

**The Bible, the
Commentary, and the
Sermon on the Mount**

**From the "Major Works"
series**

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Preface

The works at Jonathan's Corner refer to the Bible frequently, and usually with a hypertext link to the Powered Access Bible to let you read the text quoted in its context. But two works stand out in particular with reference to the Bible: "The Commentary," and "The Most Politically Incorrect Sermon in History: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount."

You are invited to read both, and explore the theology section at CJSHayward.com for further study.

The Commentary

Memories flitted through Martin's mind as he drove: tantalizing glimpses he had seen of how people really thought in Bible times. Glimpses that made him thirsty for more. It had seemed hours since he left his house, driving out of the city, across back roads in the forest, until at last he reached the quiet town. The store had printer's blocks in the window, and as he stepped in, an old-fashioned bell rung. There were old tools on the walls, and the room was furnished in beautifully varnished wood.

An old man smiled and said, "Welcome to my bookstore. Are you—" Martin nodded. The man looked at him, turned, and disappeared through a doorway. A moment later he was holding a thick leatherbound volume, which he set on the counter. Martin looked at the binding, almost afraid to touch the heavy tome, and read the letters of gold on its cover:

**COMMENTARY
ON THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS
IN ONE VOLUME
CONTAINING A CAREFUL ANALYSIS OF
ALL CULTURAL ISSUES
NEEDFUL TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE
AS DID ITS FIRST READERS**

"You're sure you can afford it, sir? I'd really like to let it go for a lower price, but you must understand that a book like this is costly, and I can't afford to sell it the way I do most other titles."

"Finances will be tight, but I've found knowledge to cost a lot and ignorance to cost more. I have enough money to buy it, if I make it a priority."

"Good. I hope it may profit you. But may I make one request, even if it sounds strange?"

"What is your request?"

"If, for any reason, you no longer want the commentary, or decide to get rid of it, you will let me have the first chance to buy it back."

"Sir? I don't understand. I have been searching for a book like this for years. I don't know how many miles I've driven. I will pay. You're right that this is more money than I could easily spare—and I am webmaster to a major advertising agency. I would have only done so for something I desired a great, great deal."

"Never mind that. If you decide to sell it, will you let me have the first chance?"

"Let's talk about something else. What text does it use?"

"It uses the *Revised Standard Version*. Please answer my question, sir."

"How could anyone prefer darkness to light, obscurity to illumination?"

"I don't know. Please answer my question."

"Yes, I will come to you first. Now will you sell it to me?"

The old man rung up the sale.

As Martin walked out the door, the shopkeeper muttered to himself, "Sold for the seventh time! Why doesn't anybody want to keep it?"

Martin walked through the door of his house, almost

exhausted, and yet full of bliss. He sat in his favorite overstuffed armchair, one that had been reupholstered more than once since he sat in it as a boy. He relaxed, the heavy weight of the volume pressing into his lap like a loved one, and then opened the pages. He took a breath, and began reading.

INTRODUCTION

At the present time, most people believe the question of culture in relation to the Bible is a question of understanding the ancient cultures and accounting for their influence so as to be able to better understand Scripture. That is indeed a valuable field, but its benefits may only be reaped after addressing another concern, a concern that is rarely addressed by people eager to understand Ancient Near Eastern culture.

A part of the reader's culture is the implicit belief that he is not encumbered by culture: culture is what people live under long ago and far away. This is not true. As it turns out, the present culture has at least two beliefs which deeply influence and to some extent limit its ability to connect with the Bible. There is what scholars call 'period awareness', which is not content with the realization that we all live in a historical context, but places different times and places in sealed compartments, almost to the point of forgetting that people who live in the year 432, people who live in 1327, and people who live in 1987 are all human. Its partner in crime is the doctrine of progress, which says at heart that we are better, nobler, and wiser people than those who came before us, and our ideas are better, because ideas, like machines, grow rust and need to be replaced. This gives the reader the most extraordinary difficulties in believing that the Holy Spirit spoke through humans to address human problems in the Bible, and the answer speaks as much

to us humans as it did to them. Invariably the reader believes that the Holy Spirit influenced a first century man trying to deal with first century problems, and a delicate work of extrication is needed before ancient texts can be adapted to turn-of-the-millennium concerns.

Martin shifted his position slightly, felt thirsty, almost decided to get up and get a glass of water, then decided to continue reading. He turned a few pages in order to get into the real meat of the introduction, and resumed reading:

...is another example of this dark pattern.

In an abstracted sense, what occurs is as follows:

1. Scholars implicitly recognize that some passages in the Bible are less than congenial to whatever axe they're grinding.
2. They make a massive search, and subject all of the offending passages to a meticulous examination, an examination much more meticulous than orthodox scholars ever really need when they're trying to understand something.
3. In parallel, there is an exhaustive search of a passage's historical-cultural context. This search dredges up a certain kind of detail—in less flattering terms, it creates disinformation.
4. No matter what the passage says, no matter who's examining it, this story always has the same ending. It turns out that the passage in fact means something radically different from what it appears to mean, and in fact does not

contradict the scholar at all.

This dark pattern has devastating effect on people from the reader's culture. They tend to believe that culture has almost any influence it is claimed to; in that regard, they are very gullible. It is almost unheard-of for someone to say, "I'm sorry, no; cultures can make people do a lot of things, but I don't believe a culture could have *that* influence."

It also creates a dangerous belief which is never spoken in so many words: "If a passage in the Bible appears to contradict what we believe today, that is because we do not adequately understand its cultural context."

Martin coughed. He closed the commentary slowly, reverently placed it on the table, and took a walk around the block to think.

Inside him was turmoil. It was like being at an illusionist show, where impossible things happened. He recalled his freshman year of college, when his best friend Chaplain was a student from Liberia, and come winter, Chaplain was not only seared by cold, but looked betrayed as the icy ground became a traitor beneath his feet. Chaplain learned to keep his balance, but it was slow, and Martin could read the pain off Chaplain's face. How long would it take? He recalled the shopkeeper's words about returning the commentary, and banished them from his mind.

Martin stepped into his house and decided to have no more distractions. He wanted to begin reading commentary, now. He opened the book on the table and sat erect in his chair:

Genesis

1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and

the earth.

1:2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

1:3 And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

The reader is now thinking about evolution. He is wondering whether Genesis 1 is right, and evolution is simply wrong, or whether evolution is right, and Genesis 1 is a myth that may be inspiring enough but does not actually tell how the world was created.

All of this is because of a culture phenomenally influenced by scientism and science. The theory of evolution is an attempt to map out, in terms appropriate to scientific dialogue, just what organisms occurred, when, and what mechanism led there to be new kinds of organisms that did not exist before. Therefore, nearly all Evangelicals assumed, Genesis 1 must be the Christian substitute for evolution. Its purpose must also be to map out what occurred when, to provide the same sort of mechanism. In short, if Genesis 1 is true, then it must be trying to answer the same question as evolution, only answering it differently.

Darwinian evolution is not a true answer to the question, "Why is there life as we know it?" Evolution is on philosophical grounds *not* a true answer to that question, because it is not an answer to that question at all. Even if it is true, evolution is only an answer to the question, "*How* is there life as we know it?" If someone asks, "Why is there this life that we see?" and someone answers, "Evolution," it is like someone saying, "Why is the kitchen light on?" and someone else answering, "Because the switch is in the on position, thereby closing the electrical circuit and

allowing current to flow through the bulb, which grows hot and produces light."

