

***THE TABERNACLE, DEAD WORKS
HUMILITY AND PERSISTENCE***

**March 21, 2010
5th Sunday of Lent
Mary of Egypt
Revision E**

GOSPEL: Mark 10:32-45
EPISTLE: Hebrews 9:11-14

In the West, today’s Gospel lesson is used at various times during the Church year: the account from Mark in October, the parallel account from Matthew in August and the parallel account from Luke on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. Today’s Epistle lesson is also used during Lent in the West, either today (the 5th Sunday of Lent) or on the Monday of Holy Week.

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Epistle Lesson: Hebrews 9:11-14

The Tabernacle:

The Epistle lesson speaks of Christ entering once for all into the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands and not of this creation. There is a mystery associated with this. In Hebrews 8:2, He is a liturgist (Greek: *leitourgos*) of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, not man. Comparing this to the tabernacle erected by Moses, Paul says that the Levitical priesthood serves a copy and shadow of the heavenly things (Hebrews 8:5) and that Moses was instructed to “make all things according to the pattern¹ shown him on the mountain”. And whereas the Levitical priesthood entered the copy every year, on the Day of Atonement, with the blood of animal sacrifices, so the Lord entered the true tabernacle once for all with His own blood (Hebrews 9:12-26).

The tabernacle is referred to as the tabernacle of the testimony. The testimony (or witness) refers to objects that the Lord told Moses to put inside the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus

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¹ See also Exodus 25:8-9, 25:40, 26:30, Numbers 8:4, Acts 7:44.

25:16, 21). There were three objects there: a jar of manna (Exodus 16:33-35), the two tables of stone that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai (Exodus 31:18, 32:15-16, Deuteronomy 10:3-5) and Aaron's rod that budded (Numbers 17:1-11). By the time of Solomon's Temple, only the tablets of stone were still in the Ark (1 Kings 8:9). These three objects represented Israel's rejection of God's provisions (the manna), rejection of God's Law (the tablets) and rejection of God's leadership (Aaron's rod which budded at the time of Korah's rebellion.) The three objects were a testimony or witness against them just as James, the Lord's brother, warns that our riches can become a witness against us when the Lord returns (James 5:1-3). They testify as to whom we serve and obey.

Just before the Lord's return, the sanctuary of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven will be opened and out will come seven angels to dispense the wrath of God on His enemies (Revelation 15:5). The illustration of the heavenly Tabernacle is very similar to the earthly tabernacle. As the seven angels come out, the tabernacle will be filled with smoke from the glory of God (Revelation 15:8). This is very similar to events associated with the copy on earth; the copy was filled with smoke at the occasions listed in Table 1:

Table 1
Occasions When the Earthly Temple Was Filled with Smoke

Earthly Temple Filled with Smoke	Reference
In the days of Moses as the tabernacle was finished	Exodus 40:34-40
In the days of Solomon when the Ark was brought into the Temple	1 Kings 8:10ff, 2 Chronicles 5:11-14
In the days of Isaiah	Isaiah 6:1-4

When the Holy City, New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God (Revelation 21:1-3), it is referred to as a bride adorned for her husband. A loud voice also proclaims from heaven, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men" (Revelation 21:3). Following this, John was shown more detail of "the bride, the Lamb's wife." Included were the details shown in Table 2:

Table 2
Details of the Lamb's Bride

Details of the Lamb's Bride	Reference
12 gates which are 12 pearls and are the 12 tribes of Israel	Revelation 21:12-13
12 foundations which are 12 precious stones and are the 12 Apostles	Revelation 21:14
Walls made of jasper (or diamond)	Revelation 21:18
The city constructed of pure gold	Revelation 21:18,21
No temple, because the Lord is its temple	Revelation 21:22

Somehow, the treasure we now have in earthenware vessels (2 Corinthians 4:7) gets refined and put together as this holy city. That way, the glory is God's and not ours for putting it together. As we go about our earthly life, if our tabernacle (2 Corinthians 5:1) is destroyed, meaning we die, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the

heavens. The play on words in the Greek text between the tabernacle of God and the tabernacle of our bodies seems to be intentional on the part of Paul. And it was the building from God that Abraham was looking for: the city with solid foundations, whose craftsman and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10).

Dead Works:

In the verses just prior to the Epistle reading, referring to the High Priest's entrance into the Holy of Holies once per year, it says: "The Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holy of Holies was not yet made clear while the first tabernacle was still standing. It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience" (Hebrews 9:8-9).

John Chrysostom interpreted² the imagery as follows:

- Christ, our High Priest, entered the Holy of Holies in the heavenly tabernacle with His Own Blood once for all (Hebrews 9:11, 24)
- Heaven is also a veil that hides the goings-on from curious bystanders (Hebrews 6:19)
- Christ's flesh was also a tabernacle and a veil hiding the Godhead (Hebrews 10:20)
- This Holy of Holies is as yet inaccessible to us (Hebrews 9:8)

Thus "Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation" (Hebrews 9:11, compare Matthew 1:20). While this Holy of Holies is as yet inaccessible to us, such will not be permanent, for he speaks of "the good things to come". We have a boldness to approach the Throne of Grace, which is the Lord's Body and Blood in the Lord's Supper. From this we obtain mercy and grace (Hebrews 4:16). This boldness is confidence but not arrogance. An arrogant heart represents uncleanness and an evil conscience, not a true heart in full assurance of faith (Hebrews 10:19-22).

The Epistle lesson concludes with "since we have this greater and more perfect tabernacle (i.e. the New Jerusalem, our resurrected bodies, etc.), how much more shall the blood of Christ cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Hebrews 9:14) But what are dead works? Regarding works in general, the Last Judgment is unquestionably based on works of some kind: feeding, welcoming, clothing, visiting the members of Christ (Matthew 25:31-45).

James, the Lord's brother, speaks at length about faith and works (James 2:14-26). James was addressing dead faith; that is, "faith" that has no works or fruit to show for it (James 2:17, 20). He said that faith working together with works was made perfect or complete (2:22). And as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also (2:26).

In our Epistle lesson, Paul addressed the converse of what James addressed: dead works. Earlier, we are given some background regarding the context. The Hebrews being addressed had become lazy of hearing (Hebrews 5:11) so much so that they needed to go back to milk rather

² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XV, 1-4.

than partake of solid food (Hebrews 5:12-14). Paul went on to say (Hebrews 6:1, 2), that he will not lay again the foundation:

- of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,
- of teaching of baptism and laying on of hands,
- of resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.

The dead works in this context are most likely related to people who came from or apostatized back to Judaism, but the lessons we learn go beyond that to any lifeless drifting from the Faith into nominal Christianity. This is something that anyone can drift into. We can go through the motions of fasting, attending church, doing charitable works just to look good before men. Coming at this time during Lent, today is a reminder that we also need to repent from dead works.

John Chrysostom used³ an Old Testament analogy to explain dead works: comparing the presence of a dead body to the presence of dead works. This is something that we need to sense by the Holy Spirit.

“Under the Mosaic Law, if any man touched a dead body, he was defiled; and here, if any man touch a ‘dead work’, he is defiled through his conscience. Paul declares that it is not possible while one has dead works to serve the Living and True God, for they are both dead and false. For if it was not fit that one should enter in who had touched a dead body, much more one that has dead works, for this is a really bad pollution. And ‘dead works’ are all which don’t have life, which breathe forth a bad odor. For as a dead body is useful to none of the senses, but is even annoying to those who come near it, so sin also at once strikes the reasoning faculty and does not allow the understanding itself to be calm, but disturbs and troubles it”.

Paul went on to say that God is not unjust to forget their work and labor of love toward the saints (Hebrews 6:10). He desires them to show diligence to the end and not become lazy. And he wishes them to imitate those who through faith and patience are inheriting the promises (Hebrews 6:11,12). Paul then went on for several chapters to detail the people who showed diligence to the end, and faith and patience in inheriting the promises.

The message here for us is that laziness in body or spirit can generate dead works. In this regard, we remember that whatever is not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23) and whatever is of sin is dead works. And we are encouraged to persevere in the fast until the end.

³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XV, 5.

HUMILITY AND PERSISTENCE

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Gospel Lesson: Mark 10:32-45 (Matthew 20:17-28, Luke 18:31-34)

Today's Gospel lesson speaks of humility and perseverance. In the first part, Jesus told His disciples again that He would be betrayed, condemned, mocked, scourged, spit on and killed. He had told them this at least twice before (Mark 8:31, 9:30-32) over the past nine months; but this time they were on the road going up to Jerusalem where it would happen. This time the disciples were afraid.

Prediction of the Crucifixion

Judas Iscariot, His betrayer, was among the disciples as he always was and heard the Lord predict His betrayal. But mostly, the disciples didn't seem to grasp what He was saying. Knowing what He was heading for, the Lord was very humble, but yet persistent in pursuing His mission, since this was what He came to do (John 12:23-28).

Cyril of Jerusalem stated⁴ that not only did Jesus predict the Crucifixion, but also He came to it willingly as the glorification of His patience.

“Would you care to be persuaded that Christ came to His passion willingly? Others, who don't know the future, die unwillingly; but Jesus spoke before of His passion, ‘Behold, the Son of man will be betrayed to be crucified’ (Matthew 26:2). Do you know why this Friend of man did not shun death? It was lest the whole world should perish in its sins. ‘Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man shall be betrayed, and shall be crucified’ (Matthew 20:18); and again, ‘He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem’ (Luke 9:51). Know for certain, that the Cross is a glory to Jesus? Hear His words, not mine! Judas had become ungrateful to the Master of the house, and was about to betray Him. Having just gone away from the table, and drunk His cup of blessing; in return for that drink of salvation, he sought to shed righteous blood. ‘He who did eat of His bread, was lifting up his heel against Him’ (Psalm 41:9). His hands had just received the blessed gifts⁵, and for the wages of betrayal, he was plotting His death. After being reprov'd, and having heard that word, ‘You have said it’ (Matthew 26:25), Judas left. Then Jesus said, ‘The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified’ (John 12:23). Do you see how He knew that the Cross was His proper glory? Isaiah was not ashamed of being sawn in half⁶, and shall

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⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, XIII, 6.

⁵ That is, the Bread and Wine when Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper.

⁶ Isaiah was sawn in half with a wooden saw by King Manasseh, where a wooden saw was used to prolong the agony. Paul referred to this (Hebrews 11:37), and Justin Martyr stated that the Jews deleted this from the Hebrew Scriptures in his day.

Christ be ashamed of dying for the world? ‘Now is the Son of man glorified’ (John 13:31). Not that He was without glory before; for He was ‘glorified with the glory which was before the foundation of the world’ (John 17:5). He was always glorified as God; but now He was to be glorified in wearing the Crown of His patience. He did not give up His life by compulsion, nor was He put to death by murderous violence, but of His own accord. Hear what He says, ‘I have power to lay down My life, and I have power to take it again’ (John 10:18). I yield it of My own choice to My enemies; for unless I chose, this could not happen. He came therefore of His own set purpose to His passion, rejoicing in His noble deed, smiling at the crown, cheered by the salvation of mankind. He was not ashamed of the Cross, for it was to save the world. For it was no common man who suffered, but God in man’s nature, striving for the prize of His patience.”

John Chrysostom noted⁷ that Jesus told His disciples more about the upcoming Crucifixion than He told the crowds. Neither the crowds nor His disciples understood what He was saying, however.

“Was it not told to the people? It was indeed told to the people, but not plainly. ‘Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up’ (John 2:19); and, ‘This generation seeks a sign, and no sign be given it, except the sign of Jonah’ (Matthew 12:39); and again, ‘Yet a little while am I with you, and you shall seek me, and shall not find me’” (John 7:33-34).

“But to the disciples He spoke to them more plainly about this too. Since the multitude didn’t understand the force of His sayings, He spoke to them that they might learn after these events, that foreknowing it, He came to His passion willingly; not in ignorance, nor by constraint. To the disciples, there was another reason He foretold it: in order that having been exercised by the expectation, they might more easily endure the passion, and that it might not confound them by coming upon them without preparation. At the beginning He spoke of His death only; when they were practiced and trained to hear of it, He added the other circumstances also. For instance, that they should deliver Him to the Gentiles, that they should mock and scourge Him; in order that when they saw the mournful events come to pass, they might expect from this the resurrection also. For He had not cloaked from them what would give pain, and what seemed to be matter of reproach; they could reasonably conclude what He said about good things too. Note how with regard to the time He orders the thing wisely. For neither at the beginning did He tell them, lest He should trouble them, neither at the time itself, lest by this again He should confuse them. But when they had received sufficient proof of His power, when He had given them promises that were very great concerning life everlasting, then He introduces also what He had to say concerning these things, once and twice and often interweaving it with His miracles and His instructions.”

“He brought in the prophets also as witnesses (Luke 18:31); but they themselves didn’t understand His words, but the saying was hid from them, and they were amazed (Mark 10:32) as they followed Him.”

⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXV, 1.

“Surely then, one may say, the benefit of the prediction was taken away. For if they didn’t know what they were hearing, neither could they look for the event; and not looking for it, neither could they be exercised by their expectations.”

John Chrysostom also stated⁸ that the reason Jesus’ followers were not aware of what was about to happen was because it was too much for them at this point.

“They were ignorant on most points, because He did not reveal to them. For when He said, ‘Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up’ (John 2:19), the disciples did not understand. Another Evangelist said, ‘the saying was hid from them’ (Luke 18:34), and they did not know that He should rise from the dead. This was with reason concealed from them. When they heard it from time to time, they grieved and were dejected, because they didn’t understand the saying concerning the Resurrection. It was concealed, because it was too much for them. Even the matter of the donkey (Matthew 21:2-8) was not revealed to them, because this was a great thing also. Observe the wisdom of the Evangelist, how he is not ashamed to parade their former ignorance. That it was written they knew; that it was written of Him they didn’t know. It would have offended them if He, being a King, were about to suffer such things, and be so betrayed. Besides, they could not at once have taken in the knowledge of the Kingdom of which He spoke; for they thought the words were spoken of a kingdom of this world” (Matthew 20:21).

James and John Ask for Glory

A few days earlier, the Lord had mentioned the rewards for the Twelve, who had left everything to follow him. “When the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the Twelve Tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28). Since they expected the Kingdom of God to come in its glory when they got to Jerusalem (compare Acts 1:6), they naturally asked for a leading position.

This prompted James and John to ask if they could sit at Jesus’ right and left hand (places of honor) in His glory. According to the parallel account in Matthew, it was Salome, their mother, who first did the asking (Matthew 20:20-21). Salome was Jesus’ stepsister (the daughter of Joseph); she had grown up with Jesus; and she was very close to Jesus’ mother, Mary, and about the same age as Mary (i.e. about 50 years old in 30 AD). Salome was one of the righteous women who accompanied Jesus and provided for Him out of their means (Luke 8:2-3). She was also later one of the myrrh-bearing women at the cross and at the tomb on Pascha morning (Mark 15:40, 16:1). Her son John was close to Jesus also; he leaned back on Jesus’ chest at the Last Supper and later referred to himself as the disciple⁹ whom Jesus loved (John 13:23-25, 21:20).

The location for these events was on the road going up to Jerusalem. Jesus had left Galilee and had gone to the area East of the Jordan (Matthew 19:1, Mark 10:1). Leaving the lowlands of the Jordan valley and climbing to Jerusalem, Jesus was leading the way (Mark

⁸ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, LXVI, 2.

⁹ See the study for the Feast Day of the Apostle John, September 26, for more details.

10:32), where many people were accompanying Him, including the Twelve, most of the Seventy and also the Holy Women. For Salome to “kneel down before Jesus” (Matthew 20:20), her stepbrother, she had to hustle on ahead of the crowd that was climbing the hill. To Salome, it may not have seemed as an unreasonable request.

Since Jesus defined what “glory” is by going willingly to the Cross, and since He has stated that we cannot be His disciple unless we take up our cross also, what does it mean for us to ask for “glory”? This can be a thought-provoking question! The servants (us) are not better than the Master! If we are willing to suffer for Him in some way, we will be glorified with Him.

Irenaeus of Lyon stated¹⁰ that Salome, in her request for her sons, could be compared to good, but immature fruit, similar to Abraham before he was tested. At this time prior to the Crucifixion, she recognized her stepbrother (Jesus) to be the Messiah and King of kings; and she recognized that suffering was necessary to partake of His glory. Her heart was in the right place even if her methods left something to be desired.

“‘Then the mother of Zebedee’s children drew near to Him, with her sons, worshipping, and seeking a certain thing from Him’ (Matthew 20:20). These people are certainly not void of understanding, and their words are very significant.”

“Sometimes virtue excites our admiration due to the occasion when it was shown. Refer, for example, to the premature fruit of the grape, or the fig, from which, during its process of growth, no man expects maturity. Yet, although it is still somewhat imperfect, he does not despise the immature grape as useless¹¹, but he gathers it with pleasure as appearing early in the season; he doesn’t consider whether the grape has perfect sweetness. Instead he experiences satisfaction from the thought that this one has appeared before the rest. God in the same way also, when He perceives the faithful possessing wisdom though still imperfect, and but a small degree of faith, overlooks their defect in this respect, and does not reject them. On the contrary, He kindly welcomes and accepts them as premature fruit, and honors the mind, whatever it may be, which is stamped with virtue, although not yet perfect. He makes allowance for it, as being the precursor of the vintage, and considers it highly as having a disposition more ready than the rest; it has anticipated the blessing to itself.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, our fathers, are to be considered foremost, since they gave us such early examples of virtue. Many martyrs rival Daniel and the three youths in Babylon, although the memory of the martyrs has not been brought before us so conspicuously as that of the others. Daniel and his friends were truly first fruits, and indications of the succeeding crop. God has directed their life to be recorded, as a model for those who should come after.”

“That their virtue was accepted by God, hear what He has declared, ‘As a grape’, He says, ‘I have found Israel in the wilderness, and as first-ripe figs your

¹⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus*, 55

¹¹ When growing grapes, some bunches ripen much earlier than the bulk of the crop. These can’t be used for making wine, because they will spoil before the bulk of the crop is ready for harvest. Because they ripened early, they don’t have the high sugar content necessary for good wine either. They are simply a precursor of the harvest to come.

fathers' (Hosea 9:10). Do not call the faith of Abraham blessed merely because he believed. Do you wish to look upon Abraham with admiration? Notice how that one man alone professed piety when in the world many hundreds had been contaminated with error. Are you amazed at Daniel? Behold that city Babylon, haughty in the flower and pride of impiety, and its inhabitants completely given over to sin of every description. But he, emerging from the depth, spit out the brine of sins, and rejoiced to plunge into the sweet waters of piety. With regard to the mother of Zebedee's children, do not admire merely what she said, but also the time at which she uttered these words. When was it that she drew near to Christ? Not after the resurrection, not after the preaching of His Name, not after the establishment of His kingdom! It was when the Lord said, 'Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man shall be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they shall kill Him, and on the third day He shall rise again'" (Matthew 20:18).

"These things Jesus told in reference to His sufferings and the Cross; to these persons He predicted His passion. He did not conceal the fact that it should be of a most ignominious kind, at the hands of the chief priests. This woman, however, had attached another meaning to the dispensation of His sufferings. Jesus was foretelling death; and she asked for the glory of immortality. The Lord was asserting that He must stand arraigned before impious judges; but she, taking no note of that judgment, requested as of the judge, 'Grant that these my two sons may sit, one on the right hand, and the other on the left, in Your glory' (Matthew 20:21). In the one case the passion is referred to, in the other the kingdom is understood. Jesus was speaking of the cross, while she had in view the glory, which admits no suffering. This woman is worthy of our admiration, not merely for what she sought, but also for the occasion of her making the request."

"Having been instructed by His words, she considered and believed that it would come to pass, that the kingdom of Christ should flourish in glory, walk in its vastness throughout the world, and be increased by the preaching of piety. She understood, as was in fact the case, that He who appeared in a lowly fashion had delivered and received every promise. Taking the Savior aside in a retired place, she earnestly desired of Him those things which transcend every human nature."

Ambrose of Milan made¹² a distinction between the request of Salome and that of her sons. Salome was only greedy for grace, and not for herself, but for her sons who had left her alone to follow Christ¹³. Jesus showed His tenderness by not answering His stepsister, but only answering her sons.

"Think of her who, with and for her sons, makes this request. It is a mother, who in her anxiety for the honor of her sons, though somewhat unrestrained in the measure of her desires. It is a mother, old in years, devout in her zeal, deprived of consolation. At that time, when she might have been supported by the aid of her able-bodied offspring, she allowed her children to leave her, and preferred the reward her sons should receive in following Christ to

¹² Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Christian Faith*, V, v, 55-62.

¹³ Salome was taken care of in her old age by her son John, who had been assigned the care of the Virgin Mary (John 19:26-27).

her own pleasure. When called by the Lord, at the first word, they left their nets and their father and followed Him.”

“She then, yielding to the devotion of a mother’s zeal, asked Jesus, ‘Grant that these two sons of mine may sit the one on Your right hand, the other on Your left in Your kingdom’ (Matthew 20:21). Although it was an error, it was an error of a mother’s affections; for a mother’s heart knows no patience. She was not greedy for money, but for grace. She thought not of herself, but of her children.”

“Jesus thought of the mother’s love, who comforted her old age with the thought of her sons’ reward, and though harassed with a mother’s longings, endured the absence of those she loved. The physician, therefore, ought not to wound a mother who has been deprived of everything, nor a suffering mind, with shameful reproaches, lest when the request had been made and had been proudly denied, she should grieve over the condemnation of her petition as being unreasonable.”

“The Lord, Who knew that a mother’s affection is to be honored, did not answer the woman, but answered her sons, saying, ‘Are you able to drink of the cup that I shall drink?’ (Matthew 20:22) For a mother’s feelings demanded greater tenderness.”

John Chrysostom focused¹⁴ almost exclusively on James and John rather than their mother. Putting this in context, there were many incredible things going on, and Jesus was asking a great deal from His followers. James and John saw themselves honored above the rest of the Twelve, and expected that they could obtain this request also; but they were not asking for anything spiritual. They thought that the Kingdom of God would appear immediately; because Jesus had told them that they would sit on twelve thrones, they wanted their thrones to be on His right and left. Jesus calmly refocused their attention on the wars, conflicts and struggles that lay ahead, and not on the rewards at the Second Coming.

“Jesus took the Twelve disciples aside on the road, and said to them, ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the Scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock, scourge, and to crucify Him; and the third day He will rise again’” (Matthew 20:17-19).

“He did not go up to Jerusalem immediately when He came out of Galilee, but first did miracles, stopped the mouths of Pharisees, and spoke to His disciples about renouncing possessions. Some things He said were”:

Goal	Means to Goal	Reference
Being perfect	Sell all that you have; give it to the poor	Matthew 19:21
Celibacy	He that is able to receive, let him receive it	Matthew 19:12
Humility	Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven	Matthew 18:3
Recompense here	Whoever has forsaken houses or family shall receive a hundredfold in this world	Matthew 19:29
Rewards there	He shall also inherit eternal life	Matthew 19:29

“They knew that He should die, but they didn’t know clearly the mystery of the Incarnation. They didn’t know clearly about the resurrection, or what He

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXV, 1-2.

was to achieve; and this was hid from them. For this cause they felt pain. They had seen some people raised from the dead, but for anyone to raise himself up again, and in such a way, as not to die any more, they had never heard of this. Of this death they clearly did not know what it was, and how it should come on Him. They were amazed as they followed Him; He seems to amaze them even by speaking of His passion.”

“So far were they from understanding clearly what He said, that the sons of Zebedee at the same time came to Him, and spoke to Him of precedence. ‘We desire that one should sit on Your right hand, and one on Your left’ (Mark 10:37). Matthew says that their mother came to Him; it is probable both things were done. I mean, that they took their mother (Jesus’ stepsister) with them, with the purpose of making their entreaty stronger¹⁵, and in this way to prevail with Christ.”

“For in proof that this is true, and the request was rather theirs, and that being ashamed they put forward their mother, notice how Christ directs His words to them.”

“But rather let us learn first, what do they ask, with what disposition, and why they were moved to this? They saw themselves honored above the rest, and expected from that they should obtain this request also. But what did they ask for? ‘Because He was near to Jerusalem, and because they thought the kingdom of God should appear immediately’ (Luke 19:11). For they supposed that this was about to happen, and visible, and that having obtained what they asked, they would undergo none of the painful things. They did not seek it for its own sake, but that they would escape the hardships.”

“Therefore Christ first leads them away from these thoughts, commanding them to await slaughter and dangers, and the utmost terrors. ‘Are you able’, He said, ‘to drink of the cup that I drink of?’ (Matthew 20:22) Let no man be troubled at the Apostles being in such an imperfect state. Not yet was the cross accomplished, not yet the grace of the Spirit given. If you would learn their virtue, notice them after these things, and you will see them superior to every passion. For with this object He reveals their deficiencies, that after these things you might know what manner of men they became by grace.”

“That they were asking for nothing spiritual, neither had they a thought of the kingdom above, is clear from what happened. They came to Him, and said, ‘We want You to do for us whatever we ask’. Christ said to them, “What do you want Me to do for you?” (Mark 10:35-36), not being ignorant, but that He may compel them to answer, and lay open the wound, and so apply the medicine. Out of shame, because they were under the influence of a human passion, they had taken Him privately apart from the other disciples (Mark 10:41). For they went ahead, so that the others might not see them, and so said what they wished. For it was their desire, as I suppose, because they heard, ‘You shall sit on twelve thrones’ (Matthew 19:28), to have the first place of these seats. And that they had an advantage over the others, they knew, but they were afraid of Peter, and said,

¹⁵ Salome, Jesus’ stepsister, was among the eight Myrrh-Bearing women at the Cross and at the Tomb (). These Myrrh-Bearing women also traveled with Jesus wherever He went for three years and bankrolled His three-year public ministry (Luke 8:1-3). Salome was also very close to Jesus’ mother; thus her request carried more weight than just their request.

‘Grant us that we may sit one on Your right hand, and the other on Your left’ (Mark 10:37); where they urged Him to command this.”

“Showing that they didn’t ask for anything spiritual, plus, if they had known what they were asking for, they would not have ventured to ask for so much, He said, ‘You do not know what you ask’. How great, how marvelous, how surpassing even the powers above! After that He adds, ‘Are you able to drink of the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ (Mark 10:38) You talk to me of honor and crowns, but I talk to you of conflicts and labors. This is not the season for rewards, neither shall that glory of mine appear now, but the present time is one of slaughter, wars, and danger.”

“By the form of His question, He both urges and attracts them. For He didn’t say, ‘Are you able to be slain?’ ‘Are you able to pour out your own blood?’ Instead He spoke of drinking the same cup that He drinks that by their fellowship with Him in it they might be made more ready. He calls it a baptism, showing that great was the cleansing the world was to have from the things that were being done.”

“They said to Him, ‘We are able’. Out of their forwardness they undertook it, not knowing what they were saying, but looking to hear what they had asked. He said, ‘You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism that I am baptized with you will be baptized’ (Mark 10:39). Great blessings He foretold for them. His meaning is, you shall be counted worthy of martyrdom, and shall suffer these things, which I suffer; you shall close your life by a violent death¹⁶, and in these things you shall be partakers with me. ‘But to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father’” (Matthew 20:23).

One might ask then who does sit on Jesus’ right and left? In Orthodox iconography, on the Icon Screen at the front of each Church, the Virgin Mary holding her Child is portrayed on His right, and John the Baptist is portrayed on His left. This may give us a hint.

The connection between glory and suffering for the Lord’s sake was very pronounced in the first few centuries of the Church, but this has lost some of its impact today. As an example of this understanding, we see at the martyrdom of Polycarp¹⁷ in c. 155 AD, an example of a man seeking to be glorified like His Master was. Just like at the Crucifixion of Jesus, many people were amazed at the events that occurred.

“They bound him, placing his hands behind him, like a distinguished ram out of a great flock for sacrifice to God. Polycarp looked up to heaven, and said, ‘O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of You, the God of angels and powers, and of every creature, and of the whole race of the righteous who live before you. I give You thanks that You have counted me worthy of this day and this hour, that

¹⁶ James returned from missionary work in Spain in c. 44 AD and was very outspoken against the Jewish leaders. They in turn incited Herod against him, organized false witnesses and a mock trial, and Herod beheaded James to please the Jews (Acts 12:1-3). John died of old age in c. 97 AD; however, he was beaten unconscious a number of times and left for dead, baptized in his own blood on each occasion.

¹⁷ “The Martyrdom of Polycarp”, Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna, 14-16.

I should have a part in the number of Your martyrs, in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption imparted by the Holy Spirit. May I be accepted this day before You as an acceptable sacrifice, accordingly as You have revealed beforehand to me, and now have fulfilled. I praise You for all things, I bless You, I glorify You, along with Your beloved Son, with whom, to You, and the Holy Spirit, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen”.

“When he had pronounced this amen, and so finished his prayer, they kindled the fire. And as the flame blazed in great fury, we beheld a great miracle, and we have been preserved that we might report to others what took place. For the fire, shaping itself into the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, circled the body of the martyr. And he appeared within the fire not like flesh which is burned, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace. Moreover, we perceived such a sweet odor coming from the pile, as if frankincense or some such precious spices had been smoking there.”

“When those wicked men perceived that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to approach and pierce him through with a dagger. On his doing this, there came out a dove, and a great quantity of blood, so that the fire was extinguished. All the people wondered that there was such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect, of whom this most admirable Polycarp was one, having in our own times been an apostolic and prophetic teacher, and bishop of the Catholic Church which is in Smyrna. For every word that went out of his mouth either has been or shall yet be accomplished.”

Jesus then asked James and John if they could drink His cup and be baptized with His baptism. In their youthful boldness (John was about 25, James about 29), they said they could, and indeed they did. About 14 years later, James was given a similar mock trial, complete with hired false witnesses to betray him. James conducted himself as he had seen His Master do earlier and even converted one of his betrayers, who was beheaded along with him. This is the James referred to in Acts 12:2. John Chrysostom stated¹⁸, “James did not survive a long time, but from the beginning he was so greatly filled with warmth, and so abandoned all the things of men, and mounted up to a great height, as immediately to be slain. Thus, in all respects, the Apostles, after these things, became excellent.”

John’s assignment following the Resurrection was to care for the Virgin Mary (John 19:26-27) until her death in the mid 50’s AD. For the 40 years after that, John got to drink his cup also. Many times John was mocked, beaten, and spit upon. After many beatings, Emperor Domitian tried to kill John with strong poison and by boiling him in oil. Jerome described¹⁹ this as follows:

“We may be sure that John was then a boy because ecclesiastical history most clearly proves that he lived to the reign of Trajan, that is, he fell asleep in the sixty-eighth year after our Lord’s passion (i.e. 98 AD), as I have briefly noted in

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXV, 4.

¹⁹ Jerome, “Against Jovinianus”, Treatises, I, 26.

my treatise on *Illustrious Men*²⁰. Peter is an Apostle, and John is an Apostle — the one a married man, the other a virgin; but Peter is an Apostle only, John is both an Apostle and an Evangelist, and a prophet. An Apostle, because he wrote to the Churches as a master; an Evangelist, because he composed a Gospel, a thing which no other of the Apostles, excepting Matthew, did; a prophet, for he saw on the island of Patmos, to which he had been banished by the Emperor Domitian as a martyr for the Lord, an Apocalypse containing the boundless mysteries of the future. Tertullian, moreover, relates²¹ that he was sent to Rome, and that having been plunged into a jar of boiling oil he came out fresher and more active than when he went in.”

When Domitian couldn't kill John, he exiled him to Patmos. There the priests of Apollo gave John 40 stripes, and a magician, Coenops, caused some deluded people to beat John so badly that he was baptized in his own blood and left for dead. In all this, both James and John held themselves up with humility and perseverance in the face of tremendous injustice -- just like their Lord had done.

Sitting On Christ's Right and Left

What does it mean to sit on Christ's right and left? And how is it determined who sits where, if anyone sits at all? Jesus had said, “He raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the age to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6-7). We might note that we “sit” and we “experience grace” in Christ Jesus, and not off by ourselves. But what does this “sitting” mean?

Jesus described what He would be looking for on Judgment Day: those who fed, clothed, welcomed, and visited the least of His brethren (Matthew 25:31-40). He is unquestionably looking at the works that demonstrate one's faith. Just prior to speaking of the Judgment based on works, in the Parable of the Talents, He addressed how some people will be rewarded in proportion to their works, and how they will become distinguished by their works.

Jerome, writing to the heretic Jovinianus, stated²² that there are many different mansions that are prepared for those who serve God, and they are awarded based on a person's works. Those who have “sinned but not unto death” (1 John 5:16) will be reduced to a small reward. For James and John to ask for a specific reward is not possible since the reward is based on their works, which haven't been done yet. Just as there are many mansions, so also there are many ranks among the citizens of heaven.

“The place and the mansions which Christ said He would prepare for the Apostles are in the Father's house, that is, in the kingdom of heaven, not on earth, where for the present He was leading the Apostles. He says, ‘I go to prepare a place for you. The mansions in the Father's house, each individual prepares for

²⁰ Jerome, “Lives of Illustrious Men”, Chapter 9, in Jerome and Gennadius, The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 3.

²¹ Tertullian, The Prescription Against Heretics, II, I, 36.

²² Jerome, “Against Jovinianus”, Treatises, II, 28.

himself through his own works rather than receives it through the bounty of God. The preparation is therefore not God's, but ours. This view is supported by the fact that it profited Judas nothing to have a place prepared, since he lost it by his own fault. And we must interpret in the same way what our Lord says to the sons of Zebedee, one of whom wished to sit on His left hand, the other on His right. 'My cup indeed you shall drink; but to sit on my right hand, and on my left hand, is not mine to give, but it is for them for whom it has been prepared of my Father'" (Matthew 20:23).

"If it is not the Son's to give; how then is it the Father's to prepare? There are prepared in heaven, many different mansions, destined for many different virtues, and they will be awarded not to persons, but to persons' works. In vain therefore do you ask of me what rests with yourselves, a reward which my Father has prepared for those whose virtues will entitle them to rise to such dignity. Again when He says: 'I will come again, and will receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also' (John 14:3). He is speaking especially to the Apostles, concerning whom it is elsewhere written, 'That as I and You, Father, are One, so they also may be one in Us' (John 17:11, 22), inasmuch as they have believed, have been perfected, and can say, 'the Lord is my portion' (Psalm 73:26). If, however, there are not many mansions, how is it taught in the Old Testament correspondingly with the New, that the chief priest has one rank, the priests another, the Levites another, the doorkeepers another, the sacristans another? How is it that when a description is given of the future Church and of the heavenly Jerusalem, the priests who have sinned are degraded to the rank of sacristans and doorkeepers; and although they are in the temple of God, that is on the right hand (Matthew 25:33), they are not among the rams, but among the poorest of the sheep? (Ezekiel 44:10-14) How again is it that in the river, which flows from the temple, and replenishes the salt sea, and gives new life to everything, we read there are many kinds of fish? (Ezekiel 47:1-9) Why do we read that in the kingdom of heaven there are Archangels, Angels, Thrones, Dominions, Powers, Cherubim and Seraphim, and every name which is named, not only in this present world, but also that which is to come? (Ephesians 1:21, Hebrews 1:5, 13, 1 Peter 3:22) A difference of name is meaningless where there is not a difference of rank. An Archangel is of course an Archangel to other inferior angels; Powers, and Dominions have other spheres over which they exercise authority. This is what we find in heaven and in the administration of God."

John Chrysostom stated²³ that no one is worthy to sit at the right and left of the throne of the Son of God, not even the Archangels. When this conversation occurred, the Twelve didn't understand how lofty Christ's throne is. What is prepared is an honor proportional to our works, such as the master of the Olympic Games awards to the athletes who takes first, second and third place. Jesus was a little obscure on these matters intentionally to prevent them from pressing Him, but also to avoid causing them pain.

²³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXV, 3.

“There are two points that many inquire about: (1) if it is prepared for any to sit on His right hand; and (2) if the Lord of all doesn't have power to bestow it on them for whom it is prepared.”

“If we solve the first point, then the second will be clear to the inquirers. No one shall sit on His right hand or on His left. For that throne is inaccessible to all, not to men only, but even to angels, archangels, and to all the powers, that are on high.”

“Paul puts it as a privilege of the Only-Begotten, saying, ‘To which of the angels said He at any time, Sit on my right hand?’ And of the angels He said, ‘who makes His angels spirits’; but to the Son, ‘Your throne, O God’” (Hebrews 1:7-8).

“How then did He say, ‘To sit on my right hand and on my left is not mine to give’ (Matthew 20:23), as though there are some that should sit there? There are none that sit there; far from it; but in His answer, He condescends to their understanding. They didn't understand that lofty throne, and His sitting at the right hand of the Father; how should they, when even the things that were much lower than these, and were daily instilled in them, they didn't understand? They sought to enjoy the first honors, and to stand before the rest, since they heard of twelve thrones; and ignorant of what that meant, they asked for the first place.”

“But for whom is it prepared? For those who could become distinguished by their works! Therefore He did not say, ‘It is not mine to give’, but my Father's, lest any should say that He was too weak to give them their proper recompense.” That is, He said it is not mine to give but it is reserved for those who deserve it as a result of their works.

“In order that what I say may be clearer, consider an illustration. Let us suppose there was some master of the games, and that many excellent athletes went down to the contest. Some two of the combatants that were most nearly connected with the master of the games came to him and said, ‘Cause us to be crowned and proclaimed’, confiding in their goodwill and friendship with him. He would say to them, ‘This is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared, by their labors, and their competition’. Should we condemn him as powerless? By no means, but we should approve him for his justice, and for having no respect of persons. We would say that he did not wish to corrupt the law of the games, nor to disturb the order of justice. Similarly Christ said this, to compel them, after the grace of God, to set their hopes of salvation and approval on the proof of their own good works. Therefore He said, ‘For whom it is prepared’. For what if others should appear better than you? What, if they should do greater things? For shall you, because you have become my disciples, enjoy the first honors, if you yourselves should not appear worthy of the choice? That He Himself has power over the whole is clear from His having the judgment. To Peter He says, ‘I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven’ (Matthew 16:19). Paul also makes this clear where he said, ‘After this the crown of righteousness is laid up for me, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing’” (2 Timothy 4:8).

