

The wiles of the devil and the human condition,
and praying for those who are bent over, so that they would rise up.

27th Sunday after Pentecost, 12/10/2017

St Nicholas Orthodox Church, McKinney, TX

SYNOPSIS: The healing of the woman who was bent over for 18 years and the Apostle Paul teach us the two causes of sin - the wiles of the devil and the human condition. We should blame these, and not our brother, since we share the infirmities of our brother. If we learn this skill, we will pray with compunction and power for our brother (and ourselves): "Lord, have mercy on those who are bent over, and help Them to rise up". Luke 13:10-17, Ephesians 6:11 2017-12-10



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The wiles of the devil and the human condition, and praying for those who are bent over, so that they would rise up.

In the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

I want to tell you two things today.

One is a skill, and it will help you to not judge your brother, to walk humbly before God, and to be open to His truth. Without this skill, no one can make much progress, and the sad, terrible reality is that, if we do not have the skill, we do not even know what impairs our progress.

The second thing is basically an application of this skill. Along with believing in the true God, it is the only absolutely required virtue for salvation.

The skill is this. It is a way of thinking.

All that we do that is sin is because we think poorly, self-centeredly, ignorantly. The Epistle and the Gospel refer to the two main causes of sin, that is, our *weak human nature, and the temptations of the evil one*. The apostle Paul exhorts us to "put on the whole armor of God" in order "to stand against the wiles of the devil". In Luke's Gospel, the Lord explains that the reason that the woman had been bent over 18 years is because "Satan bound her".

The commentary of all the Fathers and the whole mind of the church understands that this woman's affliction, that is, being bent over, is an indication of our sins. I say our sins, because every time we read the Gospel, when we hear of a sin we must associate ourselves with these afflictions:

either that we are doing them,
or without the help of God we would do them,
or perhaps we are thankful because we have been delivered from a particular affliction of sin.

Never read the Scripture passively or without reference to yourself. This woman's sin is indicating our sin.

There is an important spiritual meaning to the length of the woman's affliction -- 18 years. Perhaps this might be a little bit technical for some, but if you think about it for a little bit, the explanation of the number is exactly what all sin does to us and the reason for all sin. The number 18 is the sum of 10 and 8. The Fathers say that "10" indicates the 10 Commandments, and by extension all of the commandments of God. Any sin is deficient in obedience to one or two or 10 or a hundred of God's commandments. The number 8 indicates the eighth day, that is, the life to come. Every sin is a sign of our weakness in fulfilling our purpose, which is of course is to abide in the eighth day, in paradise with God and in God.

Do you truly feel in your bones that you are also bent over? Do you have troubles, sins, bad habits? Are there things that are too big for you - a bad relationship, your own confusion or laziness, your inability to pray, read the Gospels or understand them? Do you have depression, or addiction, or sadness, or does your purpose and direction wax and wane? Those things are the human condition, they are being "bent over".

I told you I wanted to tell you two things today, with one being a skill, but I want to offer you now another skill. We must understand that every sin that we commit shows that we love God very little, and that we do not understand our purpose, and leaves us bent over and unable to see God clearly. *Every* sin: the little ones, and the big ones. If we look at sin in this way, we would increase our struggles, and we would not sin so much.

The Lord's explanation of why the woman was bound 18 years is critical for us to understand. This is the skill that I want you to learn. By the way, when I say learn, I do not mean just know it, like a fact. Probably you already know this fact. And probably, every day, 100 times a day, you ignore this knowledge like I do, and judge your brother, or are not empathetic or sufficiently caring, or perhaps are even indifferent, or angry.

This is the skill in a nutshell.

The ascetical tradition of our church, preserved among our monastics, is that when our brother sins against us, we are to not blame our brother but rather to blame Satan, and the weakness of the human flesh.

If we do this, we do not judge our brother, we are not angry with our brother, and we practice two great virtues. One is humility, because if we see the working of Satan in a brother, and we should be very aware that this very same Satan could work in us in the same way or worse. And the other is compassion, since we share the same human condition of our sinning brother, we should be moved to pray for him, as someone too weak to withstand all of the onslaughts of the evil one, an affliction we share with our brother.

