

HUMILITY, CONFESSION and JUSTIFICATION

January 24, 2010

Sunday of the Pharisee and the Publican

Revision E

GOSPEL: Luke 18:10-14

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Gospel: Luke 18:10-14

The context of the Gospel lesson was Jesus’ teaching His disciples “that men always ought to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1). He then gave the parable of the unrighteous judge (Luke 18:2-8). Cyril of Alexandria introduced¹ the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (which followed) by saying, “Having then urged them to diligence in constant prayer, if we were to persevere but without discretion, we might anger Him to whom we pray. He very excellently shows us in what way we ought to be diligent in prayer”. The lesson of the Pharisee and the Publican, then, is how we should approach God in prayer.

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¹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, Homily 83, Studion Publishers, 1983. chapter 18.

Humility

The Gospel lesson is the familiar one of the Pharisee and the Publican praying in the Temple, where the theme is humility. The Pharisee prayed, “God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.” But the Publican prayed with head bowed, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!”. There was a sharp contrast between the two men: the Pharisee was highly respected as a zealous observer of the Mosaic Law; the Publican was despised as a public sinner collaborating with the Romans and cheating the people. Yet it was the Publican who was “justified” (Greek: *atoned for, propitiated*). Each man undoubtedly offered his own animal sacrifice according to the Law to make atonement or propitiation for his sin. These animal sacrifices were intended to illustrate what Jesus would do as the atonement or propitiation for the sins of the people (see Hebrews 2:17, Romans 3:25, 1 John 2:2, 4:10); however, the sacrifice of the Pharisee was rejected while that of the Publican was accepted. This is reminiscent of how the Lord accepted the offering of righteous Abel but rejected the offering of Cain (Genesis 4:3-5, compare Matthew 23:35). Like Cain, the Pharisee’s problem was that of sin crouching at the door (the sin of pride) and the Pharisee couldn’t master it (Genesis 4:6-7).

The bottom line: if we humble ourselves the Lord will exalt us; if we exalt ourselves we will be humbled (Matthew 23:12). This is a consistent theme throughout the Scriptures. For example, Israel in the desert was arrogant and stiff-necked. As a result, the Lord humbled them by letting them all die there even though they were miraculously provided for - and all the surrounding nations knew it (Deuteronomy 8:1-6). On the other hand, Moses was the most humble man on earth and wouldn’t even defend himself when his brother and sister (Aaron and Miriam) spoke against him. But the Lord defended Moses and, in doing so, exalted him (Numbers 12:1-11).

John Chrysostom addressed² humility by saying that we should not promote our own good deeds but instead declare ourselves as unprofitable. The greater our good works are, the less we should promote them. As examples, Chrysostom used the Publican, the Three Young Men in the Furnace, the Centurion, Paul, John the Baptist and Peter.

“Let no one therefore be high-minded on account of these matters, but let him consider the forefathers of the Lord, and put away all his haughtiness, and let good actions be his pride; or rather, not even these. For thus it was that the Pharisee came to be inferior to the Publican. Thus, if you would show the work to be great, have no high thought, and you have proved it so much the greater. Make account that you have done nothing, and then you have done all. For if, being sinners, when we account ourselves to be what we are, we become righteous, as indeed the Publican did; how much more, when being righteous we account ourselves to be sinners. Since if out of sinners men are made righteous by a lowly mind (although this were not to be lowly-minded but to be right-minded); if then to be right-minded avails so much in the case of sinners, consider what will not lowliness of mind do with respect to righteous men.

“Do not then mar your labors, nor cast away from you the fruits of your works, neither run in vain, making frustrate all your labor after the many courses you have run. The Lord knows your good works better than you do. Though you

² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, III, .

give but a cup of cold water, not even this does He overlook; though you contribute only a farthing, though you only utter a sigh, He receives it all with great favor and is mindful thereof, and assigns for it great rewards.

“But why do you search out your own doings, and parade them out before us continually? Do you not know that if you praise yourself, God will no more praise you? Even as if you lament yourself, He will not cease proclaiming you before all. For it is not at all His will that your labors should be disparaged.

“Let us not therefore lift up ourselves, but let us declare ourselves unprofitable, that we may become profitable (Luke 17:10). For if you call yourself approved, you have become unprofitable, though you were approved; but if useless, you have become profitable, even though you were reprobate.

“Don’t be forever parading your good works, lest someone should take them away. In the case with the Pharisee, he boasted about them; therefore the devil took them away. With thanksgiving he made mention of them, and referred the whole to God. But this did not suffice. For it is not thanksgiving to revile others, to be vainglorious before many, to exalt one’s self against them that have offended. Rather, if you are giving thanks to God, be content with Him only, and don’t publish it among men, neither condemn your neighbor; for this is not thanksgiving. Would you learn words of thanksgiving? Listen to the Three Children, saying, as they walked about inside the Babylonian furnace ‘We have sinned, we have transgressed. You art righteous, O Lord, in all that you have done to us, because you have brought all things upon us by a true judgment’ (Song of the Three Children LXX, verses 6, 8, 4). For to confess one’s own sins, this is to give thanks with confession to God: a kind of thing, which implies one to be guilty of numberless offenses, yet not to have the due penalty exacted. This man most of all is the giver of thanks.

“Let us beware therefore of saying anything about ourselves, for this renders us both odious with men and abominable to God. For this reason, the greater the good works we do, the less let us say of ourselves; this being the way to reap the greatest glory both with men and with God. Confess yourself to be saved by grace, that He may profess Himself a debtor to you; and not for your good works only, but also for such rightness of mind.

“It was in this way that the centurion also said, ‘I am not fit that You should enter under my roof (Matthew 8:8); because of this, he became worthy, and was marveled at (Matthew 8:10) above all Jews. In this way Paul says, ‘I am not worthy to be called an Apostle’ (1 Corinthians 15:9); because of this he became even first of all. So likewise John: ‘I am not worthy to loose the strap of His shoe’ (Mark 1:7); because of this he was the ‘friend of the Bridegroom’ (John 3:29); and the hand which he said was unworthy to touch His shoes, this did Christ draw onto³ His own head (Matthew 3:14, 15). So Peter too said, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man’ (Luke 5:8); because of this he became a foundation of the Church”.

Cyril of Alexandria pointed out that the Old Testament - which the Pharisee knew very well - had much to say about the Pharisee’s prayer. Regarding his boasting: “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips” (Proverbs 27:2). “Set a guard,

³ This alludes to the laying on of hands at baptism.

O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalm 141:3). Regarding his fasting, sacrifices were required to be without blemish to be accepted (Leviticus 22:21). His prayer was therefore not acceptable because of the blemish of his boasting. The fasting that the Lord chooses involves a man humbling himself, loosening the bonds of wickedness and dividing his bread with the hungry (Isaiah 58:6-8).

Regarding his judgment of others, the Lord had said, “Judge not and you shall not be judged. Condemn not and you shall not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37). James, the Lord’s brother, added: “There is One Lawgiver and Judge, who is able to save and destroy. Who are you to judge a neighbor?” (James 4:12)

Cyril added⁴, “The love of self is displeasing to God, and He rejects empty haughtiness and a proud look, puffed up often on account of that which is by no means excellent. And even if a man is good and sober, let him not allow himself to fall away into shameful pride. But rather let him remember Christ who said to His Holy Apostles (Luke 17:10): ‘When you have done all these things which you are commanded, say that you are unprofitable slaves and that you have done what was your duty to do’”.

Mark the Ascetic put it⁵ this way: “Just as water and fire cannot be combined, so self-justification and humility exclude one another”.

In the New Testament, the Virgin Mary prophesied about how all generations would call her blessed (Luke 1:46-52). She was a very humble lady and she has been very much exalted over the centuries, like her Son, who humbled Himself to the point of death on the cross. Because of this, He has been very much exalted (Philippians 2:7-11).

Jesus used a little child⁶ to illustrate humility: “whoever humbles himself as a little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1-5). Paul encouraged the Philippians: “in humbleness of mind, let each esteem others better than himself” (Philippians 2:3). James encouraged people to look beyond this life. “Let the humble (poor) brother glory in his exaltation”; that is, later in the kingdom of heaven (James 1:9, Matthew 5:3). On the other hand, James warns, let the rich man realize that his exaltation (riches) in this life will wither like a flower in the summer heat. Both James and Peter quote Proverbs 3:34, “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5).

There is an attitude prevalent today where it’s cool to be arrogant and obnoxious and to revile anything that isn’t easily understood. The Gospel and Epistle lesson today stand against the tide of today’s trends. Humility isn’t cool today and people who are humble are often ridiculed or taken advantage of. As Christians, we can be at peace even if the world hates us, reviles us or persecutes us because the world has done so to the prophets before us. All that the world accomplished in the past by doing so was to exalt the prophets in the kingdom of God.

⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, Homily 83, Studion Publishers, 1983. chapter 18

⁵ Mark the Ascetic, On the Spiritual Law. Mark was a famous writer of the 4th century and a student of John Chrysostom, who actually moved mountains when necessary.

⁶ The little child was Ignatius of Antioch, who was later the 3rd Bishop of Antioch and who was martyred in c. 107 AD. See Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, December 20.

Identifying with the Lowly

The Psalmist David wrote the following words on the day that the Lord delivered him from his enemies and from the hand of Saul: “With the holy, you will be holy; and with the innocent man you will be innocent. With the excellent *man* you will be excellent; and with the perverse you will show disobedience. For You will save the lowly people, and will humble the eyes of the proud” (Psalm 18:25-27 LXX). Hanging out with evildoers will lead us into evildoing. Therefore just as we are encouraged to give alms to those who are less fortunate than we are, so we are also encouraged to hang out with the lowly-minded rather than with the proud and arrogant.

The Twelve Apostles emphasized this. The late 1st century document that summarized⁷ what the Twelve Apostles taught states:

“Run from every evil thing and from everything that looks like it. Don’t be prone to anger, for anger leads to murder; don’t be jealous, quarrelsome, or hot tempered, for out of all these come murders. Do not be lustful, for lust leads to fornication; neither be a filthy talker, or haughty, for out of all these come adultery. Do not be not an observer of omens, since it leads to idolatry; don’t be an enchanter, an astrologer, or be willing to look at these things, for out of all these come idolatry. Do not be a liar, since a lie leads to theft; don’t be money-loving, or vainglorious, for out of all these come theft. Do not murmur, since it leads the way to blasphemy; neither be self-willed or evil-minded, for out of all these come blasphemy. But be meek, since the meek shall inherit the earth. Be long-suffering, compassionate, guileless, gentle and good and always trembling at the words that you have heard. Don’t exalt yourself, or give over-confidence to your soul. Don’t hang out with lofty people, but converse with the just and lowly. Receive as good whatever occurs, knowing that apart from God nothing comes to pass.”

John Chrysostom noted⁸ that the good deeds of the Pharisee went for nothing because of his pride. On the other hand, the Three Young Men in the Babylonian furnace confessed their sins while in the furnace out of humility. Similarly Daniel in the lions’ den humbly asked God to remember him.

“Many are elated on account of their humility; but let us not be so affected. Have you done any act of humility? Don’t be proud of it; otherwise all the merit of it is lost. Such was the Pharisee; he was puffed up because he gave his tithes to the poor; and he lost all the merit of it (Luke 18:12). But not so the publican! Listen to Paul again saying, ‘I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this’ (1 Corinthians 4:4). Do you see that he does not exalt himself, but by every means abases and humbles himself, and that too when he had arrived at the peak of his Apostleship. The Three Children in the midst of the furnace said⁹, ‘We have sinned and committed iniquity with our fathers’. This is

⁷ Roberts and Donaldson, ed., “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”, Chapter 3, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 7.

⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Philemon, II, Moral.

⁹ Lancelot Brenton, “Song of the Three Children”, 2-8, 15, in The Septuagint with Apocrypha, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody MA, 1990. The “Song of the Three Children” was originally part of the Book of Daniel.

a contrite heart; on this account they could say, ‘Nevertheless in a contrite heart and a humble spirit let us be accepted’. Thus even after they had fallen into the furnace they were exceedingly humbled, even more so than they were before. For when they saw the miracle that was done, thinking themselves unworthy of that deliverance, they were humbled even more. When we are persuaded that we have received great benefits beyond what we deserve, then we are particularly grieved. They had given themselves up to the furnace; they had been taken captive for the sins of others. They were still young, but they didn’t murmur, or become indignant. Nor did they say, ‘What good is it to us that we serve God, or what advantage do we have in worshipping Him? This king is impious, and has become our lord. We are punished with the idolatrous by an idolatrous king. We have been led into captivity. We are deprived of our country, our freedom, and all our inheritance. We have become prisoners and slaves; we are enslaved to a barbarous king’. None of these things did they say, instead, ‘We have sinned and committed iniquity’. Not for themselves but for others they offered prayers; because, they said, ‘You have delivered us to a hateful and a wicked king’. Daniel, cast into the pit, said¹⁰, ‘For God has remembered me’. Shouldn’t He remember you, O Daniel, when you glorified Him before the king, saying, “Not for any wisdom that I have?”” (Daniel 2:30)

“This is the part of well-inclined servants, not only in His mercies, but in His corrections, and in punishments wholly to submit to Him.”

Not Much Separates the Humble and the Proud

What is it that separates the humble and the proud? It turns out that there is not much, and one can step from one to the other very quickly. This is something we all need to be aware of and watch out for.

Gregory the Great illustrated this thin line between humility and pride in his epistle to Reccared, the Visigoth King of Spain, stating¹¹ that our enemies, the demons, do not try to ambush empty vessels, but those that are carrying valuables. Consequently, those people that have been given the greater gifts can expect the greater attacks. These attacks often come in the form of accolades for deeds well done, which fans the flame of pride. In this manner, we can go very quickly from humility and deeds well done to being proud for our good deeds.

“We must guard with vigilant attention against the snares of the ancient foe. The greater gifts he sees among men, the more subtle are the snares he uses to take them away. Robbers do not look out for empty travelers to seize them on the road, but only travelers that carry vessels of gold and silver. The present life is a road. Everyone needs to be the more on his guard against ambush by demons in proportion as the gifts are greater which he carries. It is the duty, then, of your Excellency, with regard to this so great gift, which you have received in the conversion of the nation subject to you, to keep with all your might, first humility of heart, and secondly cleanness of body. It is written, ‘Everyone that exalts himself shall be humbled, and he that humbles himself shall be exalted’ (Luke

¹⁰ Lancelot Brenton, “Bel and the Dragon”, 38, in The Septuagint with Apocrypha, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody MA, 1990. “Bel and the Dragon” was originally part of the Book of Daniel.

¹¹ Gregory the Great, Epistle to King Reccared, IX, 122.

14:11; 18:14). From this it is evident that he truly loves what is noble who does not cut off his soul from the root of humility. Often the malignant demon, in order to destroy the good that previously he had no power to oppose, subtly comes into the mind of the worker after accomplishment of his work, and agitates it with silent thoughts of self-praise, so that the deluded mind admires itself for the great things that it has done. Being exalted in its own sight through this hidden tumor, it is deprived of the grace of Him, Who bestowed the gift. Thus the prophet says to the soul that grows proud, 'Having trusted in your beauty you played the harlot because of your fame' (Ezekiel 16:15). A soul's having trust in its beauty is its presuming within itself on its righteous doings. It plays the harlot because of its renown, when in what it has done right, it desires not the praise of its Maker to be spread abroad, but seeks the glory of its own reputation. Again the prophet writes, 'In that you are more beautiful, go down and be placed with the uncircumcised' (Ezekiel 32:19). The soul goes down because of being more beautiful when, owing to the beauty of its virtue, it ought to have been exalted before God, but it falls from His grace through its exalted feeling. What then is to be done in this case? When the malignant demon employs the good things that we have done to exalt the mind, we should always recall to memory our evil deeds. Thus we may acknowledge that what we have done sinfully is our own, but that it is of the gift of Almighty God alone when we avoid sins. Cleanness of body is to be guarded in our strivings after well-doing, since, according to the voice of the apostolic preacher, 'The temple of God is holy, which temple you are' (1 Corinthians 3:17). Again he says, 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3). As to which sanctification, what he means by it he shows by adding, 'That you should abstain from sexual immorality, that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor'" (1 Thessalonians 4:4-5).

Gregory the Great stated¹² that the humble and the haughty ought to be admonished and encouraged in different ways (Table 1). Haughtiness or pride caused the Fall of Man and continues to lead men to perdition. Opposed to haughtiness is the humility of Christ in His humanity.

"Differently to be admonished are the humble and the haughty. To the humble suggest how true is that excellence which they hold; to the haughty suggest how that temporal glory is as nothing, which even when embracing it they don't hold it. The pride of the devil became the occasion of our perdition, and the humility of God has generated our redemption. Our enemy, having been created among all things, desired to appear exalted above all things; but our Redeemer, remaining great above all things, condescended to become little among all things."

"What, then, is more debased than haughtiness? While it stretches itself above itself, it is lengthened out beyond the stature of true loftiness. What is nobler than humility? While it depresses itself to the lowest, it unites itself to its Maker who remains above the highest. Some are deceived by a false show of humility. Others are beguiled by ignorance of their own

¹² Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome, *Book of Pastoral Rule*, IV, 17.

Table 1
Encouragement and Admonition for the Humble and the Haughty

Let the Humble Hear	Let the Haughty Hear
How eternal are the things that they long for, how transitory the things which they despise.	How transitory are the things they desire, how eternal the things they lose.
Everyone that humbles himself shall be exalted.	Everyone that exalts himself shall be humbled (Luke 18:14).
Humility comes before glory (Proverbs 15:33).	The spirit is exalted before a fall (Proverbs 16:18).
To whom shall I have respect, but to him that is humble and meek, and that trembles at my words (Isaiah 66:2).	Why is earth and ashes proud? (Ecclesiasticus 10:9 LXX).
God has respect for the things that are humble.	He knows high things from afar off (Psalm 138:6)
The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve (Matthew 20:28)	Pride is the beginning of sin (Ecclesiasticus 10:13 LXX)
Our Redeemer humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death (Philippians 2:8).	What is written concerning their leader, He is king over all the sons of pride (Job 41:34).
When they abase themselves, they ascend to the likeness of God.	When they exalt themselves, they fall into imitation of the apostate angel.

haughtiness. Some who think themselves humble have it alloyed with fear inappropriately; while an assertion of free speech commonly goes with the haughty. When any vices need to be rebuked, the humble sometimes are silent out of fear, and yet think of themselves as being silent out of humility. The haughty sometimes speak impatiently, and yet believe themselves to be speaking in the freedom of uprightness. The humble, through the fault of timidity under a show of humility, keep back from rebuking what is wrong. The haughty, through the unbridled impetuosity of pride, under the image of freedom, are impelled to rebuke things they shouldn't, or to rebuke them more than they ought. The haughty should be admonished not to be free more than is becoming, and the humble should be admonished not to be more submissive than is right. The haughty could turn the defense of righteousness into a display of pride; the humble, while they try too hard to submit themselves to men, could be driven to pay respect to their vices.”

Demons Undermine Our Humility with Gossiping and Jealousy

Some of the methods used by the demons to undermine our desire to be humble can be very sneaky. Two will be mentioned here: gossiping and jealousy. Gossiping is an assault on humility because we exalt ourselves when we speak about someone behind their back.

John Chrysostom spoke up¹³ against gossiping and reporting the failures of others abroad. Sometimes we parade these things under a cloak of zeal for goodness. Instead of

¹³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Hebrews*, XXI, 7-8.

gossiping, we should admit our own faults to our friends in humility so that they might pray for us.

“Don’t we fear to be called to account by God for our tattling? Why do we publish it? Why do we increase the evil? This is sufficient to destroy us. On this account Christ said, ‘Judge not, that you be not judged’” (Matthew 7:1).

“But we pay no attention to this, neither are we brought to our senses by what happened to the Pharisee. He said what was true, ‘I am not as this Publican’ (Luke 18:11). He also said it with no man listening; yet was he condemned. If he was condemned for this, what fearful punishment shall we suffer, who like gossiping women, carry about everywhere lies which we do not even believe?”

“Let us set ‘a door with a bolt over our mouth’ (Ecclesiasticus 28:25). Innumerable evil has arisen from tattling; families have been ruined, friendships torn apart, innumerable other miseries have happened. Don’t busy yourself with the affairs of your neighbor. If you are talkative and have a weakness, talk of your own faults to God; this way, the weakness will no longer be a weakness, but an advantage. Talk of your own faults to your friends, those who are thorough friends and righteous men, and in whom you have confidence, that they may pray for your sins. If you speak of the sins of others, you are not profited, neither have you gained anything, but have ruined yourself. If you confess your own sins to the Lord, you have great reward; for David says, ‘I said I will confess my iniquity against myself to the Lord, and You forgave the ungodliness of my heart’” (Psalm 32:5 LXX).

Jealousy is another assault of the demons against our humility because we exalt ourselves against someone else in thinking that we are better than they, and that we “deserve” whatever they have.

John Chrysostom noted¹⁴ that not even some of the disciples of John the Baptist were free from jealousy over Christ’s disciples. The Pharisee had labored a great deal in keeping the Law and tithing, but jealousy, which led to vainglory, caused him to be worse off than one of the worst sinners in Israel (the Publican), who had not labored at all.

