

# The Prophet

newsletter of

## St. John the Baptist Orthodox Church

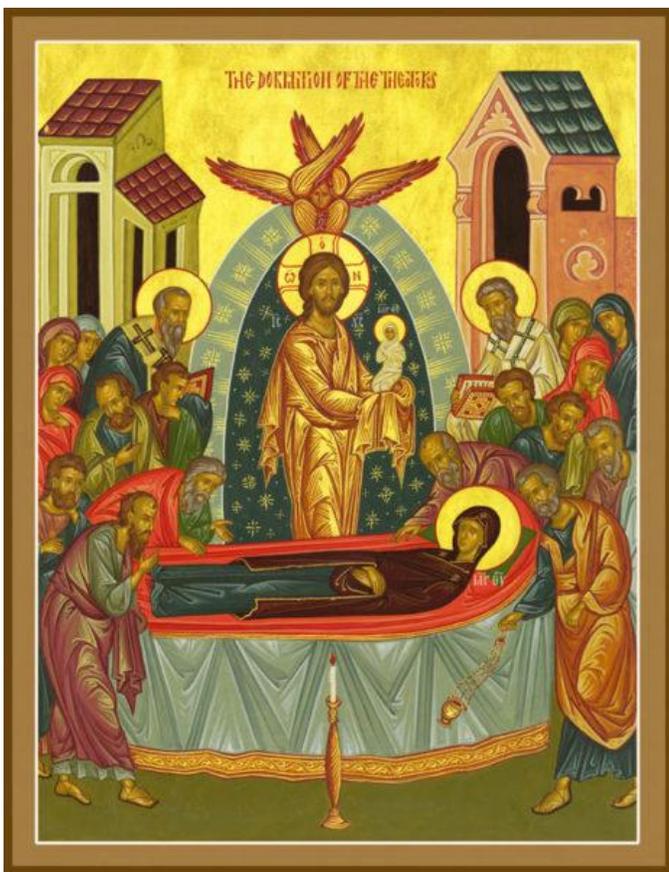
Orthodox Church in America  
Archdiocese of Pittsburgh

601 Boone Avenue, Canonsburg, PA 15317

724-745-8216 - [www.frunner.org](http://www.frunner.org) -

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### SUMMER 2020



*The Dormition of the Mother of God*

Acting Rector, **Fr. John Joseph Kotalik**  
425-503-2891 - [frjohnkotalik@gmail.com](mailto:frjohnkotalik@gmail.com)

### IN THIS ISSUE:

Rector's Report	pp. 1
Memory Eternal	pg. 2
Many Years	pg. 3
Parish Prayer List	pg. 4
Catechetical Homily of Pascha by St. John Chrysostom	pp. 4-5
The Pascha No One Wants by Fr. John Parsells	pp. 4-6
Primate's Message for the Church by Met. Tikhon	pp. 6-7

### RECTOR'S REPORT:

Glory to Jesus Christ! Slava Isusu Christu!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is certainly not the Holy Week and Pascha we desire or thought we would get, but here we are.

It is indeed a reason to grieve, to be cut off from each other from the liturgical and sacramental life of our Holy Church. However, Christ is still risen: he rose from the dead nearly 2000 years ago and whether we can celebrate it or not, we believe that our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God - God Himself - took upon Himself our sins and passions, suffering the Passion for us and for our salvation, trampling down death by death and raising all mankind with Himself.

While far from ideal, each one of us can - and should! - celebrate the Passover of our Lord, and us with him - in our own homes. For this reason, the services of Holy Week and Pascha will be live-streamed, and reader's versions (which can be done at home, if you'd rather pray yourself rather than tune in to the livestream) will be made available on our parish website. Though we will be able to bless our celebratory foods in the parking lot, we should not let this be the extent of our celebration, for the resumption of rich foods is nothing compared to the rich gift of deliverance from sin and eternal life which has been granted to us.

Instead, even if we cannot go to the church, we should invite this highest point of the liturgical year into our lives by trying to keep our focus on the feast we are celebrating, rather than just the foods we are feasting upon. I strongly encourage you all to tune in to our YouTube Channel ([www.youtube.com/c/StJohntheBaptistOrthodoxChurchCanonsburg](http://www.youtube.com/c/StJohntheBaptistOrthodoxChurchCanonsburg)) on Pascha morning at 9:30 in order to not let this Feast of Feasts pass you by. Sadly, the Coronavirus will keep us from allowing this to be open to the public, but make this part of your family's celebration. If you would prefer, you can sing and read the Typica service for Pascha, which is included in this mailing.

As for "attending" a live-streamed service, let us try to treat it like coming to church. Dress like you'd be coming to church, stand or sit as with attention, place some icons around your TV or computer screen, light incense if you have any, and feel free to try singing along! Likewise, keep the fast from midnight, and when the time for communion comes, drink some holy water instead (if you don't have any, call me; we have plenty of bottles!). It isn't the Precious Body and Blood of Christ, nor is it the same as being in church, but there are all ways in which we can make it a more "real" experience for ourselves, rather than simply sitting in our pajamas with a cup of coffee, as if what we were watching is the morning news.

Christ is risen! Let us not forget that fact in all of this; Christ is risen, and we can all enter into the joy of our Lord's Passover from death to life, even if imperfectly, cut off from the congregation of the Lord. Christ is risen, and he will not abandon us if we remember to keep his Feast with joy and love.

Most importantly, if we love the God who suffered, died, and rose in His infinite love for us, let us all strive to keep His commandments, shining forth the love and joy of this glorious feast in our lives, especially in this time of grief and affliction. The fallen world seems a bit more fallen these days, and so all the more do we need the great hope and light which is our Risen Lord to shine in the darkness. Let us be reflections of Christ and His light to a world which needs it more than ever.

Let us not forget, dear brothers and sisters, that "this is the day of resurrection! Let us be illumined

by the feast; let us embrace each other; let us call 'brothers' even those that hate us, and forgive all by the Resurrection; and so let us cry: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death; and upon those in tombs bestowing life!"

I miss you all, and cannot wait to embrace each of you with the joy of our Lord's Resurrection, once it is safe to do so.

In Christ, with thanks and love,  
*Fr. John Joseph Kotalik IV, Acting Rector*

**MEMORY ETERNAL:**  
**(Вѣчная память!)**

**We commemorate the anniversaries of:**

Infant John Popp (7/1/1980)  
Arthur Mcracken (7/1/1980)  
Mat. Sophia Hubiak Soroka (7/1/2012)  
Nicholas Gontz (7/2/1977)  
Raymond Sobczak (7/2/2005)  
Helen Kotyk (7/2/2010)  
Andrew Panko (7/3/1950)  
Mary Ridosh (7/4/1955)  
Paul Udodow (7/4/2001)  
Annabelle Lazor (7/5/1999)  
George Kozar (7/6/1973)  
Alexander Povich (7/6/1990)  
Mary Verlish (7/7/1954)  
Derek Signorini (7/7/2016)  
Richard Demsher (7/7/2019)  
Catherine Sczruba (7/8/2012)  
Martha Bedley (7/9/1950)  
Peter Ermakoff (7/9/1965)  
Maria Seminick (7/9/1966)  
Joseph Sapp (7/9/1967)  
Charles Saichie (7/11/1956)  
Gregory Antalik (7/11/2000)  
Catherine Karabushkin (7/12/1975)  
Wasil Kozub (7/13/1952)  
Peter Makarow (7/13/1956)  
Peter Hoblak (7/14/1955)  
Agnes Feyche (7/14/1995)  
Elizabeth Peal Kotyk (7/14/1997)  
Steven Mihalovich (7/16/1975)  
George Mikitin (7/16/2019)  
Julia Kolawach (7/17/1951)  
Praskava Rose Perchuck (7/17/1968)  
Mary Hoholak (7/18/1963)  
George Zubenko (7/19/2011)  
William Zubenko (7/19/2011)  
Mary Kolynych (7/20/1968)  
William Dano (7/21/2002)

Alexander Artemko (7/21/2005)  
 Thekla Kotyk (7/22/1962)  
 Mat. Anna Oleynik (7/22/1984)  
 Joann Trussell (7/22/1990)  
 Eli Bizik (7/23/1974)  
 Sophie Wussick (7/23/1995)  
 Pauline Korotky (7/24/1976)  
 John Dano (7/25/1995)  
 Florence Matyuf (7/26/2017)  
 Mary Altieri (7/27/1992)  
 Helen Povich (7/28/1951)  
 June Sevak (7/28/1987)  
 Susanna Sevak (7/30/2009)  
 Kathryn Sekuna (7/31/1950)  
 Anna Telesko (8/1/1981)  
 Julia Polinsky (8/2/1995)  
 Mary Louise Kotyk (8/2/1999)  
 Elizabeth Ludinsky (8/2/2005)  
 Andrew Chobany (8/2/2008)  
 Nancy Catherine Thompson (8/2/2011)  
 Nicholas Kozares (8/3/1960)  
 John Feyche (8/3/1991)  
 Michael Semnick (8/4/1961)  
 James Kern (8/4/2013)  
 Charles Havrilak (8/6/1981)  
 John Lazor (8/7/1966)  
 Theodore Frank Hurzon (8/7/1977)  
 Harold Uram (8/7/1993)  
 Louis Matyuf (8/9/1985)  
 Anna Savage (8/9/1985)  
 John Matyuf (8/10/1954)  
 Michael Hanaris (8/10/1973)  
 Barbara Meikel (8/11/1962)  
 John Chupinsky Sr. (8/11/2000)  
 Michael Lazorchack (8/12/1962)  
 Anna Lazor (8/12/1970)  
 Marija Mataja (8/15/2001)  
 Anthony Monsour (8/17/1993)  
 George Hoholak (8/17/1993)  
 Agnes Chupinsky (8/18/1993)  
 William Sohyda (8/18/2004)  
 Lillian Sohyda (8/18/2006)  
 Barbara Trivonovich (8/19/2016)  
 Aboud "Albert" Dagar (8/20/1968)  
 Margaret Lockoski (8/20/2016)  
 John Cruny (8/21/1949)  
 Daniel Kotyk (8/22/1959)  
 Julia Dampf (8/22/1966)  
 Anna Reucziak (8/22/1966)  
 Mary Sohyda O'Brien (8/22/1992)  
 Barbara Srubhich (8/23/1956)  
 Caroline Kozares (8/23/1986)  
 Helen Sohyda (8/24/1956)

