

## 8-4-19 The Purpose of Our Life in Christ

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Well I came in late this morning, but there is a good excuse. You know how it is when you spend time working on something, and you get done and you look at it and it's not right, you just know it's not right? I spent the last couple of days working on the homily, and it just didn't seem like it was coming together. Last night I went home after Vespers and I'm looking at it, and it's just not right. So I'm working on it, and working on it, and then I'm falling asleep. And I said, "Well this is not working." So I go to bed and I get up really early this morning and I sit down and I look at it again, and it's just wrong. It's not coming together. It's not coherent.

I tried to talk a little bit about Father John Takahashi's classes that he gave us, which were very interesting, especially the last class. A lot of food for thought, but I wasn't doing it justice. And I said, "I just can't do that to Father John, this is not right." And I tried to tie in the epistle and that wasn't working. And I looked at, I said, "What am I going to do?"

And of course, I'm running out of time. And I said, "Lord, I need help. What I really want to do, I want to give a homily on the life of St. Mary Magdalene." It's very, very interesting. If you've never read it, you should. But I didn't have time for that. It's a long story.

And so, I had the thought, "I know I've given this homily before." And so, I went up in my little upstairs cubby hole there, and pull out my box of homilies. And I'm going back through the years and I found one from three or four years ago, and I read through it and I said, "I like this homily. I hope they don't remember that I've given it before." And so, I go out and get my wife in the car and we take off. And I'm already running late, and I'm halfway down the mountain, I realize my homily is not in the car. So, I slam on the brakes and hang a U-turn, I drive back. I'm driving much too fast, hoping that Menard wasn't on duty. Then I get home and it had fallen off the car, and I had literally run over it. There's these tire marks all on the back of it.

I said, "Lord, help me get to the church on time." So here we are. Forgive my tardiness.

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

Today I would like to speak briefly about the purpose of our life in Christ, and the acquisition of the joy of our salvation. The Holy Fathers of the church often speak of a spiritual joy. They even speak from experience. They speak from experience about a joy that transcends human understanding. An elevated spiritual state, where the grace of God comes upon them. Where they are no longer confined by the five senses, but mystically rise above to a spiritual theoria, to the revelation of the grace of God. The Holy Scripture also mentions joy in both the old and the New Testament in multiple places. Galatians 5 it says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

If we only experienced all of those all of the time. What spirit is this referring to? Of course, it's referring to the Holy Spirit who indwells us, each of us, baptized Orthodox Christians. I think that it would be very helpful in our battle, in our struggle with the passions, to simply remember that God, the Holy Spirit, indwells each of us. It's not like God is somewhere up beyond the galaxies, far, far away, and we are here separated by infinity. No, not at all. The Holy Spirit has made us his dwelling place. He's made us his abode. Corinthians chapter 6, "Do you not know that your body is the temple

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of the Holy Spirit, who is in you? Whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" Think about that. If we are followers and disciples of Christ, we are not our own. We belong to him; we have committed ourselves to him.

Think about that. Our body is the temple, the temple of the Holy Spirit. A temple is a holy place. It is a holy place. It is a place of reverence. It is a place of respect. Perhaps we should think more correctly about this temple. This temple. What do we allow to come out of this temple? Is it the fruit of the spirit? Is it love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

John 15: The Lord is speaking, "If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Thessalonians: "How can we thank God enough for you, in return for all the joy we have in the presence of God because of you? For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and our joy."

This has some very deep and profound meaning because it applies to each one of us. It applies to the effect that we have on each other. If I were speaking to you seeing exactly what St. Paul is saying to the Thessalonians, that "you are my glory and my joy." He even says that they're his crown in the presence of Christ. What could this possibly mean? What would I be saying? This deserves our attention, our thought, our scrutiny. I often contemplate this struggle with the spiritual life. What does it mean? What does it really mean to follow Christ, to deny oneself? To take up the cross? To take up the cross that Christ calls us to take up, and follow him? In the midst of all of life's struggles, where is this joy? What does the scripture mean from the Psalms when it says, "Restore unto me the joy of my salvation?"

When we look at the human condition, we see so much chaos. Wars, riots, immorality, corruption, disease. When we look honestly at our own hearts even, and see the attachments to the things of this world, where is the joy that the scriptures and the Holy Fathers speak of? Where is this joy? How do we obtain this joy, Christ's joy? And to have it completely, to own it perfectly? Is it not what the Lord said? Verse 11: "I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete." This is what God desires for us. And what about the other things we have read, heard, and even repeated such as, "There's no salvation without struggle. There's no salvation without trials," and so on and so forth. We believe these are true statements, but how does the struggle or the trials translate into spiritual joy? How do they translate into spiritual joy, true joy, deep joy? Joy that breeds contentment and peace to our heart.

Blessed Jerome distinguishes between joy as a fruit of the Spirit, and gaiety. He says that joy is an elation of the mind over the things that are worthy of exaltation. And elation of the mind over things that are worthy of exaltation. So, joy as a fruit of the Spirit, is an elation. An elevation of the mind. A complete disciplined happiness or contentment of that which is worthy according to God. We're not speaking of the joy as it relates to the base things of this world. If my passion is avarice and I win the lottery, then I'm really happy. This kind of worldly, superficial happiness is not the fruit of the Spirit.

