

LEPERS, SAMARITANS AND GRATITUDE THE ANCESTORS OF CHRIST

**January 21, 2024
12th Sunday of Luke
Revision E**

Gospel: Luke 17:12-19

In the Western Church in the United States, today's Gospel lesson is used for the U.S. holiday of Thanksgiving Day. The Eastern Church does not celebrate Thanksgiving Day as a Feast Day. The Gospel lesson is the account of the ten lepers that were healed by Jesus; where one was a Samaritan. To get a better understanding of the circumstances, let us look at the Mosaic Law regarding leprosy and at the history of the Samaritan people up to the first century.

Background

Leprosy, According to Mosaic Law

Diagnosis:

The priest was given the task of diagnosing whether an infection was leprosy or benign (Leviticus 13:1-3). In addition, the priest also diagnosed leprosy arising from boils on the skin and from skin burns, whether it occurs on bare skin or in a person's hair (Leviticus 13:4-46). Clothing also was brought to the priest for inspection and diagnosis; if the clothing had leprosy that was spreading, the clothing had to be burned (Leviticus 13:47-59).

The Life of a Leper:

Lepers were required to live alone or separated from society, outside the camp. His (or her) clothing was to be torn (as in a state of mourning); he had to keep his head uncovered and his mustache covered. Whenever non-lepers came along, the leper was required to say, "Unclean! Unclean!" to warn the non-lepers to stay away (Leviticus 13:45-46).

Background.....	1560
Leprosy, According to Mosaic Law.....	1560
Diagnosis:.....	1560
The Life of a Leper:	1560
Purification of a Leper:	1560
Who Were the Samaritans?.....	1561
Gospel: Luke 17:11-19	1563

Purification of a Leper:

When a leper was cleansed or healed, he needed to show himself to a priest for verification. The priest then met the leper outside the camp and checked him over (Leviticus 14:1-3). If the leper was indeed healed, a series of offerings were performed involving two live birds. One bird was killed over running water and the other bird was dipped in the bloody water and then released. The leper was sprinkled seven times with the bloody water (Leviticus 14:4-8).

Following this, the leper was shaved of all body hair, including his eyebrows, and then, bathed. Eight days later, he was required to offer another offering involving three lambs (two males, one ewe) plus flour and oil. Only after all this could the leper return to normal society (Leviticus 14:9-32).

Who Were the Samaritans?

Samaria was part of the Northern Kingdom that was led into captivity by the Assyrians in the 8th Century BC. The ten tribes representing the Northern Kingdom had been given to Jeroboam, Solomon's servant, because of idolatry in Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:26-36). Jeroboam, in turn, made two golden calves saying that these were the ones that brought Israel out of Egypt (1 Kings 12:26-29). Archaeological research suggests that these golden calves were intended as supports for the invisible Presence of the Lord. Baal, for example, was commonly portrayed in 8th to 10th Century BC iconography as enthroned on the back of a bull or other animal.

The Samaritan people initially were Jews of the ten tribes, but the Assyrian conquerors sent bands of people from other nations into that area in the 7th and 8th Centuries BC to make up for Jews taken away captive. As the people of that area intermarried, the Samaritans came to be racially mixed. However, the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses representing the Law) was well known in Samaria. Jeroboam tried to copy the worship in Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:32) in at least some aspects. People in the Northern Kingdom were familiar with the Ark of the Covenant due to its resting place at Shiloh (located within the borders of the Northern Kingdom) prior to Solomon's Temple.

By the time of Ezra (c. 520 BC), the residents of Samaria were referred to as the enemies of the reconstruction (Ezra 4:1-2). The Samaritans claimed to be seeking the same God as the Southern Kingdom, but Zerubbabel and Ezra didn't buy it.

In about 409 BC, Manasseh, the brother of Jaddua the high priest, was expelled from the Southern Kingdom by Nehemiah for an unlawful marriage to a foreign woman. Manasseh's wealthy father-in-law, Sanballat, obtained permission from Darius, the last Persian king, to build a temple on Mt. Gerizim very much like the temple in Jerusalem. Sanballat then set his son-in-law, Manasseh, up as high priest on Mt. Gerizim and persuaded other priests in Jerusalem with foreign wives to join him¹. [Leviticus 21 required the high priest to avoid foreign wives, but not specifically the other priests. In Ezra 10:9-19 this injunction was extended to all the priests].

Thus, the Samaritans imitated the worship in Jerusalem. When persecution came, however, the worship of Mt. Gerizim changed. For example, in about 167 BC, Antiochus captured Jerusalem, pillaged the Temple and offered swine on the altar. Judas Maccabaeus then led a revolt to drive out Antiochus and purify the Temple. Before the Maccabee revolt, the Samaritans sent envoys to Antiochus (a Greek) offering to change the name of their Temple to the Temple of Jupiter and claiming that they were Persians, not Jews (thus hoping Antiochus would not pillage their Temple also). This merely added to the disgust the Jews in Jerusalem had for the worship on Mt. Gerizim².

¹ For more details, see Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book xi.

² For more details, see Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, xii, 5.

By 125 BC, Josephus stated³ that the Temple on Mt. Gerizim had fallen into disuse and was deserted. Shortly thereafter, Hyrcanus came through with his army and demolished Samaria and the Temple on Mt. Gerizim.

Later during the time of the Maccabees (167 to 63 BC), the Temple on Mt. Gerizim was rebuilt. Since the Maccabees controlled Samaria during this time, the Samaritans developed a zealous devotion to the Jewish Law. During the reign of Herod I, Samaria was refortified as a city and a great Temple was constructed within the city walls. Mt. Gerizim, five miles to the Southeast of Samaria, continued to be considered a sacred place⁴.

Mt. Gerizim and the adjacent peak of Mt Ebal were both about 2500 ft. high and located in the center of Israel. Together they formed a part of an unusual liturgy performed by Joshua at the time of the Conquest (Deuteronomy 27:12-25, Joshua 8:30-35).

On Mt. Ebal the Law was painted on stone as an icon and as a curse for those who refuse to keep it (Deuteronomy 27:2-4). Cyprian stated⁵ that the stones on which the Law was written represent Christ, the Lawgiver. As references he cited, "Thus says the Lord, Behold, I place on the foundations of Zion a precious stone, elect, chief, a corner stone, honorable; and he who trusts in Him shall not be confounded" (Isaiah 28:16). "The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner. This is done by the Lord, and it is wonderful in our eyes. This is the day, which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. O Lord, save therefore, O Lord, direct therefore. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" (Psalm 118:22-25).

The blessings and the curses were given very dramatic prominence following the Conquest and in a liturgical fashion (Deuteronomy 27:12-26). Since "those who are of faith are blessed with the believing Abraham" (Galatians 3:9), the blessing on Mt. Gerizim represents the blessing Abraham received for loving God and neighbor (Genesis 15:6). Mt. Gerizim continued to stand for holiness to the Samaritans. Photini, the Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar, a town which was at the foot of Mt. Gerizim (John 4:7-9), considered Mt. Gerizim more proper than Jerusalem (John 4: 19-24). On the other hand, "the Law is not made for a righteous person" (1 Timothy 1:9), and "as many as are of the works of the Law are under the curse" (Galatians 3:10, Deuteronomy 27:26). In His answer to Photini regarding Mt. Gerizim, Jesus spoke of true worship in spirit and truth – elsewhere.

The curse on Mt. Ebal represents what those who refuse to love God and neighbor can expect to receive after being reminded by the Law their entire life about what God expects, and yet refusing to obey. Just to show the love of God for His people, Christ Himself became the curse that was proclaimed on Mt. Ebal in becoming sin and taking away the sin of the world (Galatians 3:13, 2 Corinthians 5:21). Tertullian referred⁶ to the blessing and the curse as good and evil. "Behold", says the Lord, "I have set before you good and evil. Choose that which is good. If you

³ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, xiii, 9:1, 10:1-2

⁴ See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, xiii, 15:4; xiv, 5:3; xv, 8:5. Also Merrill F. Unger, *Ungers Bible Dictionary*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, p. 960.

