



THE LADDER OF VIRTUES

Fourth week of the Great Lent

In the preceding weeks of the Great Lent, dear brethren, the Church revealed to us the various aspects of Orthodoxy which we must incorporate into our lives, in order for the Triumph of Orthodoxy to be not only a historical fact, but a fact of our everyday life. On the second Sunday of Lent the Church instructed us in prayer, particularly inner prayer. The third Sunday of Lent was dedicated to the bearing of one's cross.

And today we are taught yet another important part of our faith, of our path to salvation – and that is the acquisition of virtues. And, as always, the Church presents to us the best teacher on the subject – St. John of the Ladder, whose writings give us an insight into this area of spiritual wisdom.

However, as we attempt to gain knowledge on the subject of virtues, we must first of all clarify two important points: first – the fact that aside from genuine virtues there are also false virtues, and secondly – the cases in which virtues do **not** lead us to salvation.

Saint Ignaty Bryanchaninov clearly tells us that worldly virtues do not bring salvation. But how can we determine whether a given virtue is genuine and leads to salvation? The answer is simple: in each virtue we try to attain, we must, as the Scripture tells us, crucify our old nature with its passions and lusts; i.e. we must always restrict ourselves in something, we must give up something, we must struggle against something. If we do not do so, then the virtue remains only theoretical and does not bring us any practical benefit. Let us look at a simple example: love for one's neighbor. If we love only those whom we like and who love us in return, then – as the Lord Himself said – we will receive no benefit from such a love, because pagans do likewise. But we must do more, we must do that which, from the world's point of view, is unnatural – we must love our enemies; only then will our love for our neighbors truly constitute a virtue.

The same is true of charity. There are so many people who are engaged in charitable works, who do good deeds... but how? For example, charity balls are organized to obtain funds for the needy. For those who attend these balls, who eat, drink, and make merry – where is the virtue in that? But to restrain oneself from buying something one terribly wants in order to give money to the poor or to a church, or to give up some badly-needed rest in order to visit the sick or comfort the suffering – that is genuine charity, that is genuine virtue.

In the same manner, even genuine virtues do not always lead us to salvation if, while engaging in them, we do not give up something. For example, for a vegetarian to keep the fast does not represent spiritual hardship, while an extravagant spender is not truly charitable. Virtues are genuine and lead us to salvation only when they are linked with spiritual endeavors and when they are interrelated.

At this point we approach the teaching of St. John of the Ladder. St. John presents virtues to us in the form of a ladder, by ascending which we reach the Heavenly Realm. Virtues are like steps, so that

the acquisition of one virtue leads us to another and that one to yet another, etc. Thus spiritual life is constant motion, constant improvement. Having acquired, by the grace of God, a certain virtue, we cannot rest on our laurels, because that is the same as becoming stuck on one step – we will not move anywhere. Similarly, if we suddenly lose a previously acquired virtue – the entire ladder will fall down.

This is how St. John of the Ladder shows us an example of how virtues are interrelated, and how one cannot bring benefit without the other: he says – “the chief of all virtues is prayer, and their foundation is fasting. If we should sow the seeds of prayer without having attenuated our bodies through fasting, then instead of truth we will bear the fruits of sin. By the same token, if the body is attenuated through fasting, but the soul is not cultivated with prayer, spiritual reading, and humbleness, then fasting becomes the parent of a multitude of passions: pride, vanity, contempt, and others.”

Even in the hustle and bustle of our modern life, dear brethren, we can step onto the ladder of virtues and ascend it. Fasting is accessible to all of us, perhaps not always in terms of food, but certainly in terms of spiritual abstinence, while in regard to prayer we have already mentioned how universally available is the Jesus prayer, even for those who are terribly busy with worldly affairs. And you can see how wonderfully everything falls into place: if we push out of our mind the usual jumble of thoughts that prevails there and replace it with the Jesus prayer, we will attain our first usage of prayer, and when the mind is filled with prayer, it will no longer have place for evil thoughts or condemnation of others, and we will thus acquire the virtue of non-judgment, and at this point the fruits of inner prayer will appear – we will begin to see our own failings, our own sins, which will help us to acquire the virtues of repentance and humility. And in this manner, very gradually, by applying effort and demonstrating earnestness on our part, and by earning in return the action of God’s grace, we will go higher and higher up the wondrous ladder of virtues, straight into the Kingdom of God. Amen.

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