife right on their wedding night, runs away from her, goes to a different city as a wanderer, and returns years later, and only on the last day of his life his parents learn that he is their own son (he had been living as a homeless man in his parents' yard). This is an example of what can happen when a person chooses love for God over earthly love. There are numerous such examples.

Take the "Lives of the Saints" of Demetrius of Rostov, and you will see a great many such examples. The remarkable pull toward

the heavenly life overcame these bonds, this format, that had been established in antiquity. The apostle Paul wanted very much for this format to be overcome—not so that people would fall into fornication, but so that marriage, while remaining as an institution, might give all who desire it the opportunity to rise to a higher level. It is a great sadness to me that young people do not even consider the option of monasticism. This is actually a sign of weakness of faith—a sign of considerable close-mindedness and considerable hedonism. The reason is that people have grown fat and lazy, and have decided to make themselves at home here on earth.

Interestingly, in the 1920s–30s there was a colossal movement of virginity specifically among the youth—a phenomenon known as monasticism in the world. Today people often say that “white kerchiefs upheld the Church.” Many people today simply do not know that the white kerchief was a sort of uniform. Frequently white kerchiefs were worn by those very *chernitsy*. When going to church they would put on a white kerchief—a sign of joy at having finally come to God. It was these remarkable old men and

women, nearly all of whom have now departed to the Lord, who upheld the Church during the most terrible persecutions. They voluntarily chose monasticism at a time when no monasteries remained. All the monasteries in Russia were officially closed by the Bolsheviki in 1918 and actually destroyed by 1929. These people lived in their homes, but they served God, copied the sacred texts by hand, and among other things it was they who supplied people with Orthodox literature. Many of them were not tonsured; some, to escape harassment by the communists, arranged fictitious marriages while remaining virgins. These people chose God and service to Him when times were hardest, risking their lives to do so. And they, while not formally tonsured as monastics (though many were indeed tonsured monastics, living in secret), nevertheless lived in piety.

One example of this remarkable secret monasticism was the renowned philosopher Aleksei Feodorovich Losev, also known as the monk Andronik. To the end of his life he did his best to always wear a little cap that had been blessed as a skouphos. I myself have seen people like this. These are truly remarkable people,

remarkable men and women, who dedicated their whole lives to the Lord, “sitting at the Lord’s feet.” I think there were so many of them because at that time people remembered (being most vividly reminded by the Lord) that life on earth is very short. They did not cleave to the earth, because this earth is difficult to cleave to. How can you cleave to the earth when you know that today or tomorrow you may face a firing squad? When you go to church and do not know whether or not you will return, or when the valiant Komsomol will grab you and drag you to the GPU—the secret police? In the 1930s this was the norm! Christians in the Soviet Union lived under these conditions, and it was they who understood the command of the apostle Paul. It is a true shame that people do not wish to serve God with all their heart in times when all is well with them.

But let us return to the words of the apostle: “Nevertheless he that stands firm in his heart, who without necessity has power over his own will, and has decided in his own heart that he will keep his virgin daughter, does well.”

*Nevertheless he that standeth stedfast in his heart, having no necessity, but hath power over his own will,*

*and hath so decreed in his heart that he will keep his virgin, doeth well* (1 Cor. 7:37).

That is, one who does not give his daughter in marriage or does not marry off his son is *stedfast in his heart*—he is unshakably firm in his heart. It is interesting to note how the two fathers are characterized—the one who does not give his daughter in marriage and the one who does. The first is unshakably firm in heart, and he is free from the power of fate. Translated literally, the text reads “he has no fate hanging over him.” Ordinarily a person who lives amid a constant flow of marriages has this fateful necessity hanging over him. But the father who does not give his daughter in marriage has no such fateful necessity: he is unshakably firm in his heart, and he is as free as a bird. Naturally, this primarily concerns people who themselves desire this, but it also concerns those who push them to this. It is this complete, absolute freedom, the freedom from slavery to necessity, that virginity bestows, which gave people wings and raised them up to the heights of virginity. It is to this that the apostle Paul calls us. Again and again he shows that marriage is inferior to virginity. For this reason the apostle concludes his thoughts with

these words: *So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better* (1 Cor. 7:38).

“Good” and “better”—this is the juxtaposition in Christianity that many find incomprehensible. One thing may be “good” and another “better;” they are not necessarily “good” and “bad.” Those who enter marriage do “well,” and so the Church glorifies them, rejoices, celebrates, and solemnly weds them. But there is also “better”: when a person enters a monastery and gives his heart to God. This is what is better! And the Church surrounds what is “better” with the wonderfully beautiful rite of the tonsure, which is performed in silence. Do you understand why? Because the person is now entering the heavens. Not for nothing is it said that a person who receives the tonsure has received the grace of the angelic rank: he has joined the forces of the archangel Michael, and has become an angel! Incidentally, he is also now free of gender distinctions. This is why nuns are frequently given masculine names. The nun has now superseded feminine nature.

Finally, in concluding the subject of marriage, the apostle touches on the subject of

married women. The parents' authority over the child ends when a person marries or enters a monastery. This is important to remember, because a great many parents thoroughly enjoy interfering in the families of others—something that seldom fails to achieve a divorce. For the apostle himself, the standard was the Old Testament. And in the Old Testament there was a rule: if an unmarried girl made a vow to God, she was to obtain her father's permission. If he was silent she was bound to fulfill her vow. A married woman was to obtain her husband's consent. If he was silent she was bound to fulfill her vow, but if he forbade her she was free of any guilt for failing to fulfill her vow. However, a divorced woman or a widow was bound unconditionally to fulfill her vow. Here her vows are entirely on her own conscience, since a divorced woman or a widow answers for herself. For us Christians, the boundary beyond which parental authority does not extend should be entry into marriage or monasticism. Beyond this boundary parents no longer have authority, but they are to be honored. We must pray for and honor our parents always, to the end of our lives.

If our parents are alive we are obliged to pray for them, to honor them, and to love them, but once we have passed this boundary we are no longer obligated to obey our parents. To listen to them, yes, but not to obey them. Many parents violate this hierarchy and interfere where they are not wanted. The result is detrimental to parents and children alike. This pertains first and foremost to marriages, but it also pertains to monasteries. It is simpler for monasteries, however. In a great many monasteries parents were simply not allowed to meet with their children. He is dead! Gone! A corpse! Make it a firm rule for yourself: whether marriage or monasticism, parental authority ends there! Period! Thereafter children are no longer subject to their parents' authority.

