

THE PARABLE OF THE GREAT SUPPER THE ANCESTORS OF CHRIST

December 14, 2008
14th Sunday after Pentecost
11th Sunday of Luke
Revision F

GOSPEL: Luke 14:16-24
Matthew 22:1-14
EPISTLE: Colossians 3:4-11

Jesus used today's Gospel lesson twice (at least). As it is recorded in Luke 14, Jesus was in Perea just after Hanukkah, 29 AD (compare John 10:22). As it is recorded in Matthew 22, Jesus was in Jerusalem on Tuesday of Holy Week, 30 AD. In the East and in the West, both accounts are used regularly. The Eastern Church uses Matthew's account for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost (generally September, but sometimes taken out of order) and Luke's account for the Sunday of the Ancestors of Christ (two Sundays before Christmas). The Western Church uses Matthew's account for about the same time of year (September or October), and Luke's account for either New Year's Day or the 2nd Sunday after Trinity (May).

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Reflecting on the Parable of the Great Supper as related to the Ancestors of Christ, not everyone who was invited to the Supper refused to come. The Ancestors of Christ came joyfully and properly clothed, and represent a list of role models for us to follow.

Gospel: Luke 14:16-24; Matthew 22:1-14

Since there are many similarities, but also notable differences between the accounts of Matthew and Luke, it is instructive to compare them side-by-side.

Table I is a side-by-side comparison of the features of the parables in Luke and Matthew. The bottom line of both parables was that the Kingdom of God was about to be taken away from

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the Jews and given to others. Both were told at very public events: Luke's account took place at a big dinner at a Pharisee's house (Luke 14:1) attended by local dignitaries (Luke 14:7-8, 12). Luke doesn't say what the occasion was, but it could have been a wedding feast from Jesus' remarks (Luke 14:8). Matthew's account took place in the Temple (Matthew 21:23), where the chief priests and elders confronted Jesus as He taught.

In Luke's account, Jesus had just finished saying to the host (who invited Him) that when giving a feast it would be better to invite the poor, maimed, lame and blind – who are unable to repay – rather than relatives and rich neighbors. That way one would be repaid at the Resurrection (Luke 14:12-14). The Parable was then given (featuring the poor, maimed, lame and blind) in response to the remark of one of the dignitaries: "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God" (Luke 14:15). At this point, it is worthwhile to consider the Lord's Supper, since the Lord's Supper is a foretaste of eating bread in the Kingdom of God. All of us are poor, maimed, lame and blind as we come to the Lord's Table, and we are called blessed as we receive "the least of these My brethren" (Matthew 25:40).

In Matthew's account, Jesus' confrontation with the Jewish leaders had gotten more acute. They had interrupted His teaching in the Temple to ask by what authority He did what He did (Matthew 21:23). After Jesus embarrassed them with a question about John the Baptist, He stated that tax collectors and harlots were entering the Kingdom of God before them. Jesus followed this with the Parable of the wicked vineyard tenants (Matthew 21:33-41) and the stone that the builders rejected (Matthew 21:42-46). Then He told the Parable of the Great Marriage Feast; the chief priests and Pharisees then knew He was talking about them (Matthew 21:45).

TABLE I
COMPARISON OF PARABLES:
GREAT SUPPER AND MARRIAGE FEAST

	Great Supper (Luke 14)	Marriage Feast (Matthew 22)
Parable told	December 29 AD	April 30 AD
Location	At Pharisee's dinner in Perea	At Temple in Jerusalem
Central figure	A certain man	A certain king
Purpose of event	A great supper	A marriage feast for king's son
Invitees	Rich & famous of Israel	Rich & famous of Israel
Excuses	Bought land, need to see it; bought oxen, need to test them; just got married	Left for his farm; left for his business; treated servants rudely & killed them
Central figure's reaction	Angry	Furious; his armies killed them & burned their cities
New invitees	From streets & lanes: the poor, maimed, lame, blind from highways and hedges: the Gentiles	From highways: good and bad
Problems	- -	Man without wedding garment

In both parables, the central figure is God the Father who has prepared a Great Supper (Luke 14:16) and a Marriage Feast for His Son (Matthew 22:2). He invited His own chosen people, but His own did not receive Him (John 1:11). He sent His servants, the Apostles and Prophets "to say to those who were invited: 'come, for all things are now ready'" (Luke 14:17,

Acts 13:46, 18:6). But those invited began to make excuses. These excuses can be boiled down to the seed that fell among thorns in the Parable of the Sower: they got choked with the cares, riches and pleasures of life (Luke 8:7, 14).

