

This is a very sobering Gospel reading we have this morning (reading can be found at the end of this entry), especially relevant to this "financial crisis" that our nation finds herself faced with (what's happening to all of our wealth?--is the commentary we hear constantly right now).

The rich man in the parable is already wealthy, he already has land and barns and goods. And this particular year the Lord blesses the ground, and his crops yield plentifully--he has more than he knows what to do with, more than he can possibly use or even store. So he decides to tear down his barns and he builds even larger barns and storehouses. His thought is only for his own ease of living--he'll have so much stored up that he can sit back for many years, take it easy, eat, drink, and be merry. But the Lord's analysis of the rich man's situation is this--"Tonight your soul will be required of you." And the question--"then whose will those things be which you have provided?" In other words, tonight you will die; now what good will all of these riches do you?

Our Lord is really hard on the rich both in His preaching and in His parables. But this particular man isn't censured because of his wealth, but because of his greed. Everything that he possibly can acquire, he keeps for himself. The saying is not money that's the root of all evil, but the love of money, the love of possessions (which really flows from the love of ourselves). Pride--the original sin. It's not that the rich man thinks consciously that he's better than everyone else, but that's how he lives; he's only concerned with his own status, with his own comfort and will. What a huge temptation this is for us. And this is the insidious way that pride gets us. Maybe our temptation isn't thinking we're God's gift to the human race (maybe it is). Our temptation, our struggle, most often, is that we live without regard for others. It's not even that we choose to ignore the needs or hurts or desires of others. We just don't notice them; we're so wrapped up in our own path in life, that we pass by other people without even realizing what we're doing. And in some ways that's even worse than the pride that puffs us up to think that we're better than everyone else.

Apathy, not paying attention and not noticing, is much harder to see in ourselves and much harder to address than a more severe manifestation of really any particular temptation, but especially pride. St. John of the Ladder has some magnificent words to help us see and dig out the pride hiding within ourselves (quotes from *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001). Firstly, a good reminder, a boundary definition for us all to remember about pride--"A most learned elder spiritually admonished a proud brother, but in his blindness he said: 'Forgive me, father, I am not proud.' The wise elder said to him: 'What clearer proof of the passion could you have given us, son, than to say, 'I am not proud?'" (Step 23.14)

St. John also writes: "If anyone thinks he is without attachment to some object, but is

grieved at its loss, then he is completely deceiving himself" (Step 2.11). If we're concerned about our material good or their loss, then we're in this battle of the rich man. This extends even to our will or our way of life, if we're grieved because others get in the way of what we want or how we want it, or whatever, then we're involved in this subtle battle with pride, our eyes are on us.

The struggle is subtle (pride is sneaky); St. John writes: "I do not know how it is, but the majority of the proud remain ignorant of their real selves. They imagine they are free from passion, and they only realize their need, lack, and poverty [spiritual] at their departure from this life" (Step 23.35). May God spare us from this blindness!

And finally, St. John (for our instruction, which helps us in the fight), he speaks in the first person, as the demons of pride, and they tell us where they come from and how to struggle against them: "We have neither beginning nor birth, for we are progenitors and parents of all the passions. Contrition of heart that is born of obedience is our real enemy; we cannot bear to be subject to anyone; that is why we fell from Heaven, though we had authority there. In brief, we are the parents of all that opposes humility; for everything which furthers humility, opposes us. We hold sway everywhere, save in Heaven, so where will you run from our presence? We often accompany dishonours, and obedience, and freedom from anger, and lack of resentment, and service. Our offspring are the falls of spiritual men: anger, calumny, spite, irritability, shouting, blasphemy, hypocrisy, hatred, envy, disputation, self-will, and disobedience. There is one thing in which we have no power to meddle; and we shall tell you this...If you keep up a sincere condemnation of yourself before the Lord, you can count us as weak as a cobweb. For pride's saddle-horse, as you see, is vainglory, on which I am mounted. But holy humility and self-accusation laugh at both the horse and rider, happily singing the song of victory..." (Step 23.37).

Re-focusing our attentions, moving away from this manner of living where we're entirely wrapped up in ourselves and the things going on in our lives, this is an essential movement for Christians. Remember the words of Christ to the rich man in the Gospel reading (he didn't make this move, and Christ said)-"Tonight your soul will be required of you, then whose will those things be which you have provided?" Whether we're laying up material riches, or simply following our own path in life, that final phrase of Christ's is just as powerful. What will any of that matter when we stand before the dread judgment seat of Christ? What good will it do us to have things, or have had the life that we wanted to have, if we fail to pay attention to the way that God would have us go.

Christ clearly tells us that a life not lived in the Gospel is a tragedy. And that's our struggle-to

put off the old man, and to walk in the light of Christ. To lay off the riches of the world, (and as our Gospel reading said), be rich toward God. As Orthodox Christians, our focus isn't supposed to be entirely on us; the first place of our attention belongs to God. And Metropolitan JONAH said it perfectly, when our focus is on Christ, when He occupies the first place in our attention and in our desire, when our goal is constantly "His will be done," then that solves our problem. If Christ is first, then I can't be wrapped up entirely in my own doings. And when Christ is my focus, then my brother and my neighbor (in the Biblical understandings) have incredible significance for me. We remember the words of our Lord, if you've done it to the least of the brethren, you've done it to me. We can see Christ in every face, but only when the desire of our heart is to see the face of Christ ourselves.

Let us use this time of fasting, the preparation for our Lord's Nativity, as a time to search our hearts and to begin to cleanse ourselves and ensure that heart's desire is firstly for our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

Gospel Reading Luke 12:16-21

16 Jesus spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully:

17 And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits?

18 And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods.

19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.

20 But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?

21 So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.