⁵ Cyprian, *Treatises* XII, iii, 16.

⁶ Tertullian, *On Monogamy*, xiv.

cannot because you will not (for that you can if you will He has shown, because He has proposed each to your free-will) then you ought to depart from Him whose will you do not do”.

Jesus had several other contacts with Samaritans during His three-year public ministry. For example, James and John, the sons of thunder as Jesus called them, (Mark 3:17) proposed calling down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village that did not receive them (Luke 9:51-56) just as Elijah did. That Jesus was in Samaria at all is noteworthy, since Jews usually traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem via the East side of the Jordan so they could avoid all contact with Samaritans.

Gospel: Luke 17:11-19

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus healed ten lepers at the same time. He told them to go show themselves to the priests, which was what the Mosaic Law required for them to be declared clean and free from leprosy. Then they were healed of their leprosy on the way to show themselves to the priests. Only one leper, a Samaritan, turned back to thank Jesus for healing him of this incurable disease.

Jesus healed the ten lepers in early 30 AD, as He was heading to Jerusalem to be crucified. Three years earlier, He healed a single leper right after He gave the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 8:1-4).

Per Jesus’ custom, he did not go from Galilee to Jerusalem by crossing over to the East side of the Jordan as most Jews did, but went right through Samaria. In one village there were ten lepers, and one was a Samaritan. Perhaps their quarantine and mutual misery drew them together.

Where was this village located, Galilee, Samaria, or Judea? The text doesn’t say. Since Jesus referred to the Samaritan as a foreigner or stranger (Luke 17:18), the implication is that the village was in Galilee, perhaps near the border with Samaria. Cyril of Alexandria interprets⁷ it this way also.

The lepers seemed to know who Jesus was, yet they kept their distance in obedience to the Mosaic Law. The text doesn’t mention them crying out “Unclean! Unclean!” as required by the Mosaic Law, but they probably did this at first. As we do often in the Liturgy, they cried out, “Have mercy on us!” the first thing Jesus said was, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” As they went to show themselves to the priests, they were healed. Given that Samaritans were despised by Jews, we can only wonder whether the Samaritan leper could find a priest that would even stoop to look at his condition, never mind perform all the sacrifices required by the Mosaic Law. The Samaritan, perhaps realizing this and knowing that it was a Jew who healed him, returned and glorified God with a *LOUD VOICE*, falling down at Jesus’ feet.

When Jesus sent all ten lepers to show themselves to the priests, they still had the leprosy. Since they were cleansed on the way, Jesus expected (and common courtesy would also dictate) that they should return to express their gratitude before going through the eight-day purification required by the Mosaic Law.

⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 17, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 466.

Tertullian of Carthage stated⁸ that the Law about lepers had a profound meaning where Christ simply commanded the lepers to show themselves to the priest. No part of this healing was affected in a way different from the Law. His main purpose was to strike at the unbelief of Israel, in that there were many lepers among them. Yet for many hundred years not one had been moved even by so conspicuous an example to call on God who was working in His prophets. Christ Himself inspected them according to the hidden intention of the Law; they were cleansed because they were obedient, and went as the Law required. They recognized the truth that at Jerusalem the Law was to be fulfilled; but Christ was astonished that only one out of the ten was thankful for his release to the divine grace. The Samaritan leper had discovered that it was his duty to render the true oblation to Almighty God — even thanksgiving — in His true temple, and before His true High Priest *Jesus* Christ.

“The Law about lepers had a profound meaning regarding the forms of the disease itself, and of the inspection by the high priest (Leviticus 13-14). The interpretation of this sense it will be our task to ascertain. Christ simply commanded the lepers to show themselves to the priest; ‘and as they went, He cleansed them’ (Luke 17:14) — without a touch, without a word, by His silent power and simple will. Christ had been once for all announced as the healer of our sicknesses and sins, and had proved Himself such by His acts. Why did He need to busy Himself with inquiries into the qualities *and details* of cures; why did the Creator need to be summoned to the scrutiny of the Law in the person of Christ? No part of this healing was affected by Him in a way different from the Law, He Himself did it to perfection. Surely the Lord may by Himself, or by His Son, produce after any manner by His servants the prophets, those proofs of His power and might. He said in a preceding chapter, that ‘Many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’ (Luke 4:27). The mere number proves nothing tending to the abasement of the Creator in curing only one leper. Who can doubt that many might have been cured by Him who cured one (Matthew 8:1-4) and then ten (Luke 17:12-19)? His main purpose in this declaration was to strike at the unbelief or the pride of Israel, in that there were many lepers among them, and a prophet was not lacking to them for many centuries. Yet not one had been moved even by so conspicuous an example to take himself to God who was working in His prophets. He was Himself the High Priest of God the Father; He inspected them according to the hidden intention of the Law, which signified that Christ was the true distinguisher and extinguisher of the defilements of mankind. However, what was obviously required by the Law He commanded should be done: ‘Go, show yourselves to the priests’ (Luke 17:14). Yet why this, if He meant to cleanse them first? The interpretation to be found of the passage is that they were cleansed on this account, because they were obedient, and went as the Law required, when they were commanded to go to the priests. Why, however, did He not give such a command to the leper who first returned? Because Elisha did not do so in the case of Naaman the Syrian; and he was no less the Creator’s agent! This is a sufficient answer. But the believer knows that there is a profounder reason. Consider: therefore, the true motives. The miracle was performed in the district of Samaria, to which country

⁸ Tertullian, Five Books against Marcion, II, iv, 35.

also belonged one of the lepers (Luke 17:16). Samaria, however, had revolted from Israel, carrying with it the disaffected ten tribes, which, having been alienated by the prophet Ahijah (1 Kings 11:29-39; 12:15), Jeroboam settled in Samaria. Besides, the Samaritans were always pleased with the mountains and the wells of their ancestors. Thus, in the Gospel of John, the woman of Samaria, when conversing with the Lord at the well, says, ‘Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet’ (John 4:19), and again, ‘Our fathers worshipped on this mountain; but you Jews say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship’ (John 4:20). Accordingly, He who said, ‘Woe to them that set Zion at naught, and that trust in the mountain of Samaria’ (Amos 6:1 LXX), granting now to restore that region, purposely requests the men ‘to go and show themselves to the priests’. These priests were to be found only there where the temple was; submitting the Samaritan to the Jew, inasmuch as ‘salvation was of the Jews’ (John 4:22). To the tribe of Judah, indeed, wholly appertained the promised Christ, in order that men might know that at Jerusalem were both the priests and the temple. There also was the womb of religion, and its *living* fountain, not its *mere* ‘well’. Seeing, therefore, that they recognized the truth that at Jerusalem the Law was to be fulfilled, He healed them, whose salvation was to come of faith (Luke 17:19) not needing the ceremony of the Law. Christ was astonished that only one out of the ten was thankful for his release to the divine grace, He does not command the former leper to offer a gift according to the Law. He had already paid his tribute of gratitude when ‘with a loud voice he glorified God’ (Luke 17:15); for thus did the Lord will that the Law’s requirement should be interpreted. Therefore, it was said to him, ‘Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well’ (Luke 17:19). He had discovered that it was his duty to render the true oblation to Almighty God — even thanksgiving — in His true temple, and before His true High Priest *Jesus* Christ. ‘The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you’ (Luke 17:20-21). Now, who will not interpret the words ‘*within you*’ to mean *in your hand, within your power*, if you hear, and do the commandment of God? If, however, the kingdom of God lies in His commandment, set before your mind Moses on the other side, according to our *antitheses*, and you will find the selfsame view of the case. ‘For this commandment which I command you today *is not too* mysterious for you, nor *is* it far off. It *is* not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Nor *is* it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word *is* very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it’ (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). This means, ‘Neither in this place nor that place is the kingdom of God; for, behold, it is within you’”.

