



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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Good Teacher, What Good Thing Must I do that I may have Eternal Life? Week of September 11, 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16; the beginning of Sunday's Gospel lesson)

This question posed to our Lord is one that few people ask today: "What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" Those *outside* of the Body of Christ either put off their consideration of those things which are eternal, choosing to pursue lives of comfort and momentary satisfaction; or, they adopt a world-view which denies the existence of God and/or His personal involvement in human life. Many *within* the Church also distance themselves from asking the question of the man who came to Jesus, thinking they already understand all things and do not have to ask Him at all. They think, "I'm not as bad as the next man or woman; I do my duty, pay taxes, come to church, treat my family and friends with relative consideration and care, and when I die, God will overlook my "minor" faults and allow me to enter heaven (whatever that is they cannot say) since I have not killed or stolen or done anything really terrible." So on the part of those both within and outside of the Body of Christ, they never come before the Lord honestly with self-awareness and inner examination to ask the vital question, "What must I do to have eternal life?"

The answer that Jesus gives to the man who came to Him is shocking, unless we understand why lies behind it. Jesus tells him to obey the commandments; the man says he has done so all his life (*Who among us can claim THAT?*). In response, Jesus tells him to sell all his goods, to distribute them to the poor and to come, follow Him. The man leaves Him, unwilling to do what the Lord tells him to do.

There is no one thing we can do to inherit eternal life; in fact, there are no things at all we can do to inherit eternal life. We misunderstand the Gospel entirely if we think that we have the ability to do or to say or to think any one or multiple things in order to inherit eternal life at all. Does God need our actions? Does He need our thoughts? No. He needs nothing from us at all. It is we who desperately need Him! The key to inheritance of eternal life, Brothers and Sisters, is to be united with Him in all things, so that every action, every thought, every desire is animated and motivated by the single desire to be His, to follow His example, to act and to do and to be as He acted, did and is.

The Holy Fathers of the Orthodox faith are quite clear about this. Salvation, eternal life, the Kingdom of Heaven where He reigns, is a matter of transformation; our union to Him in faith motivates a healthy life, Life Eternal, which bears the fruit of love, the fulfilment of all the commandments given by God to His people. We begin with self-examination, contrition, repentance, seeking reconciliation with the One Who is Health and Life and Love incarnate; then through our participation in the Holy Mysteries within the Church we grow evermore like Him in our thoughts, words and deeds. The fulfilment of the commandments comes naturally to those united to Him in faith; the care for the poor and the oppressed follows equally naturally, as St. Isaac of Syria so profoundly preached; a person united to Christ cannot bear the suffering of another, and mourns in compassion for all creatures, good or ill. This is why the answer to the man who came to Jesus strikes us as so radical. Who among us can claim that we have followed the commandments since our youth? Or that we have made our first priority the care and feeding and love to the poor? And yet, this is our goal. As our faith strengthens, so will our love for others. Only in Jesus can we have the Health and Salvation which IS Eternal Life.

Christianity is not a complex faith. The foundation lies in the love of God incarnate, Jesus Christ, the Life of the Word, our Savior and Redeemer. We become healthy and loving ourselves only to the extent that we strive to be united with Him, that we come before Him and receive those things that He offers only in His Holy Church. And as we pass from one glory to another, as St. Gregory of Nyssa taught, so do we grow eternally toward that perfection that fulfills the commandments and seeks in eternal prayer and actions the good of the other. May it be so for each of us!

Remember what the LORD has done for you! Give Him thanks and praise! *Glory to His NAME for all things!* Pray for me, His most unworthy of priests.

In Christ our true God,

+Fr. Elias

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