

## 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Colossians 3: Overcoming Anger

A sermon by the Rev. Fr. David G. Subu  
delivered on January 15, 2006

Colossians 3:4-11

*<sup>4</sup>When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. <sup>5</sup>Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. <sup>6</sup>Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, <sup>7</sup>in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. <sup>8</sup>But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. <sup>9</sup>Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, <sup>10</sup>and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, <sup>11</sup>where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we continue the theme of renewal in our reading from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians. Having just celebrated the Lord's Theophany, or appearing or manifestation at the time of His baptism, now we are appropriately reminded of his second and awesome coming. For then "when Christ who is our life appears, then [we] also will appear with Him in glory." In particular St. Paul is referring to those who have died in Christ and will return with Christ in the general Resurrection. But it also applies as well to those of us who have died in Christ spiritually and been renewed in Him in this world. Today we will consider how we are to specifically enter into the renewing of our lives in Christ who "is all and in all."

First we are called to "put to death [our] members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." These are all expressions of basic selfishness. The soul becomes selfish when it lives for this world, this life, and not for the Lord and eternal life. Those who live for themselves and disregard the Lord are likened to "the sons of disobedience." St. Paul says to the Colossians that they themselves once walked and lived in these same earthly ways, just as all of us have walked and lived in them and may find

ourselves slipping into again and again despite our best efforts. If we are ever to be free of these temptations we must let go of the deeper passions which hold us. St. Paul says, “<sup>8</sup>But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth.[and] Do not lie to one another...” Whereas the first list represents sins and vices of a more reactive quality—that is, we are faced with these as temptation and we fall into them—this second set represents more inner dispositions of the soul. If the inner state of our personality is given to these, we will not stand a chance against the everyday earthly temptations and seductions which come are way.

Appropriately, this list of St. Paul’s is mirrored in the 8<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> steps of the Ladder of Divine Ascent by St. John Climacus. This great doctor of the church compiled so much of the wisdom of the desert fathers whose practice in life was exactly the putting off of the old fallen man and the renewing of our human nature in the new man, Jesus Christ. From sources like this we can find great advice on how to apply the Apostle’s command: now put off the old man. In regards to the first, anger, St. John says that

Freedom from anger is an endless wish for dishonor... it is a triumph over one’s nature. It is the ability to be impervious to insults, and comes by hard work and the sweat of one’s brow... The first step toward freedom from anger is to keep the lips silent when the heart is stirred; the next, to keep thoughts silent when the soul is upset; the last, to be totally calm when unclean winds are blowing.... Just as darkness retreats before light so all anger and bitterness disappears before the fragrance of humility. (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 8, Translation from Lubheid and Russell. Paulist Press, pg. 146)

My spiritual father in Pennsylvania would remind me that in combating the devil only humility would suffice for we can never out-pray the devil, he is ever vigilant and never sleeps; nor can we out-fast him, for he never eats. But there is something that we can do that he cannot: we can humble ourselves. In this way we resist the devil, and he flees from us (cf. Jas. 4:7).

The next vice is malice. Usually we use this word today only in legal speech: so and so acted with malice aforethought, and so on. Or we speak of malicious slander and gossip. They are all appropriate. St. John describes malice as the remembrance of wrongs. If anger is the tendency to react against any insult or opposition or offense out of pride, malice is then to hold and cherish that anger the way a hot fire later smolders with embers, waiting to ignite again when the wind blows. Malice is resentment, a desire for revenge, the inability to let go of our injured pride, the need to keep a feud going. St. John is even more colorful:

Remembrance of wrongs comes as the final point of anger. It is a keeper of sins. It hates a just way of life. It is the ruin of virtues, the poison of the soul, a worm in the mind. It is the shame of prayer, a cutting off of supplication, a turning away from love. A nail piercing the soul. It is a pleasure-less feeling cherished in the sweetness of bitterness. It is a never-ending sin, an unsleeping wrong, rancor by the hour. (*Ibid.*, Step 9, pg. 152).

Malice can even effect the most seemingly kind and gentle of us, for memory is a powerful temptress. One can see how quickly someone who is normally gentle, pious, and faithful can suddenly be transformed and disfigured in the face as the pain of their wounded pride overcomes them. It says things like, "I can forgive, but I can't forget!" and "Never again!" St. John tells us to "Let the prayer of Jesus put it to shame, that prayer which cannot be uttered in the company of malice." Whether he is referring to the traditional Jesus prayer or the Lord's prayer which requires us to forgive others before we ask God to forgive us, the truth is that if we think we can be good and faithful Christians with a genuine prayer life and yet harbor resentment towards another, we are only fooling ourselves.

Lastly, blasphemy and filthy language both reflect that the soul has become darkened within. The Lord Himself said, <sup>18</sup>"But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. <sup>19</sup>"For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.." (Matthew 15). We live in such an

irreverent society that we often do not even recognize blasphemy even when we hear it or even say it. We all were hopefully taught not to use the Lord's name in vain yet how many of us catch ourselves using His name as a curse on a daily basis! When our heart is confused and darkened our tongue becomes like a dog without a leash. One of the things the world recognizes in any individual that is considered to be a true Christian is how they conduct themselves verbally. Learning to purify the heart so that the tongue may be contained is an essential step in putting off the "old man" of our fallen nature.

Lastly, St. Paul says, "<sup>9</sup>Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, <sup>10</sup>and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him," Little white lies seem so harmless we can become so used to them that we even begin to believe them ourselves. We take so little notice to them we forget to confess them. Yet perhaps falsehood, even in the slightest, is the worst of blasphemies. For out of all things we can do or make in this world, there is only one thing that we can call our own creation. If we build something, we needed tools and materials that came from somewhere else. If we paint, we need the same. If we program a computer, we depend on the hardware. But what we say comes from nowhere else, excepting the air that God gives us to breathe. Thus, our ability to speak words is what makes us most like God, who creates and sustains the entire universe by His word. It is the way in which we demonstrate that we are created in His image on a daily basis. To then use that divine gift to utter falsehood is the ultimate abuse of our greatest gift. To be renewed according to that image requires a total commitment to truth and honesty both with ourselves and with our fellow Christians. Just remember that honesty does not mean the same thing as candor. Sometimes being brutally honest is just being brutal.

May the long-suffering God who commands us to forgive even seventy times seven and beyond, grant us freedom from malice, anger, and replace in us a spirit of humility and contrition and forgiveness. For He is a merciful God, a God who saves, and we offer glory to Him: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.