John Chrysostom pointed out⁹ that the Scribes and Pharisees accused Jesus early in His public ministry of being a Samaritan who has a demon (John 8:48). Therefore, Jesus used Samaritans in some of His parables and miracles as examples of the one who did good, such as the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), and one of the ten lepers (Luke 17:12-19).

⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXI, 2.

Athanasius of Alexandria stated¹⁰ that Christ loved the one as thankful, but was angry with the others as ungrateful. They thought more of the cure of the leprosy than of Him who healed them. The result was that there was more given to the Samaritan leper than to the rest. Similarly, Paul exhorts all men to this.

“So now, those who keep the Passover like the Jews, the Lord again reproves, as He did those lepers who were cleansed. He loved the one as thankful, but was angry with the others as ungrateful, because they did not acknowledge their Deliverer; they thought more of the cure of the leprosy than of Him who healed them. ‘And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on *his* face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan. ‘Jesus answered and said, “Were there not ten cleansed? But where *are* the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?”’ (Luke 17:15-18). There was more given to him than to the rest; for being cleansed from his leprosy, he heard from the Lord, ‘Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well’ (Luke 17:19). For he who gives thanks, and he who glorifies, have kindred feelings, in that they bless their Helper for the benefits they have received. Paul exhorts all men to this, saying, ‘therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s’ (1 Corinthians 6:20); and the prophet commands, saying, ‘Give glory to God’ (Jeremiah 13:13). Testimony was borne by Caiaphas (Matthew 26:65) against our Redeemer, and He was set at naught by the Jews, and was condemned by Pilate in those days. Yet exalted exceedingly and most mighty was the voice of the Father which came to Him; ‘Then a voice came from heaven, saying, “I have both glorified it and will glorify *it* again”’ (John 12:28). For those things which He suffered for our sake have passed away; but those which belong to Him as the Savior remain forever.”

John Cassian described¹¹ the insight of Abbot Paphnutius regarding the free gift of God that brought Israel into the land of promise. It belongs to divine grace to give us opportunities for salvation, prosperous undertakings and victory; but that it is ours to follow up the blessings which God gives us with earnestness. After the reception of any blessing, the grace of God, and the use of free-will both remain, the case of the ten lepers, who were all healed, shows us. When one of them returned thanks, the Lord praised the one, and showed that He was anxious to help even those who were unmindful of His kindness

“The free gift of God is clearly and plainly described in Deuteronomy. ‘When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you: the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you. When the Lord your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them *and* utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. Nor shall you make marriages with them’ (Deuteronomy 7:1-3). So, then Scripture declares that it is the free gift of God that they are brought into the land of promise, that many nations are destroyed before them, that nations more numerous and mightier than the people of Israel are given

¹⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, Festal Letters, VI, 3.

¹¹ John Cassian, Conference of Abbot Paphnutius, I, iii, 19.

up into their hands. But whether Israel utterly destroys them, or whether it preserves them alive and spares them, and whether or not it makes a covenant with them, and makes marriages with them or not, it declares lies in their own power. By this testimony we can clearly see what we ought to ascribe to free will, and what to the design and daily assistance of the Lord. It belongs to divine grace to give us opportunities for salvation, prosperous undertakings and victory; but that it is ours to follow up the blessings which God gives us with earnestness or indifference. This same fact we see is plainly taught in the healing of the blind men. For the fact that Jesus passed by them, was a free gift of Divine providence and condescension. But the fact that they cried out was an act of their own faith and belief. ‘Then the multitude warned them that they should be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, “Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!”’ (Matthew 20:31). That they received the sight of their eyes was a gift of Divine pity. But that after the reception of any blessing, the grace of God, and the use of free will both remain, the case of the ten lepers, who were all healed, shows us. For when one of them through goodness of will returned thanks, the Lord looking for the nine, and praising the one, showed that He was ever anxious to help even those who were unmindful of His kindness. For even this is a gift of His visitation; that he receives and commends the grateful one, and looks for and censures those who are thankless.”

Athanasius of Alexandria stated¹² that we are encouraged to not quench the Spirit, even though bad and unthankful men persecute the Spirit with unholy deeds. They being without understanding, walk still as in darkness. Jesus Christ, being good and a lover of men, came that He might cast this fire on earth; Paul also, when seized by this fire, revealed it not to flesh and blood. But not such were those nine lepers, who were unthankful to the Lord who healed them. Such men will receive the due reward of their folly.

“Paul, when desirous that the grace of the Spirit given to us should not grow cold, exhorts, saying, ‘Do not quench the Spirit’ (1 Thessalonians 5:19). For so shall we remain partakers of Christ, if we hold fast to the end the Spirit given at the beginning. Paul didn’t say, ‘Do not quench;’ because the Spirit is placed in the power of men, and is able to allow anything from them. But because bad and unthankful men are such as manifestly wish to quench it, since they, like the impure, persecute the Spirit with unholy deeds. ‘For a holy spirit of discipline flees from deceit; and sends away undiscerning reasoning (Wisdom 1:5 LXX). Now they being without understanding, deceitful, and lovers of sin, walk still as in darkness, not having, ‘That which was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world’ (John 1:9). Now a fire such as this laid hold of Jeremiah the prophet, ‘But *His word* was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding *it* back, and I could not’ (Jeremiah 20:9). And our Lord Jesus Christ, being good and a lover of men, came that He might cast this fire on earth, and said, ‘I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!’ (Luke 12:49). He desired, as He testified in Ezekiel, ‘For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies, says the Lord God. Therefore, turn and live!’ (Ezekiel 18:32). So that evil should be entirely consumed in all men, that the soul, being purified, might

¹² Athanasius of Alexandria, Festal Letters, III, 4.

be able to bring forth fruit; for the word which is sown by Him will be productive, some thirty, some sixty, some a hundredfold (Mark 4:20). Thus, for instance, those who were with Cleopas (Luke 24), although infirm at first from lack of knowledge, yet afterwards were inflamed with the words of the Savior, and brought forth the fruits of the knowledge of Him. Paul also, when seized by this fire, revealed it not to flesh and blood, but having experienced the grace, he became a preacher of the Word. But not such were those nine lepers who were cleansed from their leprosy, and yet were unthankful to the Lord who healed them. Nor Judas, who obtained the lot of an apostle, and was named a disciple of the Lord, but at last, ‘while eating bread with the Savior, lifted up his heel against Him, and became a traitor’ (Psalm 41:9, John 13:18). But such men have the due reward of their folly, since their expectation will be vain through their ingratitude. For there is no hope for the ungrateful; the last fire, prepared for the devil and his angels, awaits those who have neglected divine light. Such then is the end of the unthankful.”

Gregory the Theologian stated¹³ that we were full of leprosy; we should not associate with the nine unthankful men. We do not want to break out again with evil ulcers. By our cleansing we have become an object of enmity to the Evil One. While rejoicing and being lifted up above measure by the blessing, we may fall again through pride.