“A mad desire for glory is the cause of all evil. This led the disciples of John the Baptist to jealousy; when the jealousy had ceased for a little, they were roused again. Therefore they came to Jesus, and said, ‘Why don’t Your disciples fast?’ (Matthew 9:14) Let us avoid this passion; if we avoid this we shall escape hell, for this vice especially kindles the fire of hell. Everywhere it extends its role, and tyrannically occupies every age and every rank. Jealousy has turned churches upside down, it is mischievous in state matters, has subverted houses, cities, peoples, and nations. Why do you marvel? It has even gone out into the desert, and shown its great power. For men who have bid farewell to riches and all the show of the world, who converse with no one, who have gained mastery over the more domineering desires after the flesh, these men sometimes have been made captives by vainglory, and have lost everything. Because of jealousy, one who had labored much (the Pharisee) went away worse off than one who had not labored at all (the Publican), and who had committed ten thousand sins. Condemning the passion is easy enough; all agree in doing that. The question is,

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXIX, 3.

how to get the better of it. We can do this by setting honor against honor. As we despise the riches of earth when we look to heavenly riches, as we despise this life when we think of that far better than this, so we will be able to spit on this world's glory, when we know of another far more majestic than it, which is really glory. The glory of this world is a vain and empty thing, and has the name without the reality. But the glory which is from heaven is true, and has Angels, and Archangels, and the Lord of Archangels to give its praise; or rather I should say that it has men as well."

The Antichrist: the Model of Those Who Exalt Themselves

Paul wrote about "The Antichrist", "The Man of Sin", who will appear just before the Second Coming of Christ. One striking characteristic about this man is how he exalts himself. Paul described him as one "who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God" (2 Thessalonians 2:4). Part of his exalting of himself will be causing deceit to prosper (Daniel 8:25, 11:36-37). In this way, he takes on the characteristics of the Pharaoh of the Exodus (Exodus 9:17), the rebellious Korah (Numbers 16:1-3) and Satan himself (Isaiah 14:13), all of whom exalted themselves against God. If we exalt ourselves, we imitate all these enemies of God, and we will perish with them. Humbling ourselves, however, is the antidote to this.

John Chrysostom noted¹⁵ that the Antichrist revealed great mysteries. Not only will sin be a major characteristic of his life, but so will miracles.

"Paul spoke about the Antichrist, and revealed great mysteries (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4). What is 'the falling away?' Paul calls him Apostasy, as being about to destroy many, and make them fall away. So that if it were possible, He says, even the Elect should be deceived (Matthew 24:24). He calls him 'the man of sin'. For he shall do damage without number, and shall cause others to do them. Paul calls him 'the son of perdition', because he is also to be destroyed. But who is he? Is it then Satan? By no means; but some man, that admits Satan's fully working in him. He is a man, who 'exalts himself against all that is called God or is worshipped'. For he will not introduce idolatry, but will be a kind of opponent to God; he will abolish all the gods, and will order men to worship him instead of God. He will be seated in the temple of God, not that in Jerusalem only, but also in every Church. Paul said that the Antichrist will not just say things, 'but will endeavor to show it. For he will perform great works, and will show wonderful signs."

Basil the Great, along with some other early 4th century Church Fathers, wondered¹⁶ if the exaltation of the Antichrist was immanent due to all the persecution and the problems in the Church.

"Can the Lord have abandoned His Churches completely? Has the last hour come, and is 'the falling away' thus coming upon us, that now the lawless one 'may be revealed the son of perdition who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God and is worshipped?' (2 Thessalonians 2:4) But if the

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Thessalonians, III, vv. 3-4.

¹⁶ Basil the Great, Letter to the Alexandrians, 139, 1.

temptation is for a season, bear with it, noble athletes of Christ. If the world is being delivered to complete and final destruction, let us not lose heart for the present, but let us await the revelation from heaven, and the revealing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. If all creation is to be dissolved, and the fashion of this world transformed, why should we be surprised that we, who are a part of creation, should feel the general calamity, and be delivered to afflictions, which our just God inflicts on us according to the measure of our strength. He does not let us 'be tempted beyond what we are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that we may be able to bear it' (1 Corinthians 10:13). Brothers, martyrs' crowns await us. The companies of the confessors are ready to reach out their hands to us and to welcome us into their own ranks. Remember how none of the saints of old won their crowns of patient endurance by living luxuriously and being tempted; but all were tested by being put through the fire of great afflictions."

Pride Overrules All the Virtues

The Pharisees were strict adherents to the Mosaic Law. Every week, they practiced a strict fast (no food or water) on Monday and Thursday¹⁷. This fast commemorated Moses climbing Mt. Sinai on a Thursday to receive the Law (Exodus 24:9-18), then climbing back up Mt. Sinai again on a Monday to receive the Law the second time (Exodus 34:1-8). In addition, the Pharisees practiced a strict tithing of everything they earned (Luke 11:42, 18:12). Thus they spent a great deal of effort aimed at godliness. But pride mixed in with the efforts at being godly short circuited everything.

John Chrysostom stated¹⁸ that pride is the greatest of evils. It caused the fall of Satan, the fall of Adam and the lack of justification of the Pharisee. Even though the Pharisee had spent much effort in fasting and tithing, he lost everything because of pride.

"The greatest of evils, and that which makes havoc of the whole world, is our entering into pride. The devil, not being such before, thus became 'the devil' by pride. Paul plainly declared, 'Lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil' (1 Timothy 3:6). The first man, puffed up by the devil with these hopes, became mortal; expecting to become a god, he lost even what he had. God criticized him about this, and mocking his folly, said, 'Look, Adam has become as one of us' (Genesis 3:22). Everyone that came after Adam wrecked himself in impiety, fancying some equality with God. This was the center of our evil, the root and fountain of all wickedness. God, preparing a remedy suitable to the disease, laid the Law first as a strong and safe foundation. This being fixed as a base, the Builder in security lays on it all the rest. But if this were to be taken away, though a man might reach to the Heavens in his course of life, it is all easily undermined, and comes to a grievous end. Though you practice fasting, prayer, almsgiving, temperance, any other good thing whatever, without humility everyone falls away and perishes.

This took place in the instance of the Pharisee. Even after he had arrived at the summit of godliness (through fasting and tithing), he 'went down' (Luke

¹⁷ Merrill F. Unger, Unger's Bible Dictionary, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, p. 346.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XV, 3.

18:14) with the loss of everything, because he didn't have the mother of virtues. Just as pride is the fountain of all wickedness, so is humility the principle of all self-command."

Chrysostom also encouraged¹⁹ his people to assume the attitude of the Publican, confess our sins and ask for mercy. However, there is a danger that pride can enter our hearts as we confess our sins and negate any benefits we obtain for doing this. If we confess our sins and admit our faults only so that people will see how humble and penitent we are, we have become prideful like the Pharisee.

"Let us apply ourselves to Prayer. It is a mighty weapon if it is offered with earnestness, without pride, and with a sincere mind. It has turned back wars and has benefited an entire nation though undeserving. 'I have heard their groaning', He says, 'and I have come down to deliver them' (Acts 7:34). It is a saving medicine, and has power to prevent sins and to heal evil desires. Those who are really widows and continue in prayer and supplication illustrate this (1 Timothy 5:5). If we pray with humility, striking our chest as the publican, if we say, 'Be merciful to me a sinner' (Luke 18:13), we shall obtain everything. Though we are not publicans, yet we have other sins as great as his."

"Let us not only say, 'Be merciful to me a sinner', but let us also be thus minded. Should someone call us a sinner, let us not be angry. The Publican heard the words from the Pharisee, 'I am not as this Publican' (Luke 18:11), and was not provoked by it, but he accepted the criticism. The Pharisee spoke of the wound, and the Publican sought the medicine."

"If we admit many evil things of ourselves, are we bothered when we hear the same things from others? If we are bothered, then there is no longer humility, or confession, but exhibition and pride. Is it exhibition to call one's self a sinner? Yes; for we obtain the credit for humility, we are admired, we are commended; whereas if we say the opposite of ourselves, we are despised as prideful. We sometimes do this for the sake of credit. But what IS humility? It is bearing it when another reviles us, acknowledging our fault, enduring evil words spoken by others. Yet this is not a mark of humility but one of truthfulness. We call ourselves sinners, unworthy, and many other names; but if someone else applies one of them to us, we are bothered, we become angry. Do you see that this is not confession, nor even truthfulness? We say of ourselves that we are such; we shouldn't be indignant if we hear it also said by others, as they reprove us."

"In this way our sins are made lighter for us. When others criticize us; they lay a burden on themselves, but they lead us on to practical wisdom. Hear what the blessed David says, when Shimei cursed him, 'Let him alone', he said, 'the Lord has ordered him, in order that He might look on my humiliation. The Lord will repay me with good for his cursing on this day'" (2 Samuel 16:11, 12).

"While we say evil things of ourselves, even in excess, if we don't hear from others the praises that are due to the most righteous, we are enraged. In doing so, we are trifling with things that are serious. For we even repudiate some praises in our desire for other praises, that we may be more admired. When we decline to accept praises, we do it that we may increase them. We do all things for credit, not for truth. Therefore all these things are hollow. I ask you to

¹⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XXVII, 9-10

withdraw from this mother of evils, pride, and to live according to what is loved by God, that by doing so you may attain to the good things to come.”

Gregory the Great warned²⁰ that Christ will take vengeance against the proud at the Second Coming, where the proud are unclean before Him. This He demonstrated when He came in humility at the Incarnation, and asked us to imitate Him.

“The Apostle John warned that it is the last hour (1 John 2:18). Disease and fighting rage throughout the world; nations rise against nations, the globe of the earth gets shaken; the gaping earth with its inhabitants melts (Psalm 46:6). The king of pride is coming, and, awful to be said, there is an army of priests preparing for him, in that they, who have been appointed to be leaders in humility, enlist themselves under the neck of pride. Coming in power, Christ in His own person will oppose the vice of pride and take vengeance against pride. It is written, ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’ (James 4:6). Again, ‘Whoever exalts his heart is unclean before God’ (Proverbs 16:5 LXX). Against the man that is proud it is written, ‘Why is earth and ashes proud’ (Ecclesiasticus 10:9)? The Truth in person says, ‘Whoever exalts himself shall be abased (Luke 14:11). That He might bring us back to the way of life through humility, He condescended to exhibit in Himself what He teaches us. ‘Learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart’ (Matthew 11:29). To this end the only begotten Son of God took on Himself the form of our weakness; to this end the Invisible appeared not only as visible but even as despised. He endured the mocks of insolence, the reproaches of derision, the torments of suffering; God in His humility taught man not to be proud. How great, then, is the virtue of humility, where He who is great beyond compare became little even to the suffering of death! Since the pride of the devil was the origin of our perdition, the humility of God has been found the means of our redemption. That is to say, our enemy, having been created among all things, desired to appear exalted above all things; but our Redeemer remaining great above all things, condescended to become little among all things.”

Justification

The interpretation of “Justification” and “Righteousness” and what they mean is different between East and West. Much of this difference comes from Augustine of Hippo, who was a much bigger influence in the West than in the East. In this section we will look at Western interpretation of “Justification”, then look at the Church Fathers’ views of various means of “Justification”

To begin, John Chrysostom defined²¹ the meaning of the word “Justified”, when speaking of God. Paul stated that “doers of the Law will be justified” (Romans 2:13); therefore, this is also applicable to men.

“What does the word justified mean? That, if there could be a trial and an examination of the things He had done for the Jews, and of what had been done

²⁰ Gregory the Great, Epistle to John of Constantinople, V, 18.

²¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, VI, v. 4.

on their part towards Him, the victory would be with God, and all the right on His side.”

Western Protestant Definition of “Justification”

Fr. John Breck summarized²² “Righteousness” and “Justification by Faith” as seen in Western Protestant thinking.

A Roman Catholic friend (and a good theologian) recently asked me whether the Greek Fathers of the Church understand the term “righteousness” in a forensic sense. He was referring to a Protestant doctrine that holds that God does not “make” us righteous; He “declares” or “counts” us righteous. That is, God *imputes* righteousness to us, while we remain in a state of sinfulness; Luther would say, at once justified and sinful. Reading, for example, St Paul’s letter to the Romans, my friend asked, do the Eastern Fathers also read the notion of “righteousness” forensically? Well no, I thought. But then I had to formulate something of the reason why. After a lot of stumbling, this is what I passed on to him.

The Protestant notion of “imputation,” (as I understand it) grew out of the conviction that we are inherently (by nature) incapable of making ourselves righteous; we cannot become truly just on the basis of our own good deeds or merits. This states that insofar as the qualities of justice and righteousness are attributable to us, we should understand that God *imputes* them to us as an expression of His mercy. This God does so that we can re-enter the realm of His righteousness, His holiness, and thus be saved from the consequences of sin, which is (eternal) death. This interpretation, however, as many people have pointed out, means that our righteousness is little more than a legal fiction. God treats us *as if* we were just or righteous, although He (like us) knows full well that we are not²³.

The difference between this notion and the Orthodox perspective is well illustrated by our respective interpretations of Romans 5:12. In the West, at least in the popular mind, the debate was long polarized between Catholic emphasis on salvation through “works-righteousness,” and Protestant insistence on “justification by faith (alone!).” The presupposition underlying both views is that we inherit Adam’s *guilt*, according to Augustine, which resulted from his sinful disobedience to the divine commandment²⁴.

Augustine seemed convinced that the guilt resulting from Adam's sin is transmitted through the sexual act, from generation to generation, like some deleterious gene. This “original sin” must be removed if we are to be saved from death, to share in eternal life. The question as to how this is accomplished has received many different answers. Medieval Catholic piety held that this occurs through infused grace, which confers upon us the power to perform righteous deeds and thereby actually to become or be made righteous. This enables us to build up a “treasury of merits,” the term “merit” being understood as a gift of divine grace rather than our own accomplishment (Council of Trent, 1547). The popular notion that we are saved only if our merits outweigh our sins on the scales of divine justice is usually attributed to Roman Catholics.

²² Very Rev. John Breck, God's "Righteousness", Life in Christ, September 2006, Article # 1, <http://www.oca.org>.

²³ D. Guthrie, New Testament Theology (Inter-Varsity Press, 1981, pp. 498-504) discusses various Protestant approaches to this question, including the distinction between “imparted” and “imputed” righteousness.

²⁴ Modern dialog between Catholics and Protestants has gone beyond this focus on inherited guilt and is concerned more with the meaning of “justification.”

It is shared, nevertheless, by many Orthodox, who have failed to appreciate the fullness of God's grace, both in enabling us to perform good works and in forgiving us fully when we sincerely repent of our sins²⁵.

To the Greek Fathers, what we inherit from Adam is not his sin and consequent guilt, but *mortality*²⁶. From Adam (understood, really, as an archetype), we “inherit” the sting of *death*. Death has spread to all of humanity, as an inevitable consequence of our fallen nature; yet each of us, under the threat of death, rebels personally against God, the Author of Life. This means that our guilt is our own; we bring it upon ourselves. A sign in our local marina declares: “You are responsible for your wake!” How true! Just as boaters are responsible for their own wake, all men are responsible for their own actions.

Greek patristic tradition generally interprets Paul's words as “righteousness,” rather than as “justice” in the forensic sense. That is, God demonstrated His righteousness, not His justice (Romans 3:25, 26). The term refers first to God's own quality of righteousness, understood more as an expression of love and mercy than as one of divine justice that must be “satisfied.” Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, followers of Christ are capable of receiving that divine righteousness as a gift – one that can actually work a transformation in human life by enabling us to pray, to wage spiritual warfare against the passions, and to love both God and other people. Human nature remains “fallen”; but the Spirit leads the human person on a pathway of sanctification.

In the Eastern perspective, there is no thought that we must accumulate merits in order to justify ourselves before God, although our faithful often seem (as evidenced in Confession) to feel that if we are to be saved, our good works must outweigh our sins. Nor, on the other hand, is there a denial of the place and importance of good works in Christian life! (Ephesians 2:8-10) Salvation is accomplished by grace in response to faith. But that faith cannot be passive; it must express itself, not merely by confessing Jesus as “personal Lord and Savior,” but by feeding, clothing, visiting and otherwise caring for the “least” of Jesus' brethren (Matthew 25:31-46).

What we are saved *from* is the key issue here. Rather than view salvation primarily as a forensic liberation from guilt through imputed or imparted righteousness, we should see it as incorporation, by baptism, into Christ's death and resurrection, such that we “die and rise” with Him. Thus we are saved *from Death*. We are freed from this ultimate consequence of sin and guilt – but only as a divinely bestowed gift of God's ineffable love, expressed in the suffering death of His Son, a gift to which we respond with faith that issues in love. That response, through the action of the indwelling Spirit, enables us finally to share in Christ's own

²⁵ The common view of merits as a means by which we put God in our debt (never sanctioned as dogma), together with the idea of inherited guilt, has been treated well and in detail in recent Catholic reflection. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (§ 404-409), for example, makes an important distinction between original sin as a “deprivation of original holiness and justice” – which renders human nature “subject to ignorance, suffering and the dominion of death, and inclined to sin” – and personal faults for which each of us is responsible. In this perspective, “original sin” is close to the Orthodox understanding of “fallen human nature.”

²⁶ E.g., John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, X, v. 19; Maximus the Confessor, *Quaest. Ad Thal.* (PG 90:408). An excellent summary of this issue can be found in J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, Fordham University Press, 1974, pp. 143-146.

resurrection and glorification, attaining what the Greek Fathers²⁷ call *theôsis* or “deification” (which means participation in God’s life, and not confusion between God and His human creatures).

Good works should thus be understood to be a *response* to salvation rather than a *means* to salvation. And God’s righteousness should be seen as a gift of loving, merciful, saving grace, rather than as a forensic tool, wielded in the service of divine judgment.

Justification by Confession

Isaiah stated, “Let us plead together; first confess your transgressions, that you may be justified” (Isaiah 43:26 LXX). We normally think of justification as by faith and not by confession. Yet the Publican didn’t show any obvious faith as he confessed, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13). The Church Fathers make a very strong case for justification by other means than by faith alone. Here we will look at what the Church Fathers had to say about one being justified by confession of sins. Later we will look at confession itself, regarding what it entails.

Ignatius of Antioch set²⁸ the tone of the Early Church: in order to be justified before God, like the Publican, we need to be our own accusers and confess our sins.

“I know that you are not puffed up, for you have Jesus in yourselves. All the more I commend you; I know that you cherish modesty of spirit. As it is written, ‘A righteous man accuses himself at the beginning of his speech’ (Proverbs 18:17 LXX); and again, ‘first confess your transgressions, that you may be justified’ (Isaiah 43:26 LXX); and again, ‘When you shall have done all things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants’ (Luke 17:10); ‘for that which is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God’ (Luke 16:15). For the Scripture says, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’ (Luke 18:13). Therefore those great ones, Abraham and Job, styled themselves ‘dust and ashes’ (Genesis 18:27, Job 30:19) before God. David says, ‘Who *am* I, O Lord God? And what is my house, that You have brought me this far??’ (1 Chronicles 17:16) And Moses, who was ‘the humblest of all men’ (Numbers 12:3), said to God, ‘I *am* not eloquent, but I *am* slow of speech and slow of tongue’ (Exodus 4:10). Be therefore also of a humble spirit, that you may be exalted; for ‘whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’” (Luke 14:11).

John Chrysostom spoke²⁹ of five different ways of repentance, and all lead to heaven. These are:

1. The condemnation of sins. ‘First confess your transgressions, that you may be justified’ (Isaiah 43:26 LXX). Also David said ‘I acknowledged my sin, and did not hide my iniquity: I said, I will confess my iniquity to the Lord against myself; and You

²⁷ “Communion in the risen body of Christ; participation in divine life; sanctification through the energy of God, which penetrates true humanity and restores it to its ‘natural’ state, rather than justification, or remission of inherited guilt – these are at the center of Byzantine understanding of the Christian Gospel.” J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 146.

²⁸ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, 12.

²⁹ John Chrysostom, *Against Those Who Say that Demons Govern Human Affairs*, II, 6.

forgave the ungodliness of my heart' (Psalm 32:5 LXX). Condemn yourself therefore for your sins. This is enough for the Master by way of self-defense. For he who condemns his sins, is slower to fall into them again. Awake your conscience, that inward accuser, in order that you may have no accuser at the judgment seat of the Lord.

2. The forgiveness of our neighbors' sins. This is not less than the first: not to bear a grudge against your enemies to overcome anger, to forgive the sins of our fellow-servants. Similarly those sins, which have been done against the Master, will be forgiven us. Note the second expiation of sins: 'If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you' (Matthew 6:14).
3. Fervent and diligent prayer. Do this from the bottom of the heart. Have you not seen that widow, how she persuaded the shameless judge? (Luke 18:2-6) But you have a gentle Master, both tender, and kind. She asked, against her adversaries, but you do not ask against your adversaries, but on behalf of your own salvation.
4. Almsgiving. This has a great unspeakable power. Daniel said to Nebuchadnezzar when he had engaged in all kinds of evil, and had entered into great impiety, 'O King, let my counsel please you, and atone for your sins by alms, and your iniquities by compassion on the poor; it may be that God will be long-suffering to your trespasses' (Daniel 4:27 LXX). What could be compared with this loving kindness? After countless sins, after so many transgressions, Daniel promised him that he would be reconciled with God if he will show kindness to his own fellow-servants.
5. Humility. Modesty and humility, not less than all words spoken, exhaust the nature of sins. The publican is proof; being unable to declare his good deeds, he brought forward his humility, and laid aside the heavy burden of his sins (Luke 18:13).

Confession as Medicine

Chrysostom also noted³⁰ how fasting and confession with humility was like a physician's medicine applied to the wound caused by our sin. Everyone needs to confess their sins continually in order to be blessed before God. Chrysostom added two other means to the list above that heal our wounds: the giving thanks in affliction and the defending of the oppressed.

