

# Orthodox Asceticism

## 1. Introduction

Our topic for this evening is Orthodox Asceticism. Why do we as Orthodox Christian people have various ascetical practices such as fasting, vigils, morning and evening prayers, obedience to a spiritual father, regular confession, etc.? Are these just old rituals that somehow grew up through the centuries and just stuck? Or is there something deeper involved?

To answer that question, we need to go back to the beginning and discover how we Orthodox view the very nature of man and the nature of his fall so long ago.

## 2. God - we must always begin with God

- a) God is light, and in him is no darkness at all
- b) God is holy (The Cherubic Hymn)
- c) God is love... perfect unselfish love

## 3. Man

- a) Created in the Image and Likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27)
- b) Created like children... sinless, yet not complete. Not all knowing, not all wise. Room for growth.
- c) Created to grow into the likeness of God
- d) The Image of God
  - The basic equipment
- e) The Likeness of God
  - Given in "seed" form, so to speak
  - This was mankind's vocation - the pursuit of God-likeness in his life, so that whatever else he may do, this one thing was the foundation of it.
- f) What did this mean for mankind? How did he have this within him?
  - He was indwelt by the Holy Spirit
  - The eyes of his heart – the nous/intellect was clear and unstained and not focused on self, but on God.

## 4. The Fall – What happened to man when he disobeyed God?

- a) His focus turned to himself
- b) The Image of God was stained, darkened, diminished, bent... yet not wholly destroyed
- c) But the Likeness of God within him was lost
  - No longer could man pursue the likeness of God
  - God's Spirit left the Temple
  - The eyes of his heart turned to himself as god and so were darkened.
  - Why? Because sin separates us from God.
    - It is not as though God is moved by sin – he is always love – the same yesterday, today and forever
    - It is WE who are moved, changed, darkened, stained, separated from God by sin.
    - Consider the story of the Prodigal Son.
    - Self love is not compatible with God's love, which is selfless.
    - He could no longer commune with God... he had become his own idol.
- d) And so, without being able to see as he used to, having only his mind and his physical sense to work with, he pursued God on his own terms, and ended up following one idol after another in pursuit of happiness and meaning in life.
- e) And so man was badly wounded - sick and blind in his soul. He needed healing. But separated from the source of life – from God himself – death entered the world.

## 5. Redemption - God's response to Man's fall

- a) This was not a situation that God designed nor desired.
- b) Sin and death and selfishness had taken hold of man.
- c) But God was not angry with man – not the way we get angry - ready to meet out judgments without giving aid.
- d) **You've seen the big banner at baseball games... John 3:16** - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever would believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."*
- e) **Philippians 2:5-8** - *"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."*
  - God's love for man never changed.
  - But God would not force his love on mankind, else it would not be love.
  - So God opened the gates of paradise again by sending His Son to die on the cross for our sins, to enter into death -

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that great enemy of man - to become the Second Adam - the entirely selfless Lover of Mankind, and through his life, teaching, passion, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and promised second coming, do the work of salvation.

f) **Ephesians 2:8-10** - *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”*

- God offers this free gift of salvation to all who will receive it.