Where the reader only sees one question, an ancient reader saw at least two other questions that are invisible to the present reader. As well as the question of "How?" that evolution addresses, there is the question of "Why?" and "What function does it serve?" These two questions are very important, and are not even considered when people are only trying to work out the antagonism between creationism and evolutionism.

Martin took a deep breath. Was the text advocating a six-day creationism? That was hard to tell. He felt uncomfortable, in a much deeper way than if Bible-thumpers were preaching to him that evolutionists would burn in Hell.

He decided to see what it would have to say about a problem passage. He flipped to Ephesians 5:

5:21 Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

5:22 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord.

5:23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

5:24 As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.

5:25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

5:26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

5:27 that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without

blemish.

5:28 Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

5:29 For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church,

5:30 because we are members of his body.

5:31 "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

5:32 This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church;

5:33 however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

The reader is at this point pondering what to do with this problem passage. At the moment, he sees three major options: first, to explain it away so it doesn't actually give husbands authority; second, to chalk it up to misogynist Paul trying to rescind Jesus's progressive liberality; and third, to take this as an example of why the Bible can't really be trusted.

To explain why the reader perceives himself caught in this unfortunate choice, it is necessary to explain a powerful cultural force, one whose effect cannot be ignored: feminism. Feminism has such a powerful effect among the educated in his culture that the question one must ask of the reader is not "Is he a feminist?" but "What kind of feminist is he, and to what degree?"

Feminism flows out of a belief that it's a wonderful privilege to be a man, but it is tragic to be a woman. Like Christianity, feminism recognizes the value of lifelong penitence, even the purification that can come through guilt. It teaches men to repent in guilt of being

men, and women to likewise repent of being women. The beatific vision in feminism is a condition of sexlessness, which feminists call 'androgyny'.

Martin stopped. "What kind of moron wrote this? Am I actually supposed to believe it?" Then he continued reading:

This is why feminism believes that everything which has belonged to men is a privilege which must be shared with women, and everything that has belonged to women is a burden which men must also shoulder. And so naturally, when Paul asserts a husband's authority, the feminist sees nothing but a privilege unfairly hoarded by men.

Martin's skin began to feel clammy.

The authority asserted here is not a domineering authority that uses power to serve oneself. Nowhere in the Bible does Paul tell husbands how to dominate their wives. Instead he follows Jesus's model of authority, one in which leadership is a form of servanthood. Paul doesn't just assume this; he explicitly tells the reader, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." The sigil of male headship and authority is not a crown of gold, but a crown of thorns.

Martin was beginning to wish that the commentary had said, "The Bible is misogynistic, and that's good!" He was beginning to feel a nagging doubt that what he called problem passages were in fact perfectly good passages that didn't look attractive if you had a problem interpretation. What was that remark in a theological debate that had gotten so much under his skin? He almost wanted not to remember it, and then—"Most of the time, when people say

they simply cannot understand a particular passage of Scripture, *they understand the passage perfectly well*. What they don't understand is how to explain it away so it doesn't contradict them."

He paced back and forth, and after a time began to think, "The sword can't always cut against me, can it? I know some gay rights activists who believe that the Bible's prohibition of homosexual acts is nothing but taboo. Maybe the commentary on Romans will give me something else to answer them with." He opened the book again:

1:26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural,
1:27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

The concept of 'taboo' in the reader's culture needs some explanation. When a person says, "That's taboo," what's being said is that there is an unthinking, irrational prejudice against it: one must not go against the prejudice because then people will be upset, but in some sense to call a restriction a taboo is de facto to show it unreasonable.

The term comes from Polynesia and other South Pacific islands, where it is used when people recognize there is a line which it is wiser not to cross. Thomas Aquinas said, "The peasant who does not murder because the law of God is deep in his bones is greater than the theologian who can derive, 'Thou shalt not kill' from first principles."

A taboo is a restriction so deep that most

people cannot offer a ready explanation. A few can; apologists and moral philosophers make a point of being able to explain the rules. For most people, though, they know what is right and what is wrong, and it is so deeply a part of them that they cannot, like an apologist, start reasoning with first principles and say an hour and a half later, "and this is why homosexual acts are wrong."

What goes with the term 'taboo' is an assumption that if you can't articulate your reasons on the drop of a hat, that must mean that you don't have any good reasons, and are acting only from benighted prejudice. Paradoxically, the term 'taboo' is itself a taboo: there is a taboo against holding other taboos, and this one is less praiseworthy than other taboos...

Martin walked away and sat in another chair, a high wooden stool. What was it that he had been thinking about before going to buy the commentary? A usability study had been done on his website, and he needed to think about the results. Designing advertising material was different from other areas of the web; the focus was not just on a smooth user experience but also something that would grab attention, even from a hostile audience. Those two goals were inherently contradictory, like mixing oil and water. His mind began to wander; he thought about the drive to buy the commentary, and began to daydream about a beautiful woman clad only in—

What did the commentary have to say about lust? Jesus said it was equivalent to adultery; the commentary probably went further and made it unforgiveable. He tried to think about work, but an almost morbid curiosity filled him. Finally, he looked up the Sermon on the Mount, and opened to Matthew:

5:27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

5:28 But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

There is a principle here that was once assumed and now requires some explanation. Jesus condemned lust because it was doing in the heart what was sinful to do in the hands. There is a principle that is forgotten in centuries of people saying, "I can do whatever I want as long as it doesn't harm you," or to speak more precisely, "I can do whatever I want as long as I don't see how it harms you." Suddenly purity was no longer a matter of the heart and hands, but a matter of the hands alone. Where captains in a fleet of ships once tried both to avoid collisions and to keep shipshape inside, now captains believe that it's OK to ignore mechanical problems inside as long as you try not to hit other ships—and if you steer the wheel as hard as you can and your ship still collides with another, you're not to blame. Heinrich Heine wrote:

Should ever that taming talisman break—the Cross—then will come roaring back the wild madness of the ancient warriors, with all their insane, Berserker rage, of whom our Nordic poets speak and sing. That talisman is now already crumbling, and the day is not far off when it shall break apart entirely. On that day, the old stone gods will rise from their long forgotten wreckage and rub from their eyes the dust of a thousand years' sleep. At long last leaping to life, Thor with his giant hammer will crush the gothic cathedrals. And laugh not at my forebodings, the advice of a dreamer who warns you away from the . . . *Naturphilosophen*. No,

laugh not at the visionary who knows that in the realm of phenomena comes soon the revolution that has already taken place in the realm of spirit. For thought goes before deed as lightning before thunder. There will be played in Germany a play compared to which the French Revolution was but an innocent idyll.

Heinrich Heine was a German Jewish poet who lived a century before Thor's hammer would crush six million of his kinsmen.

The ancient world knew that thought goes before deed as lightning before thunder. They knew that purity is an affair of the heart as well as the hands. Now there is grudging acknowledgment that lust is wrong, a crumbling acceptance that has little place in the culture's impoverished view, but this acknowledgment is like a tree whose soil is taken away. For one example of what goes with that tree, I would like to look at advertising.

Porn uses enticing pictures of women to arouse sexual lust, and can set a chain of events in motion that leads to rape. Advertising uses enticing pictures of chattels to arouse covetous lust, and exists for the sole reason of setting a chain of events in motion that lead people to waste resources by buying things they don't need. The fruit is less bitter, but the vine is the same. Both operate by arousing impure desires that do not lead to a righteous fulfillment. Both porn and advertising are powerfully unreal, and bite those that embrace them. A man that uses porn will have a warped view of women and be slowly separated from healthy relations. Advertising manipulates people to seek a fulfillment in things that things can never provide: buying one more product can never satisfy that deep craving, any more than looking at one more picture can. Bruce Marshall said, "...the young man

who rings at the door of a brothel is unconsciously looking for God." Advertisers know that none of their products give a profound good, nothing like what people search for deep down inside, and so they falsely present products as things that are transcendent, and bring family togetherness or racial harmony.

