

SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON
Luke 15:11-32

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, 12189, March 3, 2024

We listened today to the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We were comforted by being reminded of God's limitless love and patience with each of us. When the youngest son left his father's house and squandered his inheritance, not for a moment did his father stop loving him, and he patiently awaited his return. When his son returned and repented, his father eagerly received him with open arms. God loves and treats us the same way. When we sin, He patiently waits for us to repent and return to Him as well. God loves those who believe in Him, and He equally loves those who do not believe in Him as well. Every evening before we go to bed, as part of our evening prayer rule, Orthodox Christians are called upon to make an examination of conscience. We take a few moments to reflect on the day's events — what we did, our interaction with others, and the words we spoke during the preceding day, which is now coming to an end. Acknowledging and recognizing the sins we have committed, we then ask the Lord for forgiveness.

Concerning the reception of Holy Communion, in as much as it is spiritually beneficial to receive Holy Communion frequently, no less important is it for us to go to Holy Confession on a frequent basis. When I grew up and while I was in seminary, I went to confession every week. That was the norm. In those days we were expected to go to confession each time before we received Holy Communion. Today, in the Clergy Guidelines of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America, it is recommended that frequent communicants go to confession at least on a monthly basis. We do not do this because God needs this from us. We do this because it is *we* who need this *for ourselves*. In addition, there are the fasting periods during the church year, such as the Dormition fast, the Peter and Paul fast, and the fast before Christmas, which are special times that are set apart precisely for intensifying our prayers, our fasting and other spiritual efforts, and especially in order to prepare ourselves for confession. In only two weeks we will enter into the most intense fast and spiritual struggle of the entire year — Great Lent. This is fitting, because this fast is a preparation for the greatest feast of the church year — Holy Pascha.

I should like to say a few words about the epistle which was read today. The Holy Apostle Paul makes some seemingly unusual remarks. He says that "All things are lawful for me" and "Foods are for the belly, and the belly for foods." Although he goes on to give a clear exposition of the Christian reaction to these sentiments, why does he say these strange words at all? Paul is not actually speaking from himself; these are not his words. These two ideas about "everything being lawful" and about "foods for the belly" were actually popular prevailing philosophies believed and often repeated by the Corinthians of his time. Therefore, in his epistle St. Paul is expressing two prevailing unChristian attitudes of his day, and then he proceeds to refute them from a Christian point of view. Ancient Corinth was famous for its debauchery. The world we live in today is very similar to the Corinth of apostolic times. In many ways we have even surpassed them by the contemporary immorality and perverted influences which surround and bombard us in today's world: critical race theory, mental health professionals encouraging young children to have gender altering surgery, Black Lives Matter (a hateful, destructive, anarchistic and avowedly Marxist group), the stifling and censorship of free academic discourse on the campuses of what used to be our greatest universities, being taught that there is no such thing as only two genders but that we can choose any gender or "pronoun" that we like, transvestites serving at the highest level of government, to name a few. I can't emphasize enough how serious and unprecedented the times are that we are living in today.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, the famous Russian writer, was once arrested in his lifetime and sentenced to be executed. The crime he supposedly committed was sedition against the

monarchy and the Orthodox Church. He was actually innocent, but the judge did not believe his sincerity and he was convicted based on hearsay. Tsar Nicholas I himself personally planned a mock execution for Dostoevsky and nineteen other convicts who were sentenced for the same crime. They weren't informed that they were sentenced to death until right before the sentence was to be carried out. The Emperor planned it out ahead of time that at the last moment he would grant them "a most merciful pardon" as they all stood blindfolded, tied to posts and faced a firing squad, waiting to be shot. They were then told that their sentences would be reduced to various years of penal servitude (hard labor). Dostoevsky himself received the sentence of eight years of hard labor in Siberia. This cruel Tsar thought that this was a good way to teach each of them a lesson and at the same time put fear into anyone else who harbored any plans of revolution. One of the convicts lost his mind because of this nerve shattering charade and remained mentally ill the rest of his life. Dostoevsky himself suffered nightmares and trauma for the rest of his life. Here is a quote from Dostoevsky's novel "The Idiot," where he expresses some of his actual thoughts (through the lips of one of his characters) when he was expecting to die by firing squad. It was before the pardon was announced, and he had just been informed that he only had five minutes left to live:

" nothing was more oppressive for him at that moment than the constant thought: 'What if I were not to die! What if life were given back to me — what infinity! And it would all be mine! Then I'd turn each minute into a whole age, I'd lose nothing, I'd reckon up every minute separately, I'd let nothing be wasted!'"

The message here is that every moment of life is a very precious gift and that we should not squander even one minute of it. The prodigal son chose to squander his life but later he repented. Likewise, let us not squander the gift and precious time of Great Lent, but use it to grow spiritually, and to make a serious repentance for our sins. Let us practice Lent prudently and wisely, and let us make the most of it. May God bless and help us in this sacred task, and may we all keep a good Lent. Amen



The Return of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt van Rijn