

12-1-19 We Need to Live a Life that is Pleasing to God
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In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I pray that all of you had a wonderful Thanksgiving, time together, and abundance of food, joy, and fellowship together in your families. If for some reason you didn't, make a plan for making it better next year. If you were alone, you shouldn't be. Find your friends and your family, at least the family members of this church to join them. If there was any family tensions, work on it this year. Sometimes Thanksgiving can be quite a ruckus for families, particularly outside of the church where we get together and old wounds are provoked and personalities that conflict and haven't forgiven each other find themselves in tension once again, but I pray that that was not the experience of anyone here. That instead we enjoyed the company of each other, the fellowship that we can offer each other, the loyalty, the support, the love.

When we gather, as I reminded all of us on Thanksgiving Day, that when we gather the church here in the temple for the Divine Liturgy, particularly, we are coming to give thanks, we are coming to be moved into the Eucharistic experience, that our experience of communing of Christ, body and blood would not only be unto the remission of sins and eternal life, which we pray every time we put the Communion into somebody's mouth, but that also our hearts would be filled with joy in thanksgiving, gratitude towards God for everything that He has given to us. And that is the experience of Divine Liturgy that we are to be striving to enter into, that is the eucharistic experience that we are longing to have at every Liturgy that we anticipate happening.

I think it's important once in a while that we reflect a little bit on what has just happened now in the Liturgy. We've gathered together, we have sung together various songs and hymns, reminding us of the themes of the day, the resurrection of Christ that we are celebrating every Sunday, also, being in the Nativity fast. And when we come to, say, the Epistle reading, there are things that happen that are so common and regular in our worship that we probably don't pay much attention to them anymore. Like before the Epistle reading, the command, the encouragement being called out, 'Wisdom! let us attend.' Let us be attentive. There's an experience of wisdom that is about to happen. Pay attention.

Before the Gospel reading, the priest comes out and he says to you, "Peace be to you. Peace be to you." Why? Why are we encouraged to accept and receive the peace that God gives to us before the Gospel is read? We realize once again, even though it's happening in every service, sometimes we wonder why there's so many readings. Every time the Epistle is presented to us, every time the Gospel is presented to us, we are to be gaining spiritual wisdom and we are to have peace in what God has said and what he has delivered to us. And when I stopped and I read the Epistle reading for this morning, I hope you were listening to it, that we find great, great news from the Apostle Paul writing to the Ephesians. That the struggle between God and man had gone on from the time of Adam and Eve through the whole Old Testament until the coming of Christ.

the struggle between God and man, the wall of enmity that had developed particularly with the giving of the law in the Old Testament where man knows that he is separated from God. I always like to point out that when we look at the history of the human race,

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we see that man was ready to know God when God revealed himself to Abraham. We look at all of the cultures of the world and religious movements are beginning all over the world. Religion dawns on mankind at approximately the same time, no matter where the people were in the world, man was longing for God. Mankind had gone long enough that he had forgotten who God was but had the longing in his soul to know him, to know him. And God revealed himself to Abraham.

When God gives the law to Moses, and Moses delivers it to the people, it's incredibly good news because now there is a perfectly clear recipe for salvation and righteousness. There is a perfect manual of instruction given to the people that they would know how to know God, how to be the people of God, how to pursue righteousness. And yet, hardly anyone was able to do it. God gave clear instructions to mankind; keep these laws and you will return to the state of righteousness that Adam and Eve had. You'll be ready again to be perfected by Me. And mankind being fallen and weak and predisposed, particularly in the flesh towards sin, mankind looks at that 600- and - something rules and despairs.

Like many of us still to this day think we know what the ideal is that we are striving for, but when we look at it, we don't get inspired, instead we just despair. It's so far away from us, it seems, and we don't know yet the experience of being energized by the grace of the Holy Spirit to pursue those ideals and so we despair. It's too hard. It's just the odds are very low. We are a worshipping society of math and probability these days. And although I have great appreciation for science and all of these things, we also we can't let it dominate our existence. Our existence with God is predominantly subjective, not objective. We don't have proof of God's existence; we have experiences of his existence.