It has been asked, "Was the Sabbath made for man, or was man made for the Sabbath?" Now the question should be asked, "Was economic wealth made for man, or was man made for economic wealth?" The resounding answer of advertising is, "Man was made for economic wealth." Every ad that is sent out bears the unspoken message, "You, the customer, exist for me, the corporation."

Martin sat in his chair, completely stunned.

After a long time, he padded off to bed, slept fitfully, and was interrupted by nightmares.

The scenic view only made the drive bleaker. Martin stole guiltily into the shop, and laid the book on the counter. The shopkeeper looked at him, and he at the shopkeeper.

"Didn't you ask who could prefer darkness to light, obscurity to illumination?"

Martin's face was filled with anguish. "How can I live without my darkness?"

The Most Politically Incorrect Sermon in History:

A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit:" here begin the Beatitudes, a ladder reaching to the expanse of Heaven.

Poor in spirit was the Theotokos whose scandalous pregnancy helped prepare the way for the scandal of the cross. Poor and humble in spirit was the one who humbly prayed the doxology, the Magnificat:

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For he hath regarded the low estate of his
handmaiden:
For, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call
me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;

and holy is his name.
 And his mercy is on them that fear him from
 generation to generation.
 He hath shewed strength with his arm;
 he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their
 hearts.
 He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
 and exalted them of low degree.
 He hath filled the hungry with good things;
 and the rich he hath sent empty away.

To be poor and humble in spirit is the first rung on a
 ladder that climbs to Heaven.

**Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be
 comforted.**

This life was given to us for repentance. Repentance is
 terrifying as a prospect; it seems like mournfully letting go
 of something we must have. Then when we let go, we find
 ourselves in a space more spacious than the Heavens, and
 realize, "I was holding on to a piece of Hell!"

To those who mourn their sins, who cry out for mercy,
 Christ answers by pouring out mercy and comforting them.
 But it is nonsense to expect such comfort without
 mourning; comfort is the fruit that men eat when they have
 planted it as a seed of mourning. And the fruit would have
 no taste to one who had not done the work of planting the
 seeds. Heaven offers nothing the mercenary soul can desire,
 and the Fire of Hell is itself the Light of Heaven as it is
 experienced through the rejection of the only Joy that we
 can have: Christ himself.

**Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the
 earth.**

One person I heard years ago said that the term "meek"
 in Greek was a term one would use of a horse that for all its

strength was under disciplined control, and so to be "meek" was power under control. And that reading, however good or bad it may be from a scholarly perspective, *is spiritual poison*: it castrates the words that are meant to be an insult to our pride.

Part of what is not communicated clearly is that a "meek" horse was under disciplined control from another; *from its rider*: a meek horse was not exceptionally good at marching to the beat of a different drummer! A meek horse, like you or me, is under authority, under headship, and to be meek is defined by that headship. And this unfolds in showing meekness before others: the Lord was meek before his accusers because he was meek to his Father and Head. The meekness we are meant to have has an aspect of discipline, even power, but it is neither ungrounded nor headless; it reflects the headship of Christ and others over us.

The Sermon on the Mount is intended to build power in the reader; but part of this power is the power of humility, and to be able to interpret "Blessed are the meek" without seeing a challenge to one's pride is poison. One time I confessed pride in my intelligence, and the priest told me quite emphatically, "*The only true intelligence is humility!*" Humility is the mortar that holds together all spiritual bricks and stones, the virtues in the spiritual life and the Sermon on the Mount. And we need the humbling spiritual training ground of meekness if we are going to get anywhere. Crediting ourselves with "strength under control" is worthless, penny wise and pound foolish, or worse.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is truly good for them: for they shall be satisfied.

The Greek term translated 'blessed' at one stroke means

both happy and blessed. So this beatitude could be rephrased, "Blessed are those who seek for the only happiness there is; for they will be satisfied. (Others who seek happiness in the wrong places can never be satisfied, even if they find it: "Two great tragedies in life: not to find one's heart's desire, and to find it," applies to that case.)

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Here and now I would underscore something that may not have needed such emphasis in other times: the word translated "mercy" refers both to God's love, in "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,*" or giving money. St. John the Merciful and St. Philaret the Merciful are both called merciful because they are generous to those who beg them.

Now here I am entering a controversial point because many people say that it does no true help to give money to a beggar; and this is not simply an excuse of stinginess. You will hear this argument being made by people who work in soup kitchens and really care about the poor. And I would more pointedly bring something from a conversation with a friend, after we had given some money to a beggar and he quoted an anecdote where two friends were walking, one of them gave a little money to a beggar, and the other said afterwards, "You realize that he'd have probably drunk it?" and the first answered, "Yes, but if I'd have kept I'd have probably drunk it," and I stridently objected to this anecdote. I told him that I would have no qualms about buying my next drink, or my friend's next drink, but I would have every objection to buying the next drink for a pastor we both loved, who was an alcoholic: perhaps he had been stone cold sober for decades, but he was an alcoholic and I saw nothing good in giving him his next drink.

With that stated, all Orthodox priests I've heard on the topic say that you give something to beggars. Money. Not

very much, necessarily, an amount that is entirely within your power. But it is worth considering carrying a pouch for change to give. Maybe it would also make sense to give fresh oranges or clementines (don't give apples; people who have lost teeth have trouble with them), or chocolates. But when you give a beggar *money*, you are treating that person as a moral agent made in the image of God, and if he uses it wrongly, you have no more sinned than God has sinned by giving you blessings that you use wrongly. But in any show mercy and give *something*, with a kind look, as well as being merciful in other areas of your life, and you will be shown mercy in the more serious areas of your own life.

Be faithful to your neighbor in little, and God will be faithful to you in much. Be merciful to your neighbor in little, and God will be merciful to you in much. (Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.)

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are those who seek what they ought to seek, for they will receive it.

The saints shall see God: saint and sinner alike shall see the Uncreated Light which shone on Mount Tabor. God is Light; he cannot but shine, and can only shine in fulness, for every creature, for the saved and for the damned. Then why say, "Blessed are the pure in heart" as if they alone will see God?

The answer is that the pure in heart will see God in their ultimate triumph, while the impure will see God in their ultimate defeat. God cannot do anything but shine in his Light; creatures cannot be happy, blessedly happy, except that they see this light. Now it may only be a mediated, dimmed, filtered, metaphorical sight of God who is Uncreated Light, but still: blessedness is the only entryway to happiness. (If in fact they really are two different things.)

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

In English, "peace" often means the absence of violence, though something that is soothing may be called "peaceful." In Hebrew and in Greek, the defining characteristic is not the absence of violence, but a state of well-being where love is manifest. The predominant, though not exclusive, sense is of divine blessing. One may be a peacemaker by quelling violence, but the broader sense is a way of life where divine love is manifest.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

We are entering a time of trial, when darkness rises. When I was a boy it seemed obvious to me that I had good chances of living to a ripe old age. Now it seems much more possible that I may endure persecution at least. Or at least face persecution; I would compare myself to a poorly trained soldier on the eve of a battle. But the stronger persecutions get, the more powerfully some of these passages speak. The Sermon on the Mount was not given to people whose lives would be comfort and ease. The Sermon on the Mount was given to people where persecution was a fact of life, and this beatitude has good news: *persecution for righteousness' sake is the privilege of the Kingdom of Heaven*. We know enough of earthly privileges: a car, a big house, the respect of others. But persecution for righteousness' sake is not meaningless; it is the token by which saints are given the Kingdom of Heaven.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were

before you.

