

JESUS HEALS A CRIPPLED WOMAN
Repentance — the Recovery After Illness
Luke 13:10-17

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All of us carry various burdens in our lives. Added together, they are enough to bow us down to the ground like the crippled woman in today's Gospel. Some common burdens are worrying about how to pay our bills, or being oppressed by a severe illness, or being a caregiver and worrying about a relative or friend in grievous circumstances. Another reason that we may feel hunched over and bowed down to the ground is that no matter how hard we struggle, we may feel that we cannot live the way a Christian is supposed to live. Perhaps we feel that God's expectations of us are beyond our capabilities. Perhaps we have sins for which we repent, but no matter how hard we try, somehow we cannot free ourselves, and we continuously repeat the same sins over and over again. We think that we are failures, and this leads us to fall into despair, depression and hopelessness. Even though we go to Confession, we allow our sins to push our noses down into the ground. When we allow ourselves to become bowed down, all we can see is the ground and nothing else. God, however, does not want us to perish because of the feeling of the heaviness of our sins. He does not want us to be bowed down to the ground or to be filled with hopelessness and despair. There is a whole world around us filled with bright and good things. There is light in the darkness, and above all of this there is Heaven. We can only see these things if we stand up straight. No one is worthy of God, and the grace and blessings of God are always a gift. Don't we all pray before we receive Holy Communion that God came into the world to save sinners of whom we are the first? Is this only hyperbole, or do we really believe it? We *all* should believe it. But that does not mean that as a result we should allow ourselves to fall into despair and depression.

Having healed the crippled woman who was bent down to the ground, this demonstrates that the Lord waits for all of us to stand up straight to our full height, as the Apostle Paul says, "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). We must remember that no sin, no matter how great, is greater than the mercy of God. St. Isaac the Syrian writes that our sins are like grains of sand which are cast into the ocean of God's mercy, where they disappear without a trace.

The Church gives us the opportunity to focus not on ourselves but on God, to reorient our attention away from ourselves and our personal problems and to focus instead on the Kingdom of God, with which we can have real contact and be a part of, even while still on this earth. Despite all of our sins, despite our inability to rise to the level at which a Christian should live, despite the fact that we find ourselves unable to fulfill the commandments of Christ, which, as it seems to us, exceed our strength - despite all this, we still have the opportunity to constantly be spiritually renewed here in the Church, through the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, through prayer, and through worship in the Divine services.

The Church gives us new strength so that we grow spiritually, ascend "from strength to strength," straightening up more and more, remembering less and less about earth, turning more and more to Heaven. The closer a person is to God, the more he feels his sinfulness, but at the same time the feeling of God's closeness increases in him. And then repentance turns into joy — like recovery after a long illness, like straightening up after many years of suffering the ugliness of being hunched and bent over. Let us walk together with Christ and together with each other on the straight path, not stopping for a day, not for an hour, not for a minute. Having put our hands to the plough, may we never look back, but struggle day and night, always loving and trusting in God. May we ascend to the abodes of the Kingdom of Heaven, where there is enough room for each of us, if only we become worthy of God. Amen. (Based on a sermon by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev).