

In the Gospel reading this morning, we have a scene that's not so unusual for Christ in the Gospels. He takes pity on an ill person and he heals them; he has a run in with the religious authorities of His day. These things come together several times in the Gospels, and they happen separately on many occasions. Our Lord uses these confrontations with the leaders of the Temple to try and show them how they've come to worship the things of God's law, and they no longer care for the things of God. This morning He calls them hypocrites, and reminds them that they would help an animal on the Sabbath, so why not heal this woman who has been suffering for 18 years.

They've lost proper perspective-remember when Christ reminds them that the Sabbath is created for man, and not man for the Sabbath. The law was given for man's healing, but it had become a burden just as bad as the burden of their sins. Christ comes to release us from what St. Paul calls "the curse of the law," and we see that release most perfectly demonstrated in the choice to heal this woman's spirit of infirmity instead of following the man made law about what tasks could be done on the Sabbath. This release from the law was a great gift for the Jews - over time they had composed hundreds of religious laws that God's chosen people were supposed to follow in order to be "good Jews." The law had become a monster.

And the Father's have us read this Gospel (and others that are similar) to remind us that we now live under the law of the grace of Jesus Christ. We don't blindly follow rules in order to be good Orthodox Christians, we follow Christ. Now, this doesn't mean that there aren't laws and rules - the Church has canons, we still follow the 10 Commandments and the Beatitudes and the Gospels, there are still expectations of morality and norms of daily living. But it all has a new meaning in Christ.

We do face a constant temptation to become slaves of the law. The Church offers us a multitude of advice on many aspects of living as a Christian in the modern world. And it's a great temptation to turn the canons of the Church into law. Canon means rule, mean, normal - the Church provides us with guidelines for what should be the norm. We see this perfectly now, in the fast. There's a rule, or a norm, for Orthodox Christians during the Nativity Fast. But in Christ these norms aren't vicious laws that beat us down; they provide us with guidance so that we can discover the joy of being in Christ. If we're mired in sin, we can't see the light of Christ. If we're slaves to our own will, we can't see the light of Christ. So the Church helps us in discovering the joy of living in Christ.

The problem is, on many levels, we actually prefer rules. It's easier to be told what to do, than to have to decide what to do. It's easier to break a law and ask forgiveness, than to make difficult choices in the middle of battle. God has created us free; freedom, free will, free choice, these are difficult things to control, to learn how to use properly. But as Elder Sophrony was

known to say: the things we do in our lives as Christians have no eternal value if they aren't done freely. Our obedience to rule is meaningless, if it's forced on us from the outside. Our submission to others, to God, and to the Church, is eternally rich and transformative if that submission is offered freely and in love.

The Church reminds us of these things today, as we're in the middle of a Fasting season in the Church, preparing for the Nativity of our Lord. We even have this same Gospel reading (in some Orthodox traditions) on the Feast of the Conception of the Theotokos - through her person Christ comes into the world to set us free from bondage to law and sin and death, and to open for us loving communion with God and with each other. So as we prepare to do our rule of prayer in the evenings, or fast, or give alms, or even come to Church on a Sunday morning - we're not simply fulfilling the expectation of some rule written somewhere that Orthodox Christians are supposed to follow. As Elder Sophrony writes-“The essence of Orthodox asceticism [Christian life] lies in striving to make [the commandments of Christ] the one law of our whole temporal and eternal being...[our concentration is] on an effort to merge our life and will with the will and life of God Himself.”

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!