

SUNDAY AFTER THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD
“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”
Matthew 4:12-17

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
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“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” With these words the forerunner St. John the Baptist began his preaching in the Judean desert. It is not without reason that the Lord began his ministry by preaching these very same words (Matt. 4:17, Mark 1:14). The essential theme of the preaching of both St. John and our Lord Jesus Christ is repentance. From the moment we are baptized, Christians are called to lead a life of repentance. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that *everything* we do as Christians is connected in one way or another with repentance. First of all, we participate in the Holy Mystery of Confession, where we verbalize our sins in the presence of the priest, and ask the Lord for forgiveness. We are taught that a major gift from God, when we properly prepare with repentance, prayer and fasting before approaching the Holy Mysteries of Unction and Holy Communion, is that we receive the forgiveness of our sins. We are taught by the Holy Fathers that when we practice almsgiving (or “mercy-giving”) a multitude of our sins are covered. The very words of one of the main prayers of the Orthodox Christian, the Jesus prayer, are words of repentance: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” Along these same lines, the major prayer which runs like a thread throughout all of the Divine services of the Orthodox Church is to ask the Lord for mercy: “Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy...”

What is sin, and why is repentance so important? In his short catechism Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev defines sin as “any deviation by man from the moral law established by God from the purpose for which God intended for him.”¹ Sin separates man from God and leads to spiritual death. Sin enslaves people and makes them dependent on sinful habits and inclinations. Sins are interconnected. Just like one particular physical illness of the body can lead to symptoms and illness in other parts of the body, so it is the same with the spiritual illness we call sin. For example, the Holy Fathers teach us that judging others leads to carnal sins. If we cleanse ourselves of the habit of judging others, then it becomes possible to eradicate the obsession and addiction to sins of the flesh. Sins are many and diversified: gluttony, pride, anger, drunkenness, addiction to narcotics or alcohol, and jealousy, to name a few. The apostle James teaches us that “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desires. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death” (James 1:14-15).

What is the purpose of life? St. Seraphim of Sarov teaches us that the goal of life is to acquire the Holy Spirit. ² Certainly we receive the Holy Spirit when we are baptized and when we participate in the Holy Mysteries of the Church. However, the degree to which the Holy Spirit fills our hearts and our very being varies from one person to another. The saints of the Church to whom we pray and who we depict in the icons overflowed with the Holy Spirit to a magnanimous degree. This occurred through a life long process of repentance and waging the invisible spiritual battle to resist temptation, which resulted in cleansing from the various passions and sins that afflict mankind. These holy ones, in their struggles, drew their strength by calling on God for help in prayer, by faith, by fasting, by frequently confessing their sins and their thoughts to their elders, and by daily nourishing themselves by reading Holy Scripture, the Word of God.

The Son of God did not come into the world to condemn mankind but to bring spiritual healing, deliverance from sin, and salvation. “I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world” (John 13:47). Likewise, it is not the Church’s task to condemn and berate people for their sins, but to help them recognize them, and to be healed from them. The medicine for healing from sin is **repentance**. There are no sins which cannot be healed by repentance. In Matthew 12:31 our Lord says that all sins can be forgiven except for blasphemy against the

Holy Spirit. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is usually understood as a stubborn rejection of the will of God, deliberate conflict with God, and not wanting to repent and correct oneself. In my pastoral work as a priest, I was once called upon by a pious family to visit a young family member who was dying in the hospital. This man did not go to church and I did not know him personally, but apparently he had been baptized in my parish as an infant. When I came to him in the hospital, he adamantly refused and rejected my prayers and my offer to hear his confession. He refused to receive Holy Unction and Holy Communion. God does not force Himself on anyone, and neither does the Church nor I. The Lord knocks on the door of our hearts and offers us salvation and eternal life. It is up to us to respond and to open the door. Respecting the free will that God has given us, it is up to us to choose how we will use this awesome responsibility. Even if we open the door just a little, God will do wondrous things and do whatever He can to help us save our souls. It is very sad when someone keeps the door tightly shut.

We are living in an age when talking about sin is not fashionable. Part of the lyrics of a song that was released in 1977 are “do what you wanna do, go where you wanna go, don’t let anyone tell you what to do, and be your own judge and jury too.” These words are the anthem of the modern age. Naturally this is the opposite of Christianity. Christians try to follow the teachings of God, and God is the judge and jury. Let us be strong enough to step out of the mold of the modern age. Let us open our hearts to God. Sodom and Gomorrah were the epitome of moral decadence. When Lot and his wife fled from this region, an angel of the Lord warned them not to look back. Lot’s wife did not heed the angel’s warning. She looked back and turned into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26). Let us remember Lot’s wife and resist the temptation to look back and to consider succumbing to the philosophy of the modern age. There is another song called “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize”, which is based on a gospel song called “Keep Your Hand on the Plow.” Let us keep our hands on the plow, and let us keep our eyes on the prize which is Christ and salvation. Let our anthem be to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Amen.

1. “Катехизис. Краткий путеводитель по православному веру.” Митрополит Иларион Алфеев. Издательский дом “познание”, 2018, стр. 150, *passim*. “Catechism. A Short Guide to the Orthodox Faith” by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev. Unpublished and unofficial English translation by Archpriest Peter Olsen. Page 70, *passim*.
2. “A Conversation of Saint Seraphim of Sarov with NA Motovilov,” Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, NY, 1962.