"In ancient times the Ninevites sinned; they did the things that we are doing now. Let us see what it was that was available to them. As in the case of the sick, physicians apply many remedies. However the man of understanding doesn't consider those things that didn't help the sick person; only what helped him. What helped those barbarians? They applied fasting to the wounds, extreme fasting, lying on the ground, putting on sackcloth, ashes, and lamentations; they applied also a change of life. Let us see which of these things made them whole. The Physician has set down in writing the medicine that restored them. 'God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it' (Jonah 3:10). He didn't say that He saw their fasting, sackcloth and ashes. I say this not to overturn fasting, but to exhort you that with fasting you do that which is better than fasting, the abstaining from evil. David also sinned (2 Samuel 11). Let us see then how he repented. Three days he sat on ashes. This he did not for the sin's sake, but for the child's (2 Samuel 12:14-18). The sin he wiped away by other means: by humility, contrition of heart, compunction of soul, by falling into

³⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, IV, 6-7

sin no more, by remembering it always, by bearing thankfully everything that happened to him, by sparing those that grieved him, by not repaying in kind those who conspired against him; even preventing those who desire to do this. For instance, when Shimei was slandering him with criticism without number, and the captain who was with him was greatly indignant, David said, 'Let him curse me, for the Lord has ordered him' (2 Samuel 16:5-13). David had a contrite and humble heart, and it was this especially that wiped away his sins. This is confession; this is repentance! But if while we fast, we are proud, we have not only profited nothing, but we have even been injured."

"Humble your heart, that you may draw God to you. 'For the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy' (Psalm 33:18-19). If anyone reviles you, don't grow fierce, but groan, not for the insult, but for that sin which you are being reviled for. Groan when you have sinned, not because you are to be punished, for this is nothing, but because you have offended your Master, one so gentle and kind, who so loves you and longs for your salvation as to have given even His Son for you. Groan continually for this; this is confession. Don't be cheerful today, sad tomorrow, and then again cheerful; but continue always in mourning and self contrition. For, 'Blessed are they that mourn' (Matthew 5:4); that is, that do this perpetually. Continue to do this, and to pay attention to yourself, to afflict your heart, as one who had lost a beloved son might mourn. 'Tear your hearts, and not your garments' (Joel 2:13). That which is torn will not exalt itself. 'Sacrifice to God means a broken spirit; a broken and humbled heart God will not despise' (Psalm 51:16 LXX). Though you are wise, wealthy, or a ruler, tear your heart. Do not allow it to have high thoughts or to be inflated. For that which is torn is not inflated, and even if there is something to make it rise, from being torn it cannot retain the inflation. So also be humble minded! Consider that the publican was justified by one word; that was not humiliation, but a true confession. Now if this has so great a power, how much more humiliation. Forgive offenses to those who have transgressed against you, for this also forgives sins. Concerning humility He said, 'He was grieved, and he went on sorrowful in his ways. I have seen his ways; I healed him, I comforted him, and I gave him true comfort' (Isaiah 57:17-18 LXX). In Ahab's case, this appeased the wrath of God (1 Kings 21:29); concerning forgiveness, 'Forgive, and you shall be forgiven' (Luke 6:37). There is another way which brings us this medicine: condemning what we have done wrong; for, 'First confess your transgressions, that you may be justified' (Isaiah 43:26 LXX). When someone in affliction gives thanks, it loosens his sins; almsgiving too, which is greater than all."

"Summarize therefore the medicines which heal your wounds, and apply all continuously: humility, confession, forgetting wrongs, giving thanks in affliction, showing mercy both in alms and actions, persevering in prayer. Thus the widow won over the cruel and unyielding judge (Luke 18:2-7). If she satisfied the unjust, much more you can satisfy the gentle God. There is yet another way along with these: defending the oppressed; for He said, 'Judge the fatherless, and plead for the widow; and come, let us reason together, and though your sins are as scarlet, I will make them white as snow' (Isaiah 1:17-18). What excuse then can we deserve if with so many ways leading us up to heaven, and so many medicines to heal our wounds, even after the Laver, we continue where we

were. Let us not only continue so, but let those who have never yet fallen continue in their beautiful behavior; rather let them cultivate it more and more. These good works, where there are no sins, make the beauty greater. Let us who in many things have done wrong, for the correction of our sins, use the means mentioned, that we may stand at the tribunal of Christ with much boldness.”

Chrysostom further stated³¹ that we need to gain an appreciation for the Medicine of Repentance, where almsgiving adds strength to this. First we need to condemn and acknowledge our own sin. Humility is necessary also along with prayer and forgiveness of others.

“What then is the medicine of Repentance, and how is it made up? First, it is the condemnation of our own sins. ‘I acknowledged my sin, and did not hide my iniquity. I said, I will confess my iniquity to the Lord against myself; and You forgave the ungodliness of my heart’ (Psalm 32:5 LXX). And ‘First confess your transgressions, that you may be justified’ (Isaiah 43:26 LXX). Also, ‘A righteous man accuses himself at the beginning of his speech’ (Proverbs 18:17 LXX).

“Secondly, it is great humility of mind. It is like a golden chain; if one has hold of the beginning, everything will follow. If you confess your sin as you ought to confess, your soul is humbled. Conscience turning it on itself causes it to be subdued.”

“Other things too must be added to humility of mind to be such as the blessed David knew when he said, ‘A broken and humbled heart God will not despise’ (Psalm 51:17 LXX). For that which is broken does not rise up, does not strike back, but is ready to be treated badly. Such is contrition of heart; though it is insulted, though it is treated evil, it is quiet, and is not eager for vengeance.”

“After humility of mind, there is need of intense prayers, of many tears, tears by day, and tears by night. David says, ‘I am wearied with my groaning; I shall wash my bed every night; I shall water my couch with tears’ (Psalm 6:6 LXX). And again, ‘I have eaten ashes as it were bread, and mingled my drink with weeping’ (Psalm 102:9 LXX)

“After prayer this intense, there is need of much almsgiving, for this it is which especially gives strength to the medicine of repentance. Among physicians’ prescriptions, there are many herbs, but one is often essential; so also in the case of repentance, almsgiving is the essential herb, and it may be everything needed. Hear what the Divine Scripture says, ‘Give alms of such things as you have; then indeed all things are clean to you’ (Luke 11:41). And again, ‘By alms and by faithful dealings sins are purged away’ (Proverbs 15:27 LXX). And, ‘Water will quench a flaming fire; and alms makes an atonement for sins’ (Ecclesiasticus 3:30 LXX).

“Not being angry with anyone, not bearing malice; the forgiving all their trespasses is also necessary. For, it is said, ‘One man bears hatred against another, and does he seek pardon from the Lord?’ (Ecclesiasticus 28:3 LXX) The Lord said, ‘Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses’ (Mark 11:25).

³¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, IX, 8.

“Finally, we need to convert our brethren from their wandering. For, it is said, ‘Go and convert your brethren, that your sins may be forgiven you’ (James 5:19-20 loosely). And from one’s being in close relations with the priests, ‘Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven’” (James 5:14-15).

John Chrysostom encouraged³² us to think of confession as repairing the house of our soul. Houses constantly get old and need repair; so does our soul.

“The fashions and cares of this world, even before they come to light, are dissolving. If you throw the fashion aside, you will quickly come to the form. Nothing is weaker than vice, nothing so easily wears old. Then since it is likely that being men they would sin every day, Paul consoles his hearer by saying, ‘renew yourself’ from day to day (Romans 12:2). This is what we do with houses; we keep constantly repairing them as they get old, and so we should do to ourselves. Have we sinned today? Have we made our soul old? Don’t despair or be despondent; renew it by repentance, tears, confession, and by doing of good things. Never fail to do this. How are we to do this? ‘That you may prove what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God’” (Romans 12:2).

Justification by Other Methods – Or Lack of It

Chrysostom also posed³³ a situation such as existed during the High Priesthood of Eli, where there were sacrilegious priests (Eli’s wayward sons) serving the Tabernacle (1 Samuel 2:12-25). If there were a sacrilegious priest serving our parish, would our reaction be the same as the Pharisee to the Publican? “I am not as this sacrilegious priest!” If this is the case and we react this way, our reward would be the same as the Pharisee.

“If a notorious sinner, when he confessed, ‘went home justified’ (Luke 18:14), he who is a sinner in a less degree, and is conscious of it, how will he not be rewarded? Examine your own life; you are guilty of many other lesser things. Deeply lament if there is anything you are guilty of! While sacrilege is a great evil, it is worse if our virtue is rendered vain by our accusing others. What was worse than the Publican? He was guilty of many offenses. Yet because the Pharisee only said, ‘I am not as this publican’, he destroyed all his merit. If we were to say, ‘I am not like this sacrilegious Priest’, we would make all our efforts in vain.”

Under certain circumstances, one can be justified by money. Cyril of Jerusalem stated³⁴ that from the Lord’s own words, one can be justified by money and its proper use. Cyril said this to contradict heretics of his day who said that money and men’s bodies are cursed.

“Riches, gold, and silver are not, as some think, the devil’s; for ‘The faithful has the whole world full of wealth; but the faithless not even a penny’ (Proverbs 17:6 LXX). Nothing is more faithless than the devil; and God says plainly, ‘The gold is Mine, and the silver is Mine’ (Haggai 2:8), but the devil

³² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XX, v. 2.

³³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Timothy, II, Moral.

³⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, VIII, 6-7.

says, 'This has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish' (Luke 4:6). Use it well, and there is no fault to be found with money. But whenever you have made a bad use of that which is good, if you are unwilling to blame your own management, it is impious to throw back the blame on the Creator. A man may even be justified by money: 'I was hungry, and you gave Me food'; that certainly was from money. 'I was naked, and you clothed Me' (Matthew 25:35-36); that certainly was by money. Do you wish to learn that money may become a door to the kingdom of heaven? 'Sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven'" (Matthew 19:21).

"Now I have made these remarks because of those heretics who count possessions, and money, and men's bodies as accursed. For I neither wish you to be a slave of money, nor to treat as enemies the things which God has given you for use. Never say then that riches are the devil's; though he say, 'All these I will give you, for they are delivered to me' (Luke 4:6), one may reject his assertion; for we need not believe the liar. Yet perhaps he spoke the truth, being compelled by the power of His presence; for he didn't say, 'All these I will give you, for they are mine', but, 'for they are delivered to me'. He hasn't grasped dominion of them, but confessed that he had been entrusted with them, and was for a time dispensing them. But at a proper time interpreters should inquire whether his statement³⁵ is false or true."

John Chrysostom on Justification by Faith

John Chrysostom spoke a great deal on Justification by Faith. His perspective, understanding and depth of knowledge are unusual. Not only does he proclaim Justification by Faith from the Old Testament, but he shows that the Gentiles were part of God's plan from the beginning. 1st century Jewish believers often had a misconception of how the Mosaic Law fit into the bigger picture, and how it is a fellow-worker with grace.

Chrysostom stated³⁶ that the grace that was revealed at Christ's Advent was present all along in the Law and the Prophets, but it was concealed. To 1st century Jews, however, there was confusion. (1) How could Gentiles, with no good works to show, be saved, while Jews, with many good works, may not be saved at all? But more perplexing than this was (2) where was the justice that uncircumcised Gentiles might enjoy the same blessings as Jews who had been nurtured in the Law for 1500 years? Paul sought to educate the Jews in what the Law had been saying all along. In all this, faith is not opposed to the Law but is an ally and cooperator with the Law.

"Now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets' (Romans 3:21). This statement needed much proof. That which is revealed is so as being old, but concealed. This is no recent thing, because it has been witnessed by the Law and the Prophets."

"Don't be troubled because it is a thing new and strange. Both the Law and the Prophets foretold it. Habakkuk stated, 'The just shall live by faith' (Habakkuk 2:4), and Abraham and David, themselves, speak with us about these things."

³⁵ See also Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, V, xxiv, 1; Gregory of Nyssa, The Great Catechism, 5.

³⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, VII, vv. 21-31.

“Paul generated many proofs of what he said. (1) From the worthiness of the person, for it is not a man who does these things, that He should be too weak for it, but the all-powerful God. It is to God that the righteousness belongs. (2) From the Law and the Prophets, you need not be afraid at hearing the words ‘without the Law’, since the Law itself approves this. (3) From the sacrifices under the old dispensation, he said, ‘In His blood’ (Revelation 1:5), to call to their minds those sheep and calves. If the sacrifices of unreasoning animals cleared from sin, much more would the blood of Christ. To show again that it was no recent thing, he says, the Father ‘foreordained’ it, but Christ in His own blood made it happen.”

“Paul calls the Faith ‘a law’, keeping the same terms, reducing the seeming novelty. But what is the ‘law of faith?’ It is being saved by grace! Paul shows God’s power, in that He has not only saved, but has even justified, and this without needing works, but looking for faith only. He that has been saved, if he continues in the Law (thus rejecting grace), will be told that he himself has stopped his own mouth and accused himself; he has renounced claims to his own salvation. But he that has not believed, being humbled by these same means, will be capable of being brought over to the Faith. Faith’s preeminence has not even allowing us to boast of the things of the Law.”

“‘We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the Law’ (Romans 3:28). When he had shown that by faith the Gentiles were superior to the Jews, then he goes on to speak about it, and what seemed to annoy the Jews. These two things were what confused the Jews: (1) was it possible for men, who with works were not saved, to be saved without them? (2) Was justice served for the uncircumcised Gentiles to enjoy the same blessings with the Jews, who had been nurtured in the Law for 1500 years? This second confused them more by far than the first. The Jews even complained on this second point against Peter after they believed. What does Paul say then? ‘Therefore we conclude, that by faith a man is justified’. He does not say, a Jew, or one under the Law, but opening the doors of faith to the world, he says ‘a man’, implying everyone.”

“‘Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law’ (Romans 3:31). The use of the word ‘establish’ shows that it was not then standing, but was worn out. Note also Paul’s power, how he maintains what he wishes. He shows that the Faith, so far from doing any disparagement to the ‘Law’, even assists it, as the Law, on the other hand, paved the way for the Faith. Just as the Law before bore witness to it, ‘being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets’ (Romans 3:21), so here the Law establishes grace. What was the object of the Law and was what the scope of all its enactments? To make man righteous! But this it had no power to do this! ‘For all have sinned’ (Romans 3:23). When faith came, it accomplished this. When a man is a believer, he is immediately justified. The intention of the Law it established, including what all its enactments aimed for. Consequently faith has not abolished, but perfected the Law.”

“Paul demonstrated three points here; first, that without the Law it is possible to be justified. Second, that the Law could not do this. And third, that faith is not opposed to the Law. Since the chief cause of perplexity to the Jews was this, that faith seemed to be in opposition to the Law, Paul shows more than the Jew wishes, that so far from being contrary, faith is even in close alliance and

cooperation with the Law, which was what they especially longed to hear proven.”

“After this grace, whereby we were justified, there is need also of a life suited to it; let us show earnestness worthy the gift. Show it we shall, if we earnestly keep with love, the mother of good deeds. Now love is not bare words, or merely ways of speaking to men, but a taking care of them, and a putting forth of itself by works. For instance, relieving poverty, lending one’s aid to the sick, rescuing from dangers, standing by those that are in difficulties, weeping with those that weep, and rejoicing with those that rejoice (Romans 12:15). Even this last is a part of love. This seems a little thing, to be rejoicing with them that rejoice; nevertheless it is exceedingly great, and requires the spirit of true wisdom.”

Chrysostom continued³⁷ to say that Paul advocated righteousness by grace using the same words that Moses used for keeping the Law. Thus grace is described in the Old Testament for those who have ears to hear. By acquiring righteousness by grace, one also acquired the righteousness of the Law, where Christ is the end or object of the Law. The righteousness of faith is light and easy to receive; to pass this up in favor of the Law, which is burdensome and impossible to keep, represents a spirit of contentiousness and rebellion against God.

“Paul shows that there is only one kind of righteousness, and that he that has acquired righteousness by faith, has fulfilled the righteousness of the Law also. But he that rejects righteousness by faith falls short as well of the righteousness of the Law. For if Christ is ‘the end of the Law’ (), he that does not have Christ, even if he seems to have the righteousness of the Law, doesn’t have it. But he that has Christ, even though he hasn’t fulfilled the Law outright, has received the whole. For the end of the physician’s art is health. He that can make someone well, even though he doesn’t have the physician’s art, has everything; but he that doesn’t know how to heal, though he seems to be a follower of the physician’s art, comes short of everything. This is also the case of the Law and of faith. He that has Christ has the end of the Law, but he that is without Christ is an alien from both. For what was the object of the Law? To make man righteous! But it didn’t have the power, since no one fulfilled it. The end of the Law and all its parts were made, its feasts, commandments, sacrifices, etc., that man might be justified. Christ gave a fuller accomplishment of this end through faith. Don’t be afraid of transgressing the Law in having come over to the faith. For you really transgress it, when you do not believe Christ. If you believe in Him, then you have fulfilled the Law also, and much more than it commanded, for you have received a much greater righteousness.”

“Moses shows us the righteousness coming from the Law, what it is like. ‘You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them’ (Leviticus 18:5, Romans 10:5). There is no other way of becoming righteous in the Law except by fulfilling the whole of it. But this has not been possible for anyone, and therefore this righteousness failed those who tried to keep it. What does the righteousness of grace consist of? Hear the words in which Moses gives a clear sketch of it.”

³⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XVII, vv. 4-5.

“Obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this Book of the Law, and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 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?’ The Word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it” (Deuteronomy 31:10-14, Romans 10:6-9). This sounds very much like grace, where the Lord said, ‘My yoke is easy and My burden is light’ (Matthew 11:30).

“The chief characteristic of faith is to leave all the consequences of this lower world, to seek for that which is beyond nature, and to accept everything from the Power of God. The 1st century Jews did not accept this, but said that it was impossible to be justified by faith. But Paul uses the words (above), which are found in the Old Testament, to oppose them. What Paul says here of faith, Moses said to them of the Law, so showing that they had enjoyed at God’s hand a great benefit. There is no need to say that one must go up to heaven, or cross a great sea, and then receive the commandments, but things so great and grand God has made easy access to. The phrase, ‘The Word is very near you’, means that it is easy. For in your mind and in your tongue is your salvation. You may be saved even while you sit at home. ‘In your mouth and in your heart’ is the source of salvation.”

“The resurrection is easy too, and has been shown even to those who are unbelieving. Since the righteousness of faith is greater, and it is light and easy to receive, to leave what is light and easy, and set about on the impossibilities of keeping the Law is a sign of contentiousness. Paul then deprives them of all excuse. For what do they deserve to have said in their defense, who choose what is burdensome and impractical, and pass by what is light, and able to save them, and which can give them those things which the Law could not give? All this can come only from a contentious spirit, which is in a state of rebellion against God. The Law is galling, but grace is easy. The Law, though they dispute ever so much, does not save; grace yields the righteousness resulting from itself, and includes that from the Law.”

Chrysostom further described³⁸ “the righteousness of God” as not just Christ dying for sinners, but Him who had not even known sin being cursed and dying disgracefully for those who didn’t even care. As a result, we became not just righteous, but we became the righteousness of God

“What has God done? ‘Him that knew no sin He made to be sin, for you’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Had He achieved nothing else but done only this, think how great a thing it were to give His Son for those that had outraged Him. He has not only done mighty things, but besides, has allowed Him that did no wrong to be punished for those who had done wrong. He mentioned what is far greater than this. ‘Him that knew no sin’, he says, Him that was righteousness itself, ‘He made sin’, that is He suffered as a sinner to be condemned, as one cursed to die. ‘For cursed is he that hangs on a tree’ (Deuteronomy 21:23, Galatians 3:13). To

³⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XI, 5.

die this way was far greater than just to die; and this he also implied, saying, ‘Becoming obedient to death, even the death of the cross’ (Philippians 2:8). This thing carried with it not only punishment, but also disgrace. Reflect therefore on the great things He granted to you. It is a great thing for even a sinner to die for anyone whatever. But He who underwent this both was righteous and died for sinners; and not died only, but even as one cursed; and not as cursed only, but thereby freely granting us those great goods, which we never looked for. He says, that ‘we might become the righteousness of God in Him’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Paul didn’t just say that He made the righteous One (i.e. Christ) a sinner, or that He might make sinners righteous. Instead He made Him to be sin, who had not even known sin. Because of this, we might become, not just righteous, but, ‘the righteousness of God’. This is the righteousness of God, when we are justified not by works, in which case it would be necessary that not even a spot should be found, but by grace, in which case all sin is done away. This does not allow us to be puffed up, seeing that the whole is the free gift of God; it teaches us also the greatness of that which is given. For that which was before was a righteousness of the Law and of works, but this is ‘the righteousness of God’”.

Chrysostom also stated³⁹ that the Gentiles have been brought into Abraham’s family. The Jews thought that the Law predated faith, but Paul demonstrated that Abraham was justified by faith prior to the Law. The Jews also thought that the Gentiles, who didn’t keep the Law, were cursed by the Law. Paul demonstrated that only those who tried to keep the Law in all its points were cursed, because they couldn’t do it. Instead those who live by faith are blessed with the believing Abraham, because this is what Abraham did. The Prophets (Habakkuk) say that the just shall live by faith, and the Law has served as our tutor until Christ. The Law is not the adversary of, but the fellow-worker with grace.

“The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the Gentiles be blessed’ (Galatians 3:8). If those were not Abraham’s sons, who were related to him by blood, but those who follow his faith, for this is the meaning of the words, ‘In you all the Gentiles’, then it is plain that the Gentiles are brought into Abraham’s family.”

“There is another important point. The Jews thought that the Law was the older, and faith came afterwards. Paul showed that faith came before the Law; in Abraham’s case, he was justified before the giving of the Law⁴⁰. Paul showed too that recent events came about according to prophecy. ‘The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, *saying*, In you all the nations shall be blessed’ (Galatians 3:8). Thus God gave the Law after He had decreed that the Gentiles should be justified by Faith. And Paul doesn’t say ‘revealed’, but, ‘preached the Gospel’, to signify that the patriarch was in joy at this method of justification, and in great desire for its accomplishment.”

“Further, the Jews had another apprehension; it was written, ‘Cursed is everyone that continues not in all things that are written in the book of the Law, to do them’ (Deuteronomy 27:26). Paul removes this with great skill and prudence,

³⁹ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Galatians, Chapter 3, vv. 7-11, 23-26.

