

Luke 13:10-17

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In today's Gospel reading we heard of the healing of a woman who had been crippled by an infirmity for some eighteen years. We heard how the Lord called her to Him and said, "Woman, you are loosed of your infirmity" and immediately she ceased being bent over, lifted herself up and glorified God.

Yet, as marvelous as this may be, the primary lesson of today's Gospel reading has more to do with what happened next, than with the actual healing. The primary lesson of today's Gospel has to do with the difference between keeping the letter of the Law and fulfilling the spirit of the Law.

We know the objection which the ruler of the Synagogue made to the Lord's healing. He cited the fourth commandment given to the Prophet Moses and the Israelite people in the Old Testament:

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. You shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger within your gates... [For on the seventh day the Lord your God rested]"

Yet, the objection raised was not motivated by a desire to ensure that the commandments of the Lord were kept, rather the objection was raised to discredit Jesus Christ as an innovator of the Law. This is because the Pharisees saw the Lord as a threat, a threat to their way of life.

When they saw Christ teaching, preaching, and working miracles, they feared losing their status as rulers of the people and they said within themselves, "what are we to do, the world is going after Him?"

And so the Pharisees plotted against Christ, but their plots failed for two reasons.

First, they were up against the Son of God, and as Scripture says, "who can stretch forth his hand against the Lord's anointed and be guiltless?" (1 Samuel 26:9) Who can fight against God and win? (Acts 5:39)

And second, because the Pharisees had clung so tightly to the letter of the Law that they had squeezed out every last drop of the Spirit. And by doing so they turned the life-giving commandments of God into the life-burdening traditions of men.

Let us ask ourselves, "Was it by chance that the woman in today's Gospel account was bent over to the earth, unable to lift her eyes to heaven?"

No, it wasn't by chance at all, the Lord allowed this woman to suffer this particular affliction to illustrate a point: the keeping of the letter of the Law binds one to the earth, while the keeping of the spirit of the Law lifts one up to heaven.

The Lord in healing the woman on the Sabbath, who was bent over for eighteen years, did not violate the fourth commandment but He fulfilled it, making it not just a day of rest from worldly cares, but a day of rest from worldly afflictions, not just a day of religious observance but truly a day dedicated to the glory of God.

As Orthodox Christians, the message of today's Gospel lesson is of great importance.

And why is this? It is because as men and women growing into our Faith, we sometimes fall into one of two extremes.

The first is legalism – the fulfilling of the letter of the Law to the point that we forget the Spirit of the Law. And the second, which is equally as dangerous, is the disregarding of the Law as something contrary to freedom in Christ.

As Christians we know that Christ did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. That is to make it life-bearing by energizing it and completing it with the Spirit.

Often times we hear people say that the only difference between Christians and Jews is that Christians accept Jesus as the Christ while the Jews don't. Of course, these type of statements, while helpful, do oversimplify things a little. But perhaps, if we are going to say this, we should also add that the Christian by virtue of the Holy Spirit finds true freedom through the Law, while the Jew, to whom the Spirit has not been given, is still bound by the letter.

Sometimes we forget that as Christians we have been called to this glorious liberty and freedom, for the curse has been annulled and we are being fashioned anew each day, being recreated into new men and women in Christ, no longer merely servants of God but adopted heirs of our Father's heavenly kingdom.

We are called not to be servants, who do our Master's will for fear that if we don't we will be punished. Nor are we called to be God's employees, doing His work with the hope of getting paid for it – for the hope of the reward. Rather we are called to be God's children, fulfilling His will because we love Him, imitating Him as a young child imitates its parents.

Yet at the same time, we know that we just aren't fully there yet. We haven't fully arrived at the love St. Paul speaks about in Galatians that is the summation and true fulfillment of the Law. We haven't fully reached the point where we can say that it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And for this reason we still need the commandments of Christ, we still need to be guided along the straight and narrow path of the Christian life.

Practically, what does this all mean for us as Orthodox Christians today? Two things.

First, we must be on guard against legalism – the fulfilling of the commandments of Christ and the guidelines of the Church in a Pharisaical way, as an attempt to justify ourselves in the sight of God, or as an attempt to separate ourselves from our neighbor, somehow distinguishing ourselves as the better Christian.

This type of mentality will only lead to pride, self-justification, envy, anger, and the feeling that we need to correct others, setting them on the true path. And furthermore this type of mentality can even lead, God forbid, to our separation from the community of believers and Christ Himself. We must remember that the word Pharisee literally means, “the one who separates himself”; this is why the early Christians had a saying that a Christian alone is no Christian at all.

And second, we must be on guard against the desire to cast away the Law as worthless, as something unbecoming a Christian. Our Christ did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it, that is to make it life-bearing by energizing it with the Spirit. This is why when He ascended into heaven, He commissioned His disciples not only to baptize but also to teach; to teach those called in His Name, that is us Christians, to observe everything which He has commanded us to do.

Brothers and sisters, the Christian life is about walking the straight and narrow, the “royal path” of moderation, not falling into extremes, one way or the other. This is why the Christian is neither a Pharisee, nor is he one who despises the commandments of Christ or the guidelines of His Church.

For the Christian, the one who lives according to the Spirit, rules and regulations aren’t life-burdening, on the contrary they are life-bearing, life-transforming, and life-transfiguring.

To be sure, the Christian sees the commandments of Christ as the way of self-denial, as the way of the Cross, but for him the Cross is neither a stumbling block as it was for the Jews, nor foolishness as it was for the Greeks; for the Christian, as St. Paul tells us, the Cross is the wisdom and power of God.

For the Christian, the Cross is the only way of life which leads to true freedom, freedom from self-love, freedom from the passions, and ultimately through Christ freedom from sin, the devil, and death.

And so, brothers and sisters, as we continue our walk through the Nativity Fast to the joyous celebration of the Lord’s birth, let us give thanks that we have commandments and guidelines to follow; commandments and guidelines empowered by the Spirit of God; empowered by the Spirit of God to set us free, to raise us up from our afflictions like the woman in today’s Gospel, so that with her we might give glory to God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!