When a person of faith comes and they say, well, of course, God exists and God is active in my life, and we asked them, well, how do you know that? They don't give us a list of evidences that are convincing. They just say, I just know. I have the experience inside of me. When I experiment with the faith, I have predictable experiences of God's grace in my life. And so, I know that it is there. And yet, that giving in the commandments in the Old Testament develops into what St. Paul calls this wall of enmity, this wall of bitterness between mankind and God, that the means of righteousness have been given to man but man in general cannot fulfill it, and he's bitter about it. And God knows that this is going to happen just like he knows Adam and Eve are going to fall. He knows that it's better if Adam and Eve did not sin, but he knew that they were going to and he took the risk anyways.

He knows also that it would be better if mankind voluntarily just took those commandments from the Old Testament and kept them voluntarily, with zeal, with faith, with force of will, just kept the laws and attained righteousness voluntarily. But he also knows they're not going to be able to do it. It's amazing how God calls us to the ideal and then meets us exactly where we end up being. Think about that. He never gives up the ideal, and as his church, we don't give up the ideal either, no matter how far it is away from us. Because we know that our God is a loving God and a compassionate God along with being perfect. And we see that in his relationship with the mankind of over and over again, knowing that we are going to fail, he gives this

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opportunity to be ideal. And when we fail to be ideal, he in his love and his mercy meets us again exactly where we are, no matter how low we are. Whether we are in Jerusalem or down and dirty Jericho, he goes to where we are. And that is great hope.

And St. Paul in the Epistle this morning is telling the Ephesians, which is a word for all of us, but it's something they were particularly struggling with at the time, that that wall of enmity isn't there anymore. You know what God called you to because he delivered it in the law of the Old Testament, but now he has come and broken down that wall. He has united God and man by being God and man himself. He has created the union that we longed for that it caused bitterness because we couldn't attain it. He united God and man and in doing so, creates a new avenue through which we can be united to God once again, through our faith in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. And that idea, if you remember, that idea of being separated from God was seen most clearly in the Old Testament through the curtain that divided the sanctuary of the temple from the Holy of Holies.

A curtain that weighed hundreds of pounds that was about a foot thick of material. And it took multiple servants, multiple deacons in the altar area to physically pry that gigantic curtain out of the way of the high priest who would go into the Holy of Holies. And it was so terrifying to be in there that the high priest went in with a rope tied to his leg. Because if he did something wrong, he would die, and no one else could go in to retrieve his body. They would just pull him out with a rope tied to his ankle. And that kind of relationship with God has been removed by Jesus Christ our Lord.

As Orthodox Christians, we still have a wall and we still have a curtain. It's a very thin curtain. And it's there because we don't ever want to forget that wall that used to be there. And in the Liturgy, itself, you see us making processions and the first procession that we make is with the Gospel. Because through the Gospel, the words of God Himself are revealed to us through His Son, the incarnate God, the God man, the one who loves mankind. And we process through the people because the Gospel has been delivered to you, and then we process back up because the Gospel unites us, makes unity between earth and heaven. And we go in and the doors open, and the curtain is removed, and heaven and earth are joined together.

If we took down the Iconostasis, this generation of people would rejoice that heaven and earth is united, as they did in the early church. And then the next generation would sort of start forgetting that there used to be a wall and the third generation would have no appreciation at all for earth being united to heaven in Jesus Christ, our Lord. And so we keep the Iconostasis there. And over and over again, in our services, twice in the Divine Liturgy, we break down that wall. We open the doors and we see that we are united to God, and Heaven and Earth is united in Christ our Lord. And in the Epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul is telling them this, the wall of enmity has been removed. You are no longer, and this is the good news for the people of God, you are no longer strangers and foreigners or sojourners in the eyes of God. You are of his household. You're already here. You are membered in His Kingdom, in his house, in his home, in his family. You are the adopted sons and daughters of God the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ.

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That's the good news. If you didn't have enough thanks on Thanksgiving, have some more today. We are in the household of God. Can we choose to leave? Yes, that's the scary part. Can we dwell in his house? Can we be his friend like Judas was and turn our back on him? Yes, we can. We are members in the household but we do not assume that we are always going to be here unless we are continually recommitting ourselves to Christ, recommitting ourselves to being a part of his family, being in his house, in his home, dwelling with him, because the doors are open. There's the door that unites earth to heaven here. There's also a door that unites the world with the Church there. And we can come in that door and be united through the Church and to the heavenly kingdom, or we can turn our back on Christ and use the same doors to leave. That's the scary part of having free will, that gift of God that makes us in his image.