The Excuses

One of those invited said he had just bought a field and he must go see it. This may seem strange to us that someone would buy a field before he had ever seen it. Under Old Testament Law, however, the land belonged to the Lord and could not be sold permanently (Leviticus 25:23). In the Year of Jubilee (every 50th year), all land reverted to the family of its original inheritor as the land was divided at the time of Joshua (Leviticus 25:28). The worth of any land that was sold was calculated in terms of how many years until the next Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:27). Thus when one bought a field, one bought a number of years' crops and not the land itself (Leviticus 25:16). Thus one did not need to see land to determine its sale price, but one did need to see it to determine its readiness; he needed to know quickly what needed to be done to the field.

From Table II, one can see that someone buying land just after Hanukkah (December) has to be concerned about the late planting. If he takes a week off to attend a marriage feast, he may miss much of the spring rains – which can be very intermittent. Another consideration was what seed, if any, was already in the ground? Grain had already been planted, but hoeing was mandatory between December and February to keep weeds down and make harvesting easier (compare the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares – Matthew 13:24-30). The person buying the field needed to see the field to determine what had to be done.

Buying land often meant buying it from someone who was hopelessly in debt. And the creditor could then take over the debtor's land as well as take the debtor and his family as slaves (Leviticus 25:39ff). Foreclosing on debtors like this could be very lucrative for a creditor because he could afford to work the land much more efficiently than a poor man. Efficient use of land is what made the Rich Fool into a very wealthy man (Luke 12:16-19), and this new landowner seems very caught up in acquiring the riches of this life.

Another of those invited begged off because he just bought five yoke of oxen and needed to test them. Oxen were used¹ for plowing using crude plows (compared to today). A "plow" was little more than a stick that was stuck in the ground and dragged by oxen. Plowing couldn't be done in dry soil; it would break the "plow". One had to wait for some of the first winter rain to loosen up the soil. Since he had bought five yoke of oxen, one can presume that he had a lot of land to plow and a number of servants to use the oxen. Thus he was managing a large farm. In this case, the new owner was really wrapped up in the cares of the world since he didn't have much time to get his fields ready for planting.

Still another of those invited said that he just got married and therefore couldn't come. According to Old Testament Law: "When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out with the army, nor be charged with any duty; he shall be free at home one year and shall give happiness to

¹ Gower, Manners and Customs of Bible Times, pp. 87-95.

his wife whom he has taken” (Deuteronomy 24:5). Gregory the Great wrote² that this excuse signifies the pleasures of the flesh.

TABLE II
PLANTING AND HARVESTING SCHEDULE
FROM THE GEZER CALENDAR³

Name of Month	Corresponds To	Number of Days	Month of Civil Year	Month of Sacred Year	Agricultural Events
Nisan (Abib)	Mar.-Apr.	30	7th	1st	Hoeing up of Flax
Iyar	Apr.-May	29	8th	2nd	Barley Harvest
Sivan	May-June	30	9th	3rd	Harvest and Festivity
Tammuz	June-July	29	10th	4th	Vine Tending
Ab	July-Aug.	30	11th	5th	
Elul	Aug.-Sept.	29	12th	6th	Summer Fruit
Tishri	Sept.-Oct.	30	1st	7th	Olive Harvest
Heshvan	Oct.-Nov.	29 or 30	2nd	8th	
Chisleb	Nov.-Dec.	29 or 30	3rd	9th	Planting Grain
Tebeth	Dec.-Jan.	29	4th	10th	
Shebet	Jan.-Feb.	30	5th	11th	Late Planting
Adar	Feb.-Mar.	29 or 30	6th	12th	

All of the above excuses are reasonable excuses, but they all represent a decision on the part of the excuse-giver that was made regarding the importance of the supper or the feast. The supper had been planned a long time; they had time to prepare to attend. But their decision was that the cares, riches, and pleasures of life were more important to them. Here we might ask ourselves if we make similar excuses to avoid going to Church and partaking of the Lord’s Table.