In Hebrew, to repeat an adjective three times is to give superlative force: in Isaiah 6, the seraphs call to each other, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of Hosts." Here we have the same beatitude repeated three times in three wordings. The point is emphasized. The first time, Christ says, "Blessed are *they*..." as it speaking of others. Now he says, "Blessed are *ye*..." and addresses us directly. He strengthens those who will be persecuted for the sake of righteousness, and underscores the *heavenly privilege* of being "counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5:41).

Persecution and defamation are how the world heralds true sons of God. Satan is the ultimate sore loser, and these blows struck from below acknowledge that one is ascending into Heaven.

Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

During one scandal about baseball players abusing steroids, the question was raised of what a terrible example these athletes were to younger kids looking up to them as role models. Some had the audacity to protest, "But I never tried or sought out to be a role model," and other people said, "Sorry, buddy, you are. The question is not whether an athlete like you *is* a role model. The question is whether an athlete like you *is a good* role model, or a *bad* role model. You *are* a role model."

The Sermon on the Mount does not say that if we are

very holy we may become the salt of the earth and the light of the world; it says that we are, fullstop. We can lose our saltiness and become worthless as salt; but the question is not whether we are holy enough to be salt of the earth and light of the world. We aren't, but that's beside the point. The only question is whether we exercise this role well or poorly.

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Christ changes things, but if you think he is a way to dodge the hard parts of the Law, you have another think coming.

The story of the woman at the well is a story where shame loomed large. The woman came to draw water alone because she had a terrible reputation, and when Christ announced living water, she sought his help running for her shame. Read her story; Christ offers no help in escaping her shame, but instead *pulls her through her shame to the other side*, when she ran through the village, freed from her shame, announcing, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did!"

If we seek Christ to provide an easy way out of the hard parts of the Law, we seek the impossible.

But Christ can pull us through to the other side.

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

These are strong words, and if you ask if this is an example of "hyperbole", then if you mean by "hyperbole" a way to dodge their force, then no, they are not hyperbole.

Some of the Fathers look for a more than literal sense: "Agree with thine adversary quickly" does not refer to a man, but our ever-accusing conscience. And though few have had spine enough to leave a gift before an altar, we offer wrongly if we go to the altar without first coming terms with the other person.

More broadly, these words are not an exaggeration of "First things first." These words are forceful at a point where the truth is forceful, and we gain something when we look for, not *less* than these words would appear to offer, but *more*. For one example, when we have offended another person, the wrong thing to do is hope it will go away, hope that if you forget about the whole deal the other person will to. You are in their eyes as one justly in prison, and will

remain so until you have made amends, and that to the uttermost farthing: "*almost* satisfied" is a very bad resting place.

Even when there was no question of conflict, the principle applies. One of my responsibilities as a web designer at my university was to take portraits of faculty members, and you could tell the difference between when a professor was *happy* with a picture, and when she was *almost* happy with the picture. There were times when a professor was almost happy and thoughtfully talked about wrapping up the photo shoot and moving on, and that was an ending I avoided like the bubonic plague. I would rather spend a full hour shooting photos to get one the professor was happy with, and have both of us walk away happy, than have the professor decide, "I've taken enough of your time," and walk away *almost* happy. In practice it never took anywhere near an hour, but better devote an hour to getting the other person happy, to the uttermost farthing, and *both* walk away happy, than say, "Well, I suppose this is good enough." *Better to pay the uttermost farthing.*

**Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time,
Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you,
That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after
her hath committed adultery with her already in
his heart.**

This being commentary on the world's most politically incorrect sermon, perhaps it might be appropriate to give a few words here on unnatural vice.

In one sense sin and vice are never natural. But there are vices that are unnatural, such as (among sexual vices) contraception. To people who find *that* identification of unnatural vice, I extend an invitation to read "Orthodoxy, Contraception, and Spin Doctoring: A Look at an Influential but Disturbing Article," in which I tear to shreds the article that defined the (hotly contested) "new concensus" that

contraception is permissible to Orthodox provided you follow a few guidelines.

There is a shift between patristic times and our day; it may well be that an Orthodox monk in America interacts more with women than a married Orthodox Christian in patristic times. The old rule was, "Don't go to your wife unless you're going to her to try to make a baby." And over time this harsh position has been progressively softened, and an I would be overstepping to suggest a reconstitution of the ancient rule. But there has been a progression over history; once people changed their minds and said that it is *permissible* to have sex during the infertile period *despite* the infertility to such acts, to some saying that it is permissible to *limit* sex to the infertile period *in order to* enjoy sex without the encumbrance of fertility. We have no entitlements, but we believe we are entitled to the pleasure of sex without the encumbrance of fertility. And in recent years we have pursued this sexual perversion further, and a man who has trouble getting it up once is *entitled* to ED drugs. Far from a St. Maximus Confessor who regarded the pleasure of sex as not spiritually helpful and regarded sex as wrong when a man approached a woman other than his wife or approached his wife for a purpose other than conceiving a child, we understand sex as good in terms of being a potent "pleasure delivery system." And, pop culture notwithstanding, we don't need a pleasure delivery system. It is almost an act of counterculture for Orthodox Christians to refuse to practice more unnatural vice than the Greeks of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, where one philosopher was asked, "How often should I have sex?" and gave the answer, "*As often as you wish to deplete your energy.*" It's not just that ancient Orthodoxy exercised a tad bit more self-control in sex than we do; queer Greek philosophers were also just a little more self-restrained than us.

And a note to those anticipating at least a mention of queer sexuality, I will say this. *Westboro Baptist Church may be conservative Christianity's greatest gift to queer*

advocacy yet. It spares gays the trouble of wondering whether a God who loves gays infinitely, and a God who wants far better than gay acts for them, might be one and the same God. Before trying to straighten out queers, we might work on straightening those who appear straight.

Once a great teacher and a truth-seeker were standing in a river. The teacher asked the student, "What do you want?" The truth-seeker said, "Truth."

Then the teacher plunged the student under the water, and let him up and asked him, "What do you want?" The student said, "Truth!" Then the teacher held the student's head under the water, and the student struggled and struggled, and finally the teacher let him up and asked him, "What do you want?" The student gasped, "**Air!!!**" Then the teacher said, "*When you want truth the way you want air, you will find it.*"

The same thing goes for freedom from porn!

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

In ancient times the concensus was that this cannot be taken literally. If you sin with your right eye and pluck it out, you will go on sinning with your left eye. Furthermore, when a man decided to cut off the problem at its root, the Council condemned self-castration.

However, the fact that these words cannot be *literal* does not mean that they cannot be *true*. In ascetical struggle, there will be some sin, some thing to which one is attached in passion, that it seems we cannot live without. To give it up would be to tear out our right eye or right hand.

But the Lord tells us: "Tear out your right eye and your right hand and be free," and we must cut off our own damnation. Never mind that afterwards we realize that we were afraid of letting go of Hell; never mind that once we have torn out our right eye cut off our right hand we find that we have our right eye and our right hand now more than ever: if cutting off our right hand is the price of freedom, cut it off.