Peter Kirr (8/25/2007)  
 Beatrice Joseph (8/26/1957)  
 Pearl Karabushkin (8/26/1982)  
 Catherine Toth (8/26/1997)  
 Michael Suvak (8/28/1957)  
 Mary Dzuiba (8/28/1966)  
 Steven Kotyk (8/29/2000)  
 Marie Sohyda (8/30/2004)  
 William Sohyda (8/31/2002)  
 Mary Chupinsky (9/2/2001)  
 Albert Johnson (9/3/1959)  
 Edward Danyo (9/3/2011)  
 Mary Bedey (9/4/1980)  
 George Ezerski (9/5/1954)  
 William Sohyda (9/5/2004)  
 Joseph Chobany (9/5/2005)  
 Michael Dunda (9/7/1954)  
 Julia Gabowsky (9/7/1998)  
 Julia Sapp Kochanski\* (9/8/2019)  
 Margaret Dichak (9/10/1994)  
 Anne Roskowski (9/10/2008)  
 Anna Zotov (9/11/1971)  
 Metro Bobble (9/11/1994)  
 Patricia Maceiko (9/11/2011)  
 Richard Sweda (9/12/1959)  
 Ann Marty (9/13/2004)  
 Rd. Michael Povich (9/13/2019)  
 Samuel Zulick (9/15/1980)  
 Eleanor Dano Boettcher (9/15/2016)  
 Dolores Soroka (9/17/1993)  
 George Semnick (9/18/1957)  
 John Zotov (9/18/1966)  
 Christine Zedlovich (9/18/2002)  
 Boris Martynuk (9/18/2007)  
 Peter Koppo (9/19/1955)  
 Steven Sebastian (9/21/1966)  
 Andrew Beba (9/22/1952)  
 Helmut Weber\* (9/22/2017)  
 Nicholas Fecycz (9/24/1961)  
 John Melnyk (9/24/1970)  
 George Savage (9/26/1985)  
 Julie Telesko Kern (9/26/2017)  
 Pelagia Soroka (9/27/1966)  
 Geneva Doll (9/28/2008)  
 Mary Artemko (9/29/1952)  
 Mary Furman (9/29/1965)  
 Helen Zulick (9/30/1973)  
 Michael Haverlack (9/30/2000)

### MANY YEARS:

(Многая и благая лѣта!)

### Namedays:

Olga Rusinko (7/11)

Elijah Cario (7/20)  
 Layla Marie Killmeyer (7/22)  
 Mat. Janine Marie Kotalik (7/22)  
 Dawn Marie Simko (7/22)  
 Fr. John Joseph Kotalik (7/31)  
 Susan Pazuchanics (8/11)  
 Samuel Simko (8/20)  
 Aidan Onest (8/31)  
 Kiprian Yarosh (8/31)  
 Zachary Strennen (9/5)  
 Ashley Elizabeth Wright (9/5)  
 Met. Theodosius (Lazor) (9/9)  
 Chelsea Anne Geer (9/9)  
 Marcie Ann Killmeyer (9/9)  
 Melina Anne Killmeyer (9/9)  
 Anita Prince (9/9)  
 Mary Ann Reck (9/9)  
 Annabelle Ruffing (9/9)  
 Mary Ann Zupancic (9/9)  
 Sonia Blaha (9/17)  
 Sonya Klingensmith (9/17)  
 Fr. John Joseph Kotalik (9/26)

#### **Birthdays:**

Cirio Signorini (7/4)  
 Kathryn Pazuchanics (7/6)  
 Bridget Onest (7/8)  
 Anastasia Rudolph (7/10)  
 Benjamin Phillis (7/14)  
 David Schenken (7/18)  
 Rd. Anthony Kolarsky (7/22)  
 Anthony Cario (7/24)  
 Ruth Gillespie (7/24)  
 Mat. Pamela Onest (7/24)  
 Michael Killmeyer (7/30)  
 Dr. Dennis Davis (8/2)  
 Gwen Bushko (8/4)  
 Alexandra Oleynik (8/5)  
 Michael Pazuchanics (8/6)  
 Stephen Simko (8/6)  
 Dorothy Petronka (8/7)  
 Kiprian Yarosh (8/7)  
 Ryan Williams (8/13)  
 Fr. John Joseph Kotalik (8/15)  
 Beverly Davis (8/18)  
 Helen Lazorchak (8/18)  
 Luis Thompson (8/18)  
 Elijah Cario (8/19)  
 Ashley Wright (8/19)  
 Alexandra Yarosh (8/26)  
 Elena Yarosh (8/26)  
 Lydia Williams (8/28)  
 Grace Matyuf (8/30)  
 Chelsea Geer (9/1)

Julie Simko (9/9)  
 Evelyn Davis (9/11)  
 Gregory Oleynik (9/13)  
 Anita Prince (9/13)  
 Kristy Paradise (9/14)  
 Catherine Thompson (9/14)  
 Christopher Weber (9/18)  
 Rachel Phillis (9/20)  
 Patricia Kolarsky (9/24)  
 Diane Yarosh (9/25)  
 Jacob Ruffing (9/26)  
 Luke Phillis (9/27)  
 Joseph Helinski (9/28)  
 Richard Blaha (9/29)  
 Nina Onest (9/30)

#### **Anniversaries:**

Todd & Lynn Geer (7/2)  
 Dn. Theodosius & Mat. Pamela Onest (7/12)  
 Gregory & Gwen Bushko (7/14)  
 Dr. John & Eva Chupinsky (7/15)  
 Anthony & Julianna Cario (7/22)  
 Joseph & Katie Helinski (7/28)  
 Peter & Dorothy Petronka (8/7)  
 Dr. Rodney & Jo Fedorchak (8/8)  
 Kevin & Mary Ann Reck (8/20)  
 John & Dawn Simko (8/24)  
 Jason & Natalia Grimm (9/1)  
 Kathy Caligiuri (9/1)  
 John & Eleanor Simko (9/3)  
 Lee & Sonya Klingensmith (9/15)  
 John & Geraldine Petronka (9/26)

#### **Family Patronal Feasts:**

Onest (8/9, St. Herman)  
 Kotalik (8/15, the Virgin Mary)

*If you or a loved one are missing, please let  
 Fr. John know so that we can correct our records!*

### **PARISH PRAYER LIST:**

**We pray for the health and salvation of ALL our  
 parish family members, and especially for:**

All those suffering from the spiritual, bodily, material,  
 and financial effects of the Coronavirus  
 Met. Theodosius (Lazor)  
 Igumen Patrick (Carpenter)  
 Apr. John (Horosky)  
 Apr. George & Pres. Dyanthe (Livanos)  
 Apr. John (Reeves)  
 Apr. Michael (Hatrak)  
 Pr. Benjamin (Tucci)  
 Mat. Natasha (Lazor)  
 Mat. Kelly Elizabeth (Oleynik)