“You were full of leprosy, that shapeless evil, yet you scraped off the evil matter, and received again the Image whole. Show your cleansing to me your Priest, that I may recognize how much more precious it is than the legal one. Do not range yourself with the nine unthankful men, but imitate the tenth (Luke 17:12-19). For although he was a Samaritan, yet he was of better mind than the others. Make certain that you will not break out again with evil ulcers, and find the indisposition of your body hard to heal. Yesterday meanness and avarice were withering your hand; today let liberality and kindness stretch it out (Luke 6:6-10). It is a noble cure for a weak hand to disperse abroad, to give to the poor (Psalm 112:9), to pour out the things which we possess abundantly, till we reach the very bottom. Perhaps this will gush forth food for you, as for the woman of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-14). Especially if you happen to be feeding an Elijah, to recognize that it is a good abundance to be needy for the sake of Christ, Who for our sakes became poor. If you were deaf and dumb, let the Word sound (Mark 7:32-35) in your ears, or rather keep Him there, Who hath sounded. Do not shut your ears to the Instruction of the Lord, and to His Counsel, like the deaf cobra to charms (Psalm 58:4-5 LXX). If you are blind and unenlightened, lighten your eyes lest you sleep the *sleep of death* (Psalm 13:3 LXX). In God’s Light see light (Psalm 36:9 LXX), and in the Spirit of God be enlightened by the Son, That Threefold and Undivided Light. If you receive all the Word, you will bring upon your own soul all the healing powers of Christ, with which separately these individuals were healed. Only don’t be ignorant of the measure of grace; don’t let the enemy, while you sleep, maliciously sow tares (Matthew 13:25). Take care that as by your cleansing you have become an object of enmity to the Evil One, don’t again make yourself an object of pity by sin. Be careful lest, while rejoicing and lifted up above measure

¹³ Gregory the Theologian, Oration on Holy Baptism, XL, 34.

by the blessing, you fall again through pride. Be diligent as to your cleansing, ‘going up to the valley of weeping to the place which He has appointed’ (Psalm 84:6 LXX). Keep with all diligence the remission which you have received as a gift, in order that, while the remission comes from God, the preservation of it may come from yourself also.”

Leo the Great, Pope of Rome, wrote¹⁴ that the example of the ten lepers means that we may gain soundness of body but succumb to ungodliness in the process. If we have experienced grave neglect, we need even greater repentance.

“I entreat you, beloved, let those words of the Savior touch your hearts. When by the power of His mercy He had cleansed ten lepers, He said that only one of them all had returned to give thanks (Luke 17:18). This means without doubt that, though the ungrateful ones had gained soundness of body, yet their failure in this godly duty arose from ungodliness of heart. Therefore, dearly-beloved, that this brand of ingratitude may not be applied to you, return to the Lord, remembering the marvels which He has granted to be performed among us. Do not ascribe our release as the ungodly suppose, to the influences of the stars, but to the unspeakable mercy of Almighty God. He has granted the softening of the hearts of raging barbarians; go to the commemoration of so great a benefit with all the vigor of faith. Grave neglect must be atoned for by yet greater tokens of repentance. Let us use the Mercy of Him, Who has spared us, to our own amendment. Let the blessed Peter and all the saints, who have always been near us in many afflictions, grant aid to our entreaties for you to the merciful God, through Jesus Christ our LORD. Amen.”

The healing process here can be summarized by three words: cleansed (Luke 17:14), healed (Luke 17:15) and made well (Luke 17:19). The nine were cleansed and healed but not made well because they forgot to express their gratitude. They were satisfied too early with too little. From this we understand that faith and thanksgiving have a connection, where faith is the substance of things hoped for (Hebrews 11:1). The substance is baptism and its results.

The Greek word translated “made well” (Greek *sozo*) is translated almost everywhere else in the New Testament as “saved”. For example:

- “Praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).
- “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).
- “Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Romans 5:9-10).
- “For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?” (Romans 8:24).
- “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

¹⁴ Leo the Great, Sermons, 84, 2.

- “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8).

The implication of Jesus’ words, then, is that one can be healed, but not be saved! We can have great gifts given to us and still be lost, depending on the gratefulness of our hearts.

Cyril of Alexandria comments¹⁵ on this as follows, “And why did (Jesus) not rather say, ‘I will, be cleansed’, as He did in the case of another leper (Matthew 8:2) but commanded them rather to show themselves to the priests? He commanded them to go, as if being already healed, that they might bear witness to the priests, as the rulers of the Jews and ever envious of His glory, that wonderfully and beyond their hope, they had been delivered from their misfortune by Christ’s willing that they should be healed”. This occurred in 30 AD as Jesus headed for Jerusalem and the Cross (Luke 17:11, 18:31-33). A little over a year later (Pentecost, 31 AD), a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the Faith (Acts 6:7).

In a way we are all lepers to some extent, and the image of leprosy has been applied especially to heresy in the Church, because it is so contagious and destructive. Heretics have been cut off from the Church in ages past to avoid the leprous effect of their teaching.

This can be a lesson for us, also. Have we ever been given a gift from the Lord, where we know it’s His Will that we pursue this gift, but yet forget to take time out from our busy schedule to say thanks?

¹⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 17, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 466.

THE ANCESTORS OF CHRIST

January 21, 2024
29th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision D

Epistle: Colossians 3:4-11

Today's Epistle lesson is not used very frequently in the West, but sometimes in early August.

Table of Contents

Epistle: Colossians 3:4-11	1571
Background to Colossians.....	1571
Spiritual Conditions in Colossae.....	1572
The Ancestors and Family of Christ.....	1573
True Mysticism: Colossians 3:1-4	1573
Covetousness and Idolatry: Colossians 3:5.....	1577
Why Does Covetousness Represent Idolatry?.....	1577
Joachim and Anna.....	1580
True Asceticism: Colossians 3:6-14	1581
Putting off the Old Man (Colossians 3:6-9).....	1581
Putting on the New Man (Colossians 3:10-14).....	1583

Background to Colossians

Paul wrote his Epistle to the Colossians in about 62 AD from house arrest in Rome. Yet he is not recorded in the book of Acts as actually visiting Colossae. However, in Acts 19:10, while Paul spent two years in Ephesus, “all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.” Most people infer that it was during this time that Paul visited Colossae as well as Assos, Hierapolis, Miletus (Acts 20:15-17), Smyrna (Revelation 2:8), Pergamos (Revelation 2:12), Thyatira (Revelation 2:18), Sardis (Revelation 3:1), Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7) and Laodicea (Revelation 3:14), all of which are in Asia. Colossae is about 100 miles East of Ephesus and is a neighboring city to Laodicea and Hierapolis. (Colossians 4:13-16 implies Paul visited both Hierapolis and Laodicea).

The Epistle to the Colossians, like the Epistle to the Ephesians, was circulated among several Churches. In Colossians 4:16, Paul instructed that the Epistle to the Colossians also be read publicly in the Church in Laodicea and likewise that the “epistle from Laodicea be read in the Church in Colossae.” Many have theorized that the “epistle from Laodicea” is the one we know as Ephesians.

Paul was very close to three members of the Seventy who were from Colossae: Epaphras, Archippus, and Philemon (with his wife Apphia). Epaphras was very active in teaching the Colossians as “a faithful deacon of Christ” (Colossians 1:7). In 62 AD, Epaphras was with Paul when he was under house arrest (Colossians 4:12, Philemon 23). Unger refers¹⁶ to Epaphras as the first Bishop of Colossae according to tradition – which makes sense in light of Colossians 1:7.

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¹⁶ Merrill Unger, Unger's Bible Dictionary, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, p. 315.

Paul encouraged Archippus to fulfill the deaconate (or ministry), which he received in the Lord (Colossians 4:17). Paul also referred to him as “our fellow soldier” (Philemon 2). Archippus seems always very closely associated with Philemon and Apphia, and they were even martyred together¹⁷. He was probably Philemon’s deacon.

Philemon is referred to in the New Testament only in the epistle addressed to him. The story behind the epistle involves Philemon’s slave, Onesimus (also one of the Seventy), who ran away to Rome and took some of Philemon’s money with him. Paul met Onesimus in Rome in 62 AD, and Onesimus repented and became Paul’s deacon. For this reason, Paul wrote the Epistle to Philemon; as a result of this epistle, Philemon forgave Onesimus and granted him his freedom. Onesimus was often referred to as the Bishop of Ephesus after Timothy and was ordained by the Apostle John after John’s return from exile on Patmos. Ignatius refers¹⁸ to Bishop Onesimus also in one of his epistles in 107 AD.