The apostle continues: *The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God* (1 Cor. 7:39–40).

Here the apostle is citing the Old Testament law which imposes but one condition: a widow may only marry in the Lord. This is a very



important rule, because it is one of the biblical bases for the prohibition of marriages with people of other faiths—an absolute prohibition. The Bible is full of similar prohibitions. This is one of the favorite subjects of Holy Scripture: the categorical prohibition of marriage to non-Christians. Remember that in the Old Testament, when Abraham sent his servant to find a bride for his son, he made him swear a terrible oath not to take her from among the daughters of Canaan. In the same way later on, throughout all of history, the Bible always emphasizes that if a person takes a foreign woman (meaning a woman of a strange faith) to wife, he apostasizes from God and falls into the most terrible sins. For example, Solomon, that wisest of kings, fell into apostasy specifically because he took many foreign women to wife, and they turned his heart away after other gods. Both the book of Nehemiah and the book of Esdras are dedicated specifically to demonstrating that such marriages are impermissible under any circumstances, and that if they have taken place they must immediately be dissolved.

This is in fact what the apostle Paul is speaking of, as well: a woman may only marry in

the Lord. Based on these words of the apostle and of all of Holy Scripture, in the 72nd canon of the Sixth Ecumenical Council the Church decreed that a Christian is not permitted to marry an unbeliever. If he has done so the marriage is to be considered null and void, and he may not be admitted to Holy Communion until this lawless union has been dissolved. This naturally does not refer to the marriages of unbelievers, who are actually outside the Church, in which one of them later converts and the other does not. It refers only to Christians. Unfortunately, this is an acute problem today, since in their foolishness many Christians marry unbelievers, with the result that they depart from God. God does not help such people. Why should He help someone who has violated the express commandment of God, and has become hardened in this violation? Incidentally, in the Russian Empire such marriages were considered adulterous, and the children were considered illegitimate. A marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian was not recognized under any circumstances!

The apostle again repeats: *But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God* (1 Cor. 7:4).

In other words, “My advice is, of course, my own, but the Holy Spirit is speaking within me. It is He that has given this advice concerning marriage, and He ought to be obeyed.” This also means that a woman may marry a second time. Incidentally, it is very important to remember that second marriages are not a sin. Many of us think that second marriages are sinful, impure, and defiled by definition, but this is not the case. The Lord, through the mouth of the apostle, did not say this. He said that a widow may marry a second time, though only in the Lord. And as you know, what is done in the Lord is not a sin. There was indeed a teaching that called second marriages a sin. This was the heresy of the Novatianists.<sup>8</sup> They taught that even widowed Christians may not marry a second time, and that they may not repent of mortal sins at confession, since only God can forgive mortal sins. But based on these very words of the apostle Paul the Church condemned this teaching as a heresy.

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<sup>8</sup> Novatianism—a teaching according to which the Church is a community of saints, and all those who have fallen or committed mortal sins after baptism must be cast out of it.

Theodoret says, “Marry one who is a believer and pious, and do so chastely and lawfully.” And Chrysostom adds: “With chastity, with purity, for these virtues are needed everywhere, and care must always be taken for them, for without this one cannot see God.” Ecumenius: “For childbearing and child rearing in the fear of God, and not out of lustful passion.” “And this is sufficient to rebuke the followers of Novatian, who condemn second marriages as fornication in direct contradiction of the laws of the apostle,” adds Theodoret [2].

Once again, however, the most blessed is she who, having been freed from marriage through her husband’s death, one who is a widower or a divorcee, remains as she is and dedicates her life to God. According to the Gospel, whereas she receives thirtyfold fruit in marriage, in widowhood she will receive sixtyfold fruit in eternity.

#### THE LIMITS OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

The apostle now moves on to a most important subject: the proper attitude toward food sacrificed to idols. What is “food sacrificed

to idols”? You are no doubt aware that to this day in countries that practice idolatry, where people worship the work of their own hands instead of the Creator, people offer fruits or animals in sacrifice to idols. But the animals are not burned up completely: only a part of the animal is burned, while the rest of the meat is eaten—part by the priests, part by those who offered the sacrifice. This meat or fruit that was offered in sacrifice to idols is called “food sacrificed to idols.” An example of contemporary idol-worship in Moscow would be the Hare Krishna temple. The devotees of Krishna absolutely require a person to offer some sort of fruits: oranges, apples, and the like. Whoever has traveled to the Far East or to India knows that the guides there will usually say, “There is a tradition of bringing an apple to the shrine of Shiva, Krishna, or another god”—as though this were a nice folk tradition. But this “nice folk tradition” is idol worship, and it is a grave mortal sin, graver than murder or fornication, since this sin gives a person over directly into the power of the demons.

Why exactly did this issue arise? Quite simply, because in Corinth at the time there were two parties. One party claimed that an idol

means nothing in the world: it is a lump of wood, nothing more, and can sully nothing. Others claimed the opposite: that an idol possesses magical power capable of defiling. The apostle calls the former strong, and the latter weak. At the same time, he tells them how one ought to act in the unified Church of God, and how one ought to regard this demonic poison.

What existed then in Corinth exists here to this day. Some people say, “Someone slipped me such-and-such after casting a spell on it. What am I to do with it?” Others recoil: “Oh, it has a bar code!” (or “a taxpayer ID number!” or some other such thing). How are we to regard this? How are we to evaluate all these things? The apostle Paul evaluates them as follows: the strong are those who know that nothing in this world can defile anything else. For the Christian all things are pure. He is a strong man, and he knows the plans of God. But this does not imply that one may eat food sacrificed to idols. In several chapters the apostle Paul explains why one ought not to eat food sacrificed to idols. His logic is this: firstly, he says that the gravest sin is when a person leads weak believers into temptation. Secondly, it is when a person begins interacting with demons.