But St. Paul encourages us and gives us great hope. And how are we to respond to that? In the Gospel reading today, providentially we see one of the main lessons, one of the main things that is going to bring us peace. Think about that. Peace be to all. The Gospels about to be read. And then we heard the Gospel this morning about the rich fool who wanted to build the bigger barns. And I think a lot of times we don't hear that as peaceful news, do we? We hear it as sort of scary news. Father, I'm supposed to take peace from the fact that if I accumulate a lot of wealth and I have a lot of things that God is going to call me a fool and take my soul? And that isn't the lesson that at all that we're supposed to learn from this Gospel reading, that's very familiar to us.

Reflect for a moment that the ground didn't do anything wrong in bringing forth the harvest. It did its job. It provided the nutrients. The seeds did their job. They're put into the ground, the ground and the seeds cooperated and brought forth a great harvest. There's nothing wrong with that at all. The man has had barns before. If you have grain, you have to have barns. There's no error in doing that. There's also no error in recognizing that the harvest is so big, you're going to need more room to store it. Think of Joseph in Egypt, who delivered the entire nation from famine by being told ahead of time to grow and store up the grain. So the man hasn't done anything wrong in doing any of those things. We should take peace in that.

We ought to long for a great harvest in that God gives to us if he chooses. He blesses some with wealth, and others, the saints teach us, he blesses with poverty. Some of us will advance the Church and bring people into the Kingdom because through the material wealth that we gain in our life, others, wealth would create them to be covetous. It would actually separate them from God. And so, some of us are blessed and some of us are not when it comes to wealth. St. John Chrysostom says very clearly, "Wealth is neutral." It's not inherently good or evil. It can be used to save souls, advance the Kingdom, heal the sick, feed the poor, or it can be used selfishly in a way that destroys the soul. It's not the money itself that is a problem, it's our orientation towards it.

And when we listen to this Gospel reading, we realize we're going to gain peace through hearing this Gospel because a secret is being told to us. We're gaining spiritual wisdom. We know what to do and what not to do, because we see the fault. The only fault in this parable is that the man sees all of it as a result of his work and it belongs to him. He says

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over and over again, it's my harvest. I will build bigger barns. I will supply for myself. I will be happy and rest and be on vacation the rest of my life because of what I have achieved. That's the foolish part. That's the foolish part. And God says to him, "You've been incredibly foolish by being so self-orientated that way."

We're all going to die. We know that. He just didn't know he was going to die that night. Death is not a surprise when it comes and who it happens to is at times. But his plan was so self-entered, that nothing of the bounty that God had given to him was planned well to be used to a great benefit. The Saints point out in this, looking at this scripture that, when we don't have a plan for our estate, it usually goes to the evil people, they say. In the old days, it was the robbers who would come when they found out that someone had died and there was no plan for the family to be there and take care of the possessions. Nowadays, the government will take it. We have to have a plan.

He looks at the man, though, and he says, "You've been a fool because this self-centered life to whom now is everything going to belong? You thought you were going to keep it all, and now it's gone. Who's it going to be?" There is no plan there. And then there's these incredible words at the end that are not a part of the parable. The parable ends, And Christ says to those who are listening, such as this, this is what happens when we are not rich towards God, when we lay up treasures for ourselves. It doesn't say it's bad to lay up treasures. It's when we lay up treasures for ourselves and we are not rich towards God. And I looked up that word 'towards', I wanted to know what it was in Greek. And it has a lot of different interpretations. It might be more compatible with the Orthodox understanding in English to say, this is what happens to those who lay up treasures for themselves and are not rich in God. Rich in the things of God, whose life has not been lived in a way that makes it compatible with God.