Mat. Alexandra (Safchuk)  
 Mat. Cindy (Voytovich)  
 Diane (Arcoletti)  
 Shirley (Brookman)  
 John (Boschuk)  
 Darcie (Burkholder)  
 Elaine (Gwen Bushko)  
 Elizabeth (Demsher)  
 Ruth (Gillespie)  
 Shirley (Lazorchak)  
 Janice (Lenart)  
 Donald (Marsico)  
 Albert (Maruskin)  
 Brandon (Mayberry)  
 Gregg (Nescott)  
 Peter & Dorothy (Petronka)  
 Sonia (Petronka)  
 Michael & Mary (Pirih)  
 Gabriel (Prince)  
 Anastasia (Rudolph)  
 John (Simko)  
 Carol (Sweda)  
 Dennis (Sweda)  
 Luis (Thompson)  
 Richard (Trombetta)  
 Stephen (Urchick)  
 Mary Kay (Weber)  
 Diane (Yarosh)  
**Catechumens:** Frank (Sullivan);  
 Daniel & Emily (Thacker)  
**Inquirers:** Hannah (McClendon)  
 Vincent (Wise)

## The Holy Church, Holy Communion, and an Orthodox Ethos

*by Bp. Alexis of Baltimore, June 8, 2020*

When believers enter an Orthodox Church, they are passing from this world of sickness, strife, and death into a realm of spiritual health, peace, and life. In a consecrated Orthodox Church, the Kingdom of God is at hand and the King of all is in their midst. Believers can feel the presence of the God-man through the life-giving, uncreated divine energies that are especially concentrated in a Holy Orthodox temple. These energies purify, illumine, and even deify the believer according to the receptivity of each. The sacred icons are not only windows to heaven, but a meeting place between the believer and the saint, a place of comfort, a place of healing, and a place of life. When believers venerate an icon with faith, they not only touch the Saint depicted, the depicted Saint also touches them. And when

they partake of Holy Communion, receiving the most precious, most pure, most holy, Body and Blood of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, they receive the Good Physician into their heart, cleansing it of all impurity. These are basic truths that Orthodox Christians espouse and that many are trying to defend in these uncomfortable days.

Unfortunately, some are using these same truths to criticize and even condemn the shepherds of Christ's holy flock for decisions that are in line with civil directives about social distancing, wearing of masks, and the means for distributing Holy Communion. They may argue quite convincingly that these temporary directives harm Orthodox liturgical worship, depriving it of its ability to be an icon of the Kingdom or for the faithful to feel as though they are one Body. They forget that we are living in dangerous times with far too many Orthodox Metropolitans, Bishops, Priests, and Deacons now taken from us into the mansions of the righteous through the corona virus. Unfortunately, these critics go further, construing concerns for safety as faithlessness, love for the flock as disdain for the fathers, and economy as apostasy. In so doing, they are rending the garment of Christ, becoming "false witnesses who speak lies and sow discord among the brethren." (Prov. 6:14) They have zeal, but "not according to knowledge," (Rom. 10:2) for if it were according to knowledge, their words would be kind, longsuffering, thinking no evil, not easily provoked, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things and enduring all things. (I Cor. 13:4-6)

The Church has overcome such controversies in the past and She will overcome them today. The Church historian Socrates Scholasticus writes about a similar situation at the time of the Origen heresy:

By clever arguments, he [Dioscorus] took advantage of the simplicity of these monks and thus a fierce controversy was stirred up among them... The less informed, who greatly exceeded the others in number, were inflamed by an ardent zeal, but not according to knowledge. They immediately raised their voices against their brethren. Thus, they were divided with both parties branding each other as impious. (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.7 PG 67.688bc)

Today, by clever or not so clever arguments, some are taking advantage of the simple faith of believers in order to stir up controversy at the very time when Christians should be united in love and care for one another. Behind these arguments, however, is a deep misunderstanding about the nature of grace and even the incarnation itself.

With respect to the incarnation, our Lord is perfect God and perfect man. Saint John of Damascus thus teaches that in our Lord “the created remains created, and the uncreated, uncreated. The mortal remains mortal; the immortal, immortal. The circumscribed remains circumscribed; the uncircumscribed, uncircumscribed. The visible remains visible; the invisible, invisible. ‘The one part is all glorious with miracles: while the other is the victim of insults.’” (Saint John of Damascus *Expositio Fidei Orthodoxae* 3.3 PG 94.993c) The same is also true for the Church, the Theanthropic Body of Christ. It is a divine place where miracles take place, where the blind see the true Light and the deaf hear the Gospel of grace. It is also a human place where we give the last kiss to the dead. Corruption and incorruption are both present in Church as they are both present in our lives as Christians. Those who claim that it is impossible to catch a cold in Church are also teaching that it is not possible to be fully human in Church with all the fragility that surrounds our human condition, because that fragility is somehow swallowed up by the surrounding divinity. On December 28<sup>th</sup> of each year, we celebrate the memory of the two thousand Christians who died, being burned alive in Church. The Church did not magically keep them healthy or immune from the laws of nature as in the case of the three children in the fiery furnace, but it was the place from which they were transferred from this world into paradise. The Church saves the soul, but it does not, nor has it ever promised a state of incorruption prior to the general resurrection. The temple is a physical place in this world with the grace of the world to come. It is both physical and spiritual. In its materiality, the wood, the marble, the air of the temple do not differ from the same substances in the outside world. In her spiritual radiance, however, the temple provides the receptive believer with everything necessary in order to act, think, perceive, and desire in perfect harmony with the Gospel of Christ.