The general rule is this: we may not eat meat sacrificed to idols. For example, suppose you have a Tatar, Chechen, or Dagestanian neighbor, and it is the feast of Kurban Bayrami. They slaughter a sheep and offer you a piece of meat. If you know that the meat was sacrificed, you may not eat it. If you do not know that the meat was sacrificed, eat it without questioning. In the same way, if Jews come to you and offer you matzo, you should not eat it. For this will be deliberate participation in a Jewish holiday. If you simply stop by an office somewhere and are invited to have coffee and cookies, eat them without question. Even if it is matzo, it will by no means defile you. This is the general rule, which the apostle goes on to describe throughout several chapters.

Further on we read this: *Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. But if any man love God, the same is known of him. As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For*

*though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God, the Father, of Whom are all things, and we in Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom are all things, and we by Him. Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled (1 Cor. 8:1–7).*

We all have knowledge concerning things offered to idols. What knowledge? The knowledge that there is one sole Creator of the Universe: the Holy Trinity. There are no other gods in the world. Not Perun, not Zeus—none. They do not exist as gods, as beings worthy of honor, who created man or have any authoritative influence over his fate. No such gods exist. And these idols—the lumps of wood, chunks of stone, pictures, and hunks of metal which are worshiped—these are mere meaningless objects. They cannot help a person, but they are also unable to harm him. This is the attitude that Christians as well as Jews have always held toward them. For this reason the prophet Jeremiah said, *Bats, swallows, and birds alight on their bodies and heads; and so do cats.*



*From this you will know that they are not gods; so do not fear them. ... Gods made of wood and overlaid with silver and gold are unable to save themselves from thieves or robbers. Anyone who can will strip them of their gold and silver and of the robes they wear, and go off with this booty, and they will not be able to help themselves (Letter of Jeremiah 1:21–22, 57–58).*

Idols are not to be feared; idols are mere shells. This is the most terrible deception the devil has worked: when a person begins to reverence as God the works of his own hands. Can you fathom the madness of this?

*We all have knowledge*, says the apostle Paul, and then goes on: “But knowledge puffs up with smoke” (translated literally). Hence the translation, *But knowledge puffeth up* (1 Cor. 8:1).

In Russian what is the root of the term *nadmenie* (“being puffed up”)? *Dym* (smoke). Puffed up, then, means puffed up with smoke. This is why when a person says he knows much, he becomes puffed up in just this way: “Oh, I know so much! I’m so smart! Oh, how smart I am!”

But while knowledge puffs up, *charity* (i.e., love) *edifieth* (1 Cor. 8:1).

The apostle does not say that it *humbles*, but rather that it *edifies*. That is, love builds people up. Knowledge in and of itself only makes people arrogant, puffed up, conceited, permeated with an internal stench. It is no accident that the word *demon* means “knower”—one who has knowledge, but has lost love. This is why the demons cannot build anything. It is love that builds. Love builds the house of the soul! Love builds the Church! It is through love that many people of all different kinds are able to accommodate each other. The fact is, in a sense we have an ideal parish: our membership is not at all limited to any given segment of society. We have journalists, film directors, chauffeurs, cleaning ladies, teachers, young people, old people ... This means that we have a normal church community. God forbid that we should be a special-interest club! We would then be a sect, not a parish. A true parish is made up of people of all kinds.

Aristotle said, “A city is a unity of unlikes.” This parish must be a unity of unlikes. The whole Church itself is a unity of people who are unlike—people of all different backgrounds, with all different pasts, with all different

presents, united in a common love for God. This is a wonderful choir, created by the Holy Spirit. Our parish is a small particle of the vast universal body, where no one asks your nationality, or your ethnic background, or where you work. They ask, “Do you believe in God? Do you believe correctly? Are you Orthodox? Do you not commit iniquities, and do you live a godly life?”

Do you know how normal people ought to greet each other—how they greet each other on Athos? There are two variations of greeting: “How goes your salvation?” and “How goes your prayer?” For the Athonites two things are important: how your salvation is coming, and how you are praying. These two things are interlinked. Prayer is inseparably linked with salvation. The apostle goes on to say that *charity edifieth*, i.e., builds up, making all Christians into a single cohesive building: the house of the living God.

“If knowledge is not joined to love, it produces pride. Knowledge has need of love. Whoever loves, being one who fulfills the greatest of all the commandments, though he should have any deficiencies, through love he will swiftly acquire knowledge” [2].

How very interesting: love is a tool for acquiring knowledge! There are mysteries you cannot solve with your head, yet through love and prayer you can solve any mystery. This is why the apostle says that love edifies, i.e., builds up. *But whoever has knowledge without love not only acquires nothing, but frequently loses even what he has.* A person who knows but does not love will later lose his faith as well, and consequently his knowledge.

“Knowledge distances love from the inattentive person, begetting pride and arrogance in him. Pride produces division, but love unites. I do not forbid you, he says, to have perfect knowledge, but along with it I command you to have love. Otherwise it will be not only useless, but even harmful. Why are you proud of knowledge? If you do not have love it will do you harm, for what is worse than pride? But if you have love, knowledge will also serve you well, for whoever better knows his neighbor and loves him will not exalt himself, but will communicate the same to him” [2].

Observe how interesting his logic is: when a person has both knowledge and love he is able to share this with his neighbor. He will not exalt

himself above the person who does not know, but will support him. C.S. Lewis<sup>9</sup> noted that when he grew up and became an adult (as opposed to his time in school) he saw that the busiest people were often the most considerate. The humblest people are the quickest to respond to your call for help. And Lewis says that when he became a professor he hardly ever had to go digging for knowledge on his own: even the busiest people would share their knowledge. This is actually a sign of spiritual maturity in people. When a person is wrapped up in himself, constantly seeking validation, he conceals everything: God forbid that someone else should find out

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<sup>9</sup> *Editor's note:* Clive Staples Lewis (November 29, 1898, Belfast, Ireland—November 22, 1963, Oxford, England). English writer, scholar, and theologian. Known for his works on medieval literature and Christian apologetics, as well as his fictional fantasy works. Lewis was baptized as an infant in the Anglican Church in Ireland, but as a teenager lost interest in religion. Thanks to his friend J. R. R. Tolkien, at the age of 32 Lewis returned to the Anglican Church. His faith had a profound influence on his literary works, and Lewis gained world renown through his radio shows on Christian topics during World War II.

or accomplish something before I do! But the Christian does not care who accomplishes what. If a thing is worth doing, it does not matter who does it. What matters is that God is glorified. A person like this will be equally glad over a cathedral that he himself built and a cathedral built by someone else. This is a very important trait, since it shows the link between love and knowledge.