The same thing applies to us today, especially to those who may despise a priest who happens to irritate them. We have no good reason to despise him, for it is God who sent him. Gregory the Great wrote⁴,

“We must see that the servant sent with invitations by the Master of the household represents the preachers of the Church (beginning with Christ and the Twelve Apostles). It often happens that a powerful person has a contemptible servant, and when he sends a message by this servant to relatives or to strangers, those who hear him do not think of the person who brings the message but only of the message he brings and the person who sent it. And if you consider us preachers unworthy, nevertheless venerate God who calls you through us”.

John Chrysostom stated⁵ that Christ does not drag people to His Kingdom against their will. People will be dragged to hell against their will; but if people were dragged into the Kingdom, it would be an insult to the nature of the blessings of the Kingdom.

² Gregory the Great, Parables of the Gospel, XXXVI.

³ The Gezer Calendar dates from the time of the conquest of Canaan under Joshua and was a schoolboy’s exercise describing the yearly agricultural schedule.

⁴ Gregory the Great, Parables of the Gospel, XXXVI.

“But some man will say, ‘He ought to bring men in, even against their will’. However, He does not use violence, nor compel; for who in the world that invites someone to honors, crowns, banquets and festivals, drags them, unwilling and bound? No one! Doing this would be inflicting an insult! To hell He sends men against their will, but to the kingdom He calls willing minds. To the fire He brings men bound and bewailing themselves; to the endless state of blessings not so. Otherwise it is a reproach to the very blessings themselves; their nature is such that men should run to them of their own accord and with thankfulness. ‘Why then’, you say, ‘do men not choose them?’ From their own infirmity! ‘And why does He not cut off their infirmity?’ How tell me should He cut it off? He has made a world that teaches His loving-kindness and His power. For ‘the heavens declare the glory of God’ (Psalm 19:1). He has also sent prophets. He has both called and honored us. He has done wonders. He has given a Law both written and natural. He has sent His Son and commissioned the Apostles. He has threatened hell and promised the kingdom. Every day He makes His sun to rise. Are not the things, which He has asked, so simple and easy, that many people transcend His commandments in the greatness of their self-denial? As Isaiah said, ‘What was there to do to the vineyard that I have not done?’” (Isaiah 5:4)

In Matthew’s account of the Parable, the excuse-givers ignored the servants’ invitation, but also seized the servants, treated them with violent insults and murdered them (Matthew 22:6). This occurred with Jesus at His trial (Luke 18:32, 22:64-65, Matthew 27:27-31) and with the Apostles for their whole lives (Acts 12:1-3, 14:4-6, 16:19-24, 1 Thessalonians 2:2). The King in Matthew’s account was furious and sent his armies to destroy those murderers and burn their cities (Matthew 22:7). This happened in 68-70 AD when the Roman General Titus destroyed Jerusalem and massacred its inhabitants.

With the original list of invitees decimated with no-shows, the central figure in both Parables extended His invitation farther afield. In Luke’s account, He first sent His servants into the streets and lanes of the city to bring in the poor, maimed, lame and blind (Luke 14:21). The word street (Greek: *platus*) refers to a broad street. Jesus taught in broad streets (Luke 13:26); people later brought the sick out into the broad streets such that the shadow of the Apostle Peter passing by might fall on some and heal them (Acts 5:15). The word lane (Greek: *rhume*) refers to the crowded streets or narrow streets. Together the streets and lanes refer to the underbelly of Jewish society: the uneducated, the poor, the crippled, the blind, etc. This is the part of Jewish society that Jesus spoke to a lot (Luke 7:22), and from which many of the Apostles came (Acts 4:13).

After the servants did as their Master had commanded, they reported to Him that there was still room at the Great Supper (Luke 14:22). The Master then sent them into the highways and hedges to compel others to come in that His house may be filled. The highways (Greek: *hodos*) are the main roads from city to city and country to country. Traveling on these roads, one would find many Gentiles. The hedges (Greek: *phragmos*) are walls or barriers such as one might find around a vineyard to prevent theft (Matthew 21:33, Mark 12:1) or between courtyards

⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, II, 9.

to keep out unlawful entry (Ephesians 2:14). Gregory the Great wrote⁶ that the people called from the highways and the hedges are the rustic people; that is, the Gentiles.