The courier who delivered the Epistles to Colossae, Philemon and Ephesus was Tychicus (Colossians 4:7-9, Ephesians 6:21-22) and Onesimus traveled with Tychicus as Tychicus brought the Epistle to Philemon (Philemon 10-12). Tychicus had joined Paul’s Third Missionary Journey in Ephesus (Acts 20:4) and had gone on to Rome when Paul was arrested. As Acts 28 ended, Paul was still under house arrest but was able to receive visitors freely (Acts 28:30) and send them out with the letters he wrote.

Spiritual Conditions in Colossae

Given that the Epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians were circulated to be read by the same Churches and were hand-carried by the same person (Tychicus), it may seem strange that there are many parts that are very similar. For example, one of the most obvious similarities is the instruction concerning husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves (Ephesians 5:19-6:9, Colossians 3:18-4:1).

But yet there are different themes to the two epistles: Ephesians is speaking generally about the riches of Christ in the church while Colossians speaks more specifically about heresies developing there. For example, Paul encouraged the Colossians to “beware lest anyone rip you off through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the traditions of men, according to the basic principles of the world and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8). Three specific things that were being taught by Colossian heretics are listed in Table I. These heresies originated¹⁹ with the Arch Heretic Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-25) and his followers all over the ancient world. Simon became so celebrated in his deception that Emperor Claudius, at the concurrence of the Roman Senate, erected a statue of Simon along the Tiber River in Rome with the inscription: “To Simon, the Holy God”. These heretics taught a weird mysticism that Paul felt necessary to address in his Epistle.

¹⁷ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, February 10.

¹⁸ Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Ephesians, 1:3.

¹⁹ For more information on the life of Simon Magus, see Mark Kern, Simon Magus the Heresiarch, St Athanasius Press, 2002

Contrasting the practices of the heretics, Paul describes true mysticism (set your minds on the things above, Colossians 3:2), true asceticism (put off anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, etc., Colossians 3:8) and true worship in the Church (Colossians 3:15-17).

The Ancestors and Family of Christ

Today’s Epistle lesson and the Gospel lesson for the 11th Sunday of Luke are used together to remember the ancestors of Christ. The Gospel lesson goes into detail about many who made excuses as to why they couldn’t come to the Great Supper or the Marriage Feast given by God the Father. But on the other side of the coin, there were some who did come without any excuse. Table II lists some of them who also happen to be Jesus’ ancestors and extended family during his 33 years.

**TABLE I
HERESIES IN COLOSSAE**

GNOSTICS	PAUL’S REPLY
Worship of angels as superior to Christ.	Let no one rip you off by taking delight in worship of angels (Colossians 2:18).
Christ was a lesser God.	Christ is the image of the invisible God and the firstborn over all creation; He created all things, is before all things and in Him all things consist. All the fullness dwells in Him (Colossians 1:15-19).
Salvation consisted in certain rituals regarding food, observances and asceticism.	Let no one judge you in food, festivals, etc.; they’re just a shadow of Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). These things have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility and severe treatment of the body – but are of no value against indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2:23).

Matthew 1 and Luke 3 list Jesus’ genealogy back to Abraham and Adam respectively. This could be done easily in the First Century because genealogical records were kept meticulously in the Temple for determining priestly qualifications (i.e. descendants of Aaron – Leviticus 21). But that capability was lost with the burning of Jerusalem in 70 AD by the Roman General Titus. The genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 only trace Jesus’ roots through Joseph, His stepfather and legal father. Jesus’ mother Mary, had roots that went back to both King David and to Aaron the Priest. Joachim, Mary’s father was of the tribe of Judah; Anna, Mary’s mother, was of the tribe of Levi. For more discussion on this, see the Gospel lesson for the Sunday before Christmas.

Of the seventeen people in the lower half of Table II, their names read like a Who’s Who of First Century Christianity. This was definitely not an average Jewish family. About half of them died as martyrs and all of them were very much involved with a life of prayer and fasting. With these people from Table II in mind as examples, let us look at the text of the Epistle lesson in more detail:

True Mysticism: Colossians 3:1-4

Mysticism is somewhat of a dirty word today because of its association with the occult in our day and because of its identification with individuals who “answer only to God” and have no need for the rest of the Body of Christ. Paul re-focuses a true mysticism back to the central part of Christianity: the Body of Christ. In contrast to those who “intrude into those things which he

has not seen, being vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind” (Colossians 2:18), Paul spoke of the Colossians “holding fast to the Head, from whom all the Body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God” (Colossians 2:19). Mysticism, in Paul’s view, was simply “setting one’s mind on the things above, not on the things on the earth” (Colossians 3:2).

**TABLE II
WELL-KNOWN ANCESTORS AND FAMILY OF CHRIST**

NAME	RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST
Adam	First man
Enoch	Translated to Heaven
Abraham	Patriarch of Israel
Isaac	Patriarch of Israel
Jacob	Patriarch of Israel
Rahab	Repentant Jericho harlot
Boaz and Ruth	Distant ancestors
King David	Distant ancestors
King Solomon	Distant ancestors
Zerubbabel	Prince of Judah in captivity
Zachariah & Elizabeth (chief priest)	Uncle & Aunt, once removed
John the Baptist	Second cousin
Joachim & Anna	Grandparents
Joseph	Stepfather & Uncle once removed
Virgin Mary	Mother
James, Bishop of Jerusalem	Stepbrother
Jude, of the Twelve	Stepbrother
Salome, of Myrrh-Bearers	Stepsister
Zebedee	Husband of Salome
James, of the Twelve	Nephew, son of Zebedee
John, of the Twelve	Nephew, son of Zebedee
Cleopas (Alphaeus) of the Seventy	Joseph’s brother, Jesus’ Uncle
Matthew, of the Twelve	Cousin, son of Alphaeus
James, of the Twelve	Cousin, son of Alphaeus

Paul makes three points regarding this:

- You were raised with Christ; seek the things, which are where Christ is: at the Right Hand of God (Colossians 3:1).
- You died with Christ and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3).
- When Christ appears, you will appear with Him in glory (Colossians 3:4).

That we were buried with Christ in baptism and raised with Him, Paul testified on several occasions (Colossians 2:12, Romans 6:1-4). That Christ is now seated at the Right Hand of God, we know (Ephesians 1:20, Psalm 110:1, Mark 14:62, Luke 22:69). And that we will appear with Him when He comes is our hope of glory (1 Thessalonians 2:19, Romans 8:19-25, 1 Corinthians 15:23). John Chrysostom stated²⁰ it this way:

²⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Colossians, VII, 3:2, 3, 4.

“This is not your life, Paul said; it is some other one. He insists on showing that they are seated above and are dead; from either perspective, they are not to seek the things, which are here (in this world). For whether you are dead, you ought not to seek them; or whether you are above, you ought not to seek them. If this life is not life but is hidden, we ought to live this life as though dead”.

But how is our life hidden with Christ in God? This is part of the mystery of the Body of Christ, “which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden (Colossians 3:3, Ephesians 3:9), it may not be readily apparent how we shall appear and consist. Included in there are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3), but it takes a vision or revelation to see this. This is a mystery that the ancestors and family of Christ were able to see and understand in part. This mystery was deep enough that had the rulers of this age had a clue, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:7-8).

Admittedly, this is somewhat mystical. But then, hope is somewhat mystical too.

Referring to the ring of Gvges²¹, Ambrose stated²² that this fable is similar to our life in Christ. Just as Christ’s Name was not preached while He lived for 33 years, so we should shun boastfulness and live in humility like Christ’s ancestors.

“Although that fable has not the force of truth, yet it has this much to go upon, that if an upright man could hide himself, yet he would avoid sin just as though he was visible. He would not hide his person by putting on a ring, but his life by putting on Christ. As the Apostle says, ‘Our life is hid with Christ in God’ (Colossians 3:3). Let no one here strive to shine, let no one show pride, let none boast. Christ willed not to be known here; He didn’t want His Name to be preached in the Gospel, while He lived on earth. He came to lie hidden from this world. Let us therefore likewise hide our life after the example of Christ, let us shun boastfulness, and let us not desire to be made known. It is better to live here in humility, and there in glory. ‘When Christ shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory’” (Colossians 3:4).