And to pick a salient example: if you are one of many men who does not benefit from having a porn delivery service attached to your computer, cut off the sewer of pornography at whatever level necessary to be free. Censorware exists; not wanting to have to bring a sin to confession exists. Canceling internet service and checking email at libraries is better than having full internet access and taking that path all the way to Hell.

It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: 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.

Marriage is permanent. Civil divorce exists, and the great mercies of Orthodox oikonomia extend to allowing a second or third marriage after divorce, even if they make clear that this is oikonomia. But even with divorce in the picture, marriage is indelible: to put it bluntly, when two divorced people sleep together, there are *four* people in the bed.

But there is another point to be made: the place of marriage, that is real, full, true marriage in the world today is almost like the place of monasticism in the desert in days past. One monk in the *Philokalia* wrote that the things that are successes for a man in the world are failures to the monk, and the things that are successes to a monk are failures to a man in the world. A man in the world wants a

fine reputation and places of honor, a beautiful wife and fine children, a magnificent and luxurious house, to be able to have his way in what happens, etc. And all of these are ruin to the monk. For the monk, success consists in living in obedience and receiving painful commands, having a spartan cell, enduring shame and dishonor, being cut off from his kin, and so on. And if this happens to the man in the world, some have committed suicide. And there is something strikingly similar, spookily similar, with the faithful married life in the world and classical monasticism.

If we ask what is success in the world as a whole, it is sampling various world spiritualities, having a nice car and house, being able to buy the things you see advertised, and so on and so forth. And not all of these are ruin for faithful married life in the world, but at least the price tags are switched. To faithful married life in the world, doing some nice family activity every week, or even just doing *chores* together, is much better than two high paying jobs and a nanny. A family presumably means some income, but the faithful living married life in the world are probably not going to be good enough at running the rat race to have much more money than they need (and if they are faithful, they will be more likely to open their hands). None of this is technically a monk's "vow of poverty," but between inflation, low income, and debt, the family may have a "virtual vow of poverty." People in times before have said that marriage and monasticism are two different and possibly opposite ways to reach the same goal, ultimately a goal of living out of love for God. But that's a decoy to my point here. My point here is that compared to the success and standards of the world around us, faithful married life in the world starts to look a whole lot like monasticism and not much at all like people who look to Starbuck's and yoga, perhaps also serial monogamy, to fill their deepest needs.

Marriage is given attention in the quite short Sermon on the Mount, and its sanctity is underscored by underscoring its permanence. Especially today, we should

give marriage something of the recognition we give monasticism.

Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

To abolish oaths is to make every statement an oath. An oath is specially sanctioned; by saying "You know I am telling truth because I am swearing," you implicitly say, "This needed because I were not to swear it might be OK for me to lie."

God swears in the Bible, and St. Paul's letters contain much swearing, or language that is close to swearing, but none the less it is not only the radical Reformers' fixation on the Sermon on the Mount that rejected swearing: an Athonite monk refused to swear in court and went, uncomplainingly, through a four month jail term and said, "It may seem a small matter to you, but we recognize something real and important in it." And, I would expect, truthfulness was enough of this monk's character that to him every statement was made as if it were an oath.

There is also a second layer, which might be put as follows: "Swear even by your head? Guarantee that something will happen? Do you have any idea that you might not wake up tomorrow, that any number of things might change about your circumstances? Don't you understand that you cannot make one single hair white or black?"

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

Is there a just war? No and never; Orthodox soldiers who kill in war must do penance. The treasury of Orthodox saints includes mighty warriors like St. George, and passion-bearers like the princes Boris and Gleb who allowed themselves to be murdered by wicked rulers usurping their throne. But even St. George did not defend himself from being martyred.

But the point here is not overstated; if anything, it is understated. It may or may not be right to defend oneself, one's loved ones, one's country, by force of arms. There may be *oikonomia*, leniency, to defend oneself by force even though it injures others' bodies. But the Christ before Pilate

not only did not defend himself by violence; he did not resist evil even by words. And Orthodox tradition has picked up on this and said that monks are to remain silent before their accusers and not even defend themselves by words. And it is a strange thing to say that we may never injure another's body to defend ourselves; it is beyond strange to say we may not defend ourselves even by healing another's understanding. But let us recall Christ on trial. Christ did not do what was expected, make any defense against the many allegations brought before him; his entire passion is a living exposition of the claim, "My kingdom is not of this world." And this is not just that Christ's disciples did not defend him beyond cutting off Malchus' ear (whom Christ healed), but there is something positive we will forever miss if we say that in the ideal we may not defend ourselves even by trying to heal the poison others hold in their mind when they accuse us.

When Christ had refused to play along with the Sanhedrin, the astonished Pilate asked him, "Don't you know I have the power to crucify you or to free you?" Or, to paraphrase, "Don't you see that I have all the cards in my hand, and you have none?" And Pilate was terrified as their exchange unfolded; Christ made no effort to free himself and Pilate did not know what power he was dealing with but knew that he was dealing with a power next to which his power, his pomp, his authority was but dust and ashes. Pontius Pilate sensed that he was a chintzy wooden puppet king passing judgment on the first real man he'd met. After then, Christ was crucified, but the grave was not big enough to hold him, and is the grave, not Christ, that lost in the exchange. In the Resurrection of Christ, when the Devil appeared to have managed a decisive and final victory, "God the Game Changer" trumpeted, "Checkmate!"

And here we come to something politically incorrect enough that most readers will read the text and be blithely unaware of it. It doesn't even show up as a blip on the radar.

Perhaps the best way to portray it, or at least the best I can find, is to portray two archetypes, the archetypes of the Saint and the Activist, which define a polarity. The Saint, as I use the term here, consists mostly of people who will never see canonization as formal saints, and the Activist includes mostly people who don't think of themselves as activists, not any more than people who use cars, trains, busses, and airplanes think of themselves as "motor vehicle enthusiasts." The Activist prays, if anything, "*Lord, help me change the world,*" and is concerned with the sewer of problems in the world around. The saint prays, "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,*" and is concerned with the sewer of problems within. (G.K. Chesterton won an essay contest, and also wrote the shortest letter to the editor on record, answered the question, "What is wrong with the world?" with a Saint's, "*Sir, I am.*") The Saint may end up changing the world; in the end the Saint *will* end up changing the world, but that must never be his goal. "*Save yourself, and ten thousand around you will be saved,*" is not about the need to straighten out ten thousand people, but the need to straighten out *one*, and the one person you may least wish to correct. The Activist says, "*Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.*" The Saint says, "Be it unto me according to thy word;" Could any difference be greater?

Since the Catholic Church, one could say, self-amputated from Orthodoxy in 1054, East and West have been separated by a growing chasm, and in an inconsistency I will use 'East' to refer to the Eastern Orthodox Church (though, in this regard, it shares much with Hinduism, (more subtly) Islam, Jainism, etc.), while by 'West' I refer to the broader Western society and specifically include elements that the Roman Catholic Church played no part in. There is a reason for this inconsistency in that the fall of the Roman Church deprived the West of a vital nutrient, however I am simply choosing terms inconsistently to best illuminate something.