⁴⁰ That is, the Law was given at Mt. Sinai c. 500 years later.

turning the argument of the Jews against themselves, and showing that those who relinquish the Law are not cursed, but blessed; and they who try to keep it, are not blessed but cursed. Paul had already shown this, by referring to the words spoken to the Patriarch, 'In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed' (Genesis 12:3), at a time, that is, when Faith existed, not the Law."

"So then those, which are of faith, are blessed with the faithful Abraham' (Galatians 3:9). Then, that they might not turn around, and object that, while Abraham was justified by faith, for the Law was not then given, but that faith would not justify after the delivery of the Law. Paul addressed this, and proved that not only did faith justify, but that the Law brought its adherents under a curse. 'As many as are of the works of the Law, are under a curse' (Galatians 3:10). From the Law itself, 'For it is written, Cursed is everyone that continues not in all things that are written in the book of the Law to do them. Now that no man is justified by the Law is evident' (Galatians 3:10-11). For all have sinned, and are under the curse."

"No man has fulfilled the Law; therefore they are under the curse, and faith justifies. From the prophet Habakkuk, 'The just shall live by faith' (Habakkuk 2:4), which not only establishes the righteousness that is of faith, but also states that there is no salvation through the Law. As no one kept the Law, but all were under the curse, on account of transgression, an easy way was provided, that from faith, which is a strong proof that no man can be justified by the Law. For Habakkuk doesn't say, 'The just shall live by the Law', but, 'by faith'".

"Before faith came, we were kept under guard by the Law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed' (Galatians 3:23). Here the expressions 'we were kept' and 'under guard', signify nothing else than the security given by the Commandments of the Law; which like a fortress fenced them around with fear and a life conformable to itself, and so preserved them for faith.

'So that the Law has been our tutor until Christ, that we might be justified by faith' (Galatians 3:24). Now the Tutor is not opposed to the Preceptor, but cooperates with him, ridding the youth from all vice, and having all time to make him ready to receive instructions from his Preceptor. When a youth's habits have been formed, then the Tutor leaves him. 'But now that faith has come, which leads to perfect manhood, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus'" (Galatians 3:26).

"The Law then is not the adversary but the fellow-worker of grace. But if when grace has come, the Law continues to hold us down, it becomes an adversary. If it confines those who ought to go forward to grace, then it is the destruction of our salvation. If a candle which gave light by night, kept us, when it became day, from the sun, it would not only not benefit, it would injure us. So does the Law, if it stands between us and greater benefits. Those who still keep the Law disgrace it the most; just as the tutor makes a youth ridiculous, by retaining him with himself, when time calls for his departure. We are no longer under a tutor, 'for you are all sons of God'. Wonderful! See how mighty is the power of Faith, and how he unfolds as he proceeds! Before, he showed that it made them sons of the Patriarch; now he proves that they are sons of God also."

Cyril of Jerusalem added⁴¹ that although Abraham was justified by works and by faith, it was because of his faith, not his works, that he was called the “friend of God”.

“We have been made Abraham’s sons through faith. He was justified not only by works, but also by faith (James 2:21); though he did many things well, yet he was never called the friend⁴² of God, except when he believed. Moreover, his every work was performed in faith. Through faith he left his parents; left country, place, and home through faith (Hebrews 11:8-10). In like manner as he was justified, we can be justified also. In his body he was already dead in regard to offspring, and Sarah his wife was now old, and there was no hope left of having children. God promised the old man a child, and Abraham, without being weakened in faith, though he considered his own body now as good as dead (Romans 4:19), heeded not the weakness of his body, but the power of Him who promised. He counted Him faithful who had promised (Hebrews 11:11-12), and so beyond all expectation gained the child from bodies as it were already dead. After he had gained his son, he was commanded to offer him up, although he had heard the word, ‘In Isaac shall your seed be called’ (Genesis 21:12, 22:2), he proceeded to offer up his son, his only son, to God, believing that God is able to raise up even from the dead’ (Hebrews 11:19). Having bound his son, and laid him on the wood, he purposed to offer him, but by the goodness of God in delivering to him a lamb instead of his child, he received his son alive. Being faithful in these things, he was sealed for righteousness, and received circumcision as a seal⁴³ of the faith, which he had while he was still uncircumcised (Romans 4:11), having received a promise that he should be the father of many nations” (Genesis 17:5).

The Relationship of the Mosaic Law to Faith

Irenaeus of Lyons stated⁴⁴ that the Patriarchs who lived before Moses were justified by faith and by the precepts of the Law, where the Law that they observed was similar to the one that Christ fulfilled and extended.

“The Lord did not repeal the natural precepts of the Law, by which man is justified, which those who were justified by faith, and who pleased God, observed prior to the giving of the Law. That He extended and fulfilled them, is shown from His words. ‘It has been said to them of old time, Do not commit adultery. But I say unto you, That everyone who has looked upon a woman to lust after her, has committed adultery with her already in his heart’ (Matthew 5:27-28). And again, ‘It has been said, You shall not murder. But I say to you, everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause, shall be in danger of the judgment’ (Matthew 5:21-22). And, ‘It has been said, You shall not swear falsely. But I say to you, don’t swear at all; but let your conversation be, Yes and No’ (Matthew 5:33-37). And other statements of a like nature! For all these do not contain or imply an opposition to and an overturning of the precepts of the past.”

⁴¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, V, 5.

⁴² See James 2:23, 2 Chronicles 20:7, Isaiah 41:8, Genesis 15:6.

⁴³ That is, Abraham was first promised that he would be a father of many nations (Genesis 17:5), then he and his children were circumcised (Genesis 17:10) as a seal of the promise.

⁴⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, IV, xiii, 1.

John Chrysostom encouraged⁴⁵ the repentance of Theodore, later a priest and a bishop, after his fall into worldliness. Theodore's case was like the Galatians, who had performed miracles and suffered persecution for Christ, but had fallen from grace in trying to be justified by circumcision and the keeping of the Mosaic Law. Christ needed to be formed in Theodore again. Theodore did repent and became a pillar of the Church in the early 5th century.

“When the whole Galatian people fell after having believed, and worked miracles, and endured many trials for the sake of their faith in Christ, Paul restored them. That they had done miracles, he testified when he said, ‘He therefore that supplies to you the Spirit and works miracles among you’ (Galatians 3:5). They endured many contests for the sake of the faith, as Paul testified, ‘Have you suffered so many things in vain -- if indeed *it was* in vain?’ (Galatians 3:4). Nevertheless after making so great an advance they committed sin sufficient to estrange them from Christ, concerning which he declares, ‘Behold, I Paul tell you, that if you get circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing’ (Galatians 5:2); and again ‘You who would be justified by the Law are fallen from grace’ (Galatians 5:4). Yet even after so great a lapse he welcomes them saying, ‘My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you’ (Galatians 4:19), showing that after extreme perversion it is possible for Christ to be formed again in us. He does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that he should be converted and live” (Ezekiel 33:11, 18:32).

To illustrate the role of the Law, John Chrysostom used⁴⁶ the parable of the two sons who were asked by their father to work in his vineyard (Matthew 21:28-32). One said he wouldn't go, but later repented and did; the other said he would go, but didn't. The vineyard is the Kingdom of God and the first son represents the Gentiles. The second son represents the Jewish leaders that Jesus was speaking to, where they pronounced their own condemnation for not doing what the Law required.

“Jesus convicted the Jewish leaders by a parable, intimating both their unreasonable obstinacy, and the submissiveness of those who were utterly condemned by them. For these two children declare what came to pass with respect to both the Gentiles and the Jews. The Gentiles not having undertaken to obey, neither having become hearers of the Law, showed forth their obedience in their works. The Jewish leaders having said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken, we will do’ (Exodus 19:8), in their works were disobedient. That they might not think the Law would benefit them, He shows that this same thing condemns them. Just as Paul said, ‘Not the hearers of the Law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the Law will be justified’ (Romans 2:13). That He might make them self condemned, He causes the judgment to be delivered by themselves, just as He does also in the ensuing parable of the vineyard.”

John Chrysostom stated⁴⁷ that the Jews were burdened by the Gift of the Law in that they were required to keep it, and penalties were prescribed for not doing so. As a result, the Jews needed grace more than the Gentiles, since they were liable for more punishment. Paul

⁴⁵ John Chrysostom, Exhortation to Theodore After His Fall, 1st Letter, 8.

⁴⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXVII, 2.

⁴⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, V, vv. 12-14.

magnified the greatness of the Law since only doers of the Law were justified. The Gentiles kept it without knowing all its details; the Jews didn't, even though schooled in it from childhood.

“Paul shows not only the equality of the Jew and the Gentile, but that the Jew was much burdened by the gift of the Law, while the Gentile is judged without Law. This ‘without Law’ (Greek: lawlessly) here expresses not the worse plight but the easier; that is, the Gentile does not have the Law to accuse him. For ‘without Law’, that is, without the condemnation arising from it, he is condemned solely from the reasoning of nature; but the Jew, ‘in the Law’, has nature and the Law to accuse him. The greater the attention he enjoyed, the greater the punishment he will suffer. See how much greater is the necessity which he lays on the Jews for a speedy recourse to grace! They said that they didn't need grace, being justified by the Law; Paul showed that they needed it more than the Gentiles, considering they are liable to be punished more. Then he adds another reason.”

“Paul said, ‘For not the hearers of the Law are just before God’ (Romans 2:13). Well does he add ‘before God’; before men they may be able to appear dignified, but before God it is quite otherwise. The doers of the Law alone are justified. Paul combats with a huge advantage, turning what they said to its opposite. If it is by the Law that you claim to be saved, the Gentile will stand before you, when he is seen to be a doer of what is written in the Law. How is it possible, one may say, for one who has not heard to be a doer? Not only is it possible without hearing to be a doer, but even with hearing not to be so. This last thing he makes plainer, when he says, ‘You that teach another, do you not teach yourself?’” (Romans 2:21)

“Paul was not rejecting the Law, he was justifying the Gentiles. When he was undermining the conceit of Judaism, he gave no handle against himself as vilifying the Law; but on the contrary, by extolling it and showing its greatness, he so makes good his whole position.”

John Chrysostom stated⁴⁸ that neither speaker nor listener will be justified unless their behavior closely corresponds with the teaching. In fact, our condemnation will be greater if we don't practice what we say or what we listen to.

“Hearing profits nothing unless it is accompanied by practice. It makes our punishment heavier, if we continually hear the same things and do none of the things which are spoken. The chastisement will be heavier, since we have no excuse for our sin’ (John 15:22). Paul says ‘Not the hearers of the Law shall be justified’ (Romans 2:13). These things He says to the hearers. When He wishes to instruct the speaker also, that his manner of life might be in harmony with his speech, hear how Paul and the prophet Asaph address themselves to him. Through Asaph God says to the sinner, ‘What right do you have to declare My statutes, or take My covenant in your mouth, seeing you hate instruction?’ (Psalm 4:16-17) Paul, addressing himself to these same again, who thought great things of their teaching, says, ‘You are confident that you yourself are a leader of the blind, a light of those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes. You therefore, who teach another do you not teach yourself?’ (Romans 2:19-21) It could neither profit me the speaker to speak, nor you the hearers to

⁴⁸ John Chrysostom, Homily to Those Who ad Not Attended the Assembly, 4.

hear, unless we comply with the things which are spoken, rather it would increase our condemnation. Let us not limit the display of our zeal to hearing only, but let us observe what is said, in our deeds. It is indeed a good thing to spend time continually in hearing the divine oracles; but this good thing becomes useless when the benefit to be derived from hearing is not linked with it.”

Gregory the Theologian spoke⁴⁹ of Rahab being justified by her hospitality and the Publican by his humility, but they received no praise for the rest of their conduct. Similarly the laborers in the vineyard all received the same wage, even though some worked all day while others worked just one hour (Matthew 20:12). The vineyard is the Kingdom of God and the hiring of the workers is the call to baptism. The murmuring of the ones called first subtracts from the reward of their work, since they were not justified by their murmuring, so that all justly received the same reward. In this respect, those working from the 1st hour represent the Jews, while those coming at the 11th hour represent the Gentiles.

“Our success is always judged by comparison with our place in life by our just and merciful Judge. Often one who is in public life and has had small success has had a greater reward than one, in the enjoyment of liberty, who has not completely succeeded. I think it more marvelous for a man to advance a little in fetters, than for one to run who is not carrying any weight; or to be only a little spattered in walking through mud, than to be perfectly clean when the road is clean. To give you an example of what I have said: Rahab the harlot was justified by one thing alone, her hospitality, though she receives no praise for the rest of her conduct; and the Publican was exalted by one thing, his humility, though he received no testimony for anything else. Do not so easily despair concerning yourself.”

“Some will say, ‘What shall I gain, if, when I am preoccupied by baptism, and have cut off myself by my haste from the pleasures of life, when I could have lived in pleasure, and then obtained grace?’ The laborers in the vineyard who had worked the longest time gained nothing thereby, for equal wages were given to the last. Everyone therefore should wait until the 11th hour. Those who say this have told the secret of their delay. Though I cannot applaud their shiftiness, like Rahab and the Publican, I do applaud their confession. Listen to the interpretation of the parable. First of all, the issue here is baptism, and those who believe at different times enter the good vineyard of the Church. From the day and hour at which each believed, he is required to work. Although those, who entered first, contributed more to the measure of the labor, yet they did not contribute more to the measure of the purpose. The cause of their later entrance was their later call to the work of the vineyard. In all other respects let us see how different they are. The first did not believe or enter till they had agreed on their wages; but the others came forward to do the work without an agreement, which is a proof of greater faith. The first were found to be envious and murmuring, but no such charge is brought against those coming at the 11th hour. To the first, that which was given was wages, though they were worthless fellows; to the last it was the free gift. So the first were convicted of foolishness, and with reason were deprived of the greater reward. The murmuring takes away the merit of their labor from the first,

⁴⁹ Gregory Nazianzen, Oration on Holy Baptism, XL, 19-20.

although they worked longer; therefore it turns out that the distribution of equal pay was just, if you measure the good will and murmuring against the labor.”

The Scriptures on Confession of Sins

The Scriptures speak of the confession of sins, but these are not familiar to many people today. The Early Church Fathers, however, refer to these Scriptures fairly often. Considering first some of the Scriptures from the Old Testament:

David stated, “I acknowledged my sin, and did not hide my iniquity: I said, I will confess my iniquity to the Lord against myself; and You forgave the ungodliness of my heart” (Psalm 32:5 LXX).

Isaiah stated, “Let us plead together; first confess your transgressions, that you may be justified” (Isaiah 43:26 LXX).

Solomon stated, “A righteous man accuses himself at the beginning of his speech” (Proverbs 18:17 LXX).

The New Testament doesn’t spell out confession in as much detail as the Old Testament, but the following indicate that confession, as in the Old Testament, is what God desires. “Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16). “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

In addition, the following have been interpreted in terms of confession by many of the Church Fathers. “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the Day of Judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37). That is, by our words of confession we are justified. Similarly, “For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged” (1 Corinthians 11:31). In this latter reference, Paul was addressing abuses of the Lord’s Table at Corinth. A traditional practice from the beginning was the confession of sins just prior to the Lord’s Table. In today’s common practice among some, where the Lord’s Table is just a remembrance and not the Body and Blood of Christ, confession prior to partaking is not needed.

John Cassian wrote⁵⁰ of the benefits of true confession as bringing out the grace of God. We acquire victory over our faults without works or merit on our part to outweigh them.

“The thief on the Cross, who was by a single confession admitted into paradise (Luke 23:40), did not acquire such bliss by the merits of his life, but obtained it by the gift of a merciful God. Those two heinous sins of King David, blotted out by one word of penitence (2 Samuel 12:13), the merits of his works were not sufficient to obtain pardon for so great a sin. But the grace of God abounded; when the opportunity for true penitence was taken, He removed the whole weight of sins through the full confession of but one word. If we consider also the beginning of the call and salvation of mankind, in which we are saved not

⁵⁰ John Cassian, Institutes of the Coenobia, XII, 11.

of ourselves, nor of our works, but by the gift and grace of God (Ephesians 2:8-9), we can clearly see how the whole of perfection is ‘not of him that wills nor of him that runs, but of God that has mercy’ (Romans 9:16). He makes us victorious over our faults, without any merits of works and life on our part to outweigh them, and without any effort of our will to scale the difficult heights of perfection, or to subdue the flesh which we have to use. No tortures of this body, and no contrition of heart, can be sufficient for the acquisition of that true chastity of the inner man so as to be able to gain that great virtue of purity, merely by human efforts, i.e., without the aid of God. This is inherent in the angels alone and occurs in heaven. The performance of everything good flows from His grace, who by multiplying His bounty has granted such lasting bliss, and vast glory to our feeble will and our short, petty course of life.”

John Cassian also stated⁵¹ that almsgiving, tears and repentance are connected, where the almsgiving generates a remedy for our wounds. That is, we discover that it’s not all about me! Tears are good in that they show a heartfelt contrition for sin. Confession of sins is necessary in order to be justified.

“There are many fruits of penitence by which we can succeed in expiating our sins. Eternal salvation is not only promised for penitence, of which the blessed Apostle Peter says, ‘Repent and be converted that your sins may be forgiven’ (Acts 3:19); and John the Baptist and the Lord Himself said, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Matthew 3:2, 4:17). By the affection of love the weight of our sins is overwhelmed; for ‘love covers a multitude of sins’ (1 Peter 4:8). In the same way also by the fruits of almsgiving a remedy is provided for our wounds, because ‘Water will quench a flaming fire; and alms makes an atonement for sins’ (Ecclesiasticus 3:30). So also by the shedding of tears is gained the washing away of offenses, for ‘Every night I will wash my bed; I will water my couch with tears’. Finally to show that they are not shed in vain, he adds, ‘Depart from me all you that work iniquity, for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping’ (Psalm 6:6-8). Moreover by means of confession of sins, their absolution is granted. ‘I said, I will confess my iniquity to the Lord against myself; and You forgave the ungodliness of my heart’ (Psalm 32:5 LXX); and again: ‘First confess your transgressions, that you may be justified’ (Isaiah 43:26 LXX). By afflicting the heart and body, forgiveness for sins committed is in like manner obtained; for he says, ‘Look on my affliction and my trouble; and forgive all my sins’ (Psalm 25:18 LXX). More especially by amendment of life: ‘Remove your iniquities from your souls before My eyes; cease from your iniquities; learn to do well; diligently seek judgment; deliver him that is suffering wrong; plead for the orphan, and obtain justice for the widow. And come, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are as purple, I will make them white as snow; and though they are as scarlet, I will make them white as wool’ (Isaiah 1:16-18 LXX). Sometimes the pardon of our sins is obtained by the intercession of the saints, for ‘If anyone sees his brother sin a sin *which does not lead* to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not *leading* to death. There is sin *leading* to death. I do not say that he should pray about that’ (1 John 5:16). Again: ‘Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the

⁵¹ John Cassian, Conference of Abbot Pinufius, III, xx, 8.

elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up; if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” (James 5:14-15).

John Chrysostom stated⁵² that we need a continual reminder of our sins in order to grow as a Christian. Confession and a continual mourning for our shortcomings are part of our humility before God. To help our growth in godliness, forgiving others from our heart, almsgiving, constancy in prayer and fasting are very helpful.

“Let us tremble at His words that He may continually build us up. ‘To whom will I have respect, but to the humble and meek, and the man that trembles at my words?’ (Isaiah 66:2 LXX) Let us mourn for our sins as Christ commanded, let us be pricked to the heart for our transgressions, let us reckon up exactly all the wicked deeds, which in time past we have dared, and let us earnestly strive to wipe them out in all kinds of ways.”

“Now to this end God has opened to us many ways. ‘First confess your transgressions, that you may be justified’ (Isaiah 43:26 LXX); and again, ‘I said, I will confess my iniquity to the Lord against myself; and You forgave the ungodliness of my heart’ (Psalm 32:5 LXX). A continual accusation and remembrance of sins contributes not a little to lessen their magnitude. But there is another more prevailing way than this: to bear malice against none of those who have offended against us, to forgive the trespasses of all those who have trespassed against us. Will you learn a third? Hear Daniel saying, ‘Atone for your sins by alms, and your iniquities by compassion on the poor; it may be God will be long-suffering to your trespasses’ (Daniel 4:27 LXX). And there is another besides this: constancy in prayer, and persevering attendance on the intercessions made with God. In like manner fasting brings to us no small comfort and release from sins committed, provided it is attended with kindness to others; it quenches the vehemence of the wrath of God. ‘Water will quench a flaming fire; and alms makes an atonement for sins’” (Ecclesiasticus 3:30 LXX).

“Let us then travel along all these ways; for if we give ourselves wholly to these employments, if on them we spend our time, not only shall we wash off our bygone transgressions, but shall gain very great profit for the future. For we shall not allow the devil to assault us with leisure either for slothful living, or for pernicious curiosity, since by these, and in consequence of these, he leads us to foolish questions and hurtful disputations, from seeing us at leisure and idle, and taking no thought for high living. But let us block this approach against him, let us watch, let us be sober, that having in this short time worked a little, we may obtain eternal goods in endless ages.”

Jerome noted⁵³ that while some men are called righteous, no one is safe from falling into sin. We are righteous when we confess our sins, and our righteousness depends on the mercy of God and not on our own merit. All our lives our enemy diligently sows tares; our task is to choose wisely and reject the tares that we are exposed to.

“It is clear that men are called righteous, and said to be without fault; but that if negligence comes over them, they may fall. A man always occupies a

⁵² John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, VII, 2.

⁵³ Jerome, Against the Pelagians, I, 12-13.

middle place, so that he may slip from the height of virtue into vice, or may rise from vice to virtue. He is never safe, but must dread shipwreck even in fair weather; and, therefore, no one is without sin. Solomon says, 'For there is not a righteous man in the earth, who will do good, and not sin' (Ecclesiastes 7:21 LXX); and likewise 'There is no man that sins not' (2 Chronicles 6:36). So, also, the blessed David says, 'Who can understand his own errors? Cleanse me from hidden faults, and keep back Your servant from presumptuous sins' (Psalm 19:12-13). Again, 'Enter not into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight shall no man living be justified' (Psalm 143:2). Holy Scripture is full of passages to the same effect."