Leo the Great spoke²³ of how we were reborn for the future and how each Christian has more in his own heart than there is in the heavens. The ancestors of Christ personified this very well.

“If we ‘are a temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwells in us’ (1 Corinthians 3:16), what every one of the faithful has in his own heart is more than what he wonders at when he looks at the heaven. We do not advise you to despise God’s works or to think there is anything opposed to your Faith in what the good God has made good, but to use every kind of creature and the whole furniture of this world reasonably and moderately. As the Apostle says, ‘the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal’ (2 Corinthians

²¹ A fable told by the philosophers described a shepherd, Gvges, who found a ring that could make its wearer invisible when the gemstone of the ring was turned inward toward the palm of the hand. Gvges used the power of this ring to murder the king and engage in adultery with the queen.

²² Ambrose of Milan, *Duties of the Clergy*, III, v, 36.

²³ Leo the Great, *Sermons*, XXVII, 6.

4:18). Because we are born for the present and reborn for the future, let us not give ourselves up to temporal goods, but to eternal. In order that we may behold our hope nearer, let us think on what the Divine Grace has bestowed on our nature on the occasion when we celebrate the mystery of Christmas. Let us hear the Apostle, saying, ‘for you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. But when Christ, who is your life, shall appear, then you shall appear with Him in glory’” (Colossians 3:3-4).

Leo the Great also stated²⁴ that those who live a righteous life are rays of light from the one Light, and are part of the glory of Christ. We carry Him everywhere; by partaking of His Body and Blood, we pass into that which we take.

“By the good manner of life observed in each one of the faithful, we know Him to be the Author of all just works, and give thanks to God’s mercy. He so adorns the whole body of the Church with countless gracious gifts, that through the many rays of the one Light the same brightness is everywhere diffused, and that which is well done by any Christian is part the glory of Christ. This is that true Light, which justifies and enlightens every man. This it is that (1) rescues us from the power of darkness and transfers us into the Kingdom of the Son of God; (2) exalts the desires of the mind by newness of life and quenches the lusts of the flesh; and (3) keeps the Lord’s Passover ‘with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth’ by the casting away of ‘the old leaven of wickedness’ (1 Corinthians 5:8) and the feeding of the new creature with the Lord. By partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, we pass into that which we then take. Both in spirit and in body, we carry Him everywhere. In Him and with Him we were dead, buried, and rose again, as the Apostle says, ‘for you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. For when Christ, your life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory’” (Colossians 3:3-4).

²⁴ Leo the Great, Sermons, LXIII, 7.

Covetousness and Idolatry: Colossians 3:5

Paul stated, “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry”. John Cassian spoke²⁵ of three kinds of covetousness: (1) that which hinders people from allowing themselves to be stripped of their goods and property. (2) That which draws us to resume with excessive eagerness the possession of those things, which we have given away and distributed to the poor. (3) That which leads a man to covet and procure what he never previously possessed. Each of these kinds of covetousness represents idolatry.

Why Does Covetousness Represent Idolatry?

Exactly why covetousness represents idolatry may not be immediately apparent to everyone. However, the Church Fathers have had a great deal to say about this. Following are a few excerpts:

John Chrysostom described²⁶ how covetousness is idolatry and how it makes slaves of those who are captured by it.

“A dreadful thing is the love of money, it disables both eyes and ears, and makes men worse to deal with than a wild beast. Like some harsh mistress, it makes those captured by it its slaves. And the dreadful part is that it persuades them even to be grateful for it. This made Gehazi a leper instead of a disciple and a prophet (2 Kings 5:20-27); this destroyed Ananias and his wife (Acts 5:1-11); this made Judas a traitor (Matthew 26:14-16, John 12:4-8); this corrupted the rulers of the Jews, who received gifts, and became the partners of thieves (Matthew 21:12-13). This has brought in ten thousand wars, filling the ways with blood, the cities with wailings and lamentations. This has made meals to become impure, and tables accursed, and has filled food with transgression; therefore, Paul called it ‘idolatry’ (Colossians 3:5), and even so he has not deterred men from it”.

John Chrysostom also referred²⁷ to the mother and source of covetousness, that is, vainglory, as being a truly filthy garment.

“If Paul calls covetousness idolatry, what ought we to name that which is mother and root and source of it; that is, vainglory? We cannot possibly find any term such as its wickedness deserves. Beloved, let us now return to our senses; let us put off this filthy garment, let us cut it off from us, let us at some time or other become free with true freedom, and be sensible of the nobility which has been given to us by God; let us despise vulgar applause. For nothing is so ridiculous and disgraceful as this passion, nothing so full of shame and dishonor. One may in many ways see, that to love honor, is dishonor; and that true honor consists in neglecting honor, but in saying and doing everything according to what seems good to God. In this way we shall be able to receive a reward from Him who sees exactly all our doings, if we are content to have Him only for a spectator”.

²⁵ John Cassian, Conference of Abbot Serapion, I, v, 11.

²⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXV, 3.

²⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, III, 6.

Jerome wrote²⁸ of examples of covetousness and hypocrisy and contrasted this with the love of God and our neighbor. In all this, he encouraged his people to be content with food and clothing.

Today you see women cramming their wardrobes with dresses, and yet unable to vanquish the moths. Rarely does one wear out a single dress, while her closet is full, and Christ lies at the door naked and dying (Matthew 25:35-36). When they hold out a hand to the needy they sound a trumpet (Matthew 6:2); when they invite to a love feast²⁹ they engage a crier. I lately saw the noblest lady in Rome with a band of eunuchs before her in the basilica of the blessed Peter. She was giving money to the poor, a coin apiece; and this with her own hand, that she might be accounted more religious. At that time an old woman, 'full of years and rags', ran forward to get a second coin, but when her turn came she received not a penny but a blow hard enough to draw blood from her guilty veins.

'The love of money is the root of all evil' (1 Timothy 6:10), and Paul speaks of covetousness as being idolatry (Colossians 3:5). 'Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be added to you' (Matthew 6:33). The Lord will never allow a righteous soul to perish of hunger. 'I have been young', the psalmist says, 'and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread' (Psalm 37:25). Ravens fed Elijah (1 Kings 17:4, 6). The widow of Zarephath, who with her sons expected to die the same night, went without food herself that she might feed the prophet. He who had come to be fed then turned feeder, for, by a miracle, he filled the empty barrel (1 Kings 17:9-16). Peter says, 'Silver and gold I don't have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ rise up and walk' (Acts 3:6). But now many, while they do not say it in words, by their deeds declare, 'Faith and pity I don't have; but such as I have, silver and gold, these I will not give you'. 'Having food and clothing, with these we shall be content' (1 Timothy 6:8). Numberless are the instances in Scripture which teach men to 'Beware of covetousness'" (Luke 12:15).

Jerome also stated³⁰ that idolatry is not confined to religious practices in an idol's temple. All that is of the devil is enmity with God, and what is of the devil is idolatry. Idolatry takes on other forms also, including lust and fraud.

"My dear brother, weigh well the various forms of transgression, and think not that the sins which I have mentioned are less flagrant than that of idolatry. Hear the apostle's view of the matter. 'For this you know, that no fornicator or unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God' (Ephesians 5:5). In a general way all that is of the devil savors of enmity to God, and what is of the devil is idolatry, since all idols are subject to him. Yet Paul elsewhere lays down the Law in unmistakable terms, saying, 'deaden your members, which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry, for which things' sake the

²⁸ Jerome, Letter to Eustochium, XXII, 32.

²⁹ The love-feast was a meal that either preceded or followed the Eucharist. Because of the problems that occurred at Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:21-22, Jude 1:12), the love-feast was eventually discontinued.