As Orthodox Christians, we universally believe that it is not possible to become physically sick from receiving the life-giving Body and Blood of our Savior, but we also give Holy Communion to the dying to accompany them into eternity. None are surprised that the dying die after receiving Holy Communion; we sometimes even read prayers afterwards that they may give up their souls into the hands of God. Communion itself is not received in order to preserve physical health in this world as though that were an ultimate good. Such a view in fact betrays a secular ethos that completely forgets the aim of the Christian life, becoming like Christ who pours out His life for the life of the world.

Holy Communion is received unto the remission of sins and life eternal. Through Holy Communion, we enter into the entire economy of salvation from the incarnation of God the Word to His session at the right hand of God the Father. The Blood of the Godman unites God to man and the members of the Church with each other into a single Body, a single life, a single soul. Through communion, we become one with Christ, one with our brother and our sister, one with the Saints, one with the entire Church, in which there is no separation between the living and the dead, for all are then one in Christ Jesus. Saint Justin Popovich writes “the divine blood of the Lord is a divinely human power that sanctifies, purifies, and transfigures, making the believer ecclesial, theanthropic, trinitarian, and saved.” (Justin Popovitch, *Philosophie Orthodoxe de la Vérité*, vol. 5 (Paris: L’Age d’Homme, 1997), 252) It is not about the physically healthy remaining healthy, but about the struggling spiritually becoming holy.

Health and sickness, baptisms and funerals, are part of life. On the Holy Mountain of Athos, in the sacred cenobitic monasteries, most of the monks become sick during the flu season. No one is surprised; no one doubts their faith. And when they are sick, the monks take medication and rest up in their cells. Many of those same monks receive flu shots as a preventative measure, so that they will not become sick, so that they will be able to pray consistently before God. Parishes are now taking preventative measures, so that the faithful may be healthy enough to pray and offer up fruits of

repentance. The additional measures are much like the flu shots received by Athonite monks. They are not about our faith in the mysteries, but about our love for our neighbor.

Saint Paul asks that we do all things “decently and in order.” It is right that we follow the directives now in good order, for “nothing builds up as much as good order, peace and love, just as nothing is more destructive than their opposites.” (Saint John Chrysostom, *Argumentum Epistolae Primae Corinthios*, 37.4 PG 61.318b) For the sake of good order, for the sake of peace, for the sake of love, let’s seek what the Church is teaching us during these difficult times: to place our brother and sister first, to walk humbly before God, and to wait patiently for the day when our glorious Divine Liturgy will be celebrated exactly as it has been in ages past. That day will surely come. May it come quickly. Amen.

### **Father of the Fatherless and Protector of Widows**

*‘The Whole Council Blog’,  
Rev. Dr. Stephen De Young, June 8, 2020*

The task of a judge in rendering judgment or judging, whether in a court context or the context of the book of Judges, is to establish or restore justice. Therefore, when Yahweh [the Lord] condemns the leadership of Israel and Judah, a chief charge is that they have judged unjustly (e.g., Is 10:1). To judge unjustly is to show favoritism, to create laws that are oppressive and do harm, or to ignore injustice rather than righting it. Yahweh, in the Old Testament, contrasts himself to this kind of judge, human judges with whom humans have had experiences. Yahweh does not respect persons and will accept no bribe (Deut 10:17). It is because of His own character and their responsibility to bring about His justice that the judges of Israel are forbidden to take bribes or show favoritism (Deut 10:19).

This is not to say, however, that the Scriptures present Yahweh as non-partisan. God associates Himself, throughout the Scriptures, with some persons and opposes others. The condemnation of favoritism in the Hebrew Scriptures takes the particular form of the condemnation of taking bribes (Ex 18:21; 23:8; Deut 27:25; 1 Sam 8:3; 2 Chron 19:7; Job

6:22; 15:34; Ps 15:5; 26:10; Prov 15:27; 17:8. 23; Ecc 7:7; Is 1:23; 5:23; 33:15; Ezek 22:12; Amos 5:12; Mic 3:11; 7:3). It seems obvious that it is not the poor and destitute who offer bribes. What is condemned is not a judge taking a side in the administration of justice. What is condemned is a judge taking the side of the wealthy and powerful for the purpose of gain, which compounds the injustice. This condemnation of favoritism toward the wealthy is continued directly in the Church (Jas 2:1-9).

Establishing justice or restoring justice once it has been violated requires taking a side or, perhaps, more appropriately, taking up a cause. In particular, it requires taking up the cause of the victims of injustice. It requires setting one’s self against the perpetrators of that injustice. Action taken on this basis will naturally be action in favor of victims and action against oppressors. This action against oppressors will always be received by them and is referred to by the text of the Scriptures as punishment for their crimes. The paradigmatic members of the weak and oppressed in the Scriptures, reflecting the reality on the ground in the Ancient Near East, are orphans and widows (Job 22:9; Is 10:2; Jer 49:11; Ezek 22:25; Mark 12:40; Jas 1:27). Yahweh is the “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows” (Ps 68:5).

God taking the side of the powerless against the powerful is not a violation of His impartiality but a consequence of it. The two are cited in the same breath: “For Yahweh, your God is God of gods and Lord of lords. He is the great, the mighty, and the fearsome God. He it is who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow. He loves the stranger, giving to him food and clothing. Love the stranger, then, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You will fear Yahweh your God. You will serve him and cling to him. By His name, you shall swear. He is your praise. He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things that you have seen with your own eyes. Your fathers went down to Egypt with seventy people. Now Yahweh your God has made you like the stars of heaven in number” (Deut 10:17-19).

In the Torah, Yahweh commands Israel to establish and maintain justice based on His own justice, thereby participating in His action in creation.

He reinforces this by pointing to the fact that they themselves have been recipients of this same favor. Yahweh allied Himself with the Hebrews, the descendants of Abraham, when they were slaves in a foreign land and powerless. He then wrought a terrible vengeance on Egypt and her gods on nascent Israel's behalf to give her justice.

Pharaoh greeted the initial approach of Moses and Aaron with derision for precisely this reason. What concern to him were the threats of a god of slaves? There is a sharp contrast here with the gods of the nations. Basic to ancient ritual was the idea that the worship of a divine being made one more like that being. And so worship was made of gods of power, beauty, victory in war, sexual prowess, fertility, health, strength, and speed. There were no gods of weakness, victimhood, defeat, infertility, or sickness. Or at the very least, if there were such spirits, no pagan would seek to worship them.

Yahweh, the God of Israel, however, is not the embodiment of some human virtue or desire, nor is He the offerer of some particular good or virtue as opposed to others. Rather He is the Creator and the Judge of all the earth. Justice, or righteous-ness, is not simply a quality of personal excellence. Judgment is a divine action within creation which continuously moves and drives all created things to form, uphold, and restore the created order. He is, therefore, the avenger of the orphan and the widow while He opposes the proud.

It is, then, no surprise that when the God of Israel became incarnate, He was not born the son of the emperor or even into the Herodian dynasty. In taking upon Himself our shared human nature, Christ continued to identify with the weak, the poor, and the oppressed. He was born to a young mother under circumstances which rendered Him subject to suspicion (John 8:41). He was born into a Galilean peasant family living in a village so small it likely moved with the seasons. St. Joseph, as a day laborer, did what would today be considered "handyman" work for fellow peasants to survive. Legally, He and His family were not Roman citizens, legally categorized by Rome as "non persona." [Christ] spent His adult life essentially homeless and dependent upon the hospitality of others. He ended His life falsely convicted, dying

the most humiliating and torturous death that a tyrannical government could devise.

An oft-neglected emphasis in the New Testament author's explanation of Christ's resurrection is justification in the sense of vindication (Rom 4:25). There is good evidence, however, that this was a major theme in apostolic preaching (e.g. Acts 2:36; 5:30-31). Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel's God identifies with the powerless and the poor. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, He promises them not only healing and restoration but also justice. He promises that the day will come when He will once again order the world aright, vindicating them and lifting them up while those who have oppressed them, profited from their misery, and done them harm will be laid low. Christ's resurrection is the beginning of the fulfillment of that promise.

### **A Homily on Slavery and Freedom, for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost** **(on Rom. 6:18-23 & Matt. 8:5-13)**

*Delivered via YouTube Live Stream  
by Apr. Stephan Meholick on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020.*

How many times in the sixth chapter of Romans could St. Paul use the word 'slave'? Actually, how many times in the last month have you heard the word 'slave' or 'slavery'? Slavery is such a horrible word that some translators actually removed it from New Testament writings, and some translators even remove it from Orthodox prayer book. The word we heard today, in Greek – and Romans was written in Greek – is the word '*doulos*': it's a masculine noun of uncertain derivation; properly it means someone who belongs to someone else – a bond slave without any ownership rights of their own. Ironically, *doulos* – bond-slave – is used sometimes in the New Testament with the highest dignity, namely of believers, as we heard Paul describe, who willingly live under Christ's authority as his devoted followers. We see that kind of example even in the Centurion's story: that that living under authority, and how much the faith of the Centurion made an impression on our Lord.

*Slave* – still, there's something in our gut that sickens and horror when we hear that word. But why don't we recoil with the same horror and

disgust at our *own* slavery. We like to think that we're free beings, and even though Independence Day may well be our greatest national holiday, we are in fact slaves; each one of us, we are slaves: slaves either to sin or to God, and we'll continue to be slaves all our life.

But the question here for us today is who is our master? which master do we serve? And we have two choices: we can walk in rebellion; we can do what we feel like. Many of us live like this and we think that it's freedom – freedom to do whatever we feel like doing – but in fact we're slaves to our appetites, we're slaves to our passions, and we're slaves *especially* to our fears. It's been often quoted by Humphrey Bogart, by James Dean, and even further back to the 1920s: "live fast, die young, and leave a beautiful corpse." That's not freedom, it's fear: fear of aging (although that thought, for some of us, is already too late).

Any addiction and/or substance abuse, no matter what form it takes – you name your own addiction – whatever drives you, whatever has more control over you than you have over it: it's fear, it's fear of the loneliness and the emptiness within. The compulsion to make a pile of money, for example, is not freedom for the future, it's *fear* of the future. What's going to happen to me if I don't have all this money.

The enemy of our souls tries to fool us with all kinds of nonsense about freedom being the ability to do what we like and to suffer no consequences. Well that's not freedom, that's license, that's licentiousness, and that is a lie: it's a lie because every choice has a consequence. We humans are hard-wired to give ourselves over to some *thing*, or to some *one*, but *we* have been born again in the waters of baptism, we have another option: earlier in the sixth chapter of Romans, Paul says that we were buried with Christ through baptism into death, but just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory Father, even so we should walk in newness of life: that means we can choose to walk in the will of God, that means we can be empowered by the grace of the Holy Spirit to live lives pleasing to God, and, if we make the right choice, we experience positive change.

In verse eighteen today, we heard that "having been set free from sin, we became slaves of

righteousness." But change, of course, also brings challenges. Paul actually starts verse nineteen, as we heard in the Epistle, with an apology: he apologizes for using the slavery image: he said "I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh," in other words "I'm using this ugly example because that's what you'll understand most easily." When he challenges his readers, he challenges us to remember our past: "for when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness... and what fruit did you have then? what positive thing did you really get in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things" – the ultimate result, as St. Paul says – "is death."

That's a question well worth asking every single time we're tempted by what we know darn well is sin: missing the mark. What am I really going to get out of this in the long term? We need to think: we need to actually make deliberate and conscious choices in our life, instead of living on autopilot, instead of letting all the habits and patterns drag us back into slavery to what's destructive, even to what we know is destructive. And our second challenge is to remember the responsibilities of the liberated life: we remember our past slavery so that we can see how we can live in our present freedom. In verse 19, Paul urges us: "just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness and lawlessness, leading to more and more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness."

Now if the word holiness starts to make you nervous, it shouldn't: don't let it. It means 'set apart,' 'totally dedicated,' 'dedicated to God.' and it produces what we're really searching for: as St. Augustine teaches, we're searching for wholeness, searching to feel complete. All those fears we said before are because somehow there's this hole in the soul that doesn't really feel complete, and we reach here and there to somehow grasp that wholeness. But sin, on the other hand, breaks us. It breaks our relationship with God, it breaks our relationships with other people, it breaks our relationships with the self that we'd really like to be; it breaks our strength, it breaks our energy, and sin breaks our joy. So serving sin is inescapably self-destructive, but serving righteousness, however, ends in our being healed, strengthened. Serving sin is a wasted

life that ends an eternal separation from God, and that's what St. Paul means when he says "the end of those things is death." And notice, from verse 23, that the wages of sin is death: an absolutely fair compensation for a life of deliberately chosen separation from God here and now.

Hell is only the completion of what people begin in this life. It's not a place to which an angry God sends bad people, it's a state we ourselves actually have to work hard to get to. And what I mean by that is that you have to work hard to overcome all the obstacles that God has placed – all the obstacles God is placing – in your way: the Scriptures, the Church, the Cross, the Resurrection, the revelation of God in the beauty of nature, the prayers of all the people who love you. You have to work hard to overcome those obstacles. Serving God, on the other hand, is a life with purpose, it's a life with promise.

In verse 22, St. Paul says that "having been set free from sin and become slaves of God, you have your fruit in holiness, and the end, eternal life." That means living now, already, in the age to come. Life lived by the power of God produces positive changes, here and now. Life lived by the power of God makes us productive, and bringing positive changes to our family, positive changes to our neighborhood, to our parish, to our workplace, to our town, to our nation, and to the whole world.

Are you a slave? Yes, you are, and so am I. But who is our master? The answer to that question makes all the difference in the world.

### **On I Thess. 4, Against the Rapture**

*As Orthodox Christians, we reject the false and novel teaching of the rapture – originating in 1833 with John Nelson Darby and the Evangelical movement – and the esteemed biblical scholar, Rt. Rev. N.T. Wright, here explains why such a teaching is simply not biblical.*

Where does this idea come from? About Jesus flying around in a cloud, and people being snatched up to meet him, and going away somewhere? That's one particular reading, of one particular passage, in the First Letter to the Thessalonians, Chapter 4. Paul says "Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, we believe that through Jesus God will bring with him those who have died. For," he says, "the Lord Himself with a cry of

command, with the Archangel's call, and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will always be with the Lord." (I Thess. 4:14, 16-17)

Now, what is Paul saying there? Paul has a habit, like many vivid writers, of mixing his metaphors; and often when Paul says something very vividly, he doesn't envisage that we would then take each bit, and try and make one single concrete picture out of that. Indeed, in the very next chapter we have a very good example of that, where he says that the Lord is coming like a thief in the night, so it's going to be like a woman going into labor, so that you mustn't get drunk, but you must put on your armour. They got four quite different images there, and Paul doesn't intend that you should somehow scrunch them all together and think that he's meaning a real thief, and a real pregnant woman, and real drunkenness, and real armour. In the same way, though it's not so often noticed, that's what's happening in this passage – this famous rapture passage in First Thessalonians.

To begin with, Paul is thinking of Jesus coming down from heaven, like Moses coming down the mountain with the Ten Commandments. The imagery is there: the Archangel's call, the sound of the trumpet. That's the first image he has: he sees Jesus coming down, like Moses, to sort out the mess in the people down below. But then he combines that with a quite different image – yes, our old friend from Daniel 7 – which is of the Son of Man being caught up in the clouds; only this time it's not Jesus, it's us, and so he says we will be caught up to meet him.

But what will happen then? Well, here's the third image: Paul lived in a world where an emperor or some great ruler might have gone away to fight a battle, to make a state visit somewhere else, but then sooner or later would come back to his home city; and when he came back to his home city, the citizens would go out to meet him. It would be a bit rude if they simply sat in the city gates with their arms folded, waiting for him to show up. No, they will go out! And what will they do then? Will they have a picnic out there in the

countryside? No, they will royally escort him back into the city, over which he will then continue to rule, and perhaps bring his rule to perfection.

So, Paul is combining the Moses image, with the Daniel 7 image, with – interestingly – the imperial image. And, as with that picture from the next chapter, we shouldn't imagine that he thinks all these will actually – so to speak – look like that when they happen. He is saying that when Jesus comes back, we don't have literal language for describing that, but it'll be something like Moses coming down the mountain with the Law, something like us being vindicated gloriously before God, after whatever suffering we have gone through, and – equally – something like an emperor coming back to run his city, with his grateful citizens coming out to meet him and escort him back to where he belongs.

And note what happens if you read that passage like this: you get, what the rest of the New Testament gives you, which is a picture of the Second Coming of Jesus with a remarkable political significance. Paul is saying here – and throughout his writings – that Jesus is Lord; therefore Caesar isn't.