In the West, the figure of the Renaissance magus looms large and still has a shadow today: job ads I see calling for an Ajax ninja or a Rails rockstar echo the Renaissance magus. The Eastern figure was the humble member of a community, one strand of an intricately woven web, relating to society, culture, and the Church as one relates to a mother. But the Renaissance magus, besides freely engaging the occult, stood over and against society, *and regarded one's culture as a sort of a despicable raw material that would gain value only insofar as one would transform it to something better.* And this attitude represented a novelty, or at least an aberration, to Orthodoxy. It would come across a bit like telling the mother who gave you birth, "*You know, I don't like the way your body is arranged. You have one arm more than you need; we can consolidate the musculature to give you a much stronger arm, and move your fingers to your feet so that you can easily use your feet to pick things up. And your present skin color is not nearly so beautiful as the royal purple with which I would see you adorned; you should go through the pain of a whole-body tattoo so that your skin may be regal in its color. And I would like to rearrange a few things inside.*" And did I mention that the Renaissance magi claimed equality to Christian saints, saying that the Renaissance magus and the Christian saint were two sides of the same coin?

The Renaissance magus left several strands that are part of the West, and I am not here talking about increasing interest in the occult. I would recall one class where the admittedly flaming liberal professor introduced the topic of "autism and advocacy," finding it patently obvious that if you care about people on the spectrum, "care" translates immediately to political activism. One of the articles she had chosen was surprisingly a Saint talking about the asceticism of love, the spiritual discipline, of living as a father to an autistic child and facing parenting issues that simply don't come up with autism-normal children. But to an

Activist, the obvious response to the autism spectrum, if you have a heart, is political advocacy. But that isn't *really* from the heart, because Activism is from a head severed from the heart. The response that had a heart was the one she was blind to even as she assigned it: the struggle of a father, in the concrete, to love and care for a highly autistic child. This *heart* had no grand schemes to transform society, even on a smaller level; it was just exercising a Saint's love and care in whatever concrete situation one is in. Including having a child and discovering that he had some unusual needs and would take a lot of love to care for.

The Activist looms large; it looms large enough that not only do liberals pursue advocacy of liberal agendas, but many conservatives shuffle a few things around and pursue advocacy of a few conservative agendas. This may seem strange enough to say, but I wince at some of the conservative, Christian pro-life advocacy I have seen, because it takes the framework of a liberal activist and fills in the blanks with something conservative instead of something liberal. Being pro-life is an area where political Activism can only take you so far: you cannot reach its *heart*, until you enter the process of becoming a Saint.

The Saint turns the other cheek. The Activist can only win by earthly victory. The Saint often wins though earthly defeat.

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

Feeding the hungry is greater work than raising the dead. the saints tell us. *Fasting benefits you alone; almsgiving also benefits your neighbor.* And these things cannot be kept secret. The harder you try to keep your almsgiving a secret, the more God will show you off as his faithful Saint.

The spiritual danger of making good deeds a means to praise is like buying food so that you can play with its packaging. It's entirely backwards, and Christ lays the axe at the root of the tree: he does not chop it off above ground so it will grow back, but cuts as deep in the roots as he needs to do uproot a deadly weed. What God does or does not do in terms of publicizing results is his concern and not ours. Our concern is that it shows severely warped priorities to seek commensurate recognition for your goodness.

I remember wishing, years back, to see some Christian institution name a building after a widow who gave \$10 a month that she couldn't afford, out of her husband's pension.

I have not lost that wish, but I am profoundly grateful that the Orthodox Church names parishes not after money bags, but after a saint or feast who has entered the heavenly mansions and is no longer in danger of sinking into pride from being so honored.

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father

knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

Almsgiving is not to be trumpeted, but few of us are so stealthy as to give alms without the recipient knowing. But prayer can be done in secret, so only God knows we pray. The text does not have mainly unspoken prayers in mind such as those coming from Protestantism may expect; purely mental prayer is one of a number of kinds of prayer there is, and the text does not discuss prayer without opening one's lips, but prayer in one's closet with the door shut, prayer which is presumably spoken aloud. But as with almsgiving, we are to seek secrecy and hidden works, and when we strive to tear away the last shred of wanting to show off our good deeds, God himself will show off our good deeds.

Orthodox writing about "much speaking" take a line of argument one might not get from the "bare text" of "use not vain repetitions." Essentially, the suggestion is that the bedrock of prayer is not from masterpieces of rhetorical excellence, but rather simple, childlike prayers which are repeated over and over. The Jesus Prayer is the crowning jewel of such prayers. But even then, it is a mistake to think one will be heard for much speaking. The Jesus Prayer is intended to sink down into you from the outside in until it becomes like the blood pulsing through your body, and even in the highest use of the Jesus Prayer there is no expectation that one will be heard from one's many words. The path that is most abundant in repeated words is the one further from thinking one is heard from much repetition.

And furthermore Christ de-mythologizes God. If the Father is seen as an old man with a beard, it may be entirely relevant to inform him what things one has need of. But Christ will not accept this: God knows, before we begin to ask him, what we need, and he knows better than we do. We are urged on every account to pray, but the burden does not lie on our shoulders to instruct God about what we need.

I may comment briefly that before Bultmann went through his campaign to de-mythologize the Bible, over a thousand years before Pseudo-Dionysius had a campaign to de-mythologize the Bible, and did a better job of it. *Here Christ instructs us in appropriate prayer to a de-mythologized God.*

After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

"Our Father:" in these two words alone is something astonishing, something stunning. This prayer is prayed in the Divine Liturgy in the brief period when the holy gifts have become the body and blood of Christ and before they are consumed. It is a singular prayer. And it may be noted that calling God one's Father is a strong claim in Scripture: to be a son of God is to be divine and from ancient times this prayer was seen in relation to theosis.

The first of seven petitions, "May your name be held holy," contains the other six. It is as if the prayer is given here, and then a commentary.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

This is an adult prayer. It is not a prayer that everything go according to your wishes, or mine, but God's. It is a prayer that God's reign extend, and the earth that is an icon of Heaven may ever be fuller or more complete.

Give us this day our daily bread.

This is the one prayer for material concerns, and it is exceedingly modest. It is kept by us who may have a month's food on hand as a formality; but to many of those who prayed, it was anything but formality. The faithful needed the days' bread. And here again it is modest, for it does not say "Give us this week a week's bread," but "Give

us this day our daily bread." The prayer is almost a goad to say, "Stop scrambling to enlist God as your helper in your efforts to build a kingdom on earth. Don't cling to wants. You have legitimate needs, and you are invited, summoned, to ask for your legitimate need of enough bread for today."

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

We ask God for contradictory things, and we do that all the time. We ask for the peace that belongs to people who are not controlling, and we also ask to be in complete control of others around us. We ask God to help a child make independent adult-like decisions, and we demand that their choice agree with ours. Or we ask God to free us from the misery of alcoholism and addiction, but we ask him to let us keep whatever we are addicted to. With the Blessed Augustine, we pray, "Lord, give me chastity, but not yet."

It is incoherent, contradictory, to ask for forgiveness when we will not forgive. We owe God billions and billions of dollars, and when he has forgiven us, we demand repayment from our brother who owes a few thousand dollars. Not that a thousand dollars is any trifling sum; it is worth months of income, but if we will not forgive, God's grace bounces off of us. The door to the heart can only be opened from the inside, but we are confused if we try to open it when we have bolted and barred it with a grudge.

There are seven petitions in this singularly important prayer, and any of them could be commented on at length. In the Sermon on the Mount only this one receives further comment, and it is a comment stark and clear.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

The closing note is not addressed to the Father alone, but asserts all kingdom, power, and authority to the whole

Trinity. But the main point I would note is something else.

