

“Be Perfect, as Your Heavenly Father is Perfect”
The Rich Young Man, Matt. 19:16-26, September 12, 2021
By Archpriest Peter Olsen

There was once a Christian mother who followed a very interesting routine every morning with her young children. Before sending them off to school, she would say morning prayers with them, and then she would review with them the Beatitudes, the Ten Commandments, and the Golden Rule. She would then challenge their little hearts and minds and ask them, “Where do you stand?” For you see, everyday she was sending them out into the world and they would be leaving the cocoon of their Christian family where Christ was the center of their lives. Everyday they had to face a world where Christ was no longer the center of life. They would be exposed to various ideas, opinions and beliefs, some which opposed their Christian faith; some which were pure evil. After prayer, by challenging her children and asking them to make a conscious choice, she was rooting and reaffirming within them the basic moral teachings of Jesus Christ. And as young as they were, on a daily basis, they were becoming accustomed to examining their consciences, their little hearts, and their young minds and they were learning to make resolute decisions about what they believe. Fortified in this way, they were now better prepared when the outside world would challenge their beliefs and their personal moral choices. It is the responsibility of all Christian parents to teach this to their children from the youngest age. They were strengthened and better prepared to not be swayed by immorality and sinful choices which even young children face, and when they would grow older and the challenges would become stronger, they will be strong enough to be able to make the right choices. This was all made possible because of the Christian upbringing given to them by their mother.

A rich young man asks the Lord what he must do to inherit eternal life. Unlike the Pharisees, he approaches the Lord with a good and sincere heart. The Lord answers by citing the sixth, seventh, ninth and fifth commandments from the Ten Commandments. In addition, the Lord adds the commandment to love your neighbor. This is the minimum. In a way, you can compare it to tithing. The traditional Scriptural teaching about monetary support for the Temple (or the Church) is the requirement to offer one tenth of your gross income for the sake of the Lord and the upkeep of the Temple. We are told that this is the amount that is expected of us, so therefore, the decision is made for us. We don't have to think and we are not required to examine our conscience. The minimal bar has been set for us, and all that we are required to do is to meet that bare minimum. The rich man answers the Lord that he has kept these commandments. What else can he do? He knows in his heart and in his conscience that he is capable of doing more. Because he is sincere and honest with himself, he does not feel spiritually fulfilled by doing only the bare minimum. He knows that he must and should do more. Jesus asks that anyone who would be His disciple to follow a path which is not reduced to bare minimums of rules or regulations. To everyone who would follow Him, Jesus offers the path of **spiritual perfection**. In the Gospel today, this is what Jesus offers the rich young man who would follow Him. The Lord says to him, “If you would be perfect. go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

The Pharisees liked to follow a path that did not involve much thinking or self-reflection. They liked a religion that was reduced to external laws and rituals. They did not like or want to be challenged to have to think or to make choices. Simply follow the rules, the bare minimum, and nothing more would be required or expected. This was the basis of their religion. This is not what Jesus expects from us. He asks and expects us to not only keep the bare minimum, but to exceed it. We are challenged to offer to the Lord in a sacrificial way as much as we are able. Jesus challenges us to examine our consciences, to practice self-reflection and to *choose* what we give to Him, and not let someone else make that choice for us. There are many ways of sacrificial giving for the sake of the Lord. It could be monetary, such as in the case with this young man. He was blessed with riches, so this is what he had that he could offer for the sake of the Lord. We are all blessed with many various talents and skills which we

can freely offer to God, to the Church, and to our neighbor, all out of love for the sake of the Lord. And everyone is blessed with the ability to offer love and kindness, which are the crowning virtues that all the commandments, all the law, and all the prophetic teachings are based upon. Love and kindness is the greatest gift of all that we can offer. This is what Jesus Christ taught. All of our Christian traditions, canon law, and even liturgical practices are based on the greatest commandment of all — the commandment of love.

In Matthew 5:48 Jesus says, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” There is no room for minimalism in Christianity. In the case of the rich young man, when he was challenged to examine his heart and his conscience, it was too much for him to give up his riches in order to follow Jesus. He could keep the bare minimum, but he was not ready yet to be perfect. Perfection does not come to anyone overnight. It is the path that all Christians are called to follow by the Lord, but it takes time, struggle and hard work. Just like the mother and her little children, these little Christian souls were gently coaxed and challenged so that not only would they remain steadfast and loyal to Christ as they would grow up into adulthood, but they were gently and lovingly guided by their mother to follow the path of perfection. Let us ask the Lord for help so that we would live our lives not as minimalists, but that we would listen to Christ and seek perfection. Let us look deep within ourselves in an honest and sincere way. Let what we offer to the Lord and to our neighbor truly be sacrificial, above and beyond, for the sake of the love of the Lord and our neighbor. Amen.