³⁰ Jerome, Letter to Hellodorus, XIV, 5.

wrath of God comes' (Colossians 3:5-6). Idolatry is not confined to casting incense upon an altar with finger and thumb, or to pouring libations of wine out of a cup into a bowl. Covetousness is idolatry, or else the selling of the Lord for thirty pieces of silver was a righteous act (Matthew 26:15). Lust involves profanity, or else men may defile with harlots those members of Christ, which should be 'a living sacrifice acceptable to God' (Romans 12:1). Fraud is idolatry, or else we should imitate Ananias and Sapphira, who sold their inheritance, and because they kept back part of the price, perished by an instant doom (Acts 5:1-11). Consider well, my brother; nothing is yours to keep. The Lord says, 'Whoever does not forsake all that he has cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:33). Why are you such a half-hearted Christian?"

John Cassian wrote³¹ of how our entire spiritual life can be affected by the subtle pull of covetousness. This can occur whether one is living in a monastery or in a villa. Cassian describes the characteristics that people take on when they get themselves into this state.

"Those who are possessed by distrust of mind, and who fall away from that spark of faith of the early days of their conversion, begin more anxiously to watch over the money, which they had begun to give away, and treasure it up with greater avarice. On this rotten foundation, it is a matter of course that the whole superstructure of faults must rise; nothing can be built on such villainous foundations, except what will bring the wretched soul to the ground with a hopeless collapse".

"The mind that is hardened by such feelings, and which begins with this miserable coldness is sure to go daily from bad to worse and to conclude its life with a more hideous end. While it is overcome by impious avarice³², it can never admit into the heart the true and unfeigned humility of Christ. The man may boast of his high birth, or be puffed up by his position in the world, or be proud of his wealth, which he retains to his own destruction. Because of this he is no longer content to be instructed by the teaching of any of the elders; he not only objects to observe any rule of obedience, but also will not even listen to teaching about perfection. Dislike of spiritual talk grows up in his heart such that if a conversation should happen to arise, he cannot keep his eyes fixed on one spot, but his gaze wanders blankly about, and his eyes shift here and there. Instead he spits from a dry throat; he coughs on purpose without any need; he drums with his fingers, and scribbles like a man writing. All his limbs fidget so that while the spiritual conversation is proceeding, you would think that he was sitting on sharp thorns, or in the midst of a mass of worms".

"If the conversation turns on something which is for the good of the hearers, he thinks that it is brought forward only for him. He is taken up with his own suspicious thoughts, and is not on the watch for something to take home for his good. He anxiously seeks the reason why anything is said, or quietly turns over in his mind, how he can raise objections to it, so that he cannot take in any of those things, which are so admirably brought forward, and the teachings do him no good. The result is that spiritual conferences are not merely of no use to him, but are

³¹ John Cassian, *Institutes of the Coenobia*, XII, 26-27.

³² Paul says of this, "and covetousness, which is idolatry, or the worship of idols" (Colossians 3:5) and again "the love of money is the root of all evils" (1 Timothy 6:10).

positively injurious, and become to him an occasion of greater sin. For while he is conscience stricken and fancies that everything is being aimed at him, he hardens himself more stubbornly in the obstinacy of his heart”.

Joachim and Anna

One prominent characteristic of the immediate ancestors of Christ is the absence of covetousness. Jesus’ grandparents, Joachim and Anna, illustrate this very well. Not only were they very generous with their worldly possessions, but also they gave to the same people who ridiculed and ostracized them.

Just as Hannah, the mother of the Prophet Samuel, was ridiculed for being unable to have children (1 Samuel 1:1-10), so were Joachim and Anna. People assumed that because the Lord’s blessing was absent in this part of their lives, that there was some secret sin. This attitude is similar to the attitude toward the man born blind: it was assumed that either he or his parents sinned (John 9:2-3). In the case of Joachim and Anna, by the time of their 50th wedding anniversary, the high priest publicly refused to accept their offering, calling them cursed when they came to present their offerings in accordance with the Law³³.

Following the public ridicule by the high priest, Joachim and Anna returned to Nazareth and retired separately for prayer and fasting with many tears. Joachim spent his time in the remote hill country with his flocks while Anna prayed in the garden of their home. Both prayed separately that the Lord would work in them the wonder that He had done with Abraham and Sarah. And they separately agreed that they would dedicate the child to the Lord as Hannah³⁴ did with Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11-2:11).

When Joachim went to the hills to pray, he did not intend to return until the Lord answered his prayer. Knowing this, Anna prayed and wept, mourning her barrenness, her reproach among the people, and her imminent widowhood. During this time of fasting and prayer, an angel appeared first to Joachim, then to Anna telling them three things. (1) Their charitable deeds have gone up into God’s presence. (2) Their shame among men in the face of righteous living had not gone unnoticed. (3) The Lord was going to answer their prayers. As a sign of this, the angel instructed Joachim and Anna separately to leave Nazareth and go to Jerusalem immediately. When they got there, they would meet each other by the Golden Gate of the city. The angel went on to say that the child to be born (Mary) would be filled with the Holy Spirit from her mother’s womb and her life would be exemplary³⁵ among her peers. This is very similar to the announcement by the angel Gabriel to the priest Zachariah concerning the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:4-23).

Anna and Joachim hurried to Jerusalem without knowing that the other had seen the angel also. Anna arrived first and waited for a long time before Joachim arrived driving a large herd: 10

³³ Roberts & Donaldson, “The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8.

Roberts & Donaldson, “The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8.

³⁴ Roberts & Donaldson, “The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8.

Roberts & Donaldson, “The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8.

Roberts & Donaldson, “The Protevangelium of James”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8.

³⁵ Roberts & Donaldson, “The Protevangelium of James”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8.

lambs for the Lord, 10 calves for the priests and elders and 100 goats for the people who had ridiculed him³⁶. Since this was not a prescribed offering but a freewill offering, which even Gentiles could offer, the high priest could not refuse (Leviticus 17:8). An interesting teaching in a similar vein by the Lord 45 years later involved loving one's enemies and doing good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27-36).

When they saw each other, Joachim and Anna rejoiced greatly. The next day, they offered their offerings and returned home to Nazareth together. When it was heard that Anna had conceived, all their neighbors and acquaintances rejoiced also and the whole land of Israel congratulated them³⁷.

True Asceticism: Colossians 3:6-14

Asceticism was practiced quite a bit in the early church, beginning with John the Baptist (Matthew 9:14-17) and organized into communities by the Evangelist Mark³⁸. However, it is not very widespread today in the U.S. In a society where consumption is the measure of success, depriving oneself seems out of place. Asceticism has a purpose, however, and Paul addresses that purpose to the Colossians:

“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things, which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ *who is* our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave *nor* free, but Christ *is* all and in all” (Colossians 3:1-11).

Putting off the Old Man (Colossians 3:6-9)

The point of asceticism is a putting off of the old man with his deeds (Colossians 3:9). The old man was crucified with Christ and buried with Him through baptism (Romans 6:4-6). Thus, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we should:

- Walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4)
- Be freed from sin (Romans 6:7)
- Reckon ourselves dead to sin (Romans 6:11)
- Not let sin reign in our mortal bodies that we obey its lusts (Romans 6:12)

We strive to do this because we are “a new creation in Christ; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). But our habits and our life-styles

³⁶ Roberts & Donaldson, “The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8.

Roberts & Donaldson, “The Protevangelium of James”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8.

³⁷ Roberts & Donaldson, “The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8.

Roberts & Donaldson, “The Protevangelium of James”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8.

³⁸ For more information on the monastic communities established by the Evangelist Mark, see Mark Kern, *The Evangelist Mark*, St Athanasius Press, 2005.

sometimes don't change instantly. There is an aspect to the Christian life where one "learns Christ" (Ephesians 4:22). The "putting off of our former conduct, the old man growing corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, the renewal of the spirit of our mind and the putting on of the new man" (Ephesians 4:22-24) is a learning experience that lasts our whole life. The heretics Paul was dealing with tolerated a lot of sin because spirituality meant something different to them.