### 6. Asceticism - Man's response to God's gift

- a) But what is our part in it all?
  - Matt. 11:12 - “... the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”
- b) "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling" - Phil 2:12
  - We are not trying to *earn* our salvation. We don't earn merit before God by fasting, praying, reading the Bible, etc.
  - Rather, we cooperate with God, working toward the healing of our soul
    - Yes, we have come to Christ in faith.
    - Yes, we have prayed for the forgiveness of our sins.
    - Yes, we have been baptized into the Body of Christ and been Chrismated.
    - But yes, that self love so easily sinks back into us.
  - We are working toward the curing of that self love – the curing of our spiritual blindness, cooperating with Him toward the goal of becoming like Him.
- c) And so we fast
  - Fasting from food – mastering the belly – is one of the best ways (say the Fathers) of putting to death this self love that we are so easily afflicted with.
  - We fast on Wednesday to remember that Judas betrayed Christ on that day.
    - We pray that we do not betray our Lord as well.
  - We fast on Friday to remember that on that day He died on the cross for our sins, and we remember that we too are to take up our cross and follow Him.
- d) And we try to keep a daily cycle
  - Morning prayers
  - Evening prayers
  - Daily Bible reading
  - Reading the words of the Fathers and the Lives of the Saints.
- e) We keep a weekly cycle
  - The weekly fasts
  - We have daily vespers
  - Great Vespers
  - Liturgy
- f) We have the annual cycle of the Fasts and Feasts
  - Major Fasts – Great Lent, Holy Week, Apostles Fast, Dormition Fast, Nativity
  - Major Feasts – Pascha, Theophany, Transfiguration, Dormition, Nativity, others...
  - Minor Feasts
- g) Vigils
  - The night before a funeral, an all-night vigil is held during which the entire book of Psalms is read.
  - Vigils can be held at other times as well.
- h) Giving of Alms
  - An indispensable part of fasting is giving and care for the needy and poor.
- i) Receiving the Sacraments
  - Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, Holy Unction, etc.
  - Especially the Eucharist – this is vital to our spiritual life.
- j) Practice of the Jesus Prayer
  - “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.”
  - With the guidance of our spiritual fathers, we seek to make this the prayer of our hearts, that becomes as much a part of our lives as breathing or the beating of our hearts.
- k) Watchfulness / Attentiveness
  - Along with the Jesus Prayer, practice of watchfulness or attentiveness to our souls is vital.
  - We guard our minds and hearts from wayward images, imaginations, judgments, thoughts, etc. that come from either us, the world or the enemies of our souls.
    - With the help of the Holy Spirit we seek to become watchmen for our souls.
- l) Obedience to a Spiritual Father
  - This is an indispensable part of our Orthodox Christian life.

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- We are never Lone-Ranger Christians. It's never just "Jesus and me."
  - We seek the guidance and instruction of one who has trodden the path before us and can help us along the way.
- m) A Larger Spiritual Community
- Additionally, we recognize ourselves as a part of the Body of Christ, not as automatons.
  - Even as God is Community (Trinity), so we place ourselves within a community to which we are answerable.
  - It is wonderful to know that the man who serves me the Body and Blood of Christ believes as I do – as WE do.
- n) All of this is to:
- Purify our hearts
    - "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." - Matt. 5
  - Cure spiritual blindness
  - Lead out of our self love and into love for God and our fellow man
  - Help us become vessels more fit for the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit
    - 2 Tim. 2:20-21 - *"But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honor and some to dishonor. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared for every good work."*

### 3. The Road Goes On

- a) Faith and Baptism are the gateway... the door into the Kingdom.
- We step through, we are washed, and by faith we are received into God's Kingdom.
- b) But the road goes on from there.
- We are preparing ourselves for the very presence of God, for life in the Kingdom to come.
  - Adam and Eve lost the presence of God and so allowed separation from God and death to come into the world.
  - All of our ascetic efforts are aimed at this one thing... to learn to be selfless and love and to be like God.
  - Fasting, alms giving, prayer, vigil, watchfulness, etc. are all geared toward this one goal - to teach us not to love ourselves so much, but to love God and Man without condition. To turn our passions away from our own desires and toward love for God and Man.
  - Love is what we lost... Orthodox asceticism aims to get it back. It aims at making us fit vessels for the Holy Spirit.
  - It is a true love, not a gooshy-feeling kind of love. It is a selflessness that compelled Christ to die on the cross for us.
  - Only when we are perfected in this kind of love will we find lasting peace and joy.
  - It is this transfiguration of our being that we seek as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling. It is nothing less than the pursuit of the Likeness of God in our lives – to find rest in the One who said, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest."