

## TRUE SPIRITUALITY: A NEW LIFE

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In the Gospel for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Matthew 19:16-26), the Lord encounters a man who poses the question to Him, “Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?” The simple answer of the Lord was that he should live a righteous life, obeying the commandments. Pursuing the Lord further, the man inquires of Him which commandments in particular he ought to obey. In response, the Saviour lists the commandments which every pious Jew would know. At this point the young man decides to open his heart to Christ and to speak on a deeper and more personal level: he reveals that he has been observing the commandments but senses that something is missing. He asks, “What do I still lack?” The Lord gives a three-part answer: 1) Sell your possessions; 2) Give the proceeds to the poor; 3) Become my disciple. The Lord adds that this is what the young man needs to do to finally become complete. Saddened by the Lord’s answer, the young man leaves. St. Matthew notes that the young man had many possessions.

Many people would be puzzled by this Gospel; why demand so much of a seemingly righteous man? The answer to this lies both in the question posed by the young man and in the Lord’s reaction to the presuppositions behind it. “What do I lack?” is a completely honest question, and the Lord is perfectly ready to accord the man a straightforward answer. This question, unlike the first two, gets right to the heart of the matter. The point is that, for all his good behaviour, the young man was still *incomplete*. His intuition had informed him that something very important was missing from his life. He was entirely correct. Unfortunately, because of the wrong assumptions he had about the spiritual life, he was totally unprepared for the answer he received.

For the young man, the spiritual life was a question of mastering a code of behaviour. He had done this successfully, and it seems that he might have been asking the Lord Jesus to supply him with another commandment which he did not yet know in order to increase the level of his moral perfection. A new rule ... a new challenge ... a new success. In this way, the young man could “perfect” himself, by going beyond the common level of good, moral behaviour to something more demanding and satisfying. The Lord, however, refused to answer him on this level, since what he wanted most from the young man was not a new good deed or a higher level of moral conduct, but his *whole life*. This meant leaving everything to follow Christ, and the young man, for all of his good intentions, was unwilling to do this.

This exchange between the Lord and the young man reveals to us the profound truth that a “religious” person is not necessarily a *spiritual* person. The spiritual person does not make the spiritual life a *part* of his life. Instead, through repentance, he gives, to the best of his ability, his entire self to God. How many times in our liturgical services does the priest or deacon invite the worshippers to “...commit ourselves and one another and *our whole life* to Christ our God”? The entire ascetic tradition of our Church with all of its disciplines (fasting, vigils, and so forth) can be seen quite simply as the means of

increasing our ability to commend our selves and lives to Christ's infinite mercy and love.

The young man in the Gospel had lots of room in his life for religious behaviour. He was even ready to do more of what he was accustomed to doing. What he was not ready to embrace was a new life, yet this was the gift which the Lord was offering him. It is the same gift which the Lord offers us in Baptism, Confession, Eucharist, and the life of prayer and asceticism. How sad it is when we view participation in asceticism and the sacraments as a means to retain our standing in the Church, or as a way to impress God, the priest, or our brothers and sisters with our religious practice! How tragic when we reserve the life of the Church – Christ's life – for Sundays, Feasts (if we are lucky) or other appropriately "religious" moments! All of this represents Christian spirituality's regression to religion and moralism.

This Gospel reading has a strong and direct application to Christians living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are living to a great extent in a "self-help society." While most of the self-help books and programmes are connected to diet, health, relationships, stress management and the like, one can now observe a movement towards including the religious dimension under the holistic self-help umbrella. "Spirituality," a word which has lost virtually all meaning these days, is in vogue again. People are meditating, discovering "lost spiritual secrets" and taking on various types of spiritual disciplines. Certainly there are some important insights to be received from the more thoughtful and serious proponents of healing and transformation in many areas. When it comes to the spiritual life, however, an Orthodox Christian encounters a problem immediately: much of what passes as "spirituality" in our contemporary context, if it is not overtly opposed to Christianity, is oriented towards self-improvement. What is unmistakably clear in the Gospel, however, is that Christ did not come to offer a better life, but a *new* life. While much of religion aims at renovation, Christianity proposes a new creation.

The young man in the Gospel sensed he needed new life, but when he was confronted with the necessity of leaving his old life behind, he could not bring himself to do so. He came to the moment of decision and did not choose life. The Orthodox Church teaches that we will have not one, but many such moments in our lives. We need to know that we will be tempted in these moments to substitute moral behaviour for true repentance, good deeds for genuine asceticism, religion for Orthodox spirituality, and self-improvement for death and resurrection. The Gospel encourages us to take the risk of denying "religious" substitutes for genuine spirituality and to accept the true life which the Lord gives us in and through His Body, the Church.