"Does the little epistle of the Evangelist John contradict itself? If 'whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God' (1 John 3:9), how is it that John says in the same place, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us?' (1 John 1:8) John tells us that 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9). We are then righteous when we confess that we are sinners, and our righteousness depends not upon our own merits, but on the mercy of God. 'A righteous man accuses himself at the beginning of his speech' (Proverbs 18:17 LXX). And elsewhere, 'First confess your transgressions, that you may be justified' (Isaiah 43:26 LXX). 'God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all' (Romans 11:32). The highest righteousness of man is this — whatever virtue he may be able to acquire, not to think of it as his own, but as the gift of God. He then who is born of God does not sin, so long as the seed of God remains in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. But while the householder slept, an enemy sowed tares when we were not aware; a sower by night scatters in the Lord's field dandelion and wild oats among the good grain (Matthew 13:24-30). This parable of the householder in the Gospel should excite our fears. He cleanses his floor, and gathers the wheat into his granary, but leaves the chaff to be scattered by the winds, or burned by the fire. The chaff is separated from the wheat at the end of the world; this is a proof that, while we are in the mortal body, chaff is mixed with the wheat (Matthew 13:36-43). But some object and ask why the Apostle said, 'and he cannot sin, because he is born of God' (1 John 3:9). I reply by asking you what becomes of the reward of his choice? For if a man does not sin because he cannot sin, free will is destroyed, and goodness cannot possibly be due to his efforts, but must be part of a nature unreceptive to evil."

John Cassian stated⁵⁴ that all the saints grieved over and confessed their sin. Man's righteousness is weak and imperfect, and always needs God's mercy.

"With daily sighs all the saints grieve over this weakness of their nature; while they search into their shifting thoughts and the secrets and inmost recesses of their conscience, they cry out in entreaty, 'Enter not into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight shall no man living be justified' (Psalm 143:2). Also this, 'Who will boast that he has a pure heart? Or who will boldly say that he is pure from sins?' (Proverbs 20:9) Again, 'There is not a righteous man in the

⁵⁴ John Cassian, *Third Conference of Abbot Theonas*, III, xxiii, 17.

earth, who will do good, and not sin' (Ecclesiastes 7:21 LXX). This also, 'Who can understand his own errors?' (Psalm 19:13) They have recognized that man's righteousness is weak and imperfect and always needs God's mercy. Isaiah, whose iniquities and sins God purged away with the live coal from the altar, after that marvelous vision of God, said, 'Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips' (Isaiah 6:5). He would not have felt the uncleanness of his lips, unless it had been given him to recognize the true purity of perfection by the vision of God, at the sight of Whom he suddenly became aware of his own uncleanness, of which he had previously been ignorant. When he says, 'Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips', he shows that his confession that follows refers to his own lips, and not to the uncleanness of the people. He confesses the uncleanness of all sinners, but he also embraces the mass of the wicked and the good, saying, 'You are indeed angry, for we have sinned. In these ways we continue; and we need to be saved. But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are like filthy rags' (Isaiah 64:5-6). What, I ask, could be clearer than this saying, in which the prophet includes not one only but all our righteousness and, looking around on all things that are considered unclean and disgusting, because he could find nothing in the life of men fouler or more unclean, chose to compare them to filthy rags."

Practical Details of Confession

Leo the Great, writing⁵⁵ to Bishop Theodore, stated that forgiveness is always available, and should never be withheld, if we would just confess our sins.

"To those who in time of need and in urgent danger implore the aid first of penitence, then of reconciliation, means of amendment and reconciliation must not be forbidden, because we cannot place limits to God's mercy or fix times for Him with whom true conversion suffers no delay of forgiveness. As God's Spirit says by the prophet, 'When you shall turn and mourn, then you shall be saved' (Isaiah 30:15 LXX); and elsewhere, 'first confess your transgressions, that you may be justified' (Isaiah 43:26 LXX); and again, 'For with the Lord is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption' (Psalm 130:7 LXX). And so in dispensing God's gifts we must not be hard, or neglect the tears and groans of self-accusers, seeing that we believe the feeling of penitence springs from the inspiration of God. As Paul says, 'God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses *and escape* the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to *do his will*'" (2 Timothy 2:25-26).

John Chrysostom stated⁵⁶ that confessing our sins leads us to avoid being overwhelmed with the difficulties of this life. By doing this, we concentrate on the things that our Master cares about rather than what our fellow-servants care about.

"If we grieved for our sins, if we mourn over our offenses, nothing else will give us sorrow; this one anguish would expel all kinds of dejection. By our thorough confession we will avoid being overwhelmed with the pains of the present life, and being puffed up with its splendors. In this way, we entirely

⁵⁵ Leo the Great, Letter to Theodore, CVIII, 4

⁵⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, VIII, 8.

appease God; just as by our deviant conduct we provoke Him to anger. If you had a servant, and he, after suffering much evil at the hands of his fellow-servants, takes no account of any of his fellow-servants, but is only anxious not to provoke his master; is he not able by this alone to do away with your anger? But if he doesn't care about his offenses against you, while he is very thoughtful about those against his fellow-servants, will you not lay on him the heavier punishment? God does this also; when we neglect His wrath, He brings it upon us more heavily; but when we pay attention to it, He is more gentle. Rather, He lays it on us no more at all. He wills that we should take action on ourselves for our offenses, and then He does not exact it Himself. This is why He threatens punishment; that by fear He may destroy contempt; and when the threat alone is sufficient to cause fear in us, He does not allow us to undergo the actual trial. For instance, He said to Jeremiah, 'Do you not see what they do in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen⁵⁷ of heaven' (Jeremiah 7:17-18). We should fear lest the same kind of thing be said concerning us. 'Do you not see what they do? No one seeks the things of Christ, but everyone seeks their own things. The children run to uncleanness; the fathers to covetousness; the wives encourage their husbands in the pomp and vanity of life, and sharpen their appetites for it'. Take your stand in the market place, and question those who come and go; not one will you see hastening on a spiritual errand, but all run after carnal things. How long before we awake from our overindulging?. How long are we to keep sinking down into deep slumber?"

We Need to Remember Our Sins

Ambrose of Milan stated⁵⁸ that Christ forgets about all our transgressions when He forgives them, but we should remember them in order to correct them, so that we don't repeat them. Confession is good in that it justifies us, avoids the devil triumphing over us and avoids punishment. Sin is like the stink of rotting flesh; confession removes that, no matter how bad the stink.

"We have a good Lord, Whose will it is to forgive all, Who called you and said, 'I am He that blots out your transgressions, and I will not remember them, but you should remember them that we may plead together' (Isaiah 43:25-26 LXX). That is to say, 'I do not recall those transgressions which I have forgiven you, which are covered, as it were, with oblivion, but you should remember them. I will not remember them because of My grace; you should remember them in order to correct them. Remember, you may know that the sin is forgiven; don't boast as though you were innocent, that you don't aggravate the sin; but you will be justified, if you confess your sin'. For showing shame at our confession of sins loosens the bands of transgression."

"You see what God requires of you, that you remember that grace which you have received, and don't boast as though you had not received it. You see by how complete a promise of remission He draws you to confession. Pay attention, lest by resisting the commandments of God you fall into the offense of the Jews,

⁵⁷ "The Queen of Heaven" was the mother goddess Astarte, which was identical to the Babylonian goddess Ishtar and represented fertility. Worship of Astarte belonged chiefly to the women, who made raisin cakes for her (Hosea 3:1).

⁵⁸ Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Repentance, II, vi-vii, 40-41, 44, 52-53, 57-58.

to whom the Lord Jesus said, “We played the flute for you, and you didn’t dance; we mourned to you, and you didn’t lament”” (Matthew 11:17).

“This, then, is the mystery⁵⁹. ‘We played the flute to you’, singing the song of the New Testament, ‘and you didn’t dance’. That is, you did not raise your souls to spiritual grace. ‘We mourned, and you didn’t lament’. That is, you did not repent. Therefore the Jewish people were forsaken, because they rejected grace and did not repent. Repentance came by John, grace by Christ. The Church keeps both that it may both attain to grace and not cast away repentance, for grace is the gift of One Who confers it; repentance is the remedy of the sinner.”

“Let us mourn for a time, that we may rejoice for eternity. Let us fear the Lord; let us anticipate Him with the confession of our sins; let us correct our backslidings and amend our faults, lest of us it is said, ‘Woe is me, my soul, for the godly man has perished from the earth, and there is none among men to correct them’” (Micah 7:2 LXX).

“Why do you fear to confess your sins to our good Lord? ‘First confess your transgressions, that you may be justified’ (Isaiah 43:26 LXX). The rewards of justification are set before him who is still guilty of sin, for he is justified who voluntarily confesses his own sin. ‘A righteous man accuses himself at the beginning of his speech’ (Proverbs 18:17 LXX). The Lord knows all things, but He waits for your words, not that He may punish, but that He may pardon. It is not His will that the devil should triumph over you and accuse you when you conceal your sins. Be upfront with your accuser; if you accuse yourself, you will fear no accuser; if you report yourself, though you were dead, you shall live.”

“The Lord Jesus weeps, seeing the heavy burden of the sinner; He does not allow the Church to weep alone. He has compassion with His beloved, and says to him that is dead, ‘Come out’ (John 11:43); that is, ‘You who lie in darkness of conscience, and in the squalor of your sins, as in the prison-house of the guilty, come out, declare your sins that you may be justified. ‘With the mouth confession is made unto salvation’” (Romans 10:10).

“If you have confessed at the call of Christ, the bars will be broken, and every chain loosed, even though the stench of the bodily corruption is grievous. Lazarus had been dead four days and his flesh stank in the tomb; but He Whose flesh saw no corruption was three days in the sepulcher, for He knew no evils of the flesh. However great the stench of the dead body may be, it is all done away by the sacred ointment; and the dead rises again, and the command is given to loose his hands who till now was in sin. The covering is taken from his face which veiled the truth of the grace, which he had received. Since he has received forgiveness, the command is given to uncover his face, to lay bare his features. He whose sin is forgiven has nothing to be ashamed of.”

John Chrysostom noted⁶⁰ that when God confronted Adam and Eve in the Garden, He did so in a way that might lead to their confession of their sin; but instead they blamed someone else for their sin.

⁵⁹ Jesus was comparing Himself during His earthly ministry to that of John the Baptist. Jesus came dining with tax collectors in a freer kind of life, but the Jewish leaders didn’t respond. John the Baptist came mourning and fasting, but they didn’t respond to him either.

⁶⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Statues, XII, 10.

“Man was self-taught with respect to the knowledge of virtue. Adam sinned the first sin; and after the sin immediately hid himself (Genesis 3:8); but if he had not known he had been doing something wrong, why did he hide himself? At that time there was no formal education, no Law, no Moses. How did he recognize the sin, and hide himself? Not only did he hide himself, but when called to account, he endeavored to lay the blame on another, saying, ‘The woman, whom You gave me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate’ (Genesis 3:12). The woman transferred the accusation to another; that is, the serpent (Genesis 3:13). Observe the wisdom of God; for when Adam said, ‘I heard Your voice, and I was afraid, for I was naked, and I hid myself’, God does not at once convict him of what he had done, nor say, ‘Why have you eaten of the tree?’ Instead He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked, unless you have eaten of that Tree of which alone I commanded you not to eat?’ (Genesis 3:11) He did not keep silence, nor did He openly convict him. He did not keep silence, that He might call him forth to the confession of his crime. He did not convict him openly, that the man might not be deprived of that pardon which is granted to us from confession. Therefore he did not declare openly the cause that this knowledge sprung from, but he carried on the discussion in the form of interrogation, leaving the man himself to come to the confession.”

John Cassian stated⁶¹ that confession and penitence are needed to clean us up from our sins. The words we read about David’s tears can apply to us also if we are truly sorry for our sins and desire to avoid sinning again. Even though God forgets our sin when He forgives us, He encourages us to remember them, so that we avoid repeating them. Our work at penitence and confession is rewarded as we obtain purity of heart.

“Holy and humble contrition is described as follows, ‘I acknowledged my sin, and didn’t hide my iniquity; I said, I will confess my iniquity to the Lord against myself; and You forgave the ungodliness of my heart’ (Psalm 32:5-6 LXX). When we kneel in prayer, how shall we be able to stir ourselves up to tears of confession, by which we may be able to obtain pardon for our offenses, according to these words, ‘I shall wash my bed every night; I shall water my couch with tears’ (Psalm 6:6 LXX)? We might expel from our hearts all recollection of our faults, but on the contrary we are instructed to preserve the remembrance of them, as the Lord says, ‘I will not remember your sins; but you remember them’ (Isaiah 43:25-26 LXX). Not only when I am at work, but also when I am at prayer I try to recall to my mind the recollection of my sins, that I may be more inclined to true humility and contrition of heart. I venture to say with the prophet, ‘Look upon my humility and my trouble, and forgive all my sins’” (Psalm 25:18 LXX).

“The remembrance of sins is useful to men who are still doing penance, that they may with constant smiting of the breast say, ‘I am conscious of my iniquity; and my sin is continually before me’ (Psalm 51:5 LXX). While we do penance, and are still grieved by the recollection of faulty actions, the shower of tears, which is caused by the confession of our faults, is sure to quench the fire of our conscience. As a man continues in this state of humility of heart and contrition of spirit and conquers the sinful habits that he was confessing, the

⁶¹ John Cassian, *Conference of Abbot Pinufius*, III, xx, 6-7.

remembrance of these things fades away, and the thorns of conscience are by God's grace extracted from his inmost heart. Then it is clear that he has attained the reward of pardon, and that he is purged from the stain of the sins he has committed. We can only attain this forgetfulness by the obliteration of our former sins and desires, and by perfect purity of heart. This most certainly will not be attained by any of those who from sloth or carelessness have failed to purge their faults. It will only be attained by one who constantly groans until he has removed every spot of his former stains, and by the goodness of his heart has proclaimed to the Lord, 'I acknowledged my sin, and didn't hide my iniquity' (Psalm 32:5 LXX); and, 'My tears have been my food day and night' (Psalm 42:4). In the end it may be granted to him to hear these words, 'Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord' (Jeremiah 31:16). These words also may be uttered of him by the voice of the Lord, 'I have blotted out as a cloud your transgressions, and your sin as darkness' (Isaiah 44:22 LXX), and again, 'I am He that blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember them' (Isaiah 43:25 LXX). When he is freed from the 'cords of his sins' (Proverbs 5:22), by which everyone is bound, he will with all thanksgiving sing to the Lord, 'You have broken my bonds apart; I will offer to You the sacrifice of praise'" (Psalm 116:16-17 LXX).

Confession Is Like the Cleansing of the Laver

Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome, compared⁶² confession to a priest with the Old Testament laver that was placed outside the Temple, where the priests washed before serving.

"When the pastor of a Church prepares himself to patiently cleanse the sins of their neighbors in confession, he supports the laver before the doors of the temple. Whoever is striving to enter the gate of eternity may show his temptations to his pastor's heart, and wash the hands of his thought and of his deed in the laver. And for the most part it comes to pass that, while the ruler's mind becomes aware, of the trials of others, it is itself also attacked by the temptations that it hears about. The same water of the laver in which a multitude of people is cleansed is undoubtedly itself defiled. In receiving the pollutions of those who wash, it loses the calmness of its own purity. But the pastor ought not be afraid of this, since under God, who nicely balances all things, he is the more easily rescued from his own temptations as he is more compassionately distressed by those of others."

John Chrysostom stated⁶³ that we are cleansed by tears and confession; however fake tears are worse than none at all. The Lord Himself wept on occasion, but He was never recorded as laughing, and neither was the Apostle Paul.

"Just like after a violent cloudburst of rain, where there is a clear open sky; so likewise when tears are pouring down, calm arises, and serenity, and the darkness that results from our sins quite disappears. Just like as by water and the spirit, so by tears and confession are we cleansed the second time; unless we are acting thus out of display and vanity. A woman whose tears were fake, I would call her justly condemnable, more than if she decked herself out like a prostitute.

⁶² Gregory the Great, Book of Pastoral Rule, II, 5.

⁶³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VI, 8-9.

The Lord seeks those tears which are shed not for display, but in remorse; those which trickle down secretly and in closets, and in sight of no one, softly and noiselessly; those which arise from a certain depth of mind, those shed in anguish and in sorrow, those which are for God alone. Such were Hannah's, for 'her lips moved but her voice was not heard' (1 Samuel 1:13), however, her tears alone uttered a cry more clear than any trumpet. Because of this, God also opened her womb, and made the hard rock a fruitful field. If you also weep thus, you have become a follower of your Lord. He also wept, both over Lazarus (John 11:35), and over the city of Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37-39); and regarding Judas He was greatly troubled. Weeping one may see Him do, but nowhere laughing; not a smile even a little; none of the evangelists at least has mentioned this. Paul wept also for three years night and day (Acts 20:31); he has said this of himself, and others say this of him (Romans 12:15). But whether he laughed, neither has he said himself anywhere about this, nor has any other of the saints said this either. But this is said of Sarah only (Genesis 18:12-15), when she is blamed, and of Ham, the son of Noah, when instead of a freeman he became a slave (Genesis 9:25). These things I say, not to suppress all laughter, but to take away dissipation of mind."

John Chrysostom compared⁶⁴ confession to a sacrifice to God, like when Abraham climbed up the mountain to offer up his only son, Isaac. We go up to the priest alone and leave behind worldly thoughts and doubts, taking only watchfulness, tears and humility of heart.

"In prayer we can keep awake, if we bear in mind with whom we are conversing, if we reflect that we are offering sacrifice and have in our hands a knife, fire and wood. If in thought we throw open wide the gates of heaven; if we transport ourselves there and take the sword of the Spirit to slay the victim; we can make watchfulness the sacrifice and tears the drink offering to Him. Such is the blood of this victim; such the slaughter that colors that altar. Don't allow any worldly thoughts to occupy your soul then. Remember Abraham, when he was offering sacrifice, didn't allow wife, servant nor any other to be present. Don't allow any of the slavish and degraded passions to be present with you, but go up alone to the mountain where he went up, where no second person is permitted to go. Should any such thoughts attempt to go up with you, command them with authority, and say, 'Sit here, and I and the lad will proceed thus far, and having worshipped we will return to you' (Genesis 22:5 LXX). Leaving the donkey and the servants below, and whatever is void of reason and sense, go up, taking with you whatever is reasonable, as he took Isaac. Build your altar as he did, with nothing human. Let nothing disturb you then, but be lifted up above the heavens. Groan deeply; sacrifice confession, 'First confess your transgressions, that you may be justified' (Isaiah 43:26 LXX); sacrifice contrition of heart. These victims don't turn to ashes, dissolve into smoke or melt into air; they don't need wood and fire, but only a deep-pricked heart. This is wood, this is fire that burns, but not consumes them. For he that prays with warmth is burned, yet not consumed; but like gold that is purified by fire becomes brighter."

⁶⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, V, 4.

John Chrysostom stated⁶⁵ that confession is not difficult or burdensome; if a publican, a notorious extortionist can be justified by confession, so can we.

“If we forgive our neighbors their trespasses, ours will be forgiven to us; if we give alms, if we are humble. This also takes away sins. If the publican, only for saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’ (Luke 18:13), went down justified, much more we also, if we are humble and contrite, shall be able to obtain abundant loving kindness. If we confess our own sins and condemn ourselves, we shall be cleansed from most of our defilement. There are many ways that purify. Let us therefore in every way war against the devil. This is not difficult or burdensome. Forgive him that has injured you; have pity on the needy; humble your soul. Though you deserve punishment as a sinner, you will be able to obtain the kingdom, by these means purging your sins, and wiping off their stain. God grant that we all, having purified ourselves here by confession from all the filth of our sins, may there obtain the blessings promised in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Precautions for Confession

Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome, cautioned⁶⁶ those who come to confession, but repeat afterward the same sins that they confessed. It is like a sow, when washed, returning to wallow in the mud. He sets himself up as an enemy of God, despises the pardon that he might have received and makes even his tears filthy before God.

“Those who lament their transgressions and yet don’t abandon them are to be admonished to learn to consider anxiously that they cleanse themselves in vain by their weeping, if they defile themselves in their living. They may wash themselves in tears, but when clean, they end up returning to filth. It is written, ‘The dog returns to his own vomit, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire (2 Peter 2:22). For the dog, when he vomits, certainly casts forth the food, which weighed upon his stomach; but, when he returns to his vomit, he is again loaded with what he had been relieved from. They who mourn their transgressions certainly cast forth by confession the wickedness, which oppressed the inmost parts of their soul; and yet, in returning to it after confession, they take it in again. But the sow, by wallowing in the mire when washed, is made filthier. One who mourns his past transgressions, yet doesn’t abandon them, subjects himself to the penalty of more grievous sin, since he despises the pardon which he might have won by his weeping. He rolls himself in filthy water; because in withholding purity of life from his weeping, he makes even his tears filthy before the eyes of God. Again it is written, ‘Do not use a lot of words in your prayer’ (Ecclesiasticus 7:14). To use a lot of words in prayer is, after lamenting, committing further sins that again require lamenting. Isaiah said, ‘Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes; cease to do evil (Isaiah 1:16). He neglects being clean after washing, whoever after tears doesn’t maintain innocence of life. He that is baptized from the touch of a dead body and touches it again, what has he gained by his washing (Ecclesiasticus. 34:25)? He is baptized from the touch of a dead body, who is cleansed from sin by weeping; but he touches a dead body after his baptism, who after tears repeats his sin.”

⁶⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Philemon, I, Moral.

⁶⁶ Gregory the Great, Book of Pastoral Rule, III, 30.

