

SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON
Repentance and Holy Confession
Epistle: 1 Cor. 6:12-20, Gospel: Luke 15:11-32

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, 12189, Feb. 16, 2025

In St. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians which we listened to today, we heard a strange adage: "All things are lawful for me.. Foods are for the belly, and the belly for foods." St. Paul is actually quoting a prevailing philosophy and attitude commonly expressed by the Corinthians of his time. He then proceeds to refute this attitude which is the exact opposite of what we believe as Christians. His purpose was to admonish the Corinthian Christians so that they would stand steadfast and not be tempted by the ungodly lifestyle which surrounded them. For you see, we Christians have a morality and way of life that distinguishes between virtue and sin and good and evil. Furthermore, we have boundaries that we should not cross. The Corinthian society was well-known for what Christians would consider to be a very loose and sinful way of life. More or less the citizens of Corinth believed that anything goes and didn't seem to practice any kind of morality at all. St. Paul makes reference to a particularly unChristian and widespread practice in Corinthian society — prostitution and fornication. It was so bad that throughout the Empire a new colloquialism developed, "to Corinthianize," which meant the same thing as "to fornicate."

The parable which we listened to today from the Holy Gospel is about repentance. Soon we will be entering Great Lent, which in the church year is *par excellence* the season of repentance when every Orthodox Christian will go to Holy Confession in preparation for the greatest Feast of all, Holy Pascha, the Resurrection of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ. Through Holy Baptism we are washed and cleansed from all sin. We are all painfully aware that it is impossible for us to completely preserve the grace and purity which we received in Baptism. We all know that we will struggle with the temptation to sin for our entire lives and that we will all sin from time to time. Although we are all called to be perfect, we know that no one is without sin except for our Lord Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother who preserved her purity and virtue. Since we are baptized only once in our lifetime, the Lord in His mercy has given us the Holy Mystery of Confession so that we may repent for our sins and restore the purity of our baptismal garment which we soil when we sin. The Holy Fathers call Confession a second Baptism. During Confession the penitent makes a sincere and heartfelt verbal confession of sins and the priest bears witness to what the penitent confesses to God. Our Lord gave every priest the Divine power to "bind and to loose," to invoke the Divine grace of forgiveness from our Lord Himself. This process of repentance goes back to Old Testament times when the penitent Jew would have the priest offer a sacrifice on the altar on the penitent's behalf. An essential component of this process was the same as we Christians practice today. The penitent Jew would confess his sins out loud in the presence of the priest. Instead of offering a whole burnt offering, we offer the bloodless sacrifice of the Holy Eucharist for the forgiveness of sins.

Confession requires serious preparation. It is important to sincerely penetrate and understand our inner state. We should try to investigate and understand the causes of our sins. After all, every sin in our heart has its origins, developing from one of our shortcomings or evil inclinations. Just as farmers try to pull up weeds from the roots, because if you only cut off the stems they grow back and destroy the harvest, so we should try to purify our hearts well and with good zeal uproot every sin from it. During the prayers before Confession, the priest reminds us that we should hide nothing, "lest we come to the physician and remain unhealed." We should not approach the Chalice with complacency but with remorse and a firm resolution and desire to abandon and change our bad habits.

Reading the Sermon on the Mount is a great way to prepare for Confession. This is a detailed explanation given to us by the Lord of what is expected of us in the New Covenant.

The bar is set very high, and there is no one who can read this with understanding and not realize that we are all unworthy sinners who sorely need Confession and repentance. The common practice is either the evening before or in the morning before going to church, in addition to our regular prayer rule, to read all of the Prayers Before Holy Communion which can be found in any good Orthodox prayer book. It is also necessary that after receiving Holy Communion we read or listen to the Prayers After Holy Communion. This is a requirement that is not optional. If we are frequent communicants, which ideally is a good thing, then in addition to the regular fasts of the church we keep a total fast from midnight the evening before until after the Divine Liturgy, unless we have medical reasons that preclude our doing this. We should always follow the direction of our physicians. Many of us remember when folks received Holy Communion only once or twice a year. It is wonderful that so many of us receive Holy Communion frequently, but it is not good if we don't properly prepare ourselves. If we choose to receive Holy Communion frequently, this is great, but this also means that we should go to Confession at least once a month and certainly during every fasting period. Remember, we all pray before receiving Holy Communion that it not be to our judgment and condemnation but for the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting.

If we have habitually not been preparing ourselves properly to receive Holy Communion, then now as we are about to enter Great Lent is the perfect time to fix this, so that our reception of Holy Communion "not be to our judgment or condemnation, but for the healing of soul and body, and unto life everlasting." Amen.