“If He has expressed these things somewhat obscurely, do not marvel. The obscurity generates two effects: (1) He did not want them to be rudely pressing Him without object or cause for the first honors, for from a human passion they felt this; and (2) He did not wish to give them pain.”

Ambrose of Milan stated²⁴ that Jesus showed His tenderness in His response to (His cousins) James and John. While they may have been lacking in merit at that time, He gave them an opportunity to prove themselves.

“Jesus showed His tenderness for His disciples, whom He loved, saying first, ‘Will you drink of My cup?’ Since He could not grant what they sought, He offered them something else, in order that they might understand that the failure lay more in the equity of their request, than in the wish of their Lord to show kindness.”

“‘You shall indeed drink of My cup’ (Matthew 20:23), He says; that is, ‘I will not refuse you the suffering, which My flesh will undergo. All that I have taken on Myself as man, you can imitate. I have granted you the victory of suffering, the inheritance of the Cross. But to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give to you’. He did not say, ‘It is not Mine to give’, but, ‘It is not Mine to give to you’; meaning by this, not that He lacked the power, but that His creatures were lacking in merit.”

“Take the words in another way; that is, ‘It is not Mine, for I came to teach humility; it is not Mine, for I came, not to be served, but to serve; it is not Mine, for I show justice, not favor’”.

“Speaking of the Father, He added, ‘For whom it has been prepared’, to show that the Father tends to pay more attention to merits than to requests; for God is not a respecter of persons (Acts 10:34). Paul also says, ‘Whom He foreknew, He also did predestinate’ (Romans 8:29). He did not predestinate them before He knew them, but He predestinated the reward of those whose merits He foreknew.”

“Rightly then is Salome checked, who demanded what was impossible, as a special kind of privilege from Him the Lord, Who of His own free gift granted not only to two Apostles, but to all the disciples, those things which He had judged should be given to the saints. He did this without a prayer from anyone, as it is written, ‘You shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel’” (Matthew 19:28).

Ambrose also stated²⁵ that while we sit in the heavenly places **in** Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6), nobody sits on the Throne of God **with** Christ Jesus. The pure in heart will have the privilege to see Him, but no one will become like Him as He is enthroned on the Cherubim.

“We may think James and John’s demand to have been possible. When I read that the seraphim²⁶ stand (Isaiah 6:2), how can I suppose that men may sit on the right hand or the left of the Son of God? The Lord sits upon the cherubim,

²⁴ Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Christian Faith*, V, vi, 79-86.

²⁵ Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Christian Faith*, V, vi, 79-86.

²⁶ In ancient cultures, the king or the respected teacher always sat to rule or to teach. Everyone else stood when he was present. Ambrose was making an allusion to this arrangement.

‘You that sit upon the cherubim, show Yourself’ (Psalm 80:1). And how shall the Apostles be able to sit on the cherubim?”

“I do not come to this conclusion by my own mind, but because of the utterances of our Lord’s own mouth. For the Lord Himself later on, in commending the Apostles to the Father, says, ‘Father, I will that they also whom You have given Me be with Me where I am’ (John 17:24). But if He had thought that the Father would give the divine throne to men, He would have said, ‘I will that where I sit, they also may sit with Me’. But He says, ‘I will that they be with Me’, not ‘that they may sit with Me’; and ‘where I am’, not ‘as I am’”.

“Then follow the words, ‘That they may see My glory’ (John 17:24). Here too He did not say: ‘that they may have My glory’, but ‘that they may see’ it. For the servant sees, the Lord possesses; David also has taught us, saying, ‘That I may see the delight of the Lord’ (Psalm 27:4). And the Lord Himself in the Gospel has revealed it, stating, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ (Matthew 5:8). ‘They shall see’, He says; not ‘They shall sit with God upon the cherubim’”.

John Chrysostom stated²⁷ that we should consider not just the rewards Christ brings, but also from where He has raised us. This should motivate us to do anything for His Name’s sake.

“Paul had been speaking of the things, which concerned Christ, and these might be nothing to us; therefore he shows that they do extend to us, inasmuch as He is made one with us. ‘We, who were dead through our trespasses He raised up with Him, and made us sit with Him’ (Ephesians 2:5-6). Take the demonstration he cites both from former things, and from His Headship, and also from His desire to show His goodness. For how will He show it, unless this comes to pass? And He will show it in the ages to come, that the blessings are both great, and more certain than anything else. Would you understand how He has made us sit together with Him? Hear what Christ Himself said to the disciples, ‘You also shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the Twelve Tribes of Israel’ (Matthew 19:28). And again, ‘But to sit on My right hand and on My left hand is not Mine to give, but it is for them for whom it has been prepared of My Father’ (Matthew 20:23). So it has been prepared! And well did He say, ‘in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus’ (Ephesians 2:7), for to sit on His right hand is honor above all honor; it is that beyond which there is none other. This then he said, that even we should sit there. Truly this is surpassing riches; truly surpassing is the greatness of His power, to make us sit down with Christ. If you had ten thousand souls, would you not lose them all for His sake? If you had to enter the flames, shouldn’t you readily endure it? He Himself said, ‘Where I am, there shall My servant be also’ (John 12:26). Why surely if you had to be cut to pieces every day, shouldn’t you, for the sake of these promises, cheerfully embrace it? Think, where He sits; above all principality and power! And with whom it is that you sit? With Him! And who are you? One dead, by nature a child of wrath! And what good have you done? Nothing! Truly now it is high time to exclaim, ‘Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God!’” (Romans 11:33).

²⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, IV, v. 7.

True Greatness Means Being Everyone's Servant

True greatness before God is a study in contrasts. Being all-powerful, there is nothing we can do to impress Him except to recognize our condition for what it is. But doing just that is a major revelation regarding the true order of things. At the Resurrection, there is nothing to hinder Him from appointing the greatest of rewards to the lowliest of His servants. Thus, the operation of the Kingdom of God is not at all like the kingdoms of this world.

John Chrysostom illustrated²⁸ this by referring to the events where James and John asked for honor for themselves. After they did this, Jesus called the other ten Apostles over to explain that His kingdom does not operate like the Gentile kingdoms that they were familiar with. It is the humble that are exalted before God; and we must remember that no matter how much we humble ourselves, we can't do so more than our Lord did. This creates a series of opposites: the more we give alms and seek the last place, the more we will be rewarded and obtain first place.

“The ten were disturbed and troubled, but He soothed them by calling them together and by drawing them near Him. The two had separated themselves from the company of the ten, and had stood nearer Him, pleading their own self-interests. Therefore He brought the others near Him also, by this act, and by exposing and revealing it before the rest, soothing the passion both of the two and of the ten.”

“Now He checks them, but not as before. Before He brought little children into their midst, and commands them to imitate the simplicity and lowliness; here He reproves them in a sharper way from the other side by comparing them to the Gentiles. ‘The princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over their citizens, and their great ones exercise authority upon them, but it shall not be so among you. He that will be great among you, let this man be servant to all; and he that will be first, let him be the slave of all’ (Mark 10:44). He shows that a feeling of loving first place such as this is like that of the heathen. For the passion is tyrannical, and continually hinders even great men; therefore it needs to be beaten down more severely. He struck deeper into their hearts, by comparing them with the Gentiles, shaming their inflamed soul, and removes the envy of the one and the arrogance of the other, all but saying: ‘Don't be moved with indignation, as insulted. For they disgrace themselves most, who seek the first places, for they are among the last. Matters with us are not like matters outside (the Church). The princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, but with Me the last, even he is first’”.