“Those who lament transgressions, yet don’t abandon them, are to be admonished to acknowledge themselves to be before the eyes of the strict judge like those who, when they come before the face of certain men, show them affection with great submission, but, when they depart, atrociously bring upon them all the enmity and hurt they can. What is weeping for sin but exhibiting the humility of one’s devotion to God? What is doing wickedly after weeping but putting in practice arrogant enmity against Him to whom entreaty has been made? James addresses this, ‘Whosoever will be a friend of this world becomes the enemy of God’” (James 4:4).

At some times, the methods of confession were quite different than they are today. Basil the Great, in writing to critics among the clergy at Neocaesarea, described⁶⁷ an all-night vigil of confession that was common among many Churches.

“The following customs are agreeable to those of all the Churches of God. The people go at night to the house of prayer, and in distress, affliction, and continual tears, making confession to God, at last rise from their prayers and begin to sing psalms. Divided into two parts, they sing antiphonally with one another, thus at once confirming their study of the Gospels, and at the same time producing for themselves a heedful temper and a heart free from distraction. Afterwards they again commit the prelude of the strain to one, and the rest take it up. After passing the night singing various psalms, praying at intervals as the day begins to dawn, all together, as with one voice and one heart, raise the psalm of confession to the Lord, each forming for himself his own expressions of penitence. If it is for these reasons that you renounce me, you will renounce the Egyptians, the Libyans, Thebans, Palestinians, Arabians, Phoenicians, Syrians, and the dwellers by the Euphrates; in a word all those among whom vigils, prayers, and common psalmody have been held in honor.”

Even the Greatest of the Saints Confess Their Sins

Cyprian of Carthage noted⁶⁸ that Daniel and the Three Young Men in the furnace continued to confess their sins and the sins of their people, even after they had performed miraculous deeds of faith.

“Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, the illustrious and noble youths, even amid the flames of a raging furnace, did not cease from making public confession to God. Although possessed of a good conscience, and having often deserved well of the Lord by obedience of faith and fear, yet they continued to maintain their humility, making atonement to the Lord, even amid the flames. The sacred Scripture⁶⁹ speaks, saying, ‘Azarias stood up and prayed, and, opening his mouth, made confession before God together with his companions in the midst of the fire’. Daniel also, after the grace of his faith and innocence, after the condescension of the Lord repeatedly with respect to his virtues and praises, strove by fasting to further deserve well of God, wrapping himself in sackcloth

⁶⁷ Basil the Great, Letter to the Clergy of Neocaesarea, CCVII, 3.

⁶⁸ Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, III, 31.

⁶⁹ Lancelot Brenton, “Song of the Three Children”, 2-8, 15, in The Septuagint with Apocrypha, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody MA, 1990. The “Song of the Three Children” was originally part of the Book of Daniel.

and ashes, sorrowfully making confession: ‘O Lord God, great, and strong, and dreadful, keeping Your covenant and mercy for them that love You and keep Your commandments, we have sinned, we have committed iniquity, and have rebelled. We have transgressed, and departed from Your precepts, and from Your judgments. We have not listened to the words of Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your Name to our kings and our princes, to our fathers and all the people of the land. O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame’” (Daniel 9:4-7).

John Chrysostom noted⁷⁰ Jesus’ response to the woman with a hemorrhage who touched the hem of His clothing. Even though she was miraculously healed because of her faith, Jesus still sought her confession.

“When she approached Jesus, and had received her health, Jesus did not immediately call her, but first He said, ‘Who touched me?’ (Luke 8:45) Then Peter and the others said, ‘Master, the multitude throngs around You, and You say, who touched me?’ The multitude did not follow Him far off, but thronged Him on every side. Jesus continued to say, ‘Somebody has touched me, for I perceive that virtue is gone out of me’ (Luke 8:46), where He answered according to the impression of His hearers. But these things He said, that He might also induce the woman of herself to make confession. For on this account neither did He immediately convict her, in order that having signified that He knows all things clearly, He might induce her of her own accord to publish everything, and work upon her to proclaim herself what had been done.”

Cyril of Jerusalem used⁷¹ as examples of great results from confession of sins David the King, Solomon, Ahab, Manasseh, Hezekiah and Nebuchadnezzar. Each was rewarded significantly for their honest confession of their sins, even though their sins were monstrous. If He can forgive these monstrosities, we can feel confident that our merciful God will certainly forgive our sins, if we honestly confess them.

“Consider the blessed David as an example of repentance. Great as he was, he fell; walking in the evening on the housetop, he took a careless look, and felt a human passion. His sin was completed, but his truthfulness concerning the confession of his fault didn’t die. Nathan the Prophet came, a swift accuser, and a healer of the wound. ‘The Lord is angry, and you have sinned’ (2 Samuel 12:7-12). So spoke the subject to the reigning king. But David the king was not indignant, for he considered not the speaker, but God who had sent him. He was not puffed up by the array of soldiers standing around, for he had seen in thought the angelic host of the Lord, and he trembled as seeing Him who is invisible. In answer to God who sent the messenger, he said, ‘I have sinned against the Lord’ (2 Samuel 12:13). Do you see the humility of the king and his confession? He had not been convicted by anyone, since few were aware of the matter. The deed was done quickly, and immediately the Prophet appeared as accuser, and the offender confessed the fault. Because he candidly confessed, he received a speedy cure. For Nathan the Prophet, who had uttered the threat, said immediately, ‘The Lord also has put away your sin’ (2 Samuel 12:13). You see

⁷⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXXI, 2.

⁷¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, II, 12-15, 17-19.

the swift relenting of a merciful God. He says, however, ‘You have greatly provoked the enemies of the Lord’ (2 Samuel 12:14). Though you had many enemies because of your righteousness, your self-control protected you; but now that you have surrendered your strongest armor; your enemies have risen up, and stand ready against you.”

“It is good to make confession. Solomon also fell but afterwards repented’ (Proverbs 24:32 LXX). Ahab, too, the King of Samaria, became a wicked idolater, an outrageous man, the murderer of the Prophets, a stranger to godliness, a coveter of other men’s fields and vineyards. When he had slain Naboth by Jezebel’s means, and the Prophet Elijah came to threaten him, he tore his garments, and put on sackcloth. The merciful God said to Elijah, ‘See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days’ (1 Kings 21:29). After this forgiveness he did not depart from his wickedness (1 Kings 22:1-27); nevertheless the forgiving God forgave him, not as being ignorant of the future, but as granting a forgiveness corresponding to his present season of repentance. A righteous judge will give sentence according to each case that has occurred.”

“Manasseh also was utterly wicked, and sawed⁷² Isaiah in half (Hebrews 11:37); he was defiled with all kinds of idolatries, and filled Jerusalem with innocent blood (2 Chronicles 33:9). After being led captive to Babylon, he used his experience of misfortune for a healing course of repentance; Manasseh ‘humbled himself before the Lord, and prayed, and the Lord heard him, and brought him back to his kingdom’ (2 Chronicles 33:11-13). If He who sawed the Prophet in half was saved by repentance, shall not you then, having done no such great wickedness, be saved?”

“We need to pay attention lest without reason we underestimate the power of repentance. We often don’t know the power that repentance has? Hezekiah, by means of confession, routed 185,000 of his enemies. This was truly a great thing, but still small in comparison with what remains to be told; the same king by repentance obtained the recall of a divine sentence, which had already gone out. When he had fallen sick, Elisha said to him, ‘Set your house in order; for you shall die’ (2 Kings 20:1). What expectation remained, what hope of recovery, when the Prophet said, ‘you shall die?’ Yet Hezekiah did not desist from repentance; but remembering what is written, ‘When you shall turn and mourn, then shall you be saved’ (Isaiah 30:15 LXX), he turned to the wall, and from his bed lifting his mind to heaven, for thickness of walls is no hindrance to prayers sent up with devotion. He said⁷³, ‘Remember me, O Lord, for it is sufficient for my healing that You remember me. You are not subject to times, but are Yourself the giver of the Law of life. For our life depends not on a nativity, nor on a conjunction of stars, as some idly talk. You are the Lawgiver according to Your Will’. And he, who could not hope to live because of the prophetic sentence, had fifteen years added to his life, and as a sign the sun ran backward in its course.”

“Nebuchadnezzar was bloodthirsty, fierce, and lion-like in disposition. He dug up the bones of the kings from their graves in Jerusalem (Jeremiah 8:1,

⁷² Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, 120 states that the Jewish leaders intentionally deleted from the Hebrew Scriptures the account of Isaiah being sawn in half by Manasseh. Manasseh used a wooden saw in order to prolong the agony.

⁷³ Cyril adds to the words of Hezekiah recorded in 2 Kings 20:2.

Baruch 2:24-25). He carried the people away captive and put out the eyes of King Zedekiah, after the king had already seen his children slain (2 Kings 25:7). He broke in pieces the Cherubim, the sculptured images, and the mercy-seat⁷⁴, from which God spoke with His voice. The veil of the Sanctuary he trampled under foot; the altar of incense he took and carried away to an idol's temple (2 Chronicles 36:7). All the offerings he took away; the Temple he burned from the foundations. How great punishments did he deserve, for slaying kings, for setting fire to the Sanctuary, for taking the people captive, for setting the sacred vessels in the house of idols?"

"He was turned into a wild beast, living in the wilderness, that he might be saved. He had claws like a lion (Daniel 4:33); for he was a ravager of the Sanctuary. He had a lion's mane; for he was a ravening and a roaring lion. He ate grass like an ox; for he was a brute beast, not knowing Him who had given him his kingdom. His body was wet from the dew; after seeing the fire of the furnace quenched by the dew, he didn't believe. After this, 'I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever' (Daniel 4:34). When, therefore, he recognized the Most High, sent up these words of thankfulness to God, repented himself for what he had done, and recognized his own weakness; then God gave back to him the honor of the kingdom."

"If after Nebuchadnezzar had done such deeds and had made confession, God give him pardon and the kingdom, surely when we repent He will give us remission of sins, and the kingdom of heaven, if we live a worthy life. The Lord is loving to man, and swift to pardon, but slow to punish. Let no man therefore despair of his own salvation. Peter, the chief of the Apostles, denied the Lord three times before a young lady; but he repented, and wept bitterly. Now weeping shows the repentance of the heart; therefore he not only received forgiveness for his denial, but also held his Apostolic dignity intact."

God Desires Confession by the Sinner

John Chrysostom stated⁷⁵ that the primary role of John the Baptist was to bring the people to confession and to a sense of their own sins.

"The reason for the coming of John the Baptist was primarily to bring the people to a sense of their own sins. Among other things, his clothing declared this, being that of repentance and confession. This was indicated also by what he preached, for nothing else did he say, but 'bear fruits worthy of repentance' (Matthew 3:8). Since the Jewish leaders didn't condemn their own sins, this made them start off separated from Christ. If they came to a sense of their own sins, they would have started longing to seek their Redeemer, and to ask for

⁷⁴ These were the two Cherubim that Solomon made. They were 15 feet tall, made of olive wood overlaid with gold, where their outstretched wings overshadowed the Ark (1 Kings 6:23-26, 8:6-7).. Nebuchadnezzar carried off or destroyed "all the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house, and he cut in pieces all the articles of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of the Lord" (2 Kings 24:13, 1 Esdras 1:54 LXX).. However, later accounts say that the tent, the Ark and the Altar of Incense were removed by Jeremiah and hidden in a cave at Mt. Sinai. This was included at one time among the writings of Jeremiah (2 Maccabees 2:4-8).

⁷⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, X, 2.

forgiveness. John came to bring this about, and to persuade them to repent, not just in order that they might avoid punishment, but that having become by repentance more humble, and condemning themselves, they might hasten to receive forgiveness.”

Jerome, writing to Rusticus, who had reneged on a vow to the Lord, pointed out⁷⁶ that King David illustrates the Lord’s desire for sinners to confess their sins and remove the stink of their wounds. The Lord accepts us as we are, not as we once were; to continue to be just before God, we must continue to confess our sin. Just as a parent does not immediately disown a child over one misdeed, so the Lord is patient in His desire for our confession.

“King David illustrated the desire of the Lord for confession by sinners after he had slept with Bathsheba the wife of Uriah the Hittite. When the prophet Nathan rebuked David for this, David replied, ‘I have sinned against the Lord’. Immediately after he confessed his fault Nathan comforted him by the words, ‘The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die’ (2 Samuel 12:13). David had added murder to adultery; yet bursting into tears he said, ‘Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your loving kindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions’ (Psalm 51:1). A sin so great needed to find great mercy. Such was the progress that David made that he who had once been a sinner and a penitent afterwards became a master, able to say, ‘I will teach transgressors your ways; and sinners shall be converted to you’ (Psalm 51:13). For as ‘confession and beauty are before God’ (Psalm 96:6 Vulgate), so a sinner who confesses his sins and says, ‘My wounds are foul *and* festering, because of my foolishness’ (Psalm 38:5) loses his foul wounds and is made whole and clean. But ‘He that covers his own ungodliness shall not prosper’” (Proverbs 28:13).

Ezekiel said, ‘as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall because of it in the day that he turns from his wickedness; nor shall the righteous be able to live because of his righteousness in the day that he sins’ (Ezekiel 33:12). The Lord judges every man according to how he finds him. It is not the past that He looks upon but the present. There may be sins from long ago, but renewal and conversion remove them. ‘A righteous man may fall seven times but rises up again’ (Proverbs 24:16). If he falls, how is he righteous? And if he is righteous, how does he fall? The answer is that a sinner does not lose the name of righteous if he always repents for his sins and rises again. If a sinner repents, his sins are forgiven not only till seven times but till seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22). One who has been forgiven much also loves much (Luke 7:47). The harlot washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair; and to her, as a type of the Church gathered from the Gentiles, was the declaration made, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ (Luke 7:48). The self-righteous Pharisee perished in his pride, while the humble publican was saved by his confession” (Luke 18:10-14).

John Chrysostom pointed out⁷⁷ how God tried to bring Cain to confess his sin after he killed Abel. Even after Cain scorned Him, God continued to look after him, trying to bring him to let go of the hatred later in his life.

⁷⁶ Jerome, Letter to Rusticus, CXXII, 3.

⁷⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XXIII, v. 10.

“On the occasion of the murder of Abel, God said to Cain, ‘Did you not sin, even if you brought your offering rightly, but did not divide it rightly? Be at peace; Abel will submit to you, and you shall rule over him’ (Genesis 4:7 LXX). God tried to repress the murder beforehand, aiming at peace between them. But when Cain had murdered Abel, He did not then bring His care for Cain to a close, but again answers the fratricide in gentle terms, saying, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’, that even then, Cain might make a full confession. But Cain struggled in defense of his crime, with a greater and sadder shamelessness. Even then God did not leave him, but again speaks the language of an injured and despised lover, and said, ‘The voice of your brother’s blood cries to Me’ (Genesis 4:10). God rebuked the earth with the murderer saying, ‘Cursed be the earth, which opened her mouth to receive your brother’s blood’ (Genesis 4:11-12). God did like those who lament, as David did when Saul had fallen (2 Samuel 1:21). God, as though singing some solitary dirge, said, ‘The voice of your brother’s blood cries to Me and now you are cursed from the earth which has opened her mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand’. He said this to humble Cain’s fiery passion, and to persuade him to love Abel at least now that he was gone. You have extinguished his life, He would say; why don’t you now extinguish the hatred also? He loves both the one and the other, since He made them both. Does He let the murderer go unpunished? No, for he would have grown worse. He both corrects Cain and also displays, even in this, His love. He does not kill him, but only fetters him with trembling, that he may strip himself of the crime, so that he may come back to a natural tenderness for Abel, and that so at last he may make a truce with Abel now that he has gone. He desired that Cain should not go away to the next world still angry with Abel. Those who are adept at love do this when they meet with no love in return; they do this to win over those that scorn them.”

Confess Now Before Judgment Day

Some people tend to put off confession, finding it difficult to admit their mistakes. Others assume that they will have an opportunity later in life to confess their sins before they die. Both these outlooks are somewhat naïve, and represent poor planning for one of the most important things that they will ever do in their lives.

John Chrysostom encouraged⁷⁸ his people to prevail on the Judge to forgive us our sins now in this life before it is too late. He likened this life to a prison, where the hardness and security of the prison increases with our personal wealth. If the Judge has to haul us out of prison in chains on Judgment Day, we have little hope of pardon. If we prevail on Him now, we will not even have to face Judgment Day.

“Let us take courage at Christ’s love for man, and let us show an anxious repentance, before the Day comes. Everything depends on us now, but then He that judges alone has control over the sentence. ‘Let us therefore come before His face with confession’ (1 Esdras 8:74); let us mourn. If we are able to prevail on the Judge before the Appointed Day to forgive us our sins, then we need not so much as enter into the court. On the other hand, if this is not done, He will hear

⁷⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XIV, 6.

us publicly in the presence of the world, and we shall no longer have any hope of pardon. Unless we have done away with our sins here, when we have departed there, we shall not be able to escape accounting for them. Like those, who are taken out of earthly prisons, and who are brought in their chains to the place of judgment, so all souls, when they have departed bound with the many chains of their sins, are led to the awesome Judgment Seat. Our present life is nothing better than a prison. When we enter into the next life, we will see everyone bound with chains. If we were able to enter into each man's life, into each man's soul, we would see it bound with chains worse than iron; and this most especially if you enter into the souls of those that are rich. The more wealth men have about them, so much the more are they bound. Regarding prisoners, when we see him with irons on his back, on his hands, and often on his feet too, we account him miserable. So also with the rich man, when we see him surrounded with innumerable things. Consider him not rich, but rather wretched because of these things. Together with these chains, he has a cruel jailer too, namely the wicked love of riches. The love of wealth doesn't allow him to get out of this prison, but provides thousands of fetters for him, plus guards, doors and bolts. When it has thrown him into the inner prison, it persuades him to feel pleasure in these bonds; thus he does not find any hope of deliverance from the evils which press on him."

John Chrysostom also advised⁷⁹ people of his day not to put off confession until old age, since there is the possibility that we might be snatched away in the midst of our sins. Putting off confession is like building a house on a rotten foundation and assuming it will be good enough to avoid collapsing.

"A wise man advised, 'Do not delay to turn to the Lord, nor postpone it from day to day' (Ecclesiasticus 5:7), and 'do not boast of tomorrow, for you don't know what tomorrow shall bring' (Proverbs 27:1). By putting this off there is danger; but by addressing it immediately there is secure salvation. Consider that as often as you have fornicated, this often have you condemned yourself. Such is the nature of sin; once committed, the Judge has also passed his sentence. Have you been drunken, gluttonous, or robbed someone? Acknowledge it to God as a mercy that He didn't snatch you away in the midst of your sins; do not seek another occasion to work evil. Many have been snatched away in the midst of their covetousness, and have departed to certain punishment. We should be fearful lest this should happen to us, and we end up without excuse. 'But God gave to many a set time for confession in extreme old age'. Will He give it to us also? Maybe! Consider that we are deliberating about our souls, and consider that He may not give us this opportunity. If we are always putting things off, for this reason perhaps we shall not have an opportunity given to us."

"When we go out to battle, we do not say, 'there is no need to make my will, perhaps I shall come back safe'; when we are deliberating about marriage, we don't say 'suppose I take a poor wife; many have gotten rich in this way contrary to expectation'. When building a house, we don't say, 'suppose I lay a rotten foundation, many houses have stood up with bad foundations'. Yet in deliberating about the soul, we lean on things more rotten than this. What if after we have had time for confession given to us, we still continue as we are? This

⁷⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XXII, v. 18.

sort of man will be listless even in old age. For this mode of reasoning even after eighty years desires ninety, and after ninety a hundred, and after a hundred we will be less likely to act. The whole of life will have been consumed in vain, and what was spoken of the Jews will happen to us; ‘Their days were consumed in vanity’ (Psalm 78:33). When we depart bearing the heavy burden of our sins, we shall carry away fuel for the fire and a plentiful feast for the worm (Mark 9:42-48). Therefore I pray that we halt and desist from wickedness, that we may also obtain the promised good things.”

John Chrysostom further noted⁸⁰ that the torments of the age to come are much worse than anything in this life. In this life extreme torture makes death come quicker, ending the torture. In the age to come no one dies; the torture just continues. Therefore we should come to confession while we have time.

“Let us be careful with our life. If we consider whatever labors and punishments are part of this life, all these combined will be nothing in comparison with the things to come. Consider fire, steel and wild beasts, and if there are any worse than these; these are not even a shadow compared with the torments of the age to come. Extreme torments applied in this life become especially light, making death come quickly, since the body can’t take both intensity and long duration of suffering. Not so in the age to come! While we have time then, ‘let us come before His Presence with⁸¹ confession’ (Psalm 95:2) that in that Day we may see Him gentle and serene, that we may escape altogether those threat bearing Powers. Notice how this world’s soldiers, who perform the bidding of those in authority, drag men around; they chain, scourge, pierce their sides, apply torches, and dismember them. Yet all these things are jokes compared to the punishments in the age to come. These punishments are temporal; but there the worm doesn’t die and the fire isn’t quenched (Mark 9:42-48). Our bodies in the age to come are incorruptible. God grant that we may never learn these things by experience; but that these fearful things may never be nearer to us than in the mention of them. God grant that we may not be delivered over to those tormentors, but are be of no use any longer; physicians can’t help when the patient is dead. They may say that so and so ought to have been done; but all is fruitless and in vain. The Jews will then say, ‘Blessed is He that comes in the Name of the Lord’ (Matthew 23:39), but they will not be able to reap any advantage of this cry towards escaping their punishment; when they ought to have said it, they didn’t. Let us reform ourselves that this may not be the case with our life, and that we may stand at the tribunal of Christ with boldness.”

A Desire for Holiness Justifies Us

We are not justified just by faith or by confession, but we are also justified by holiness. One may argue that both confession and holiness require faith. To say this may sound like one is trying to justify the theological opinion of “Justification by Faith alone” rather than taking the words of the Scriptures and the Church Fathers plainly for what they say.

