

SUNDAY OF THE PARALYTIC, MAY 15, 2022
John 5:1-15

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In the Holy Gospel today we heard the account of the healing performed by Jesus of a paralytic by the Sheep's Pool in Bethesda. During the earliest days of Christian history, when the Holy Apostles were just beginning to spread the Word of God, catechize and baptize new Christians, and the first Christian churches were being established, the Apostles performed many miracles. They performed much the same miracles which were performed by our Savior Jesus Christ Himself. In the name of Jesus Christ they healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead. We can read about many of these miracles in the Book of Acts. The ill were even healed just by coming into contact with the Apostle Peter's shadow (Acts 5:15). In Matthew 9:20-22 we read about a woman who was hemorrhaging and was healed by just touching the hem of Jesus' garment. Similarly, the sick and the possessed were healed by just coming into contact with handkerchiefs and aprons which belonged to the Apostle Paul (Acts 19:11-12). The miracles performed by the Apostles were not few and isolated instances, but in fact the opposite, the Apostles performed many, many miracles during their ministry. Again, this was the same as it was during the ministry of our Savior, who was constantly healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. In addition to God's mercy and compassion, St. Nektarios of Pentapolis writes that the Apostles performed these miracles to help people to be drawn into the Christian faith by witnessing with their own eyes the astounding power of God entrusted to the Apostles when they invoked the name of Jesus Christ. It was a means to help draw people into the saving ark of the Church. This begs the question: do such miracles occur today, and if not, then why not?

First of all, I would say that the Church of today is the same Church which existed in Apostolic times. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Furthermore, the same Holy Spirit which descended on the disciples on Pentecost is the same Holy Spirit which is working in the Church today. Christian writers have recorded and preserved volumes of biographies of an innumerable "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1), venerable saints who healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead. For example, there is St. Nektarios, the so-called "Saint of our Century," who reposed in 1920 in a hospital in Athens. After his death, when his body was being undressed, his undershirt was placed on the bed next to him. Laying in that bed was a man who had been in an accident and was now paralyzed. Immediately after St. Nektarios' garment was placed on the bed, the paralytic was miraculously healed. He who had formerly been paralyzed was now able to stand up and walk. The nun and nurse who were in the room and witnessed this miracle were astounded. A more recent saint is the venerable Archbishop John Maximovitch, who reposed in 1966. An entire chronicle has been compiled which describes the multitude of miracles which he performed in his lifetime. Not recorded in the chronicles are the many more miracles which are unknown to us. When the saint's holy relics were opened in 1993, the infant son of a priest who suffered with incurable nephritis was placed on the holy relics. Although physicians had done their best to help the child, the baby's nephritis was getting worse and worse and showing no signs of improvement. After he was placed on St. John's holy relics, his condition finally took a drastic turn to the better and continued to improve until the infant was completely healed.

The priests of today still pray for the ill in the name of Jesus Christ, but we don't witness many miraculous cures. On the other hand, there are many who are ill and who go to the holy shrines of saints, and are anointed with oil or myrrh. Sometimes miraculous cures occur. The Holy Apostles, St. Nektarios of Pentapolis, St. John Maximovitch, and all the saints known and unknown to us, became saints only after many years of ascetical struggle and self-denial. They were not gifted with the power and authority to perform miracles in the name of Jesus Christ overnight. Many do not realize that the sin of our forefather Adam was not only pride

when he partook of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was a good thing. It was God's plan that eventually Adam and Eve would be permitted to eat the fruit of this sacred tree. However, it was necessary for them to first become spiritually mature and prepared. God has a similar plan for us today. In the words of St. Athanasius the Great, "God became man so that man might become God." In other words, God wants us to grow spiritually and to achieve spiritual heights. God wants us to become ready and mature so that He can bestow on us spiritual gifts which make us holy, or god-like. After all, doesn't Holy Scripture say that we are created "in the image and likeness of God" (Genesis 1:26-27) ? Adam's mistake, however, was that he thought he could become god-like without struggles, without effort, and without self-denial. Jesus said, "The Kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force" (Matthew 11:12). If we don't take up and carry our cross, how can we possibly become sanctified? People think that holiness is beyond our reach and that it is inevitable that we will always succumb to sin and temptation. People who think this way are grossly mistaken and wrong. It is definitely within our power, with God's help, to reject sin and temptation. If holiness were not possible for all of us, then Jesus Christ's suffering and death on the Cross was in vain. Becoming holy and god-like takes a gargantuan amount of effort and struggle. Nowadays, in general, Christians tend to be unsuccessful in their spiritual battles because we are living in times when people are very spiritually weak. Instead of love of God and neighbor, humility, righteous zeal, faith, and obedience, we see lack of faith, pride, self-righteous disobedience, hatred and judgement of others. We tend to forget about God and instead rely on man and the spirit of the times (zeitgeist). We do a poor job guarding our minds (our thoughts) and our hearts. Instead of rejecting evil thoughts we accept and converse with them. We neglect our prayers, we neglect fasting and making prostrations, and we neglect the study of Holy Scripture and the Holy Fathers. As a result we have become spiritual weaklings. In Revelations 3:15-16 it says, "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth."

We never know when God will take us and this short life will be over. We never know when we might become ill, and unable to go to church, to fast, or even to pray. Therefore, while there is still light in the day, while there is still breath in our mouth, let us heed the words of our Holy Venerable Father Herman of Alaska, "From this day forth, from this hour, from this minute, let us learn to love God above all and fulfill his holy will." Amen!