“For this reason in saying *knowledge puffeth up* he added *but charity edifieth*. He did not say that it humbles; rather, he expressed something far more important and beneficial. Just as knowledge not only puffs up, but also produces division, so also the opposite effects are typical of love” [2]. The apostle goes on to add, *And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know* (1 Cor. 8:2).

There is an illness known as neophytism, but there is an even more serious illness: counter-neophytism.<sup>10</sup> People like this say, “We know all this already. Why bother us with this? We’ve been through it all; we’ve known all this for ages!” This

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<sup>10</sup> *Editor’s note:* Neophyte (from the ancient Greek νεόφυτος, *recently planted*)—one newly converted.

is what the apostle is speaking of. If you think you know enough, you know nothing! Though Theophan speaks severely of this here, he speaks the truth: even in ordinary matters there is nothing about which we know everything. “For the simplest subjects have many aspects that are beyond explanation, and the more a person learns, the more mysteries, secrets, and misunderstandings he encounters. We have examples before us: how do we see? How do we hear? How do we speak?” [2].

A person cannot learn all there is to know. This is the more true in questions of things divine. When speaking of God, how can you say you know all there is to know about something? And if a person says, “Oh, I already know everything; I don’t need these basics,” he is a fool. The basics are what one needs most of all! It is the basics that must be probed. We must not get hung up on the basics; rather we must scrutinize them. People say, “We know that God is a Trinity.” Tell me, then, what is this Trinity?! It is, in fact, an abyss that we could spend centuries examining. Tell me, how did God become man? Can you describe in detail the properties of Christ’s divine nature, the properties of Christ’s

human nature, how all this pertains to us, how our redemption was accomplished? Yet people amass superficial knowledge and then go about saying they understand everything. This is why the sage said that a little knowledge distances us from God, while abundant knowledge draws us closer to Him. It is precisely the worst students who say they know everything.

“By this the apostle showed that the Corinthians not only did not have love, but also lacked knowledge, yet since they ascribed it to themselves they thought highly of themselves. But he makes this accusation generally, since he wishes rather to heal than to strike down” [2].

The apostle then goes on to say a most interesting phrase, which is incorrectly translated into Russian as follows: “But if any man love God, the same is given knowledge of Him.” In the original and in the Slavonic translations the text reads differently: *But if any man love God, the same is known of Him*, i.e., by Him (1 Cor. 8:3).

This contains a highly important principle: you wish to have knowledge of God, but it is far better for God to know you. Whoever loves God has not received knowledge from Him, but has rather been known by God Himself. What does



this mean? Naturally, in one sense God knows everything: He knows all men without exception, and He knows all the thoughts of men—sinners and righteous, good and evil.

But in another sense Scripture says, *For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, and the way of the ungodly shall perish* (Ps. 1:6).

To know means to participate in something. You do not know a person until you have eaten a peck of salt with him. This refers to the involvement of God's mind in a person's life. When a person loves God, his life is imbued with the mind of God. God Himself thinks through a person's thoughts, He thinks through a person's life, and He lays his paths for him. He knows a person in another sense: the sense of communion—communion of the heart of God with the heart of man. This is far greater, far more important than ordinary knowledge. Why should I bother knowing all kinds of facts if God does not know me?

In Russian there is an expression: "He doesn't want to know me," meaning "He wants nothing to do with me." Theophan the Recluse explains: "What then does it mean 'to be known of God'? Inasmuch as God knows everything, to

say that a person is known of God must therefore be understood to mean some particularity of knowledge, just as when someone sees everything, but looks at one thing in particular. The prophet says that *the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous*. This means that He looks at it with special attention and watches over it, taking particular care for it, as may be seen from what follows: *and the way of the ungodly shall perish*, being cast off and ignored, as it were, by the Lord. In this same way God knows one that loves Him, knowing him in the sense that He takes particular care for him, or, to put it another way, loves him. We find that whoever loves God is known of Him, i.e., is under His special care as one of His own, and is beloved of Him. If one who loves God lives in God, then God, of Whom he who loves Him is beloved, abides in him. One who loves God abides in God, and God abides in Him. Is this not what the apostle wished to say? We are accustomed to place too high a value on knowledge, and we think that the apostle, who rebuked our knowledge, ought to show us the path to it. But the apostle cares only for life, not for knowledge” [2].

For the apostle it is life, and not knowledge, that matters! It is more important for a person

to live the life of God, not for him to possess theoretical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge is a good thing when it is incorporated into divine life. But when it is not it becomes useless and pointless. “For this reason,” Theophan continues, “in rebuking knowledge, did he not intend to say that knowledge alone, without love, puffs one up, nor does it even exist in perfect form? Suppose someone asks: what am I to do? Where am I to obtain knowledge? To this I say to you: cast off all your care for knowledge. Love God, and be beloved of Him; that is all. This is your goal! There is nowhere further to go, and there is nothing greater to be desired” [2].

In what sense are we to “cast off knowledge”? Stop perceiving knowledge as an end in itself. For example, during bible classes you obtain certain knowledge from God, knowledge of how to understand the Word of God, and you go away with theoretical data. But of what use to you is this knowledge? You will only have more to answer for at the Last Judgment! This is quite obvious: if you knew something and did not do it, more is required of you. It is another matter when we need knowledge for life and for love. Then this knowledge becomes useful. Knowledge must

always be put to practical use. For this reason in ancient times there was a saying: “Read the teachings of the fathers by your deeds.” If you hear something, do it.

The apostle says, *As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one* (1 Cor. 8:4).

“Yes, the strong are right in that God is indeed the only true ruler of the world,” says the apostle. “And an idol is nothing in the world. It can do no one any harm.” For this reason when Christians happened upon a wooden idol they would take an axe, chop it into pieces, and put it to practical use: they would feed the stove with it. If they saw an idol made of gold, they had no fear of it, but would carefully break it into pieces, melt it down, and make it into coins. For this reason when Christians see the temple of an idol, if it can be transformed into a Christian temple they do so. If it cannot, they tear it down and build a new temple.