Tertullian stated⁷ that God continually called His people to His banquet by the voice of the Prophets, which is the voice of the Holy Spirit. When His people didn't listen and refused the invitation, He sent out the call to others. Since they made Him jealous by refusing His invitation, He promised to make them jealous of the Gentiles. The result was a prolonged animosity of the Jews toward the Christians for several centuries.

“In a manner most germane to this parable, He said, ‘Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and you shall walk in all my ways, which I have commanded you’. This is the invitation of God. ‘But they didn't listen’. This is the refusal of the people. ‘They departed, and walked everyone in the imagination of their evil heart’ (Jeremiah 7:23-24). ‘I have bought a field; I have bought some oxen; and I have married a wife’ (Luke 14:18-20). And still He urges them, ‘I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, rising early even before daylight’ (Jeremiah 7:25). The Holy Spirit is here meant, the admonisher of the guests. ‘Yet my people didn't listen to me, but hardened their neck’ (Jeremiah 7:26). This was reported to the Master of the family. He was moved, and commanded them to invite people out of ‘the streets and lanes of the city’ (Luke 14:21). This is the same in purpose as His words by Jeremiah. ‘Have I been a wilderness to the house of Israel, or a land left uncultivated?’ That is to say, ‘Do I have no people I can call my own; have I no place to bring them?’ ‘My people have said that they will come to Me no more’ (Jeremiah 2:31). Therefore He sent out to call others, but from the same city” (Luke 14:23).

“Although the place abounded with people, yet He commanded that they gather men from the highways and the hedges. In other words, we are now gathered out of the Gentile strangers, with that jealous resentment, which He expressed. ‘I will hide My face from them, and I will show them what shall happen in the last days, how others shall take their place. They are a disobedient generation, children in whom is no faith. They have moved Me to jealousy by that which is no god, and they have provoked Me to anger with their idols. I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation” (Deuteronomy 32:20-21).

The Wedding Garment

In Matthew's account, an additional aspect is presented once everyone had come to the marriage feast: someone came without a wedding garment (Matthew 22:11-13). John Chrysostom interpreted⁸ this individual as someone with a corrupt life. Marriage customs of that day involved a weeklong feast at the home of the groom, where the groom's parents usually presented each of the guests with a special garment. [It was at such a feast in Cana that Jesus performed His first public miracle – John 2:1-11]. The same imagery is used in Revelation referring to the saints, the martyrs and the faithful: they are given a special white garment (Revelation 3:4-5, 18; 6:9-11; 7:13-14). When the servants had gone out into the highways (and hedges), they brought in the good and the bad (Matthew 22:10). So it has been throughout the

⁶ Gregory the Great, Parables of the Gospel, XXXVI.

⁷ Tertullian, Five Books Against Marcion, II, ii, 4, 31.

⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXIX, 2.

ages in the Church. Paul warned the Ephesian elders that savage wolves would come into their midst and heretics would arise from within their midst (Acts 20:29-30). Some examples⁹ of wolves rising from the midst of the Church, that are mentioned in the New Testament, are Phygellus and Hermogenes, Demas and Nicolas of Antioch (all of the Seventy who apostatized), Alexander the Coppersmith, Hymenaeus and Philetus. Thus Paul encouraged everyone to examine himself before partaking of the Lord's Table (1 Corinthians 11:28-29) that we might clothe ourselves in the proper garment – a humble and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17, Isaiah 57:15), and that we might be prepared ourselves for the Great Supper and the Marriage Feast.

Irenaeus spoke¹⁰ of the wedding garment as being works of righteousness. Those who are cast into the outer darkness despise the proper wedding garment.

“Christ makes it clear that we ought, after our calling, to be adorned with works of righteousness, so that the Spirit of God may rest upon us. This is the wedding garment, of which the apostle speaks, ‘Not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life’ (2 Corinthians 5:4). But those who have been called to God's supper yet have not received the Holy Spirit, because of their wicked conduct ‘shall be cast into outer darkness’ (Matthew 22:13). He thus clearly shows that the same King who gathered, from all quarters, the faithful to the marriage of His Son, and who grants them the incorruptible banquet, also orders that man to be cast into outer darkness who doesn't have on a wedding garment; that is, one who despises it. For as in the Old Covenant, ‘with many of them was He not well pleased’ (1 Corinthians 10:5); so also is it the case here, that ‘many are called, but few chosen’” (Matthew 22:14).