“Therefore, He said, ‘Even as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45). ‘For not even at this did I stop’, He said, ‘but even My life did I give as a ransom; and for whom? For enemies! Do not be afraid, as though your honor were threatened. For however much you humble yourself, you cannot descend as much as your Lord. And yet His descent has become the ascent of all; His descent has made His own glory shine. For before He was made man, He was known among angels only; but after He was made man and was crucified, so far from lessening that glory, He acquired other besides, even that from the knowledge of the world.’”

²⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXV, 4.

“Do not fear, as though your honor were put down, if you should abase yourself, for in this way is your glory more exalted; in this way it becomes greater. This is the door of the kingdom. Let us not go the opposite way, neither let us war against ourselves. If we desire to appear great, we shall not be great, but we shall be the most dishonored of all. Do you see how everywhere He urges them by the opposite things, giving them what they desire? For why do you give alms before men: to enjoy glory? You must then not do so, and you shall surely enjoy it. Why do you lay up treasure? That you may be rich? You must then not lay up treasures, and you shall be rich. Why do you set your heart on first place? That you may be before others? Choose the last place, and then you will enjoy the first. So if you want to become great, don’t seek to become great, and then you will be great.”

John Chrysostom pointed out²⁹, “Let no man be troubled that the apostles were in such an imperfect state. For the cross was not yet accomplished, the grace of the Spirit was not yet given. If you want to learn their virtue, notice them after these things, and you will see them superior to every passion. With this object He reveals their deficiencies, that after these things you might know what manner of men they became by grace”.

Commenting on John’s behavior after Pentecost, Chrysostom continued³⁰, “Hear how this same John everywhere gives up the first place to Peter, both in addressing the people (Acts 2:14-36), and in working miracles (Acts 3). In his Gospel, he does not conceal Peter’s good deeds, but relates both the confession, which he openly made when all were silent (John 1:42), and his entering into the tomb (John 20:2-9). And he puts the Apostle Peter before himself”.

Eusebius, the 4th Century church historian, wrote³¹ that Peter, James and John, out of humility, delegated to James, the Lord’s brother, the oversight of the Church in Jerusalem:

“Then James, whom the ancients surnamed ‘the Just’ on account of the excellence of his virtue, is recorded to have been the first to be made bishop of the Church of Jerusalem. This James was called the brother of the Lord because he was known as a son of Joseph. But Clement in the sixth book of his *Hypotyposes*³² writes thus: ‘For they say that Peter and James and John after the Ascension of our Savior, as if also preferred by our Lord, did not strive after honor, but chose James the Just bishop of Jerusalem’. But the same writer, in the seventh book of the same work, relates also the following things concerning him: ‘The Lord after his resurrection imparted knowledge to James the Just and to John and Peter, and they imparted it to the rest of the Apostles, and the rest of the Apostles to the Seventy, of whom Barnabas was one.’ Paul also makes mention of the same James the Just, where he writes, ‘Others of the apostles I didn’t see, except James the Lord’s brother’” (Galatians 1:19).

²⁹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, LXV, 2.

³⁰ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, LXV, 4.

³¹ Eusebius, *Church History*, II, i. 2-4.

³² Clement was a late 1st Century Bishop of Rome. His *Hypotyposes* (or Outlines) exists today only in scattered fragments.

True Humility

John Chrysostom stated³³ that arrogance and pride are uncleanness before God. On the other hand, someone who quietly offers sacrifice to God, such as the fruit of our lips (Hebrews 13:15) or almsgiving, stands out as doing no small thing. We might consider the contrast of Pharaoh versus Abraham, pride versus humility, and how they were rewarded. Arrogance subtracts from what we have, but humility adds to what we don't have.

“Which is higher? He who acts as a priest to God and offers sacrifice? Or he who is somewhere far removed from confidence toward Him? And what manner of sacrifice does the lowly man offer? Hear David saying, ‘Sacrifice to God is a broken spirit; a broken and a humble heart God will not despise’” (Psalm 51:17 LXX).

Do you see the purity of this man? Notice also the uncleanness of the other; for ‘everyone that is proud in heart is unclean before God’ (Proverbs 16:5 LXX). Besides, the one has God resting upon him, ‘to whom will I have respect’, He said, ‘but to the humble and meek, and the man that trembles at My words’ (Isaiah 66:2 LXX), but the other crawls with the devil, for he that is lifted up with pride shall suffer the devil's punishment. Therefore Paul said, ‘Lest, being lifted up with pride, he should fall into the condemnation of the devil’ (1 Timothy 3:6).

The thing that is opposite to what he wishes happens to him. His wish is to be arrogant, that he may be honored; but the arrogant are the most condemned of all. For the arrogant are the laughing stocks, the enemies to all men, the most easy to be subdued by their enemies, the men that easily fall into anger, the unclean before God.

What then can be worse than this; it is the extremity of evils? And what is sweeter than the lowly, what more blessed, since they are longed after, and the beloved of God? The glory that cometh from men, these most of all enjoy it; everyone honors them as fathers, embraces them as brothers, receives them as their own members.

Let us then become lowly, that we may be exalted. For most utterly does arrogance abase us. This abased Pharaoh! For he said, ‘I do not know the Lord’ (Exodus 5:2), and he became inferior to flies, frogs and locusts; after that, with his own army and horses, he was drowned in the sea. In direct opposition to him, Abraham said, ‘I am dust and ashes’ (Genesis 18:27), yet he prevailed over countless barbarians. Having fallen into the midst of Egyptians, he returned, bearing a trophy more glorious than the former, and, clinging to this virtue, grew more exalted. Therefore he is celebrated everywhere, therefore he is crowned and proclaimed; but Pharaoh is both earth and ashes, and anything else more vile than these. For nothing does God so abhor as arrogance. For this object He has done all things from the beginning, in order that He might root out this passion. Because of this we have become mortal, and are in sorrows. Because of this we work, sweat, and labor continually. Out of arrogance the first man sinned, looking for equality with God. Therefore, he lost everything.

For arrogance is like this, so far from adding to us any improvement of our life, it subtracts even what we have. On the contrary, humility, so far from

³³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXV, 6.

subtracting from what we have, adds to us also what we don't have. This virtue then let us emulate; this let us pursue, that we may both enjoy present honor, and attain to the glory to come

Chrysostom also spoke³⁴ of humility as part of love for our fellow man. We show love to the poor and give alms in order to be closely knit together; we love our neighbor even to the point of martyrdom on his behalf. This is true humility; by doing this we truly love our neighbor as ourselves.

“Almsgiving has been enacted by God; God might have nourished the poor without this, but that he might bind us together in love and that we might be thoroughly fervent toward each other, he commanded them to be nourished by us. Therefore, ‘a good word is better than a gift’ and, ‘behold, a word is beyond a good gift.’” (Ecclesiasticus 18:16, 17 LXX) He Himself said, ‘I will have mercy, and not sacrifice’ (Matthew 9:13; Hosea 6:6). Since it is usual, both for men to love those who they benefited, and for those who receive benefits to be more kindly affected towards their benefactors, he made this Law, constituting it a bond of friendship.”