The prayer is given slightly differently in the Orthodox practice: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One," and then a priest if present adds, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen." "Evil One" replaces "evil" because we are not praying for a delivery from some abstract, depersonalized quality like confusion or misunderstanding, but from the Devil, the Dragon who swept a third of the stars from Heaven.

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

This is the comment mentioned above. All seven petitions are inexhaustible, but this one is clear: it is a stupid thing to hold on to a grudge and expect forgiveness. (Tradition preserves the reason why: it's like holding shut the door to your heart and inviting God to come in.)

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

What has been said first of almsgiving, and then of prayer, is said of fasting, is this: if you try to show off, and your purpose is to impress others, then it is hollow and worthless. That is all the reward you will ever have, in this world or the next. But if you conceal it and perform to an audience of One, God himself, it will be full, invaluable, and

God himself will show it off. By all means, choose the right path, and it will never be taken from you.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

This says more than the *Tao Te Ching* which I remember to say, "Halls of gold and jade cannot easily be guarded." (The implication? If you don't *have* halls of gold and jade, neither can you *lose* halls of gold and jade.) A net of financial security paradoxically becomes one more thing to worry about.

Christ offers very simple investment advice. This investment advice may be beyond the pall even of political incorrectness, but here is his investment plan:

1. Do not store up financial resources, but give to the poor.
2. Give freely as an offering to Christ.
3. Christ will receive your gift as a loan.
4. Christ will repay you exorbitantly, but on *his* time and on *his* terms.

This cuts against the grain of every worldly advice; financial assets that you hold on to are not an asset but a liability. Now some people have said, "We may have things as long as we are not attached to them," and that is genuinely and fully true, but inner detachment is harder than just getting rid of one's possessions, and easier to fool

yourself.

Having an earthly safety net to do the job of God's providence is to have an idol. Earthly worldly advice is about how to have enough treasures on earth to support oneself. But they are flimsy, worthless, and the best way to take yourself is not to store up treasures on earth, not to seek one's providence from earthly treasure, but instead store up treasures of Heaven. And having really and truly thrown yourself on the mercy of God, you will find that God is merciful beyond your wildest dreams.

The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!

"If thine eye be single" has an immediate sense and a more profound sense. Marriage is honorable, but St. Paul warns that if a man is married his eye will not be single because it will be divided between the Lord and his wife. He gives advice but not a command. If it is a hindrance to divide one's eye between the Lord and one's spouse, what hindrance must it be to divide one's eye between the Lord and despicable money!

On a deeper level, I would recall an academic theology who presented as a lesson from computer science that we should switch between several activities rapidly. (In academic theology, the standard way to do name-dropping is to introduce a term from science, usually in a way that scientists could not make head or tail of.) My response was, "This may be true; what it is not is a lesson from science," but I don't believe it is true. Far from it, divided attention is a hindrance to *earthly* success, let alone *Heavenly* growth; we fragment ourselves in a way that would be unimaginable millenia ago when philosophers said then that we were fragmented.

Progress in monasticism moves through layers of contemplation that let go of worldly things and even what one has grasped in previous layers of contemplation until one is all eye and all beholding the Uncreated Light. The focus becomes progressively like a laser: the monk, who is all eye, has more and more a single eye.

Perhaps there are other ways; reading the *Tao Te Ching*—or, better, the "Nine Enneads" from *Christ the Eternal Tao*, may not be on par with the Fathers, but if you let them sink in for decades you may gain something. Or simply be under the fatherly guidance of a good priest who appropriately emphasizes the Jesus Prayer. But in any case Lao Tzu complained in his day that people had fallen from an eye that is single—let alone Christ—and if we make the same claim, we have gone from out of the frying pan, not into just fire, but into thermite (which has been used to burn through the armor on tanks).

One does not jump in a single moment from dismal conditions to perfection; the standard pastoral advice is to give a little more or cut back a little further, and we will not leap all in one jump from a divided eye to one that is single. But growing towards an eye that is single is growing towards contemplation in the glory we were made for.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Note that Christ does not call Money a servant, but a master. He says not, "No man can have two servants," but "No man can serve two masters." If your life is ordered so that you have money and the things money can buy all lined up to serve you, it is in fact you who are serving money. And this is not just some sophisticated insight, but something very basic. St. Paul tells us that the love of money is the root of all evil, and the *Philokalia* describe the demon of loving

money as what would today be described as a "gateway drug": once one's spirit is defeated by the love of money, one is passed along to other, worse demons. As regards money, the Sermon on the Mount is uncomfortably clear.

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

Let me make a couple of brief remarks before diving to the core of the passage. First of all, you are making a fundamental error if you assume that "Each day has enough trouble of its own" is only intended for the inhabitants of a

mythical and perfect world. It is in fact practical advice for our world, and it is more practical advice for us today than ever. Second, there is a translation issue in that one verse could be rendered, "Which of you by worrying could add a single cubit [a foot and a half] to his height?" or "Which of you by worrying can add a single hour of your span of life," but in fact the word play admits an apt paraphrase: "Do you think you can add a single hour to your lifespan by worrying? You might as well try to worry your way into being over a foot taller!"

Now to the main point: "Do not store up treasures on earth" and "You cannot serve both God and Money" are not a barbed wire fence that serves only to injure. They protect a paradise which we can live in here and now: if *wealthy* Solomon in all his splendor could not match the lilies of the field, to what height will we ascend if we let go of taking up God's responsibility of providing for our needs; we will be as the birds of the air or the lilies of the field, as Adam and Eve naked and innocent in Paradise. We cast ourselves out of Paradise when we open our eyes and say, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we wear?" But the entire point of the stark, pointed fence is a buildup to a right and proper invitation to live in Paradise here and now. Not later, when the economy might be better. Here and now we are called to enter paradise and live the divine life.

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye. Give not that which is

holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.

I read a woman who was a pillar of the church I grew up in, recounting a civil union and saying, "There was not a dry eye in the place." Even after I thought, I held my tongue from adding, "Only the sound of angels weeping."

One of the principles of mystagogy in Orthodoxy is that if you know the truth, and you know someone will reject it, you don't say it. Come Judgment Day, it is better for the other person to not have rejected the truth. And it is better for you not to have put the other person in that position. But even then we are not to judge; we have acted so that another person will not be Judged on Judgment Day, and who are we to judge? Has God asked our help judging our neighbor?

Someone sins, and that is a stench in God's nostrils. Then we see it and we judge. Now there are two stenches in God's nostrils. Is it better for you to leave God with one stench or two?

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

Keep on asking, and it will be given to you at a time you do not expect it. Keep on seeking, and you shall find at a place you would never imagine. Keep on knocking, and after you are certain your knocking is not working, the door shall be opened to you.

Sometimes it is less painful than this; but we must ask until our voices fail, because sometimes it is not until our voices fail and our petitions seem to have fallen on deaf ears are we ready to have what we ask for. Keep on asking. Keep on seeking. Keep on knocking. And if it is easier than this,

count yourself blessed. If it is harder than this, still count yourself blessed. In all cases it is God's sovereign hand strengthening and growing you in all the ways you would know to ask and all of the ways you would never imagine to ask.

Never stop asking, or seeking, or knocking. And never assume that because you did not instantly receive what you asked, you will never receive what you asked. Never assume that because your request was not granted in the way you envisioned, you will not be given something better that you would never think to ask.

Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?

We today, in our political correctness, manage others' moods by feeding their vices. We give a stream of compliments so others will feel better. Christ does not give a honey-sweet drone of manufactured compliments; he instead calls us "evil" and elsewhere, though he surely is good, reprov'd even the truthseeker who called him "good."

Christ says that if evil as we are, we give good gifts to children, how much will the Heavenly Father who is good give anything but excellent gifts? Quite often he gives us better than we asked and we say that our prayers were denied. We have been corrupt enough to ask for a stone to eat, or a serpent, and his work is to wean us from corrupt foods onto foods fitting in every sense to men. The original audience asked God for loaves and fishes, but we would rather have stones and serpents.

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is

the law and the prophets.

To pick a nit: the text does not say "Therefore all things whatsoever *they* would that men should do to you," but "Therefore all things whatsoever *ye* would that men should do to you." The single-word difference is subtle but *profound*.

We are to ask for bread and fish. But when others ask for a stone, prayerfully consider giving bread, and when others ask for a serpent, prayerfully consider giving a fish. The time may not be right, or the occasion, but if nothing else we can pray good gifts for them. And do whatever *you* would want others to do for you if you ARE seeking the Kingdom of Heaven.

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

At non-Orthodox funerals, I have always heard that the deceased is in Heaven. You die and next you go to Heaven. But there is another quite chilling possibility. Most people go to Hell and perhaps many Orthodox go to Hell. The one time I was closest to dying, I experienced and gave in to extraordinary temptations in my spirit. God graciously provided a way out, but it is common for the dying to be allowed great temptations, and I'm really not sure that if I had died then, in that state, I would be in Abraham's bosom. As Orthodox we do not say that we have been saved; we might say that we are being saved, but even great saints do not enjoy safety. The story is told of a dying monk who stepped with one foot into Paradise, and the demons said, "Glory to you, you have defeated us," and the monk said, "Not yet I haven't," and pulled the other foot completely into Paradise. The story is also told of a monk who experienced high mystical visions and was brought bodily

into Heaven, and then fell and was damned.

Heaven is not the final resting place for everybody in our circle. Many we are connected to can easily be damned, and we ourselves can easily be damned. I am very wary of assuming that I am standing firm, because that is how you fall. And it is clear to me now that I could be damned no matter how good my ascesis looks to me.

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

You shall know them by their fruits: not anything else, even ecclesiastical rank.

We live in an age of false prophets, and not just those promoted on Oprah. These words of Christ have never been wisely ignored, but we need them in particular here and now: the fruits of rhetoric, the fruit of people's personal lives so far as we know them, and the fruit of what happens in their following. The fruit of honest or dishonest, manipulative, shady rhetoric is perhaps the least important of these three, but it is there. The fruit of personal lives is important, though it may be harder to find since anyone can choose whatever image they want on the network: here "the prophet sees through a glass, darkly, while the archivist sees through a microscope, sharply," (Peter Kreeft), and we do not have an archivist's knowledge. But perhaps the most important fruit of all is another fruit that cannot be hidden, which is what happens in a person's wake. Does the prophet leave behind a following with the fragrance of godliness, or

a stench of rotting?

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Christ makes his point strongly. He does not say that many whose faith was lukewarm, many whose eyes were not single and whose hearts were divided, will be damned. That is of course true, although many "unlikely candidates" will feast in the Heavenly kingdom. But he puts the point most sharply: among those who seem to have a faith to remove mountains, who in his name have prophesied and cast out demons, who have performed miracles, will be damned.

There is an old Russian folktale that His Eminence KALLISTOS has what he calls an all-purpose story, where there was a woman who was exceedingly sharp and strict in fasting and every legalistic astonishment, and to her astonishment died and found herself in Hell. She called her guardian angel, and asked about what must be a mix-up. The angel asked if there was anything she had done out of charitable love for another, and she mentioned that she had given a long, thin onion to a beggar once. The angel reached out into his pouch, took out the onion, and said, "Here it is. I'll hold onto one part of it and you hold onto the other, and I will try to pull you out." The woman took the onion, and the others in Hell saw that she was starting to be pulled up, and began to grab on to her, so that there was a collected web beginning to rise out of the fire of Hell. The woman said, "Stop it! Let go! It's mine!", and when she said, "It's mine!", the onion snapped, and the woman and all those attached to her fell back into Hell.

Fasting and other disciplines are important, but a legalistic fast that does not arise from Christ knowing you is worthless. Even casting out demons and working miracles is of precious little value if it is not (the power of) Christ in you, the hope of glory. Neither unimpeachable fasting, nor working miracles, nor writing or reading theology, nor even almsgiving, will itself save you from being rightly damned to Hell.

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

When Y2k was approaching, I believed the grid would go black January 1, 2000. I believed in the worst case scenario, and while I did not have anything near adequate material preparation for this, I was completely wrong.

Completely wrong.

Then why do I feel like I'm crossing my fingers? Every prediction I believed about disaster on January 1, 2000 turned out to be 100% wrong.

The burr under my saddle in saying I was wrong was that I believe I was fully wrong about the details of Year 2000 collapse, but there are still some beliefs I retain. Not, perhaps, that the Y2k prediction was a nice, poetic story, or that I wish to say, *Star Wars* style, "What I told you was true, from a certain point of view," but let me outline the beliefs I held surrounding Y2k:

1. A great disaster will occur immediately on January 1, 2000, and will shut down Western civilization.
2. If there is a great disaster, we will have physical needs.
3. If there is a great disaster, we will have spiritual needs.

Now as far as the first point goes, I think it was wrong but not entirely off the mark; I don't believe so much that deterioration *will* happen as that deterioration *is already happening*, and this is a point I don't really think I need to argue.

Now as regards the second point, I could find survivalist resources galore; if I had more oomph to my opinion, I would have dug much deeper into the copious literature on how to care for one's material needs if civilization abruptly fell apart on a particular day.

But the third point, the interesting one, is the one I had the most trouble about. It seemed obvious to me that if the grid were to go black, if all normal societal and social patterns were completely disrupted, then we would have other problems besides how much food we had in store and how ready we were to defend our resources. One friend of mine has worked on spiritual retreats for people at the bottom of the totem pole economically socially, recognizing correctly that not only do the people at the bottom of the totem pole benefit from having something in their belly and shelter from the elements, but they could benefit from a spiritual retreat for the same basic reasons middle class people would benefit from a spiritual retreat. And I deeply respect the humanness of that observation. And I asked and poked about psychological and spiritual resources for people surviving disasters, and this point was not one that survivalists seemed to have thought through. The most of a

response I could get was, "*Buy plenty of condoms and stock up on board games.*"

I broadened my search, seeing if I could find clues anywhere else, and in fact there were clues. People who had been taken hostage by terrorists for years had established a rhythm of spiritual discipline, and this "treasure from Heaven" fed their spirits in terrible situations. People who survived Nazi and Marxist concentration camps had a spiritual fire already burning. And the core of this fire is found in the Sermon on the Mount.

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

What is the "flood"? Cancer, adultery, divorce, depression, being a hostage of terrorists or a prisoner of Nazis or Marxists in concentration camps: all of these things are storm and flood flood. That some flood will come is completely non-negotiable. Whether we build on rock or sand is up to us, and as a martial arts instructor said, "*The way you practice is the way you will fight:*" if you are slow or half-hearted in spiritual disciplines now, you will arrive with disaster on half-baked preparation, whereas if you take to heart the words, "*The more you bleed in the dojo, the less you'll bleed on the street,*" you will come to the disaster as one who has already bled, as someone who is ready for the fight.

There are resources on spiritual struggle that go into

more detail than this: *The Philokalia* immediately springs to mind. But there is no text so central as the Sermon on the Mount.