Again, I want to tell you this skill because really important. When your brother sins against you, ***do not blame him***. Do not be angry with him. Do not judge him. But rather understand why it is that he is sinning. It is because of the ***weakness of his flesh and the wiles of the devil***. You share the same weakness with him, and therefore the devil could tempt you.

I will NOT tell you to not be angry. You *should* be angry! Your anger must be directed towards the proper adversary: the devil, and the weakness of human flesh.

The truly humble man understands the weakness of his flesh. If you are careful in reading our prayers, basically from anywhere – morning or evening prayers, Vespers, matins, the Psalter, the prayers of various holy fathers - they all confess to God the weakness of our flesh. If we believe this -- if we really believe it, not just in our head but in our heart -- then we will be humble and we will do that one thing that I mentioned in the beginning that is absolutely necessary for our salvation.

The Lord mentions that one thing, almost as a parable. He reacts against the judgment of the ruler of the synagogue, who by the way, was also bound by Satan to be spiteful – and this because Satan was very angry, because someone he had tormented for 18 years was free of his torment and he was lashing out at whoever he could who was too weak to withstand him. The law of Moses forbade almost every kind of work on the Sabbath day. The ruler of the synagogue tells the Lord that there are six days in which He could heal someone, but not to do this healing on the Sabbath since according to his impoverished understanding of the law this kind of "work" was forbidden on the Sabbath.

The Lord in answering him gives him an example. He says: 'thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and take it away to watering?' In another incident, in which the same foolish judgment was being made, our Lord answered even more explicitly: "Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day?" (Luke 14:5)

The teaching here should be clear. It is that **kindness makes its own law**.

Kindness which is only possible with love is the fulfilling of the greatest law, that the Lord presents as the greatest commandment and the one that is like it: to love the Lord our God with all of our heart and all of our soul and all of our mind, and to love our neighbor as yourself. Never forget that of all the laws that God is given this one that is most like Himself, and that is, to love others.

We must always be kind. There is no reason whatsoever -- no excuse, no set of circumstances -- that excuses us from kindness.

This is why I have said to you many times, and this because I am a sinner, and I am bent over, and bound by Satan because of my passions:

"If you cannot stop sinning, at least be kind".

The person does not establish the habit of kindness because of being told to be kind. He learns to be kind by learning that he is a sinner, subject to all of the wiles of Satan, except that God gives him grace.

You see then, how this skill that I told you about and this absolutely necessary virtue of kindness are related?

If we recognize in ourselves that we are capable of any sin, and in fact we have done many sins and still do many, and yet God has not abandoned us and continues to help us – then we -- out of gratitude to our Lord and our humble self-knowledge -- will naturally be kind to every man without prejudice.

When I read this Gospel some time ago, maybe a year ago, I composed a prayer that I say every day. I invite you to say it also. It is an honest prayer, evaluating people as they really are, but without judging them. This is the prayer:

“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon those who are bent over and help them to rise up.”

When I say this prayer, I think of the woman who had been bent over for 18 years, and also how I have been bent over for 59 years. By the grace of God, I have learned to stand up, at least in some important things. In other things I am still bent over. And those that I care for, being like me, are also bent over. This is a great tragedy, because it is not what God created us for. He created us to stand up.

Let us recall that we are all great sinners, and despite our great sins may God grant us that our hearts would be full of compassion for our brothers and would beg our Savior daily to help everyone stand up straight.

May God bless you and may God help you in all things. Amen.

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Ephesians 6:10-17 10 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. 13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. 14 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; 15 And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; 16 Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God:

Luke 13:10-17 10 And he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 11 And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself. 12 And when Jesus saw her, he called her to him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity. 13 And he laid his hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God. 14 And the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because that Jesus had healed on the sabbath day, and said unto the people, There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the sabbath day. 15 The Lord then answered him, and said, Thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering? 16 And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day? 17 And when he had said these things, all his adversaries were ashamed: and all the people rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by him.