“Christ had said that both these belong to perfection, yet these without love are imperfect. In the case of the rich man, He said, not merely, ‘sell your goods, and give to the poor’, but He added, ‘and come, follow Me’ (Luke 18:22). Now not even following Him proves any man a disciple of Christ so completely as the loving one another. For, ‘by this shall all men know’ (John 13:35), He said, when He also said, ‘Whoever loses his life for My sake, shall find it’ (Matthew 10:39); and, ‘whoever shall confess Me before men, him will I also confess before My Father which is in heaven’ (Matthew 10:32). It is necessary to have love; but He declares that the reward is laid up for those who labor. Along with martyrdom He also requires love, which is what He elsewhere strongly intimates, saying, ‘You shall indeed drink of My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with’ (Matthew 20:23). That is, you shall be martyrs, you shall be slain for My sake. ‘But to sit on My right hand, and on My left, is not Mine to give’, said He, ‘but to those for whom it is prepared’. This is not as though any sit on the right hand and the left, but He means the highest precedence and honor. Then signifying for whom it is prepared, He called them and said, ‘whoever desires to become great among you, let him be servant to you all’ (Matthew 20:26), setting forth humility and love. And the love, which He requires, is intense; therefore He didn't stop here, but added, ‘even as the Son of Man didn't come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45). He pointed out that we ought to love even to the point of being slain for our beloved. For this above all is to love Him. Therefore He said to Peter, ‘If you love Me, feed My sheep’” (John 21:16).

The Apostolic Constitutions, an early Church document, describe³⁵ the character of deacons in the Church in similar terms to how John Chrysostom later summarized it as

³⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XXXII, 9-10.

³⁵ Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, III, ii, 19.

applicable to everyone. The deacons served in kindness, especially the infirm, on behalf of Christ, reporting to their bishop all who were in need.

“Let the deacons be unspotted in all things, as the bishop himself is, only more active; in number according to the largeness of the Church, that they may serve the infirm as workmen that are not ashamed. And let the deaconess be diligent in taking care of the women; but both of them ready to carry messages, to travel about, to minister, and to serve, as Isaiah spoke concerning the Lord, saying, ‘To justify the righteous, who serves many faithfully’ (Isaiah 53:11 LXX). Let everyone know his proper place, and discharge it diligently with one consent, with one mind, as knowing the reward of their service. Let them not be ashamed to serve those that are in need, as even our Lord Jesus Christ ‘came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many’ (Matthew 20:28). So the deacons ought to do also, and not to hesitate, if they should be obliged to lay down their life for a brother. For the Lord Jesus Christ did not hesitate to ‘lay down His life for His friends’ (John 15:13). If, therefore, the Lord of heaven and earth underwent all His sufferings for us, how then can we make it difficult to serve such as are in need? We ought to imitate Him who underwent servitude, deprivation, stripes, and the Cross for us. We ought to serve the brethren, in imitation of Christ. For He says, ‘He that desires to be great among you, let him be your servant; and he that desires to be first among you, let him be your slave’ (Matthew 20:26-27). He really fulfilled the prediction of ‘serving many faithfully’ (Isaiah 53:11 LXX). For ‘when He had taken a towel, He prepared Himself. Afterward He put water into a basin; and as we were sitting at dinner, He came and washed the feet of all of us, and wiped them with the towel’ (John 13:4-5). By doing this He demonstrated to us His kindness and brotherly affection, that so we might also do the same to one another. If, therefore, our Lord and Master so humbled Himself, how can you, the laborers of the truth, and administrators of piety, be ashamed to do the same to such of the brethren as are weak and infirm? Serve therefore with a kind mind, not murmuring nor mutinying; for you do not do it on behalf of man, but on the behalf of God, and you shall receive from Him the reward for your service in the day of your visitation. It is your duty, you who are deacons, to visit all those who stand in need of visitation. And tell your bishop of all those that are in affliction; for you ought to be like his soul and senses: active and attentive in all things to him as to your bishop, father and master.”

As another example of humility and persistence, the Church has chosen today to remember Mary of Egypt. She had lived the first 30 years of her life as a prostitute in Egypt, loving the lusts of the flesh and being driven by them. Coming to Jerusalem in about 482 AD, she was converted and went to live alone in the wilderness across the Jordan for the next 48 years. During this time, she had no human contact, was tormented by the cold and the heat, ate very little, and struggled to gain control of her passions. A year before her death, an elder monk, Zossima, stumbled across her in the wilderness and she told him her life story. She then asked him to bring her the Lord’s Supper the next year at the same location, by the Jordan River, which he did. When Zossima arrived, he observed Mary walking toward him across the Jordan as if it were dry land. Mary died that evening and was later buried by Zossima. Her life is a testimony

to us that it is possible to conquer the passions if we are humble and persistent. See Appendix A for a summary of the life of Mary of Egypt from the Prologue of Ochrid.

After the resurrection, James, John and the others remembered the Lord's words that conclude our Gospel lesson. Rulers of the Gentiles lord it over their subjects. However, the Lord said it should not be so among His followers. "Whoever desires to be great among you shall be your deacon (Greek: *diakonos*) and whoever desires to be first shall be the slave (Greek: *doulos*) of all" (Mark 10:42-44).

Appendix A

The Life of Mary of Egypt³⁶

The recorder of the life of this wonderful saint was Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem. A hieromonk, the elder Zossima, had gone off at one time during the Great Lenten Fast a twenty-days' walk into the wilderness across the Jordan. He suddenly caught sight of a human being with a withered and naked body and with hair as white as snow, who fled in its nakedness from Zossima's sight. The elder ran a long way, until this figure stopped at a stream and called, "Father Zossima, forgive me for the Lord's sake. I cannot turn round to you, for I am a naked woman." Then Zossima threw her his outer cloak, and she wrapped herself in it and turned round to him. The elder was amazed at hearing his name from the lips of this unknown woman. After considerable pressure on his part, she told him her life-story. She had been born in Egypt, and had lived as a prostitute in Alexandria from the age of twelve, spending seventeen years in this way of life. Urged by the lustful fire of the flesh, she one day got into a ship that was sailing for Jerusalem. Arriving at the Holy City, she attempted to go into one of the churches to venerate the Precious Cross, but some unseen power prevented her from entering. In great fear, she turned to an icon of the Mother of God that was in the entrance, and begged her to let her go in and venerate the Cross, confessing her sin and impurity and promising that she would then go wherever Mary led her. She was then allowed to enter the church. After venerating the Cross, she went out again to the entrance and, standing in front of the icon, thanked the Mother of God. Then she heard a voice, "If you cross the Jordan, you will find true peace." She immediately bought three loaves of bread and set off for the Jordan, arriving there the same evening. She received Communion the following morning in the monastery of St. John, and then crossed the river. She spent forty-eight years in the wilderness in the greatest torments, in terror, in struggles with passionate thoughts like gigantic beasts. She fed only on plants.

After telling her story, when she was standing in prayer, Zossima saw her lifted up in the air. She begged him to bring her the Lord's Supper the next year on the bank of the Jordan, and she would come to receive it. The following year, Zossima came with the Holy Gifts to the bank of the Jordan in the evening, and stood in amazement as he saw her cross the river. He saw her coming in the moonlight and, arriving on the further bank, make the sign of the Cross over the river. She then walked across it as though it were dry land. When she had received the Lord's Supper, she begged him to come again the following year to the same stream by which they had first met. Zossima went, and found her dead body there on that spot. Above her head in the sand was written, "Abba Zossima, bury in this place the body of the humble Mary. Give dust to dust. I passed away on April 1st, on the very night of Christ's Passion, after communion of the divine Mysteries." Zossima learned her name for the first time, and also the awe-inspiring marvel that she had arrived at that stream the previous year on the night of the same day on which she had received the Lord's Supper -- a place that he had taken twenty days to reach. And thus Zossima buried the body of the wonderful saint, Mary of Egypt. When he returned to the monastery, he recounted the whole story of her life and the wonders to which he had been an eyewitness. Thus the Lord glorifies repentant sinners. The Church holds her up before the faithful in these days of the Fast as a model of repentance. She entered into rest in about 530.

³⁶ Nickolai Velimirovic, *Prologue From Ochrid*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, April 1.