And so, we want to be living a life not in just regards to our money, but in regards to everything that we are doing, everything that we are pursuing for ourselves. We lay up a lot of different treasures. In fact, most Americans are not laying up treasures of money. They've fallen into the deception of thinking that debt isn't something you should accumulate. And it's not. Most of us are laying up fashion, we're laying up prestige, we're laying up education, we're laying up our job and the honor that we get through it. And it's not bad at all to have a job, to have clothes, to do what you do and do it well. I always like to remind people that when we hear the very first words of God, I've been saying this a lot lately, of God, the Father about his son, the very first thing he says to mankind about his son is "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

We ought to be living a life that is pleasing to God and pleasing to our fellow Christians. We can take great joy in what God allows us to do. It's when we start taking credit for ourselves that we fall into falling, into foolishness. It wasn't a problem that the ground brought forth a great harvest. It wasn't a problem for the man that he built bigger barns because God had given him a great amount. The problem was that in his heart, he took credit for all that himself and he assumed his ownership of it.

When it comes to our wealth, particularly, I love this saying that Dave Ramsey offers to people that 100% of everything that we gain in life belongs to God. 100%. And he lets us

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decide what to do with 90% of it. That is great freedom. He gives us a bounty.

He tells us, you're in charge of 90% of everything that I've given you. You go clothe the naked and feed the poor. Give shoes to those who are barefoot and don't want to be barefoot. 10% only. 10%. One-tenth, I ask that you give to the Church that it might be glorified, that it might be beautiful and draw people in. That it also might feed the poor that it is aware of or feed the hungry and clothe the naked. That when people come into my temple, they would see that you love me, because you love making my house beautiful. At Christmas, we decorate. But in the Church, we decorate all year long through the icons and the beauty that we present here. And this is just a little piece of wisdom given to us right now, a little bit of peace, a little bit of wisdom from the spiritual life given to us now by God's providence in the Nativity Fast.

So, take the gratitude that we practiced, particularly with the celebration of Thanksgiving, and nurture it through the rest of the Nativity Fast. Start giving thanks to God for everything that is in your life. Start giving thanks to God for everything and looking for the opportunities to share the harvest that has been given to you in your life. We all have something to share. We might not have money in the bank, but we do have some extra clothes in the closet. We do have some extra tools in our garage. We all have, - we're Americans, we're in the top 1% of people of wealthy in the world. We all have something to share. And remember, everything from God is good.

On Friday, as you as maybe you have noticed, on Friday, a tree fell on the church. I don't know if you've seen that yet. A gigantic tree fell down and it did some damage to the church. We have some leaks in the vesting room right now. Glory to God for all things. A tree fell down at a time of day where normally there would be kids running around that whole area and there was nobody there because it was a holiday. There weren't any homeless there taking shelter in our playground or behind the church because it was raining. It wasn't a school day. If the tree was going to fall, it's the right time for it to fall. It's a blessing that it fell. It's a blessing to us because when it fell and the word went out that a tree fell on the church, 20 people were down here taking care of it. And they had smiles on their faces, because they were doing a good work for the house of God which they belong to and they love.

It's a blessing to us that the tree fell when it fell because we were thinking about putting in a new playground. We've been planning for a while whether or not we should re-roof the church. The Lord has spoken, brothers and sisters. We now know what he wants us to do. Glory to God. We're not sad because it fell. We're not scared because someone might have gotten hurt, that's not us. That tree needed to come down. I looked it and I said to Deacon James, "Well, at least it came down before we put on the new roof and the new playground." Right? That would have been a tragedy. Instead, God just knew he needed to take care of us in a way that we weren't aware of yet. We were making a good plan, but there was a missing facet that came from the fact that we are not omniscient, and he is. And he knew that tree needed to come down. So, he picked the perfect time and he let it come down. And we're now cooperating with his plan. Glory to God for all things.

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Everything works together for good for those who love God, everything. Take the rest of the Nativity Fast, focus on it. Find a place in your time and your energy, although it can be a great struggle to do so and share your life with another person. Share your faith with another person. Something that all of us can afford to do. Share and get ready to celebrate with incredible gratitude, 1,000 times greater than Thanksgiving, that the Son of God has come into the world. He has been born as a helpless babe to cooperate with us. That, that wall of enmity that has been destroyed would be destroyed for all of us personally, and that we would find ourselves moving from earth through that broken-down wall of enmity into the heavenly kingdom and the household of God to which we are membered.

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