You may know that beneath the Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kremlin there used to be an enormous temple of Veles. There, I believe, fifteen horse heads were found lying in a circle

on the site where the altar would have been. Christians came and built a Christian temple on the site of the pagan one. Similarly, in Moscow not far from the Kashirskaya metro station lies the village of Dyakovo, where the Church of the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist also stands on the site of a pagan temple. In short, Christians were not at all perturbed by idols. An even more amusing example of the Christian attitude toward idols may be found in Kozelsk. In the courtyard of the museum of local history stands a cross. If you look closely you can make out an image on it: it was once an idol. The Christians felt it would be a shame to let such a good stone go to waste! They took the idol and carved it into a cross, blessed it, and placed it there. This is a normal, relaxed attitude towards idols. An idol is nothing in the world; it has no magical power.

Incidentally, the apostle writes hardly anything about sorcery; he barely mentions it. Do you know why pagans constantly talk of sorcery, the evil eye, and hexes, while the apostle has very little to say on the subject? It is because when a person is with Christ he fears nothing. The apostle says that if a person lives with God,

with Holy Communion, nothing whatsoever can harm him, since, he adds, *there is none other God but one* (1 Cor. 8:4).

#### A SULLIED CONSCIENCE

The sole Lord of heaven and earth is God. There are no other gods; consequently, nothing on earth occurs without the will of God. Everything that occurs is by the will of the Almighty Lord God. War and peace, misfortunes and joys—all these things occur by the hand of God. All rulers are appointed by the hand of God—all without exception. He holds all things in His mighty right hand, and nothing can escape it, neither devil nor angel. Many think that the devil is God's co-ruler. This is nonsense and an error. There is no God but one.

*For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God, the Father, of Whom are all things, and we in Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom are all things, and we by Him,* writes the apostle (1 Cor. 8:5–6).

In other words, though there may be so-called gods—whether in heaven or on earth,

since there are many gods and many lords—nevertheless we have one God the Father, from Whom are all things, and we are in Him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom all things are, and we through Him.

Thus, there are so-called gods—beings who are passed off as gods, and whom men worship as gods. For example, what gods are there in the heavens? The stars, the sun, and the moon. But are they actually gods? No. The gods on earth are deified people (e.g., the corpse of “Comrade” Lenin) and demons that walk the earth. But are these really gods? No, they are not gods. There are many beings that are passed off as gods and lords, but this is error, lies, and fraud.

In actuality, according to our faith and according to the Revelation we have received from God, we know that there is one God: the Father. There is one God Who is the Father of Christ, and also our Father, from Whom are all things, and by Whose will all things have their being. God the Father created absolutely everything according to His will. But note that He did not only create in the past. The soul of each of us, our own personal soul, was personally created by God the Father. And who creates the

body? Once again, it is personally created by God the Father, Who molded us through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Frequently we give no thought to this. Yet this is a mystery, a wondrous miracle: God has personally touched each of us! This is a wonder of wonders!

According to our faith, according to what we know, *there is but one Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom are all things, and we by Him* (1 Cor. 8:6).

In other words, we are inclined toward Him: He is our goal, and we must go toward God the Father. The goal of Christian life is to stand face to face before God the Father. This is why Christ came: to lead us to the Father.

*No man cometh unto the Father, but by Me*, said the Lord (Jn. 14:6).

He leads us to God, His Father, and we must come to our Father, *and we in Him*—i.e., we are inclined toward Him. “And so, pass over all these pseudo-gods; ignore them,” says the apostle Paul. “Why pay them any attention?”

Frequently one encounters people who say that they have been bewitched, hexed, poisoned with gas, and the like—a popular sort of lunacy. What does the apostle say regarding this? Pay no attention to it whatsoever! Your task is to go



toward God the Father, to strive toward Him. He created you, so go toward Him: why pay attention to various petty little demigods? Then there is political alarmism: “There’s a Masonic conspiracy afoot! What will become of us?!” What is the proper answer to this? We are created by God the Father, and to God the Father we will go! Why should we fear that which here, on earth, is merely temporary? Our direct route to God the Father is Christ.

The apostle continues: *And one Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom are all things, and we by Him* (1 Cor. 8:6).

What does “by Whom are all things” mean? It means that all things are created by God the Father through Jesus Christ, and for this reason we say of Christ, “by Whom all things were made” (in the Symbol of Faith).

By Him all things came into being. The Father created all things by His Son, Who is equally God with Him: God of God, Son of the Father, Light of Light, Who created all things by the will of the Father. But He created them as an equal, not as a tool to be used. “And we by Him.” What does this mean? It means that through Him we go toward the Father. Through Him we

are saved, through Him we are freed from slavery to the enemy, we are freed from the idols of this world, and through Him we turn to the Creator, to God our Father. For this reason all things must be inclined specifically toward God.

“Here you have begun to quarrel, the strong mocking the weak, the weak judging the strong.” We see the same thing happening today: one person says a tax ID number defiles a person, and whoever has one bears the mark of the antichrist. Others mock him: You’re all simpletons, they say; whoever refuses a tax ID number may not commune at all. It is just as it was then in Corinth, but for a different reason. This is why the apostle says, “None of this matters at all! Nothing can harm you, nothing whatsoever, if you are with God! There are no other gods or lords. There is only God the Father, Who created us and Who draws us to Himself; there is Christ, by Whom all things are created and Who saved us. Look to Them! Do not look to this earth!” Let us inscribe this concept in our hearts, and may the love of Jesus be with us, that we may fear no one but God alone!

Thus, the eighth chapter is dedicated to the question of food sacrificed to idols: may one eat

what is consecrated to an idol, or not? Part of the Christians of Corinth reasoned as follows: an idol is nothing in the world; an idol is a lump of wood, a block of stone, a heap of metal, or whatever the case may be, and as such it can neither harm nor benefit anyone. This is why one may eat what has been sacrificed to idols like any other food. So said those people who considered themselves perfect. At the same time, many people who had only recently left paganism believed that the idol itself actually possessed certain magical powers. For these latter, then, this was a temptation.