Athanasius of Alexandria linked¹¹ the proper wedding garment to the grace of the Holy Spirit. The lack of the proper wedding garment implies drunkenness, wickedness, being inflamed by pleasures, and thirsting for the destruction of others.

“It becomes us then in these days of the Passover, to rise early with the saints, and approach the Lord with all our soul, with purity of body, with confession and godly faith in Him. When we have here first drunk, and are filled with these divine waters, which flow from Him, we may be able to sit at table with the saints in heaven, and may share in the one voice of gladness, which is there. From this sinners are rightly cast out, and hear the words, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?’ (Matthew 22:12) Sinners indeed thirst, but not for the grace of the Spirit. Being inflamed with wickedness, they are wholly set on fire by pleasures, as the Proverb says, ‘All day long he desires evil desires’ (Proverbs 21:26). But the Prophet cries against them, saying, ‘Woe to those who rise up early, and follow strong drink; who continue until the evening, for wine inflames them’ (Isaiah 5:11). And since they run wild in debauchery, they dare to thirst for the destruction of others”.

⁹ For Alexander, see 2 Timothy 4:15-16; for Phygellus and Hermogenes, see 2 Timothy 1:15; for Demas, see Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:10; for Nicholas of Antioch, see Acts 6:5, Revelation 2:6, 15; for Hymenaeus and Philetus, see 1 Timothy 1:18-20. Of these, Phygellus, Hermogenes, Demas and Nicolas of Antioch had been members of the original Seventy Apostles (Luke 10:1-20).

¹⁰ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV, xxxvi, 6.

¹¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, Festal Letters, XX, 2.

John Chrysostom stated¹² that the man without the proper wedding garment was invited to the feast, but he behaved with insolence toward his host. Faith is insufficient for us; if we don't also show a pure life, we may suffer the same fate. Christ is not ashamed of beggars and those who live in squalor in this life; what matters is our behavior. If we don't adapt our behavior to the dignity of the feast, we cast ourselves out. Christ is obligated to cast out those who don't act properly, since it would insult everyone else present if He didn't.

"There is no small fear, lest having sometime defiled that beautiful robe by our sloth and transgressions, we are cast out from the inner room and bridal chamber, like the five foolish virgins, or him who did not have on a wedding garment (Matthew 25:1-12; 22:12). He too was one of the guests, for he had been invited. But after the invitation and so great an honor, he behaved with insolence towards Him who had invited him. Hear what punishment he suffers, how pitiful, a subject for many tears. For when he comes to partake of that splendid table, not only is he forbidden, but bound hand and foot, and carried into outer darkness, to undergo eternal and endless wailing and gnashing of teeth".

"Therefore, beloved, let us not expect that faith is sufficient to us for salvation. If we do not show a pure life, but come clothed with garments unworthy of this blessed calling, nothing hinders us from suffering the same as that wretched one. It is strange that He, who is God and King, is not ashamed of men who are vile, beggars, and of no repute, but brings even them to that table. We show so much insensibility, as not even to be made better by so great an honor, but after our calling remain in our old wickedness, insolently abusing the unspeakable loving-kindness of Him who has called us. He did not call us to the spiritual communion of His mysteries that we should enter with our former wickedness. Instead, putting off our filthiness, we should change our clothing to such as becomes those who are entertained in palaces. But if we will not act worthy of that calling, this no longer rests with Him who has honored us, but with ourselves; it is not He that casts us out from that admirable company of guests, but we cast out ourselves".

"He has done all His part. He has made the marriage; He has provided the table; He has sent men to call us; He has received us when we came, and honored us with all other honor. But when we have offered insult to Him, to the company, and to the wedding by our filthy garments, that is, our impure actions, we are then with good cause cast out. It is to honor the marriage and the guests that He drives off those bold and shameless persons. If He allowed those clothed in such a garment to stay, He would seem to be offering insult to the rest. May it never be that one of us finds this coming from Him who has called us! To this end have all these things been written before they come to pass; that we, being sobered by the threats of the Scriptures, may not suffer this disgrace and punishment".

Athanasius of Alexandria noted¹³ that Judas came to the great supper, but despised it. The Prodigal Son, on the other hand, came back to the feast after he repented, and his father clothed him with an incorruptible garment.