So, when the thought comes, it says, "If I only had enough money, I would be happy." We might do well to remember the hundreds of rich and famous people even in our own lifetime, who've

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committed suicide, who have died of overdoses, who have died of accidents, induced or caused by alcoholism. Whatever gift, and we might exchange the word gift for cross. Whatever cross God has given us, let us use it to the glory of God for our salvation and the wellbeing of our fellow man.

I read a book called the Love of God, the Life and Teachings of St. Gabriel of the Seven Lakes Monastery. St. Gabriel of the Seven Lakes Monastery became extremely ill. Extremely ill so much that he was completely unable to even get out of bed by himself to take care of himself in any way. He said that his sickness was one of the greatest gifts of his life. He said that it was in his sickness that he acquired the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He learned love, joy, patience, and the rest.

So, the joy of our salvation is in maturing. It is a growing up in the faith. It's a growing up, it's leaving the milk of our baptism and moving on to the meat of perseverance. There was a period in our conversion, in our conversion to Orthodoxy, and I've said this before in many homilies and in classes, that Father Thomas Hopko of Blessed Memory referred to as the honeymoon period, the honeymoon period. It's that time when we first come into the church. I remember that time well, seeing the icons, the beauty, the majesty of the service. God's grace is abundant. We are making new friends. It's a wonderful time. Then as a St. Silouan, my patron, often says, "God then withdraws his grace just a little bit, just a little bit. God withdraws his grace, and that's when the cross enters our life."

That's where the struggle begins. It's not a pleasant thing, but it's a good thing. We might say the struggles are like rain from heaven. Think about that next time you struggle with a temptation, "Oh, it's more rain from heaven." Rain from heaven, think about that. Without the rain, the roots remain small and shallow. They don't go deep. They don't grow, the plant doesn't flourish, it doesn't produce fruit. But when the rain comes, when the struggle begins, we persevere. We learn the prayer of the heart. We realize we have to trust God and our spiritual roots begin to grow deeper. Then of course, the devil comes along as he always does, to blow the winds of temptation, to uproot our faith, to knock us down, to discourage us, to try to make us give up. That sense of hopelessness. There's no reason for discouragement. Christ stands ready to lift us up, to send his grace back in abundance. He simply is waiting for us to ask. "Ask and you shall receive. Knock and it shall be opened unto you."

So, we pray and ask God for his grace to strengthen us, so that the roots of our faith will grow deep and strong. Then he will help us stand against the winds of temptation and passions. We pray this way. Our Orthodox faith is more than just rhetoric. It's more than just the words we say, it's more than even what we read. It's more than what we hear. Our faith is above all coupled with what we do. Our actions, our deeds for each other. To acquire the joy of our salvation we must live the life leading to salvation. Jesus said our joy would be complete by keeping his commandments. He specifically mentioned the commandment to love each other as he has loved us. So, it's not enough simply to say that we love Christ, we must love Christ through each other.

We see this theme in many homilies, in many scriptures. St. Gregory Palamas says, "With whom do you think we should rank such people who simultaneously confess and deny God? Confessing God with their mouth, denying him with their actions. With the believers? Do they disown God by their actions? With the unbelievers? By their tones they profess their faith." This is a difficult dilemma. However, the psalmist and prophet has given us the answer saying, "Thou, O Lord, renders to every man according to his work." And in Romans we read, "For not the hearers of the law are justified by God, but the doers." The doers shall be justified. The purpose of our life in Christ is to obtain exactly

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what God desires to give to us, which is paradise. The acquisition of the joy of our salvation is acquired by following Christ's commandments to love our neighbor as he has loved us.

Saint Gabriel of the Seven Lakes Monastery said in one of his homilies the following: "What happens in the Spring," he says, "everything from blades of grass to the tallest trees begin to grow, put out shoots, blossoms, becomes fragrant, and enjoys new life. Do you see the plant and the trees have hope? Everything comes alive and stands out beautifully with new existence. Oh, there is no doubt, brother. There is no doubt, Christ, for those who believe in the general resurrection, those who do good will be raised into the resurrection of life, and those who did evil to the resurrection of the judgment."

I love this part, and you can listen with me, "In the future life everything, the smallest tears shed by you out of pity for an innocent man will not be forgotten, and the smallest alms will be repaid. Concealed kind compassion, concealed kind compassion, and a sigh for another will be glorified before the whole world. For a cup of cold-water immortal springs will be poured out for you. Every good intention will not be put to shame. Diligent diligence will be praised. Labor will be rewarded. Faithfulness will be glorified. Zeal for God will be kissed. Struggles for faith and all virtues will be crowned. Nothing good that you have done ever will be forgotten. Thy Father who sees in secret will himself reward thee openly."

Therefore, every Christian must have the zeal to spend his life in piety and purity, if he desires that this temporal life be turned into eternal blessed life in paradise. This is the reward for those who endure with faith and live in Christ. If we pursue the things of this world, if we pursue the passions, we will be left with disappointment, disillusionment, and discouragement. But if we pursue Christ, if we pursue Christ through our love and good deeds for each other, we will attain into the joy of our salvation.

May it be blessed, Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.