In what sense was it a temptation? They saw that those who were more perfect ate any food, and so they themselves did what was contrary to their conscience. Their conscience said, "Do not eat that food!" But the neophytes replied, "Oh, it doesn't matter; those who are more perfect eat it, and so will I." But then they suffered pangs of conscience. The result was that they sinned by going against their conscience—not because the food sacrificed to idols defiled them in and of itself, but because their conscience defiled them. They had acted contrary to their conscience. This is why the apostle says that there is no God but one in this world, and that all other gods are

false gods, frauds. There is none but God the Father, from Whom all things are, and none but Christ, through Whom we have been redeemed, and we are destined for Him.

But the apostle continues: *Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse. But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; and through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend* (1 Cor. 8:7–13).

Here the apostle gives a general rule: we must try not to offend the sensitivities of those around us over neutral matters. This is a very important principle, because unfortunately

today we very frequently encounter precisely what the apostle was so vigorously polemicizing against: how people with knowledge begin exalting themselves over those who are weak in the faith, over people who are ignorant in the faith. “We’re so well-educated, we know so much, we can do whatever we want. As for the others, they can do as they please: if they want to, let them; if not, they don’t have to.” This approach is naturally foreign to Christ, foreign to the Gospel, and completely unsuitable for Christians. For this reason the apostle says, “Not everyone has that knowledge [the knowledge that you have, that an idol is nothing in the world]: for some, accustomed to the idol, even now eat this as food offered to an idol.” What does “accustomed to the idol” mean? It means that, regarding the idol as a living being, they eat what was sacrificed to the idol. “And their conscience being weak is defiled.”

*Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled (1 Cor. 8:7).*

Thus, by imitating the strong who know that idols are nothing in the world, people who are weak eat what was sacrificed to the idols and

think that by so doing one can serve both God and the idols at once. And their conscience is defiled by this syncretism, since they combine service to the true God with service to a false god.<sup>11</sup> In this way their hearts are defiled. Due to what? Due to the bad example shown by the experts, who think that for them no food can distance them from God. Indeed, the strong are correct in the sense that the idol in and of itself is naturally incapable of defiling anything. Food in and of itself cannot be defiled or undefiled. In the tenth chapter the apostle describes this in detail, and says that if a sacrifice was offered to an idol but a person was not aware of this, it does not defile that person. Food in and of itself holds no demonic power. It holds demonic power specifically when a person knows that this sacrifice was offered to idols. It is this kind of spiritual omnivorousness that harms knowledge, and not the food itself, because it is not food that is the problem, but syncretism—mixing worship of the true God with idol worship. This is

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<sup>11</sup> *Editor's note.* Religious syncretism (from the Greek συζρητισμός *union, combination*) is an amalgamation of various religious teachings that ignores their differences and contradictions.

impermissible; it is a sin against the second commandment.

Here too the apostle says that their conscience is defiled: *their conscience being weak is defiled* (1 Cor. 8:7).

“Theodoret says, ‘It is not eating that defiles; rather, the conscience is defiled by not receiving perfect knowledge, but rather being still enthralled with idolatrous delusion.’ And Chrysostom adds that some ‘did not yet know clearly that *an idol is nothing in the world*. They still tremble at idols, he says. For tell me not of the present establishment, and that you have received the true religion from your ancestors. But carry back your thoughts to those times, and consider when the Gospel was just set on foot, and impiety was still at its height, and altars burning, and sacrifices and libations offering up, and the greater part of men were pagans; think, I say, of those who from their ancestors had received impiety, and who were the descendants of fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers like themselves, and who had suffered great miseries from the demons. How must they have felt after their sudden change! How would they fear and tremble at the assaults of the demons!’” [2].

Formerly people were afraid of idols: “In that place there is a very powerful image, a powerful statue! We should treat it carefully just in case.” People grew up with this kind of dark superstition.

Today we understand this better. Do you know where people stand waiting in line in our own Kolomenskoye? At the Grandmother Stone! There is a pagan rock to which people go seeking fertility, asking the fiends to make them fertile! Complete rubbish! They go to an old rock asking for children, as though a stone could give one children. Insane! But people want this, and they stand in line for it. And how many people in Tsaritsino latch themselves onto trees to draw energy from them! And so it is that people with this kind of conscience come and see people eating food sacrificed to idols. And they find themselves in conflict with their conscience. Their conscience is afraid of these hunks of rock. The person has just been baptized, but he is afraid of the lump of rock, afraid of the piece of wood, afraid of the stars, afraid of everything—and here he is invited to dabble in the same things again.

The apostle continues: “But food will not present us to God. If we do not eat, we will not



find ourselves in need; and if we do eat, we will not find ourselves with plenty.”

*But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse* (1 Cor. 8:8).

Food will not present us blameless before God. The apostle says that food is of no consequence. It will not present you before God; it will not make you closer to God. For this reason the apostle says that if you do not eat you acquire no merit, and if you do eat you also acquire no merit.

Theophan the Recluse explains this as follows: “You who are strong in mind eat of food sacrificed to idols and are not defiled, because you are confident that in so doing you are not participating in idol worship. But your example may lead astray those who are infirm, who have no such convictions and, not having them, by eating food sacrificed to idols they offend their Christian conscience and are defiled. And defilement of the conscience is the downfall of the soul. Thus, through your intelligence you cause the downfall of your brother, and in so doing you sin in Christ. Therefore abstain. But they could have said: ‘What does that have to do

with us?’ ‘Let them explain their understanding of the matter!’ But this would have led to stubbornness and hardness of heart. To prevent this the apostle says at the outset: Eating or not eating is no great matter in the eyes of God” [2].

A few years ago a certain newspaper printed the words: “Today, in our own time, you can save your soul by doing just one thing! If you reject the tax ID number you are already in paradise; you are already saved.” You may not keep any of the other commandments, but you are already saved—guaranteed! This is insanity! This is precisely what the apostle is talking about: food neither brings us closer to God nor distances us from Him. If you have a tax ID number, it is of no consequence; you have done no harm to your soul. And if you reject the tax ID number you have done no harm to your soul. But if a person is sincerely convinced that the tax ID number is the mark of the antichrist and still accepts it, he defiles his conscience. He commits a sin. Not because the tax ID number is a sin or the mark of the antichrist, but because the person is going against his conscience. For example, if I sincerely believe that taking the metro is equivalent to accepting the mark of the

antichrist, I will be sinning by taking the metro. The problem lies not with the metro, but with my conscience. I will be committing a sin against myself. This is the reason. The apostle says that one should not quarrel or argue over things of no consequence.

This is extremely important, because due to the quarrels that have arisen over the tax ID number, which to some extent continue to this day, people begin to curse each other, abuse each other, and the like. But we ought not to behave in this way, precisely because food neither draws us closer nor distances us from God. All these things are external: they do not make us closer to God, and they do not distance us farther from God.

“The apostle reasons thus: You who boast of your lofty intelligence and clear understanding of the matter, do not think that you are doing anything of value in the sight of God by eating the remnants of sacrifices to idols. This in no way increases your pleasingness to God, which is attained by good works. Nor must you think that those who do not eat these foods are diminished thereby in the eyes of God. No, their pleasingness to God, which is acquired in another way,

suffers no injury or loss thereby. From this we may see how little basis there is to apply these words of the apostle to the fasts!” [2].

#### THE LAW OF ANTI-NIETZSCHE

For this reason the apostle goes on to say, *But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak* (1 Cor. 8:9).

We must learn to support each other, and not use our intellect and our knowledge with an attitude of “I do as I please, period!” This is in fact cruel and neglectful of one’s neighbors, which is not pleasing to Christ. If I start excommunicating people who have a tax ID number or who have rejected the tax ID number, I will not be serving Christ to any profit. One who rejects the tax ID number does not sin, and one who has a tax ID number does not sin. This is a completely inconsequential matter, as long as people have love for each other. Where there is no love, where there is hatred, where there is malice and arrogance, there people are distanced from God. This is why the apostle says, “See that you do not cause the downfall of others by your deeds!”

And Chrysostom adds, “Neither said he, ‘To the brethren,’ but, ‘To those of the brethren who are weak,’ enhancing his accusation from their not even sparing the weak, and those too their brethren. For let it be so that you correct them not, nor arouse them: yet why trip them up, and make them to stumble, when you ought to stretch out the hand? But for that you have no mind: well then, at least avoid casting them down. For if he is wicked, he requires punishment, but if he is weak, he requires healing” [2].

This is a very important rule—the law of Anti-Nietzsche. The law of Nietzsche is “kick a man when he is down,” but that of Christians is “help the weak man to his feet!” We must lift up the weakest of our brothers with love. We must not rejoice when someone leaves the Church. We must not rejoice when someone goes into schism or heresy. We suffer pain and regret when people leave the Church. This is why I believe that the joy of those who rejoice when schismatics (the followers of Diomedes and others) separate from the Church is not the joy of Christ. For Christ is pained when schismatics separate from the Church. Likewise, the joy of those who are

delighted when sectarians are imprisoned is also not the joy of Christ. Christ is grieved that the sectarian is in a sect instead of in the Church. For the majority of sectarians are our brethren, baptized in the Orthodox Church. These people are our brethren who have gone astray, weak, infirm, wounded by sin, and we must raise them up to the Orthodox faith, raising them up to communion with the Church of God. We must raise them with love, not thrust them down. This is a very important rule of the holy apostle.

*For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols? (1 Cor. 8:10).*

You prompt this kind of person to this behavior by your own example. "And this temptation occurs not only due to his infirmity, but also due to your folly, for you make him still more infirm" [2].

*And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? (1 Cor. 8:11).*

Frightening, is it not? Through your knowledge and pridefulness your weakest brother perishes, for whom Christ died! Did the Lord die just to have you push your brother away from

Him? Did He die just to have you push a person away from Almighty God by your neutral actions? For the sake of a few insignificant acts, for the sake of some insignificant food, his conscience was defiled. How frequently people pay attention to inconsequential things, forgetting the most important law of all!

Remember the words of the Lord: *You ... have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith* (Mt. 23:23).

Frequently we hear people say, "One who is not a monarchist cannot be a Christian." But why he cannot remains a mystery. Others, on the contrary, say that all monarchists are pagans and idol-worshippers. What makes them idol-worshippers and pagans? If a person incites a revolt against a monarchy, he is a rebel, he has broken his oath, he is a traitor, and he is going against the express commandment of God. But what does it matter what he considers greater or lesser in earthly matters, which are guaranteed to end? Naturally, a person sins if he believes that the government is not from God, whether it be a monarchy or some other form of government. He sins because he believes wrongly. But all other cases are neutral. Political preferences, unless

they cause a person to be carried away by evil, evil systems or evil heresies, are of no consequence. But if you use this pretense to push people out of the Church, this is of course disgraceful.

Another example is the question of what calendar to serve by. In Optina Hermitage there was a case when a Greek archimandrite came to pray to God and to venerate the relics of Saint Ambrose, and three sweet old ladies shoved him out of the church with mops on the pretext that he was a new calendarist. Do you think they behaved rightly? A fine thing indeed: shoving their own brother in Christ, a priest(!), out of the church with mops on the pretext that he celebrates Christ's Nativity on a different day than we do! This is a case of insanity. As we know, firstly, new calendarists do not serve according to the Gregorian calendar, but according to the New Julian calendar; and secondly, they do not violate the most important canon, the one regarding Pascha, which unites all Christians. And although the new calendar is inferior to the old calendar, because it compromises the liturgical structure of the Typicon, it is not sinful. Being inferior does not make a thing a sin! For example, marriage is inferior to monasticism,



but that does not make marriage a sin. Marriage is a beautiful sacrament, established by God. The Liturgy served by the Greeks is beautiful: it is the Liturgy established by God, the true Body and Blood of the Lord.

This is precisely the case of which the apostle is speaking when he says, “See, you are sinning against the Blood of the Lord.”

Theophan the Recluse says this: “He shall perish, for by going against his conscience he sins. It may even be that by participating in the meal of the demons he will fall away from the faith entirely and will turn again to idol worship. If a man falls, he has perished until he repents; but if he falls away he has perished completely. And the cause is your own intellect: you look at things rationally, but you act irrationally based on your rational views. And your brother perishes—your brother for whom Christ died. A striking reminder! Your brother has already received the cleansing, sanctifying action of the death of Christ, and the drops of the blood of the Lord were upon him unto salvation. Yet you cast him into his former impurity, and together with him trample upon this saving, priceless blood. Are you not horrified by this?”