Just because one has been baptized and is faithfully going to church doesn't mean one will be forever free from anger and every evil desire. Quite the contrary; now the enemy will step up his attacks like he did in sifting Peter (Luke 22:31, 54-62) or in decimating and vilifying Job (Job 1:12-22, 2:6-10, 4:1-11, 10:15). When this happens we need to get serious with the Christian life; and a little asceticism helps a lot.

Paul lists a number of passions as examples of things that need to be learned how to put to death:

Fornication	Anger and wrath
Uncleanness	Malice
Passion	Blasphemy
Evil desire	Filthy language
Covetousness	Lying

For example, if one of our personal passions is the sin of gluttony, we can avoid feeding that lust by doing some controlled fasting and prayer. This is the principle for putting off the old man: deny our flesh the craving of its lusts. Similar things work for other passions.

John Chrysostom mentioned³⁹ four kinds of deadness, some good and some bad. Asceticism helps us to avoid the state where we could be walking corpses.

"Let us then continue living this life; for many of those who seem to breathe and to walk about are in a more wretched plight than the dead. For there are different kinds of deadness!

[1] One is deadness of the body, according to which Abraham was dead, and still was not dead. 'God is not a God of the dead, but of the living' (Matthew 22:32).

[2] Another is of the soul, which Christ alludes to when He says, 'Let the dead bury their dead' (Matthew 8:22).

[3] Another, which is the subject of praise, is brought about by faith, of which Paul said 'Deaden your members which are upon the earth' (Colossians 3:5).

[4] Another, which is the cause of the previous one, takes place in baptism. 'For our old man', he says, 'has been crucified' Colossians 3:6), that is, has been deadened.

Since then we know this, let us flee from the deadness by which we die, even though alive [Item 2]. And let us not be afraid of that with which bodily death comes on [Item 1]. But the other two let us choose, where one is blissful, having been given by God, the other praiseworthy, which is accomplished by ourselves together with God. David pronounces Item [3] blessed, when he says, 'Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven' (Psalm 32:1). Paul holds Item [4] in admiration,

³⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XI, v. 18.

saying, ‘Those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh’ (Galatians 5:24). But of the first two, Christ declares Item [1] to be easy to hold in contempt, when He says, ‘Do not fear those, which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul’. The other is fearful, for, He says, ‘Fear Him that is able to destroy both body and soul in hell’ (Matthew 10:28). Therefore, let us flee from this, and choose that deadness which is held blessed and admirable”.

Putting on the New Man (Colossians 3:10-14)

The New Man is the Body of Christ (Ephesians 2:15, 4:24) and has other desires and cravings. Paul lists some of these desires:

Tender mercies	Long suffering
Kindness	Bearing with one another
Humility	Forgiving one another
Meekness	Love

This is an entirely different agenda than the old man because the New Man is “renewed in knowledge according to the Image of Him who created him” (Colossians 3:10). Christ is “the Image of the Invisible God, the Firstborn over all creation” (Colossians 1:15, 2 Corinthians 4:4, John 1:18, Romans 8:29).

In the Body of Christ, there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free (Colossians 3:11), male nor female (Galatians 3:28), for we are all one (that is members of one Body) in Christ. Since there is one Body and one Spirit (the Holy Spirit), one Lord (that is, Jesus the Christ), one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, God the Father is above all, and through all and in us all (Ephesians 4:4-6). And just as Christ is in the Father and the Father is in Christ (John 10:38) and Christ and the Father are One (John 10:30), so the Body of Christ is one with Christ. [For more discussion on Union with Christ, see the Epistle lesson for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost – Ephesians 4:1-6].

Ambrose of Milan stated⁴⁰ that while the Father is the fountainhead of the Trinity and the Son and the Holy Spirit are in subjection to Him through the Unity of the Godhead, they are all one Nature. On the Cross, it was not the fullness of the Godhead, but our weakness that was brought into subjection. If we live after His image and likeness, we can also bring into subjection the lusts of the flesh, that the heart may have no care for riches, ambition, or pleasures.

“The benefit has passed, then, from the individual to the community; for in His flesh He has tamed the nature of all human flesh. Thus, ‘As we have borne the image of the earthly, so also shall we bear the image of the heavenly’ (1 Corinthians 15:49). This thing certainly cannot come to pass except in the inner man. Therefore, ‘laying aside all these: anger, malice, blasphemy, filthy language, let us, having put off the old man with his deeds, put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created Him’” (Colossians 3:8-10).

⁴⁰ Ambrose of Milan, Exposition of the Christian Faith, V, xiv, 174-176.

“And that you might know that when he says ‘That God may be all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:28), he does not separate Christ from God the Father. By saying, ‘That God may be all and in all’, he comprehended that the unity and equality of Christ with God the Father, for the Son is not separated from the Father. And in like manner as the Father works all and in all, so also Christ works all in all. If, then, Christ also works all in all, He is not made subject in the glory of the Godhead, but in us. But how is He made subject in us, except in the way in which He was made lower than the angels, I mean in the sacrament of His body? For all things which served their Creator from their first beginning seemed not as yet to be made subject to Him in that”.

John Cassian spoke⁴¹ at length of the continuance of the soul after the death of the body, and included many examples (omitted here). Since the soul contains the image and likeness of God, it desires to be present with Christ as part of the New Man. In this life, the soul makes the dumb material flesh sensible by participation with it. The ancestors and family of Christ are good role models for us to follow when we consider all this.

“Everyone existing in this body should already be aware that he must be committed to that state and office, of which he made himself a sharer and an adherent while in this life. He should not doubt that in that eternal world he will be partner with Him, whose servant and minister he chose to make himself. As our Lord says, ‘If any man serve Me, let him follow Me, and where I am, there shall My servant also be’ (John 12:26). Just as one gains the kingdom of the devil by consenting to sin, so also one attains the kingdom of God by the practice of virtue in purity of heart and spiritual knowledge. But where the kingdom of God is, there most certainly eternal life is enjoyed, and where the kingdom of the devil is, there without doubt is death and the grave”.

“The nobler part of man, in which Paul shows that the image and likeness of God consists (1 Corinthians 11:7, Colossians 3:10), will become insensible when the burden of the body, with which it is oppressed in this world, is laid aside. Since it contains in itself all the power of reason, it makes the dumb and senseless material flesh sensible, by participation with it in this life. When the mind has put off the grossness of the flesh, with which it is now weighed down, it will restore its intellectual powers better than ever, and receive them in a purer and finer condition than it lost them. Paul recognized this, and he actually wished to depart from this flesh; that by separation from it, he might be able to be joined more earnestly to the Lord. ‘So *we are* always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord’ (2 Corinthians 5:6). Therefore ‘I am hard pressed, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, *which is* far better’ (Philippians 1:23). ‘We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. Therefore, we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him’” (2 Corinthians 5:8-9).

⁴¹ John Cassian, 1st Conference of Abbot Moses, I, i, 14.

Gregory of Nyssa emphasized⁴² that to approach God, we need to become like God, as much as is humanly possible. Jesus had stated this by saying, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Gregory’s words were:

“No one can come near the purity of the Divine Being who has not first himself become such. He must therefore place between himself and the pleasures of the senses a high strong wall of separation, so that in this his approach to the Deity the purity of his own heart may not become soiled again. Such an impregnable wall will be found in a complete estrangement from everything wherein passion operates”.

Clement of Alexandria stated⁴³ that the earthly Church is the image of the heavenly; this is why we pray that “the will of God may be done upon the earth as in heaven” (Luke 11:2).

⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, “On Virginity”, Ascetic and Moral Works, II, 21.

⁴³ Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, IV, 8.