

Luke 18:35-43
“The promised Land”

Then it happened, as He was coming near Jericho, that a certain blind man sat by the road begging. And hearing a multitude passing by, he asked what it meant. So they told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. And he cried out, saying, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Then those who went before warned him that he should be quiet; but he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be brought to Him. And when he had come near, He asked him, saying, “What do you want Me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, that I may receive my sight.” Then Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he received his sight, and followed Him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

In this account of the healing of the blind man of Jericho, as with the other accounts of Christ healing the blind, there is much, much more happening here than a man receiving his sight. As with the others, blindness is associated with spiritual blindness - which in turn is associated with the darkness of the soul or the health of the soul. That being the case, when we consider this healing account we must keep in mind what is really happening here is the healing of a soul of the darkness of passions. That the light the man will be allowed to see is the Light of the Gospel of John 1 as St. John Chrysostom (SJC) tells us, the Light that is the life of men, the healing of the soul that (comes into the world) to dispel the darkness, the disease of sin.

This is also the reason, SJC tell us, for the clear association with Joshua of the Old Testament (of which Yeshua/Jesus is derived), and the ancient stronghold of Jericho that God had to destroy in order for his people to enter into the promised land. What are the walls that Jesus will tear down? And what is the promised land that Jesus will lead them into?

Referring again to the Gospel of John, these walls of Jericho are unbelief and the passions that darken or blind the soul to the Light of God ...to the presence of God in His Light. That which is in man that stands between him and the Light. The ‘promised land’ then is the kingdom of heaven we talked about last week. It is the path of heaven within us made from the boulders of the passions that have been smoothed to stepping-stones of virtue – to the door of heaven that God has placed in all men. The door that is opened from the inside by God to those who knock with the knock of repentance. This is the promised land Jesus will take them to – will take us into. It is the vision the man will receive – the vision of the Light of men that can only come when the healing of the soul’s darkness takes place.

And since Christ is clear that the healing vision He gives to the man has come to the blind man because he has clearly prepared himself to receive his ‘sight,’ we must look at what he has done to prepare himself – that by God’s Grace we too will prepare ourselves in the same way.

First, he knows exactly *who* he’s speaking to and second, he knows exactly what he *wants*. That he knows without seeing Jesus who Jesus is, is seen in him crying out (or screaming)

“Son of David have mercy on me!” Using the title “Son of David” he correctly identifies Jesus as the King of which the great David was merely a representation. The Messiah.

And in begging him to *have mercy* on him, rather than asking him to pray for him or even heal him of his blindness, he shows he understands that the Messiah is God as well as man.

Because we have an external and legal, rather than personal and relational view of salvation and our relationship with God, we forget that the most basic element of relationship applies to our relationship with God in exactly the same way it does to everything else. And I say *everything* because it extends to not only people but also animals – all of creation. If we’re to have a real interaction, a real relationship, we have to know who the other (person) is.

Most of the unbelief and anger expressed toward God by people is not, in reality, aimed at God at all – but the god they believe Him to be. What so often is believed to be God ignoring us or withholding Himself from us, or treating us badly, not loving us – whatever it is – is actually the result of us asking the wrong person. We’re asking the person we believe God is, or need Him (or even demand) Him to be rather than who He really is.

Fr. Thomas Hopko gives a wonderful example of this in his conversations with people who don’t believe in God. He always asks them: “tell me about the God you don’t believe in.” They will invariably describe an angry and vengeful god - or an unfeeling and uncaring god. I love what he says to them. He says, “I don’t believe in that God either.” That’s not who God *is* - you have the wrong god.

Approaching Him based on what we think He is rather than who He really is, regardless of how we came to that image of Him, is like approaching someone and calling them by someone else’s name, or by wrongly assuming they are a particular nationality and speaking to them in a language they do not speak. The person, if they are honest and they want a healthy, true, relationship will have to tell them: you’ve got the wrong person, that’s not me.

True, healthy relationships have to be based on reality – on truth. Just as it wouldn’t be loving or healthy for us to pretend to *be* someone we’re not so we didn’t have to disappoint the other person; we must in the same way realize if we’re not the person they believe us to be we’re probably not going to be able to *do* what they want and expect us to do. And if we do do it, it cannot be healthy because it is not true. ...Being based on what they need us to be rather on who we really are.

It is no less true in our relationship with God. If we do not strive to know who He really is rather than who we need and want him to be, we will without fail be confused and disappointed at best – angry and rebellious at worst. Thus what confession, church we follow will by and large determine our view of God.

This is why the Fathers of the Orthodox Church fought so long and so hard for the dogmas of the Holy Trinity seen most clearly in the Creed we will say in a few minutes and faithful Orthodox say every day. They were protecting the knowledge of who God is because they knew if we became confused about who He is we’d be entering into a relationship with the

wrong person – the wrong God. If salvation *is* relational, as the Church teaches, then salvation lies in the balance!

This darkness of ignorance of not knowing who God is, is a darkness that has existed from the very beginning of man's relationship with God. And it is a trap the enemy has been using to ensnare us since the garden of Eden. Sadly, it is a trap we have been falling into since then. His temptation was not just to get Eve to do something wrong – the real temptation was to get her to believe a lie about God. He tempted her to believe God was not who He said He was – that He was someone else.

We see this same lie running through human history. People approaching God based on who they believe He is – who they need Him to be – rather than who He is. Then getting either discouraged or angry when He doesn't do what they want Him to do, or worse, blaming Him for things He hasn't done...And using those things that He didn't do to convince others that *that* is who He is.

Believing this lie will lead to a false relationship that leads to darkness rather than light. We see this so much in the world in which we live. Denying or being ignorant (as many modern Christians are) that God is three persons in one nature, that Jesus is true God and true man, is as destructive as the modern practice of calling God 'Mother' or 'supreme being' instead of Father – as Jesus taught us to do. In the same way, denying or being ignorant of the moral teaching of the Church seen in the Scriptures God gave the Church, is saying God is someone other than who the Church and the Scriptures say He is. It may be a god – but it is not God.

And ultimately, to not know who God is, is to not know who we are. When we are confused and mistake who He is we are confused and mistaken about who we are. As the Church has always taught: *to know God is to know yourself*.

But the blind man wasn't prepared for the grace of God's healing just because he recognized Jesus – as said earlier, he also *wanted* the right thing. If you haven't yet seen, you will see – that the consumer mentality does not end at the threshold of even the Orthodox Church door – let alone those that utilize the consumer mentality to attract people to their churches. People come to the Church, as with those churches (and 'cradle Orthodox' are no different), for many, many reasons. This has always been the case and always will be.

With the bar of 'happiness' now raised to the level of 'fulfillment,' the expectation of the average person – now a consumer – rather than simply having basic needs met (as it always was for average folks like us in the past), now has to come away fulfilled, without actually doing anything other than being there. Is it any wonder dissatisfaction, discouragement and depression are almost as pervasive among Christians as they are among non-Christians. We all know the statistics, a third of Americans are so depressed we have to be medicated to function.

Please understand, I'm not making light of depression – it is the emotional cancer of our age and if we're willing to listen, people every day are graphically showing us how horrible it is

by taking their own lives to escape the pain.

Speaking specifically of the Orthodox Church, at the end of the day it does not matter why you come, what matters is why you stay. If you come for the wrong reason; that is, anything other than to experience Jesus Christ in His Church and the healing of your soul, the Church will not meet your expectations and you will do one of three things:

- Leave ...Either to another confession or parish if you have that option in your city
- Work to change the Church – or at least your parish
- Work to change yourself through repentance in and through the Church

But as I said, what ultimately matters is why you stay. Tragically not everyone who stays does so because they have found their repentance and are trying to change themselves. They stay for as many reasons as they come and go. And lest we think only the really traditional parishes have those in them that find their repentance and struggle to change themselves, I'm reminded of a question many years ago I put before a Schema-Nun. I asked her how people could find God in these parishes that are more ethnic clubs than places of worship. She looked at me with love, knowing I was really trying to justify myself and said, "In the Church, no one can keep you from God."

If, like the blind man, you want the right thing, no one can keep you from God. It doesn't matter why you come, if you (at some point while you are here) find repentance and want the healing of your soul. If that happens you will remain – and you will not be disappointed.

Like the blind man on the road to Jericho, recognizing Jesus, knew exactly who Jesus was and what he needed – what he wanted. And what he wanted was to see of course, but more than that – infinitely more than that – he wanted to see God. And as StJC teaches, this is exactly what he got: the healing of his physical vision yes, but it was the healing of his soul, of his spiritual vision, of salvation, that Jesus gave him. This is why without question, without hesitation, his response was what our response will be with the healing of our souls: to follow Christ and glorify God – which is another way of saying to experience the kingdom of heaven.