"He who has been counted worthy of the heavenly calling, and by this calling has been sanctified, if he grows negligent in it, and although washed

¹² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, X, 3.

¹³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Festal Letters*, VII, 9-10.

becomes defiled, ‘counting the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a profane thing, and despising the Spirit of grace’ (Hebrews 10:29), he hears the words, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?’ For the banquet of the saints is spotless and pure; ‘for many are called, but few chosen’ (Matthew 22:14). Judas came to the supper, but because he despised it, went out from the presence of the Lord, and having abandoned his life, hanged himself (Matthew 27:5). But the disciples who continued with the Redeemer shared in the happiness of the feast. And that young man who went into a far country, and wasted his inheritance, living in dissipation, may receive a desire for this divine feast, and, comes to himself, saying, ‘How many hired servants of my father have bread to spare, while I perish here with hunger!’ He can rise and come to his father, and confess to him, saying, ‘I have sinned against heaven and before you, and am not worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired servants’ (Luke 15:17-19). When he thus confesses, then he shall be counted worthy of more than he prayed for. For the father does not receive him as a hired servant, neither does he look upon him as a stranger, but he kisses him as a son, brings him back to life as from the dead, counts him worthy of the divine feast, and gives him back his former precious robe. So that, on this account, there is singing and gladness in the paternal home”.

“This is the work of the Father’s loving-kindness and goodness. Therefore, instead of corruption, He clothes him with an incorruptible garment; instead of hunger, He kills the fatted calf; instead of far journeys, the Father watched for his return, providing shoes for his feet. What is most wonderful, He placed a divine signet ring upon his hand; by all these things He begot him again in the image of the glory of Christ. These are the gracious gifts of the Father, by which the Lord honors and nourishes those who abide with Him, and also those who return to Him and repent. For He promises, saying, ‘I am the bread of life; he that comes to Me shall not hunger, and he that believes on Me shall never thirst’ (John 6:35). We too shall be counted worthy of these things, if we cling to our Savior at all times, and if we are pure, not only in these six days of Pascha, but consider the whole course of our life as a feast. If we continue near and do not go far off, we say to Him, ‘You have the words of eternal life, and where shall we go?’ (John 6:68) Having first nourished the soul here, we shall partake with angels at that heavenly and spiritual table”.

The Binding Hand and Foot

Jesus stated, at the end of the parable, “But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast *him* into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”’ (Matthew 22:11-13).

In the parable, the king sent His servants out to bring in the good and the bad; but He didn’t expect the bad to remain bad forever. He expected them to learn from those around them

in the Church. Cyril of Jerusalem described¹⁴ the fate of those who cannot or will not learn what the Master expects from observing their fellow members in the Church.

“A certain man in the Gospels once pried into the marriage feasts (Matthew 22:12), and took an inappropriate garment, and came in, sat down, and ate; for the bridegroom permitted it. But when he saw them all clad in white, he ought to have assumed a garment of the same kind himself. He partook of the same food, but was unlike them in fashion and in purpose. The bridegroom, though bountiful, was discerning. In going around to each of the guests, he observed them, for his care was not for their eating, but for their appropriate behavior. He saw a stranger not having on a wedding garment, and said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here? In what a color! With what a conscience! Even though the doorkeeper didn’t forbid you, did you take advantage of the bountifulness of the entertainer? Were you ignorant of what fashion you should come in to the banquet? When you came in, you saw the glittering fashions of the guests; shouldn’t you have been taught by what was before your eyes? Shouldn’t you have retired then, that you might have entered again at an appropriate time? But now you have come in unseasonably, to be unseasonably cast out. So he commanded the servants, (1) ‘Bind his feet’, which dared to intrude; (2) ‘bind his hands’, which didn’t know how to put a bright garment around him; and (3) ‘cast him into the outer darkness’, for he is unworthy of the wedding torches¹⁵. You see what happened to that man; make your own condition safe”.

John Chrysostom compared¹⁶ the agony of being bound hand and foot with the reward for having our hearts and minds voluntarily bound to Christ.

“The blessed martyr Babylas¹⁷ was bound, for the same cause as John the Baptist also was, because he reproved a king in his transgression. This man when he was dying gave charge that his bonds should be laid with his body, and that the body should be buried bound. To this day the fetters lie mingled with his ashes, so devoted was his affection for the bonds he had worn for Christ’s sake. ‘He was laid in chains of iron’ as the Prophet says of Joseph (Psalm 105:17-18). Even women have been bound like this”.

