

SUNDAY OF THE PARALYTIC
John 5:1-15
Regard No Man as Common or Unclean

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
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The final commission that our Savior gave to His disciples before His glorious Ascension was to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). However, our Savior's plan to draw all men into His net, the ark of salvation, was done in stages. Until His death, Jesus limited His ministry to the children of Israel. There were some exceptions, such as the Canaanite woman, but even to her the Lord said: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). He had already laid down the same limits when sending the Apostles on their mission: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:5). This reserve was not absolute or final. It was only after His death on the Cross that His ministry would be extended to the Gentiles and all the nations ("when I am lifted up from the earth, [I] will draw all men to myself" {John 12:32}). We see, for example, the Gentiles already being drawn to Christ through the Cross when the centurion and those who were with him keeping guard were filled with awe and exclaimed, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Matt. 27:54).

The early Church, however, did not immediately see their mission as extending to the Gentiles. They continued to focus their ministry to the Jews. Gentile converts were required to become circumcised and essentially follow the Laws and traditions of Judaism. Initially it was the Apostle Paul to whom Jesus revealed the mission to the Gentiles. It was Paul who understood that converts to faith in Jesus Christ should not be required to convert to Judaism. We can see this break become more apparent in the great city of Antioch. As a result of renewed persecutions, the importance of Jerusalem as the center of the Church began to diminish. Antioch grew in prestige as a result of the huge number of converts to Christianity. It was Antioch and not Jerusalem which was the home base of the Apostle Paul. It was in Antioch where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. In Acts 10:9-16 we read the account of a vision experienced by the Apostle Peter. The vision is repeated three times. Through this vision the Lord reveals to Peter the extension of the Christian mission to the Gentiles. In other words, the ministry of the Apostles should not be exclusively directed to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel," but to *all mankind*. Using the kosher laws of clean and unclean animals as a metaphor, the Lord reveals to Peter that he should regard no man as common or unclean (Acts 10:28). At the same time that Peter had his revelation from the Lord, a pious gentile centurion named Cornelius, who was inclined towards the faith of the Jews, also had a vision, in which an angel commanded him to send for the Apostle Peter. Peter responded to Cornelius' summons, and taking some of the disciples with him, went to the house of Cornelius. Peter preached the word to them, and Peter and those with him were amazed when they witnessed Cornelius and his household become filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. It was now that Peter finally understood and was able to say that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him" (Acts 10:34-35). Peter declared, "Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47). And then Cornelius and his household were baptized.

St. Athanasius the Great, in speaking about the Incarnation, wrote that the Lord came to restore life back to the world. This great father did not infer that the mission to restore life was intended for only part of the world, but for the entire world and all mankind. The redemptive plan of Christian theology saves all humanity, and calls all nations to share the inheritance and make them into members of the body of Christ. The extension of this understanding is that we all share a common mission as Christians to spread the Good News and to draw others into the net of Christ. The Apostles did not keep their faith a secret. St. Paul spent the better part

of his life traveling around the world preaching the Christian faith and establishing churches everywhere he went. *All Christians have an apostolic calling.* We are all called, in our own humble way, to utilize the talents and gifts that God has given us. It is amazing how many people today have no clue who Jesus Christ was, what He did, and do not even have the most basic and rudimentary knowledge of what Christianity is all about. Isn't an organization judged by the conduct of its members? We do not have to be theologians in order to spread the Word of God. All of us have the high calling to *live our faith*, and this way of evangelizing is much more potent than flowery speech or rhetoric. If we order and live our lives according to Christ, then through the example of our lives people will be drawn to the Lord. The opposite is also true. If we call ourselves Christians but we do not live or act like Christians, then people will become scandalized and instead be tempted to turn away from Christ. Metropolitan Philip Saliba used to say that Orthodoxy is the best kept secret in America. Let each of us make it our mission to help in our own humble way to share this secret. There is no greater gift or act of love that we can offer our neighbor than to offer an invitation to share in our joy and hope in Christ. Amen. Christ is Risen!



St. Paul preaching in Athens