⁸⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, IX, 4.

⁸¹ Most translations read Psalm 95:2, “Come before His Presence with thanksgiving”. However the Hebrew word *todah* can also mean “confession”, and this is how John Chrysostom interpreted it.

Irenaeus of Lyons noted⁸² that God gave circumcision and the Sabbath as signs of holiness, that His people might be recognized as holy and separate from idolaters. The signs meant something; circumcision referred to that of the heart and the Sabbaths referred to a consecration for God's service. Abraham, Noah and Enoch pleased God and were justified by holiness without either circumcision or the Sabbaths, since the Law was not established for righteous men, who had it written on their hearts. However, when righteousness and love for God had become forgotten when Israel was in Egypt, a written Law became necessary. God fed them with manna that they might learn, like Abraham that man does not live by bread alone.

“We learn from the Scripture that God gave circumcision, not as the completer of righteousness, but as a sign⁸³, that the race of Abraham might continue recognizable (Genesis 17:9-11). Ezekiel says the same with regard to the Sabbaths, ‘I gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord, that sanctifies them’ (Ezekiel 20:12). God said to Moses, ‘My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations’ (Exodus 31:13). These signs were symbolic; that is, meaningful and for a purpose, inasmuch as they were given by a wise Artist. The circumcision of the flesh typified that of the Spirit. ‘We have been circumcised with the circumcision made without hands’ (Colossians 2:11). And ‘Circumcise the hardness of your heart’ (Deuteronomy 10:16 LXX). The Sabbaths taught that we should continue day by day in God's service. ‘For we have been counted’, says the Apostle Paul, ‘all day long as sheep for the slaughter’ (Romans 8:36); that is, consecrated to God, and serving our faith continually, and persevering in it, abstaining from all avarice (Matthew 6:19). Moreover, the Sabbath of God, which represents rest, is the kingdom, is described using created things; in the kingdom, the man who has persevered in serving God shall, in a state of rest, partake of God's table.”

“Man was not justified by these things, but they were given as a sign to the people. Abraham himself, without circumcision and without observance of Sabbaths, ‘believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness’ (Romans 4:3); and he was called ‘the friend of God’ (James 2:23). So did Noah please God, although he was uncircumcised, and receive the dimensions of the ark and the world of the second race of men. Enoch, too, pleased God, and without circumcision, was God's emissary to the angels at his translation, although he was just a man. He was translated, and is preserved until now as a witness of the just judgment of God. The angels, when they had transgressed, fell to the earth for judgment (Isaiah 14:12-14), but the man who pleased God was translated for salvation. Moreover, the rest of those righteous men who lived before Abraham, and of those patriarchs who preceded Moses, were justified without the need of the Law of Moses. As also Moses himself says, ‘The Lord did not form this covenant at Horeb⁸⁴ for your fathers, but for you’” (Deuteronomy 5:2-3).

“Why did the Lord not form the covenant for the fathers? Because ‘the Law was not established for righteous men’ (1 Timothy 1:9)! But the righteous

⁸² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, IV, xvi, 1-3.

⁸³ By the 1st century, this “sign” became so prominent that it represented a national identity. There was no way that the Jewish leaders could give up circumcision when the Gospel came.

⁸⁴ “Horeb” and “Sinai” are used synonymously in the Scriptures. Mt. Sinai is one of the mountain peaks of the range known as Mt. Horeb.

fathers had the meaning of the Decalogue written in their hearts and souls, that is, they loved God who made them, and did no injury to their neighbor. There was therefore no occasion that they should be cautioned by commands about forbidden things, because they had the righteousness of the Law in themselves. But when this righteousness and love to God had passed into oblivion, and became extinct in Egypt, God necessarily, because of His great goodwill to men, revealed Himself by a voice, and led the people with power out of Egypt, in order that man might again become the follower of God. He afflicted those who were disobedient, that they should not despise their Creator; He fed them with manna, that they might receive food for their souls. 'He fed you with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3). It urgently directed love to God, and taught just dealing towards our neighbor, that we should not be unjust or unworthy of God, who prepares man for His friendship through the medium of the Decalogue. Similarly the Decalogue dealt with our neighbor in matters which profited man himself; God never stood in no need of anything from man."

From the opposite side, Clement of Alexandria noted⁸⁵ the methods that God uses in dealing with men. Those who have no fear of God in their lives cannot be justified because they have no respect for Him. Yet He still deals kindly and justly with them. If we choose to live in sin, it is our free will that chooses punishment; blame lies with us, not with God.

"God is good. The Lord speaks many a time before He proceeds to act. 'For my arrows', He says, 'will make an end of them. They shall be consumed with hunger and the devouring of birds, and there shall be irreparable destruction. I will send against them the teeth of wild beasts, with the rage of serpents creeping on the ground. Outside, the sword shall bereave them of children, and terror shall come out of the secret chambers' (Deuteronomy 32:23-25 LXX). God is not angry in the way that some think; but often restrains, and always exhorts humanity, and shows what ought to be done. This is a good device, to terrify lest we sin. 'For the fear of the Lord drives away sins, and he that is without fear cannot be justified' (Ecclesiasticus 1:21-22 LXX). God does not inflict punishment from wrath, but for the ends of justice; since it is not expedient that justice should be neglected on our account. Each one of us, who sins, with his own free-will chooses punishment, and the blame lies with him who chooses. God is without blame. 'But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? Certainly not!' (Romans 3:5-6) He says, therefore, threatening, 'I will sharpen My sword, and My hand shall lay hold on judgment; and I will render justice to My enemies, and pay back those who hate Me. I will make My arrows drunk with blood, and My sword shall devour flesh from the blood of the wounded' (Deuteronomy 32:41-42). It is clear, then, that those who are not at enmity with the truth, and do not hate the Word, will not hate their own salvation, but will escape the punishment of enmity. 'The crown of wisdom is the fear of the Lord' (Ecclesiasticus 1:18 LXX). Very clearly, therefore, has the Lord unfolded His method of dealing, saying, 'I have overthrown you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah; and you

⁸⁵ Clement of Alexandria, The Instructor, I, 8.

became as a brand plucked from the fire; and yet you have not returned to me, says the Lord” (Amos 4:11 LXX).

“See how God, through His love of goodness, seeks repentance; and He pursues, threatening silently, showing His own love for man. ‘I will turn away my face from them, and will show what shall happen to them’ (Deuteronomy 32:20 LXX). Where the face of the Lord looks, there is peace and rejoicing; but where it is turned, there is the introduction of evil. The Lord, accordingly, does not wish to look on evil things; for He is good. But on His looking away, evil arises spontaneously through human unbelief. ‘Consider therefore’, says Paul, ‘the goodness and severity of God. On those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness’ (Romans 11:22), that is, in faith in Christ.”

Practical Advice for Seeking Holiness

David contrasted holiness with its opposite, where David defined three kinds of evil. David said (Psalm 1:1),

1. Don’t walk in the counsel of the wicked.
2. Don’t stand in the way of sinners.
3. Don’t sit in the seat of scoffers.

On the other hand, David said that one can do two things that contrast these three kinds of evil, and these two things will make a person happy. He said (Psalm 1:2),

1. Set one’s will in the Law of the Lord
2. Meditate on His Law day and night.

Hilary of Poitiers had some great insight into life as we know it and had much to say⁸⁶ about David’s definition of evil versus holiness. One cannot get to holiness or be justified without understanding some of this. There is a difference between the wicked, sinners and scoffers. “The wicked” include heretics and the irreverent, who despise their maker and believe in evolution as the source of all life. The counsel of the wicked is always wavering and drifting in vicious circles with the course of their imagination; blessed is the man that doesn’t go there. “Sinners” are those who may be outwardly good and even attend Church, but are caught up in greed, drunkenness, pride or lying. Blessed is the man who will not allow himself to be hurried into this path, and his Faith draws him back. The “seat of scoffers” is like an infection. God-fearing men may try to administer the laws of the courts, even though they are bound by the laws of the Church. They may have good intentions; but they contract the infection of using sin and the ways of the world to implement the various aspects required by their “seat”, and end up poisoning the will of the godly. Conversely, happy is the man whose will, not whose fear is in the Law of the Lord.

“There must, therefore, be a distinction between the wicked and the sinner, and between the sinner and the scoffers, chiefly because here the wicked has a counsel, the sinner has a way, scoffers have a seat. The question involves walking, not standing, in the counsel of the wicked, and standing, not walking, in the way of the sinner. We must note the precise difference between the sinner and the wicked, that so it may become clear why to the sinner is assigned a way, and

⁸⁶ Hilary of Poitiers, Homilies on the Psalms, I, 6-11.

to the wicked a counsel. Men are accustomed to connect standing with a counsel, and walking with a way or a path, not vice versa.”

“Not every man that is a sinner is also wicked, but the wicked man cannot fail to be a sinner. For example, sons, though they are drunken, licentious and spendthrift, may love their fathers; with all these vices, they may not be free from guilt, but may very well perform their duty to their father. But the wicked⁸⁷, though they may be models of sobriety and thriftiness, because they despise their parent, they are worse transgressors than if they were guilty of every sin. This analogy is also true of our relationship with our Father in Heaven and our duty to Him.”

“There is no doubt then that, the wicked must be distinguished from the sinner. Those men are wicked who scorn searching for the knowledge of God, who in their irreverent mind take for granted that there is no Creator of the world. They say that it arrived at the existing order and beauty, which we see, by chance movements. In order to deprive their Creator of all power to pass judgment on a life lived rightly or in sin, they will have it that man comes into being and passes out of it again by the simple operation of a Law of nature.”

“Thus, all the counsel of the wicked characterized by these men is wavering, unsteady, and vague, and wanders about in the same familiar paths and over the same familiar ground, never finding a resting place, for it fails to reach any definite decision. They have never in their system risen to the teaching of a Creator of the world. Instead of answering our questions as to the cause, beginning, and duration of the world, whether the world is for man, or man for the world, the reason of death, its extent and nature, they press in ceaseless motion around the circle of this godless argument and find no rest in these imaginings.”

“There are other counsels of the wicked: those who have fallen into heresy, unrestrained by the laws of either the New Testament or the Old. Their reasoning is a vicious circle with no grasp or foothold to keep them from an interminable round of endless indecision. Their wickedness consists in measuring God, not by His own revelation, but by a standard of their choosing. They forget that it is as godless to make a God as it is to deny Him; if you ask them what effect these opinions have on their faith and hope, they are perplexed and confused. They wander from the point and willfully avoid the real issue of the debate. Happy is the man who has not walked in this kind of counsel of the wicked, who has not even entertained the wish to walk therein, for it is a sin even to think for a moment of things that are wicked.”

“The man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked shall not stand in the way of sinners either. There are many, whose confession of God acquits them of wickedness, yet does not set them free from sin. For example, those who are in the Church but do not observe her laws; such are the greedy, the drunken, brawlers, the lustful, the proud, hypocrites, liars, plunderers. No doubt we are urged towards these sins by the promptings of our natural instincts; but it is good for us to withdraw from the path into which we are being hurried and not to stand there, seeing that we are offered a way of escape. It is for this reason that the man who has not stood in the way of sinners is happy, for while nature carries him into that way, the Faith draws him back.”

⁸⁷ Hilary uses the term “undutiful” as being synonymous with wicked, as he shows in the following paragraph.

“The third condition for gaining happiness is not to sit in the seat of the scoffers. The Pharisees sat as teachers in Moses’ seat, and Pilate sat in the seat of judgment. What seat then are we to consider scoffers? Not that of Moses, for it is the occupants of the seat and not the occupation of it that the Lord condemns, when He says, The Scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat; whatever they ask you to do, that do; but do not go after their work. The occupation of that seat is not scoffing, to which obedience is commanded by the Lord’s own word. Real scoffing was the infection that Pilate sought to avoid by washing his hands. He knew what was right⁸⁸, but he refused to do it out of political concerns. Many God-fearing men are led astray by seeking worldly honors and the desire to administer the Law of the courts, though they are bound by the laws of the Church.”

“Although they have a godly intention, as is shown by their merciful and upright demeanor, still they cannot escape a certain contagious infection arising from how their life is spent. The conduct of civil cases does not allow them to be true to the holy principles of the Church’s Law, even though they wish it. They are compelled, against their will, by the conditions of the seat they have won, using verbal abuse, insult, or punishment. Their position makes them authors as well as victims; their system is impregnated with the infection. Hence this title, the seat of scoffers, by which David describes their seat, because by its infection it poisons the will of the godly.”

“But the fact that he has not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of scoffers, does not constitute the perfection of the man’s happiness. The belief in one God, the avoidance of sin, the preference of private life to public position, all this may be found even in a pagan. The difference is that David portrays the man that is perfect as one whose will has been in the Law of the Lord. Most men are kept within the Law by fear; few are brought under the Law by will. Fear acknowledges what it is afraid of, but perfect piety is ready to obey commands. This is why that man is happy whose will, not whose fear is in the Law of God.”

Asking the Lord for Mercy

Luke records the Publican saying, “And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his chest, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13). We note his humility by his standing far off with downcast eyes beating his chest. His request for mercy is reminiscent of Blind Bartimaeus of Jericho (Luke 18:35-43), where Luke appears to be emphasizing the use of the words “Lord have mercy” in different contexts⁸⁹. These words had already been incorporated into the Liturgy of the Early Church as part of the prayers.

⁸⁸ Pontius Pilate and his wife Claudia Procula were good friends with the Synagogue Ruler Jairus and his wife Fulvia. When Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter, Pilate’s wife and son were present, and Jesus healed Pilate’s son of lameness at the same occasion. Thus Pilate knew better at Jesus’ trial, and he was especially worried when the Jewish leaders stated that Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God (John 19:7-8). For details, see Catherine van Dyke, tr., “The Letters of Pontius Pilate and Claudia Procula”, Relics of Repentance, 1st Edition, Issana Press, Lincoln, NE 68503, 1990.

⁸⁹ For more details of the use of the words “Lord have mercy” see the Study for the 14th Sunday of Luke, where the subject is Blind Bartimaeus of Jericho.

Ignatius of Antioch also encouraged⁹⁰ humility and gave examples of the saints who were very humble.

“I know that you are not puffed up, for you have Jesus in yourselves. When I commend you, I know that you cherish reverence of spirit; as it is written, ‘The righteous man is his own accuser’ (Proverbs 18:17 LXX); and again, ‘Declare first your own iniquities, that you may be justified’ (Isaiah 43:26 LXX); and again, ‘When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, We are unprofitable servants’ (Luke 17:10). ‘That which is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God’ (Luke 16:15). As the publican said, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’ (Luke 18:13). Therefore those great ones, Abraham and Job, styled themselves ‘dust and ashes’ before God (Genesis 18:27, Job 30:19). And David says, ‘Who am I, O Lord God? And what *is* my house, that You have loved me forever?’ (1 Chronicles 17:16 LXX) Moses, who was ‘the humblest of all men’ (Numbers 12:3), said to God, ‘I have a feeble voice, and a slow tongue’ (Exodus 4:10 LXX). Be therefore also of a humble spirit, that you may be exalted; for ‘he that humbles himself shall be exalted, and he that exalts himself shall be humbled’” (Luke 14:11).

John Chrysostom noted⁹¹ the life of Job, where Job was justified not because he suffered, but because he endured his suffering humbly and thankfully. Job sets the standard for us; anyone who suffers less than Job and complains against God is condemned by Job’s testimony.

“How can we suffer for Christ, you ask? If someone accuses you falsely, not on account of Christ, yet if you bear it patiently, if you give thanks, if you pray for him, all this you do for Christ. But if you curse him, if you utter discontent, if you attempt to revenge it, though you aren’t able, it is not for Christ’s sake. You will suffer loss, and will be deprived of your reward on account of your intention. We have the choice with our own minds. For instance, great were the sufferings of Job, yet he suffered with thankfulness; and he was justified, not because he suffered, but because in suffering he endured it thankfully. No one ever suffered like Job. If another under lighter sufferings curses the whole world, and complains against God, he is condemned and sentenced, not because he suffered, but because he blasphemed. He didn’t blaspheme from any necessity; since if necessity were the cause, Job too must have blasphemed. Since Job, who suffered more severely than anyone, did no such thing, blasphemy is not caused by necessity, but from the man’s weakness of purpose. We need therefore strength of soul, and nothing will then appear distressful; but if our soul is weak, we find a grievance in everything.”

Cyprian of Carthage stated⁹² that the Publican placed all his hope of salvation not in the confidence of his innocence, because there is none who is innocent. But confessing his sinfulness he prayed humbly, and He who pardons the humble heard the petitioner.

⁹⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Magnesians, 12.

⁹¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Timothy, IX, Moral.

⁹² Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, IV, 6.

The words and attitude of the publican became part of the first Liturgy of the Church, drafted by James the Lord's brother. We note that the imagery of the Old Testament is present in the Liturgy of St. James more so than in the Liturgy of John Chrysostom. The St. James Liturgy begins⁹³ with the following words, where the priest appears before the altar, and assumes the same manner as the publican had in the Temple:

“O Sovereign Lord our God, condemn me not, defiled with a multitude of sins. Behold, I have come to this Your divine and heavenly mystery, not as being worthy; but looking only to Your goodness, I direct my voice to You: God be merciful to me, a sinner. I have sinned against Heaven, and before You, and am unworthy to come into the presence of this Your holy and spiritual table, upon which Your only-begotten Son, and our Lord Jesus Christ, is mystically set forth as a sacrifice for me, a sinner, and stained with every spot. I present to You this supplication and thanksgiving, that Your Spirit the Comforter may be sent down upon me, strengthening and fitting me for this service. Count me worthy to make known without condemnation the word, delivered from You by me to the people, in Christ Jesus our Lord, with whom You are blessed, together with Your all-holy, and good, and quickening, and consubstantial Spirit, now and ever, and to all eternity. Amen.”

Later in the Liturgy, after the Great Entrance with the bread and wine, at the prayer before the veil⁹⁴, the priest continues⁹⁵ to pray as the publican did:

“O Lord God, who created us, and brought us into life, who showed us ways to salvation, who granted us a revelation of heavenly mysteries, and appointed us to this ministry in the power of Your all-holy Spirit, grant, O Sovereign, that we may become servants of Your New Testament, ministers of Your pure mysteries. Receive us as we draw near to Your holy altar, according to the greatness of Your mercy, that we may become worthy of offering to You gifts and sacrifices for our transgressions and for those of the people. Grant to us, O Lord, with all fear and a pure conscience to offer to You this spiritual and bloodless sacrifice, and graciously receive it to Your holy and spiritual altar above the skies for an odor of a sweet spiritual smell; send down in answer on us the grace of Your all-holy Spirit.”

“O God, look on us, and have regard to this our reasonable service; accept it, as You accepted the gifts of Abel, the sacrifices of Noah, the priestly offices of Moses and Aaron, the peace-offerings of Samuel, the repentance of David, and the incense of Zachariah. As You accepted from the hand of Your Apostles this true service, so accept also in Your goodness from the hands of us sinners these offered gifts. Grant that our offering may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy

⁹³ Roberts and Donaldson, ed., “The Divine Liturgy of James, the Holy Apostle and Brother of the Lord”, I, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 7.

⁹⁴ In the Liturgy of John Chrysostom, this prayer is shortened to the following: O Lord God Almighty, Who alone are holy, Who dost accept a sacrifice of praise from those who call upon Thee with their whole heart: Receive also the prayer of us sinners, and lead us to Thy Holy Altar. Enable us to offer unto Thee gifts and spiritual sacrifices for our sins and for the ignorance of the people. Make us worthy to find grace in Thy sight, that our sacrifice may be acceptable unto Thee and that the Good Spirit of Thy grace may rest upon us and upon these gifts here spread forth and upon all Thy people.

⁹⁵ Roberts and Donaldson, ed., “The Divine Liturgy of James, the Holy Apostle and Brother of the Lord”, XXVI-XXVII, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 7. We note that the veil models that in the Tabernacle that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies and the Presence of God.

Spirit, as a propitiation for our transgressions and the errors of the people, and for the rest of the souls that have fallen asleep earlier. That we also, Your humble, sinful, and unworthy servants, being counted worthy without guile to serve Your holy altar, may receive the reward of faithful and wise stewards, and may find grace and mercy in the awesome Day of Your just and good retribution.”

“We thank You, O Lord our God, that You have given us boldness for the entrance into Your holy places, which You have renewed to us as a new and living way through the veil of the flesh of Your Christ. We therefore, being counted worthy to enter into the place of the tabernacle of Your glory, and to be within the veil, and to behold the Holy of Holies, cast ourselves down before Your goodness.”

“Lord have mercy on us: since we are full of fear and trembling, when about to stand at Your holy altar, and to offer this dread and bloodless sacrifice for our own sins and for the errors of the people⁹⁶. Send forth, O God, Your good grace, and sanctify our souls, and bodies, and spirits; turn our thoughts to holiness, that with a pure conscience we may bring to You a peace-offering, the sacrifice of praise.”

“By the mercy and loving-kindness of Your only-begotten Son, with whom You are blessed, together with Your all-holy, and good, and quickening Spirit, now and always.”

“And the people respond, ‘Amen’.”

John Chrysostom stated⁹⁷ that we can ask the Lord for mercy, but we won’t necessarily obtain mercy unless we deserve it. By being merciful to those around us, we draw God’s mercy toward us also.

“The devil has set us up to be enemies and adversaries to ourselves! Let us be sober, let us open our eyes, let us watch, let us lay hold on eternal life, let us shake off this long sleep. There is a Judgment, there is a Punishment, there is a Resurrection, there is an Inquisition into what we have done! The Lord will come in the clouds! ‘A fire shall be kindled before him, and round about him there shall be a very great tempest’ (Psalm 50:3 LXX). A river of fire rolls before him (Daniel 7:10), the undying worm, unquenchable fire (Mark 9:44-48), outer darkness, gnashing of teeth (Matthew 22:13). For if the prophets, though stoned, did not keep silence, much more ought we to bear with enmity, and not to just tell you what you want to hear, that we may not be cut in half ourselves (Matthew 24:51) for deceiving you. There is unrelenting deathless punishment, and no one to stand up for us. ‘Who will pity’, he says, ‘the snake charmer that is bitten by the snake?’ (Ecclesiasticus 12:13) When we don’t pity our own selves, who will pity us? If you see a man piercing himself with a sword, will you be able to spare his life? No way! Much more, when we have it in our power to do well, and we do not do well, who will spare us? No one! Let us pity ourselves! When we pray to God, saying, ‘Lord, have mercy on me’, let us say it to ourselves, and have mercy on ourselves. We are the arbiters of God’s having mercy on us. This grace He has given to us. If we do things worthy of mercy, worthy of His loving-kindness towards us, God will have mercy on us. However, if we do not have

⁹⁶ This section is based on Hebrews 5:1-3.

⁹⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Thessalonians, IX, vv. 10-11.

mercy on ourselves, who will spare us? Have mercy on your neighbor, and you shall find mercy from God Himself. How many people come to you every day saying, ‘Have pity on me’, and you do not turn towards them. How many come naked, how many come maimed, and we do not bend toward them, but dismiss their supplications. How then can we ask to obtain mercy, when we ourselves do nothing worthy of mercy? Let us become compassionate, let us become pitiful, so that we may be well-pleasing to God, and obtain the good things promised to those that love Him.”

The Proper Use of Fasting⁹⁸

The Pharisee in the Parable boasted to God that he fasted twice a week. While fasting as a means of discipline for the body is good, and it has been part of the life of the people of God from the beginning, pride and boasting about it is not good. Traditionally the Pharisees fasted on Monday and Thursday⁹⁹, to remember Moses climbing Mt. Sinai on a Thursday to receive the Law (Exodus 24:9-18), then climbing back up Mt. Sinai again on a Monday to receive the Law the second time (Exodus 34:1-8).

In the Mosaic Law, fasting is only specified on one occasion: the Day of Atonement or the 10th day of the 7th month (Leviticus 16:29-31, 23:27-32, Numbers 19:7-11). On this occasion, fasting meant abstinence from both work and food from evening until evening and was a remembrance of the sin of Nadab and Abihu who offered “strange fire” before the Lord (Leviticus 10:1-3).

Following the return of the exiles from the Babylonian captivity, Jewish tradition states that additional fasting was prescribed to remember and mourn the sins of the nation prior to the Captivity as shown in Table 1. In addition, fasting was also proclaimed for the feast of Purim on the 13th of Adar (12th month) to remember the genocide planned by Haman (Esther 9:29-32)

**Table 1
One Day Fasts After the Captivity**

DAY	EVENT REMEMBERED	SCRIPTURE
17 Tammuz (4 th month)	Capture of Jerusalem	Jeremiah 52:6,7, Zechariah 8:19
9 Ab (5 th month)	Burning of Temple	2 Kings 25:8, Zechariah 7:3, 8:19
3 Tishri (7 th month)	Death of Gedaliah	Jeremiah 40:4ff, Zechariah 8:19
10 Tebeth (10 th month)	Beginning of Attack on Jerusalem	2 Kings 25:1, Jeremiah 52:4, Zechariah 8:19
13 Adar (12 th month)	Purim: genocide of Haman	Esther 9:29-32

Besides one day fasts, the Scripture also speaks of extended fasting where ordinary food was not consumed. In some cases this meant something akin to Orthodox fasts where the faster consumes one uncooked vegetarian meal per day. In other cases, it meant no food at all for a

⁹⁸ For more study on the history and use of fasting prior to the Coming of Christ, see the Study for the Gospel Lesson of the 4th Sunday of Lent.

⁹⁹ Merrill F. Unger, Unger’s Bible Dictionary, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, p. 346.

long time, such as Moses climbing Mt. Sinai and Elijah traveling to Mt. Sinai. In some cases, such as Moses on Mt. Sinai, there was a miraculous aspect of the fast where the individual was nourished by God. There is sometimes a profound fasting spoken of in the Old Testament where an extended fast is accompanied by sackcloth, ashes and often weeping. This was not something that one entered into lightly, and there was usually some strong motivation behind it. Some examples of fasting are shown in Table 2, which shows that there was a lot of fasting done under the Old Covenant.

Jerome gave¹⁰⁰ a brief history of fasting among the people of God, beginning with a partial fast by Adam. The godly have always fasted while those who are distant from God indulge themselves with food and drink.

“Fasting was in part commanded to Adam. Noah called some animals clean, some unclean, and the unclean animals were taken into the Ark by pairs, the clean in uneven numbers. The eating of the unclean was forbidden; otherwise the term unclean would be meaningless. Thus fasting was in part consecrated; restraint in the use of all was taught by the prohibition of some.”

“Why did Esau lose his birthright on account of food? He could not atone with tears for the impatience of his appetite. The people of Israel on their way to the land of promise longed for the flesh of Egypt, saying: ‘Oh that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the pots of meat *and* when we ate bread to the full!’ (Exodus 16:3) And again, ‘Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being *is* dried up; *there is* nothing at all except this manna *before* our eyes!’ (Numbers 11:4-6) They despised angels’ food, and longed for the meat of Egypt.”

“Moses’ fast for forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai showed that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word of God. He said to the Lord, ‘the people are full and make idols’ (Exodus 32:8). Moses with empty stomach received the Law written with the finger of God. The people that ate and drank and rose up to play fashioned a golden calf, and preferred an Egyptian ox to the majesty of the Lord. Forty days’ work perished through the fullness of a single hour. Moses boldly broke the tablets, for he knew that drunkards cannot hear the word of God. ‘The beloved¹⁰¹ grew fat and kicked; You grew fat, you grew thick, You are obese! Then he forsook God *who* made him, and scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation’ (Deuteronomy 32:15). The Lord warned: ‘Beware, lest when you have eaten and drunk, have built beautiful houses, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, then your heart may be lifted up, and you’ll forget the Lord your God’ (Deuteronomy 8:11-14). The people ate and their heart grew thick, lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart (Isaiah 6:10, Matthew 13:13-15). The people well fed and fat-fleshed could not bear the countenance of Moses who fasted. The second writing of the tablets could not have been without fasting. What was lost by drunkenness was regained by abstinence, a proof that by fasting we can return to Paradise, where we have been expelled through fullness.”

¹⁰⁰ Jerome, Against Jovinianus, II, 15.

¹⁰¹ The “beloved”, Hebrew *Jeshurun*, is a poetical, but yet tender and loving name for the people of Israel.

Table 2
Extended Fasts

PROFOUND FASTING EVENT	REFERENCES
Moses in receiving the Law: 40 days for each trip up Mt. Sinai	Exodus 34:28
Hannah won the gift of a son (Samuel) by fasting	1 Samuel 1:15-17
David's valiant men at the death of Saul (7 days)	1 Samuel 31:8-13
King David, facing persecution from Saul, his own family, etc.	Psalms 35:9-16, 109: 21-29
David, petitioning for Bathsheba's first son (7 days)	2 Samuel 12:16-20
Elijah fasted for 40 days on his journey to Mt. Horeb (Mt. Sinai)	1 Kings 19:8-9
King Ahab repenting for his part in Jezebel's wickedness.	1 Kings 21:27-29
Hezekiah fasted in sackcloth and Assyria was repelled	2 Kings 18-19
Jehoshaphat and all Israel at the approach of the armies of Moab and Ammon	2 Chronicles 20:1-24
The people of Nineveh facing destruction prophesied by Jonah. Even the King of Nineveh sat in ashes (Jonah 3:6)	Jonah 3
Queen Esther, Mordecai and all the Jews facing genocide at the hands of Haman fasted in sackcloth and ashes	Esther 4:3
Daniel and the three youths gained a good report by fasting	Daniel 1-2
Daniel fasted for a week in the lions' den until Habakkuk came	Bel and Dragon 1:38 LXX
Daniel, seeking to know how long Jerusalem would be desolate, prior to an angelic visit.	Daniel 9:3-22
Ezra, seeking the Lord for a safe journey from Babylon to Israel (at least several days)	Ezra 8:21-23
Nehemiah, regarding the broken down wall of Jerusalem	Nehemiah 1:1-4
Nehemiah, Ezra and all Israel as they confessed their sins following the Feast of Booths and the Reading of the Law.	Nehemiah 9:1-3
The Prophetess Anna as a way of life	Luke 2:36-38
John the Baptist as a way of life	Matthew 9:14-18
Jesus fasted for 40 days prior to his baptism	Matthew 4:1-11
The Centurion Cornelius seeking a word from the Lord	Acts 10:4, 30
Paul fasted often	2 Corinthians 11:27
All hands on Paul's ship in the face of shipwreck (14 days)	Acts 27:27-34
Paul encouraged Timothy to break his fast with wine for health	1 Timothy 5:23
The desert hermits imitated the diet of John the Baptist	Jerome, <i>Against Jovinianus</i> , II, 15.

Leo the Great, Pope of Rome, taught¹⁰² about the "Fast of the Seventh Month", which was the solemn fast of the Day of Atonement on the 10th day of the 7th Month. Leo applied this fast to the current practice in Orthodoxy where everyone is encouraged to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, where Leo also included a vigil on Saturday after Great Vespers to prepare for the Liturgy on Sunday. Leo greatly encouraged almsgiving, confession of sins and freedom from worldly cares along with the fast as the means of a deeper cleansing of the people of God.

"The Prophets proclaimed the justice of God, Whose vengeance the people of Israel incurred often through their iniquities. God cannot be appeased

¹⁰² Leo the Great, *Sermons*, 88, 1-3, 5.

except by fasting to win mercy. Joel warns, ‘Thus says the Lord your God, turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning; tear your hearts and not your garments; and turn to the Lord your God, for He is merciful and compassionate, long-suffering, and plenteous in mercy’ (Joel 2:12-13 LXX). Again, ‘Sound the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, proclaim a solemn service, gather the people, sanctify the Church’ (Joel 2:15-16). This exhortation must be obeyed in our days also, because these healing remedies must be proclaimed by us too for sanctification. Christian devotion may gain what Jewish transgression lost.”

“Individual fasting benefits a certain portion of the Church only; the fast which the whole Church undergoes is better. God’s people become strongest when the hearts of the entire faithful meet together in one common act of holy obedience, when in the camp of the Christian army there is on all sides the same making ready for the fight and defense. The cruel enemy may rage; yet he will be able to catch no one, if he finds no one off his guard, no one inactive in works of piety.”

“To this unconquerable strength of unity, we are invited by the teaching of the solemn Fast of the Seventh Month, that we may lift our souls to the Lord free from worldly cares and earthly concerns. Even though this endeavor is always needed, we cannot all adhere to it perpetually; let us at least on Wednesday and Friday withdraw ourselves from worldly occupations, and steal a little time for promoting our eternal welfare. ‘For in many things we all stumble’ (James 3:2). Though we are cleansed by the daily gift of God from pollutions, darker stains cling to unwary souls, which need a greater care to wash out. The fullest abolition of sins is obtained when the whole Church offers up one prayer and one confession. If the Lord has promised fulfillment of all they shall ask, to the devout agreement of two or three, what shall be denied to many thousands of people who unite in one act of worship?” (Matthew 18:19-20)

“Let us engage in the solemn fast with a good will. Nothing hard, nothing harsh is asked of anyone, nor is anything imposed beyond our strength, whether in the discipline of abstinence or in the amount of alms. Each knows what he can and what he cannot do; let everyone pay his quota, assessing himself at a just and reasonable rate, that the sacrifice of mercy is not offered sadly. Because few possess this greatness of heart, and yet it is truly a pious thing for each one not to forsake the care of his own family, we exhort you to perform God’s bidding according to the measure of your ability. ‘He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, will supply and multiply the seed you have *sown* and increase the fruits of your righteousness’ (2 Corinthians 9:10). On Wednesday and Friday therefore let us fast; and on Saturday keep vigil all together in the presence of the blessed Apostle Peter, by whose prayers we are sure God’s mercy will be granted to us in all things.”

Leo continued¹⁰³ to say that the fast can also help purify us from falsehood, such as taught in his day by Nestorius and Eutyches.

“The year’s course has brought back the seventh month to us; I feel certain that your minds are spiritually aroused to keep the solemn fast. You have learned

¹⁰³ Leo the Great, Sermons, 91, 1-3

by experience how well this preparation purifies both the outer and the inner parts of men, so that by abstaining from the lawful, resistance becomes easier to the unlawful. Do not limit your plan of abstinence, dearly-beloved, to the things of the body, or to the lessening of food alone. For the greater advantages of this virtue belong to that chastity of the soul, which not only crushes the lusts of the flesh, but also despises the vanities of worldly wisdom. As Paul says, ‘Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men’” (Colossians 2:8).

“We restrain ourselves from food; but much more we fast from errors in order that the mind may not be taken captive by falsehood. There are many enemies of the Truth, especially Nestorius and Eutyches, who dare to stir up civil wars¹⁰⁴ within the Church, in order that by leading the ignorant into agreement with their ungodly doctrines, they may boast of increase in numbers through those whom they have been able to sever from the Body of Christ.”

“Utter this confession with all your heart and reject the lies of heretics, that your fasting and almsgiving may not be polluted by any infectious error. Then we will offer the clean sacrifice and our gifts of mercy will be holy, when those who perform them understand what they are doing. When the Lord says, ‘unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you’ (John 6:53), you ought to be partakers at the Holy Table, and to have no doubt whatever concerning the reality of Christ’s Body and Blood. That is taken in the mouth, which is believed in Faith, and it is vain for the heretics to respond ‘Amen’, who dispute what is taken¹⁰⁵. When the Prophet says, ‘Blessed is he, who considers the poor and needy’ (Psalm 41:1 LXX), he is the praiseworthy distributor of clothes and food among the poor, who knows he is clothing and feeding Christ in the poor. He Himself says, ‘as long as you have done it to one of My brethren, you have done it to Me’” (Matthew 25:40).

Athanasius of Alexandria noted¹⁰⁶ that trumpets not only proclaimed a fast in the Old Testament, but they sanctified the fast to distinguish those who pollute the fast. The Pharisee polluted his fasting with self-exaltation. As we refrain from food during fasting, we are encouraged to have our soul feed on virtues. If the soul is not nourished with virtue, it descends to nourishment by nothing but sin. At the Lord’s Table, our Lord Jesus Christ is the food of the saints as we eat His flesh and drink His blood. Similarly the devil is the food of the impure, and of those who work the deeds of darkness. Moses, Elijah and Daniel fasted for an extended period of time by the contemplation of God, and His Word can miraculously take the place of all food.

“There are diverse proclamations to the prophet blowing the trumpet; for he says, ‘Blow the trumpet in Zion: sanctify a fast’ (Joel 2:15). This is a warning trumpet, and commands with great earnestness, that when we fast, we should make the fast holy. For not all those who call upon God, consider God holy; there are some who defile their own mind concerning Him; for He is holy, and has

¹⁰⁴ Probably the occasion was some businessmen had come to Rome from Egypt after the murder of Proterius, Patriarch of Alexandria, in 457 AD by Coptic mobs, and who supported the heresy of Eutyches. Proterius replaced Dioscorus, who was deposed for heresy by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, and this began the split between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the rest of Orthodoxy.

¹⁰⁵ This “Amen” is the response of the person receiving the Eucharist from the priest.

¹⁰⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, Festal Letters, I, 4-7.

pleasure in the saints (Psalm 16:3 LXX). Therefore the blessed Paul accuses those who dishonor God, 'You dishonor God through breaking the Law' (Romans 2:23). To make a separation from those who pollute the fast, he said, 'Sanctify a fast'. Many crowd into the fast and pollute themselves in the thoughts of their hearts, sometimes by doing evil against their brethren, sometimes by fraud. There are many who exalt themselves above their neighbors, thereby causing great harm. The boast of fasting did no good to the Pharisee, although he fasted twice per week (Luke 18:12), because he exalted himself against the publican. In the same manner the Word blamed the people of Israel on account of such a fast, exhorting them, 'I have not chosen this fast, nor *such* a day for a man to humble his soul; not even if you should bow down your neck like a hook, and should strew sackcloth and ashes under you; neither shall this fast be called acceptable' (Isaiah 58:5 LXX). That we may be able to show what kind of persons we should be when we fast, and of what character the fast should be, listen again, 'The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, In the tenth day of this seventh month, there shall be a Day of Atonement; a convocation, and a holy day shall it be to you; and you shall humble your souls, and offer whole burnt-offerings to the Lord' (Leviticus 23:26-27). Afterwards, that the Law might be defined on this point, He proceeds, 'Every soul that shall not humble itself, shall be cut off from the people'" (Leviticus 23:29).

"Notice how much a fast can do, and in what manner the Law commands us to fast. We are required to fast with the soul as well as with the body. The soul is humbled when it does not follow wicked opinions, but feeds on virtues. Virtues and vices are the food of the soul and it can eat either of these two foods according to its own will. If it is bent toward virtue, it will be nourished by virtues, righteousness, temperance, meekness, and fortitude, 'Being nourished by the words of the Faith' (1 Timothy 4:6). Such was the case with our Lord, who said, 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work' (John 4:34). If the soul is not nourished with virtue, it inclines downwards, and is nourished by nothing but sin. In describing sinners and their food, the Holy Spirit referred to the devil, when He said, 'I have given him to be food to the Ethiopian nations' (Psalm 74:14 LXX). This is the food of sinners. Our Lord Jesus Christ, being heavenly bread, is the food of the saints, according to, 'unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you' (John 6:53). Similarly the devil is the food of the impure, and of those who do nothing of the light, but work the deeds of darkness. Therefore, in order to withdraw and turn them from vices, He commands them to be nourished with the food of virtue; namely, humbleness of mind, lowliness to endure humiliations, and the acknowledgment of God. Not only does such a fast as this obtain pardon for souls, but being kept holy, it prepares the saints, and raises them above the earth."

"Some fasting has been miraculous. Moses, when fasting, conversed with God, and received the Law. Elijah, when fasting, was thought worthy of divine visions, and was taken up like Christ, who ascended into heaven. Daniel, when fasting, although a young man, was entrusted with the mystery; he alone understood the secret things of the king, and was thought worthy of divine visions. Let no man fall into unbelief because the length of the fast of these men was prolonged. Rather let him know that the contemplation of God and the word are sufficient to nourish those who hear, and can take the place of all food. The

angels are sustained by nothing else than beholding at all times the face of the Father, and of Christ who is in heaven. Thus Moses, as long as he talked with God, fasted bodily, but was nourished by divine words. When he came down from Mt. Sinai, he suffered hunger like other men. For it is not said that he fasted longer than forty days — those in which he was conversing with God. Many of the saints have been thought worthy of similar transcendent nourishment.”

“Having our souls nourished with divine food, with the Word, and according to the will of God, and fasting bodily in things external, let us keep this great and saving feast. Even the ignorant Jews received this divine food, through the type, when they ate a lamb at the Passover. Not understanding the type, even to this day they eat the lamb, going astray in that they are without the City and the Truth. As long as Judea and the City existed, there was a type, a lamb, and a shadow, since the Law commanded, ‘These things shall not be done in another city; but in the land of Judea, and in no place outside the land of Judea’ (Deuteronomy 12:11-14). The Law commanded them to offer whole burnt offerings and sacrifices at no other altar than that in Jerusalem. On this account, in that city alone was there an altar and temple built, and in no other city were they permitted to perform these rites, even though there were synagogues throughout the world. When that City came to an end, those things that were figurative were also done away with.”

Gregory the Great pointed out¹⁰⁷ that one of the dangers of too much fasting is a lack of humility – like the Pharisee. While those who refuse to fast may imitate the Fall of our first parents, continually seeking food, the overly abstinent may run into impatience and anger. During times of fasting, we discover what our wills really desire. Fasting by itself is not that commendable; it’s the virtues that go with fasting that are important. For example, a good fast is one that gives to the indigent the food that we withhold from ourselves.

“When the flesh is worn more than it needs to be by abstinence, humility may be displayed outwardly; but there may be grievous pride within. Sometimes the mind gets puffed up by the virtue of abstinence; the arrogant Pharisee numbered this among his merits, saying, ‘I fast twice per week’” (Luke 18:12).

“The gluttonous, in giving themselves to the enjoyment of dainties, may pierce themselves through with the sword of lechery. While they serve the belly, they become cruelly bound in the nooses of vice. When the hand is always stretched out for food, we imitate the fall of our first parent. Conversely the abstinent must beware lest their spirit break out into impatience, and the spirit becomes overcome by anger.”

“Sometimes the mind of the abstinent is corrupted, and loses all the good of abstinence in that it fails to guard itself from spiritual vices. ‘In the days of your fasts you find what you desire’ (Isaiah 48:3). And, ‘You fast for quarrels and strife, and strike the lowly with your fists’ (Isaiah 48:4). In vain is the body worn by abstinence, if the mind is dissipated by vice. Those that keep up their abstinence without end, should not suppose this is virtuous before the hidden judge, lest their heart might be lifted up to haughtiness. The Prophet Isaiah said, ‘This is the fast that I have chosen: to share your bread with the hungry, and bring to your house the poor who are cast out’” (Isaiah 48:6-7).

¹⁰⁷ Gregory the Great, *Book of Pastoral Rule*, III, 19.

“We should consider how small the virtue of abstinence is accounted, seeing that it is only commended because of other virtues. Joel says, ‘Sanctify a fast’ (Joel 2:15). To sanctify a fast is to show abstinence of the flesh to be worthy of God by other good things being added to it. An abstinence that pleases God occurs when they bestow on the indigent the nourishment, which they withhold from themselves. For we should listen to what the Lord says, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me? When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves?’ (Zachariah 7:5-6) A man fasts to himself and not to God, if what he withholds from his belly, he doesn’t give to the needy, but keeps to be offered afterwards to his own belly.”