“We however are not in bonds, nor am I recommending this, since now is not the time for them. We should bind not our hands, but bind our heart and mind. There are yet other bonds, and they that wear not the one, shall have to wear the other. Hear what Christ said, ‘Bind him hand and foot’ (Matthew 22:13). God forbid we should have trials with our hands or feet bound! But may He grant us to take our fill with our hearts and mind bound!”

¹⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, “Procatechesis”, 3, Catechetical Lectures.

¹⁵ The candidates for baptism, who were being educated by the Catechetical Lectures, carried torches as they came for baptism before Pascha. The atmosphere was like a bridal train as the candidates came forward.

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, IX.

¹⁷ Babylas was a 3rd Century Sicilian priest who suffered with two of his disciples.

THE ANCESTORS OF CHRIST

December 14, 2008
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.

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 refers¹⁸ to Epaphras as the first Bishop of Colossae according to tradition – which makes sense in light of Colossians 1:7.

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 together¹⁹. 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

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¹⁸ Merrill Unger, Unger's Bible Dictionary, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, p. 315.

¹⁹ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, February 10.

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 refers²⁰ 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 originated²¹ 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.

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

²⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Ephesians, 1:3.

²¹ For more information on the life of Simon Magus, see Mark Kern, Simon Magus the Heresiarch, St Athanasius Press, 2002

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).

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

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).

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 stated²² it this way:

"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

²² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Colossians, VII, 3:2, 3, 4.

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 Gyges²³, Ambrose stated²⁴ 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 spoke²⁵ 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 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

²³ A fable told by the philosophers described a shepherd, Gyges, 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. Gyges used the power of this ring to murder the king and engage in adultery with the queen.

²⁴ Ambrose of Milan, Duties of the Clergy, III, v, 36.

²⁵ Leo the Great, Sermons, XXVII, 6.

when Christ, who is your life, shall appear, then you shall appear with Him in glory” (Colossians 3:3-4).

Leo the Great also stated²⁶ 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).

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 spoke²⁷ 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 described²⁸ 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

²⁶ Leo the Great, Sermons, LXIII, 7.

²⁷ John Cassian, Conference of Abbot Serapion, I, v, 11.

²⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXV, 3.

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 referred²⁹ 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".

Jerome wrote³⁰ 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 feast³¹ 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

²⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, III, 6.

³⁰ Jerome, Letter to Eustochium, XXII, 32.

³¹ 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.

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 stated³² 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 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 forsakes all that he has cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:33). Why are you such a half-hearted Christian?"

John Cassian wrote³³ 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

³² Jerome, Letter to Hellodorus, XIV, 5.

³³ John Cassian, Institutes of the Coenobia, XII, 26-27.

with a more hideous end. While it is overcome by impious avarice³⁴, 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. And so the result is that spiritual conferences are not merely of no use to him, but are 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 Law³⁵.

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

³⁴ 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).

³⁵ 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.

Sarah. And they separately agreed that they would dedicate the child to the Lord as Hannah³⁶ 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 exemplary³⁷ 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 lambs for the Lord, 10 calves for the priests and elders and 100 goats for the people who had ridiculed him³⁸. 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 them³⁹.

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 Mark⁴⁰. 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

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ Roberts & Donaldson, “The Protevangelium of James”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8.

³⁸ 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.

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ For more information on the monastic communities established by the Evangelist Mark, see Mark Kern, *The Evangelist Mark*, St Athanasius Press, 2005.

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 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 mentioned⁴¹ four kinds of deadness, some good and some bad. Asceticism helps us to avoid the state where we could be walking corpses.

⁴¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XI, v. 18.

“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. For ‘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, 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 stated⁴² 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).

“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 spoke⁴³ 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

⁴² Ambrose of Milan, Exposition of the Christian Faith, V, xiv, 174-176.

⁴³ John Cassian, 1st Conference of Abbot Moses, I, i, 14.

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).

Gregory of Nyssa emphasized⁴⁴ 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 stated⁴⁵ 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).

⁴⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, “On Virginity”, Ascetic and Moral Works, II, 21.

⁴⁵ Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, IV, 8.