Chrysostom likewise adds: “For there are two things which deprive you of excuse in this mischief; one, that he is weak, the other, that he is your brother: rather, I should say, there is a third also, and one more terrible than all. What then is this? That whereas Christ refused not even to die for him, you cannot bear even to accommodate yourself to him. ... And he said not, ‘For whom even to die was your duty;’ but what is much stronger, that even Christ died for his sake. Did your Lord then not refuse to die for him, and do you so make him of none account as not even to abstain from a polluted table for his sake? Yea, do you permit him to perish, after the salvation so wrought, and, what is still more grievous, ‘for a morsel of meat?’” [2].

This is what Chrysostom says. It is a very important precept: do not try to stand on principle over things that are of no consequence. Christians must be unprincipled. In what sense? We have the Lord’s commandments. These are the only principles of a Christian: holy faith and the holy commandments. There is no need for any other earthly principles. This is precisely why the Church refuses to deify anything earthly. One must not judge one’s neighbors

over food or other earthly things. Just look at how “lovingly” Orthodox Christians address each other on the Internet—so lovingly they sometimes have to be banned from forums! People treat their neighbors as though they were enemies of the human race that should be ground into powder, all over some insignificant matter or disagreement. No Jew or no atheist will ever merit such a stream of abuse as does your brother in Christ whose teaching differs slightly from your own opinions. In so doing you are ignoring the explicit words of the apostle Paul, which shows your neglect and disdain for the blood of the Lord. Sometimes we think, “Oh, it doesn’t matter. So what if I did shower someone with abuse? Everyone does now and then!” Yet you may have caused that person to go against his conscience. He may become furious and start abusing others also, or he may begin to doubt his faith.

The apostle continues: *But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ* (1 Cor. 8:12).

You sin against Christ Himself by your own acts, by your terrible, impermissible, criminal indifference to your brethren.

*Wherefore, if meat [i.e., food] make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend (1 Cor. 8:13).*

How severely he speaks! “No, I will never again eat meat, so as not to offend my brother! I will even give up meat, lest he think I am eating food sacrificed to idols.” This naturally does not mean that eating meat is sinful or forbidden. One may eat meat. This means that if my brother has any suspicion that I am eating something sacrificed to idols, and this offends his sensitivities, I will try to restrain myself, that I may never commit a sin over insignificant neutral matters. Saint Basil the Great wrote: if I sin and thereby tempt my brother to sin, I sin doubly, i.e., by the sin itself and by causing temptation. If I do something neutral and know that thereby I offend my brother, I sin against my brother. But if I do good and my brother is offended at this, it is my brother’s problem. If I act according to the commandments and my brother is offended at this, the problem is his, because we must not be pleasers of men. When the question is directly related to keeping the commandments, that is one thing. Neutral matters, which neither

draw us closer nor distance us from God, are quite another.

Saint Theophan quotes Chrysostom: “This is like the best of teachers, to teach in his own person the things which he speaks. Nor did he say whether justly or unjustly; but in any case. ‘I say not,’ such is his tone, ‘meat offered in sacrifice to an idol, which is already prohibited for another reason; but if any even of those things which are within license and are permitted causes stumbling, from these also will I abstain: and not one or two days, but all the time of my life.’ For he says, ‘I will eat no flesh for ever.’ And he said not, ‘Lest I destroy my brother,’ but simply, ‘That I make not my brother to stumble’ (1 Cor. 8:13)” [2].

The apostle is afraid not only to destroy his brother, but even to offend him, lest he cause him to stumble and be perturbed. Observe how attentively we must care for our neighbors. We must care for them, and not say, “We know so much, we are so advanced, we are so savvy! Let them learn for themselves; there is no sense wasting time on weaklings.” This is Nietzscheism, not Christianity. “For indeed,” adds Chrysostom, “it comes of folly in the extreme that what

things are greatly cared for by Christ, and such as He should have even chosen to die for them, these we should esteem so entirely beneath our notice as not even to abstain from food on their account. Now these things might be seasonably spoken not to [the Corinthians] only, but also to us, apt as we are to esteem lightly the salvation of our neighbors and to utter those satanical words. I say, satanical: for the expression, ‘What care I, though such an one stumble, and such another perish?’ savors of his cruelty and inhuman mind. And yet in that instance, the infirmity also of those who were offended had some share in the result: but in our case it is not so, sinning as we do in such a way as to offend even the strong” [2].

Do you see how terrible this is? Satanic cruelty and inhumanity. If I do not try to convert all those around me to Christianity, my behavior is satanically cruel and inhumane. If I see a Jew and do not try to bring him to baptism, my behavior is satanically cruel and inhumane. If I see a Muslim or a sectarian and do not bring them to baptism, my behavior is satanically cruel and inhumane. Hence, let us learn to behave gently toward our neighbors! Otherwise nothing good or kind will come of this.

I have become convinced that the words of John the Theologian are absolutely true: *If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God Whom he hath not seen?* (1 Jn. 4:20).

If you begin berating your brother whom you can actually see, calling him names, attempting in irritation and anger to find some fault in him, how can you love God Whom you do not see? You will not even know Him! A person who does not love his brothers loses the ability to come to know God. Incidentally, this also pertains to those whose knowledge of God is theoretical. A person may have a superb theological education, but if he treats his brothers without love, treats the weak without condescension, and makes no attempt to condescend to the infirmities of the infirm, he will lose this knowledge. It will fly right out of him—as they say, use it or lose it. For a person who does not learn how to care for the weak, who does not learn how to maintain peace and love among Christians, will inevitably lose the Lord God Himself as well. This is guaranteed. We must learn what the apostle Paul spoke of.

These words are remarkable and very applicable to our time: people should not be divided over insignificant matters, and a person should not boast of his knowledge. Remember, knowledge “puffs one up” with smoke, but love builds up the house. Learn to love, and may the mercy of God be with you!



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*Translator's note:* This bibliography has been revised to reflect the English sources used in producing this translation. Scriptural texts are from the King James Version, with rare exceptions when another version better matched the original Russian, and with the exception of the psalms, taken from *The Psalter According to the Seventy*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline, MA. All texts here listed from Christian Literature Publishing Co. are taken from [www.NewAdvent.org](http://www.NewAdvent.org), revised for that site by Kevin Knight and used with permission, with occasional minor revisions by Dcn. Nathan Wiliams.

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