Now, if you have a rapture theology which says we're all going to be snatched away and live in heaven somewhere, then whoever is running the world at the moment can get on and do it whichever way they want; it really doesn't matter too much: you won't have much of a political agenda, except to say just escape; escape into spirituality in the present, escape into some forgotten far-off realm in the future. But if you have the Second Coming meaning what it means in the New Testament – and I haven't even talked about the Book of Revelation, but it's very clear there – it means that Jesus is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, and part of the point of the Christian doctrine of the Second Coming is not to make us careless about our political obligations and the quest for justice and peace in the present; it's a way of saying "Look, Jesus is going to come back and bring perfect justice, perfect love, perfect peace, perfect wisdom to the world, but we who already know Jesus, anticipating that Second Coming, have the responsibility to get on with those tasks as best we can, in

allegiance to him, so that when he comes we will greet him with gladness, and be ready for him.

## **The Sin We Stopped Feeling Sorry For**

*by Fr. Mark Sietsema, Rector of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Lansing, MI, on January 20, 2020 offered this musing for his parishioners to reflect upon: not to condemn, but to consider.*

It is a curious thing, that sometimes the clearest commandments of God are the ones we ignore the most. By the end of this article, you will come to one of two possible conclusions: either that you and I are sinners – indeed, very great sinners – or that you must renounce your Christian faith, and indeed, faith in any religion.

We start with Psalm 14 [15], which asks the question, "How does someone live when God is truly in his life?":

O Lord, who shall sojourn in thy tent?

Who shall dwell on thy holy hill?

He who walks blamelessly, and does what is right,  
and speaks truth from his heart;

who does not slander with his tongue,  
and does no evil to his friend,

nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor;  
in whose eyes a reprobate is despised,

but who honors those who fear the Lord;  
who swears to his own hurt and does not change;  
who does not put out his money at interest, and  
does not take a bribe against the innocent.

He who does these things shall never be moved.

This lesson focuses on the line about usury – lending money at interest. The godly man lends but does not charge interest. He lends, and he receives the amount loaned back again, without demanding any extra payment.

Not only in Psalm 14[15]:5 is this teaching found. It is a fundamental principle throughout the Scriptures. In Exodus (22:25) and Leviticus (25:37) and Deuteronomy (23:19), the charging of interest on loans is forbidden. Prophets like Ezekiel (18:13, 22:12) thundered against usury. Charging interest is clearly and strictly forbidden by God.

In modern life we have changed the meaning of the word "usury" to mean "charging an excessive rate of interest," without defining "excessive." Excessive usually means what the other guy wants to

charge me, not what I want to charge him. In ancient times, though, usury meant charging any interest, period. Even 1% interest was usury, and usury was forbidden.

In the New Testament we do not find the question of usury addressed. We find it transcended. Jesus says that we are not even to lend our money to our neighbor; rather, if he has need and we have surplus, we are to give him what we can, seeking nothing in return (Luke 6:35, Matthew 5:42). Not only can you not charge interest, you cannot even ask your neighbor for the principal back. And who counts as your neighbor? If you have heard the Parable of the Good Samaritan, you know the answer to that.

The Christian Church has an unbroken Tradition of forbidding usury that stretches back to the Apostles. The Church Fathers also spoke against charging interest on loans. We find it condemned in the writings of Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Saints Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, among others. They considered it a violation of the Eighth Commandment, "Thou shalt not steal." To ask for more money than what you had in the first place, to take more than you gave, is quite obviously a form of stealing. Interest is theft. Usury is robbery.

Several Church Councils issued canons, or regulations, against usury. The First Ecumenical Council in Nicea in the year 325 AD prohibited clergy from giving out loans on interest, on pain of being defrocked. Later councils reiterated that laymen are likewise expected not to be usurers, on pain of excommunication. These prohibitions were in force in the Church throughout the world. Even after the Great Schism, the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church upheld their bans on usury. For St. Thomas Aquinas, the master theologian of the Catholic Church, usury was a sin because it was contrary to nature. Money is merely a medium of exchange, and not a useful commodity in and of itself. Charging money for money amounts to creating new money out of thin air, which devalues the medium of exchange.

The ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, thought similarly. Gold and silver, they said, are sterile, barren, incapable of reproducing like

sheep or cattle or seed plants. For money to beget new money goes against the natural order of things. The poet Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, took the same point of view, which is why he cast the usurers down in the seventh circle of hell, alongside the sodomites, because usury is likewise contrary to nature.

This is not to say that in the history of Christendom, there have not been those who tried to find loopholes, excuses, clever rationalizations for charging interest on loans. As with any moral precept, there have been those who look for ways to get around it. But it is undeniable that in the main, the historic Christian system of thought has been opposed to usury, opposed to lending out money at interest.

Who then was the person who turned things around, who made interest and moneylending so acceptable in the modern world? Probably your favorite theocratic despot and mine, John Calvin. That old fox – wiser in his own eyes than all of Christianity before him – twisted logic to make usury not only acceptable, but even virtuous. Because of the Calvinists, banking as we now know it developed in Western Europe, and from there to the rest of the world.

Let me quickly add here: in case you are a fan of usury and are right now thinking of ditching Christianity for another religion, you should know that usury – in the original sense of charging interest, any interest at all, on a loan – is considered a sin in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and in Judaism (in most cases). Every major religion, and most minor ones, condemn usury.

Well, you might say: "Very interesting, never heard a sermon on usury before, so points to you, Padre, for originality. But what does this have to do with me?" you might ask. "I am not a banker. I am not a financier. I am not a venture capitalist."

Ah! But you are! Do you have an interest-bearing account at a bank? You are loaning the bank money at interest. You are a usurer. Do you have a retirement account, a 401K, a 403B? You might hold mostly stocks, but I bet the part of your portfolio is in bonds as well. Interest-bearing, usurious bonds and treasury bills.

It is inescapable. To be part of modern middle-class life in America is to be involved in usury.

And even if you somehow have avoided every opportunity to charge interest to someone else, you are almost surely still guilty of paying interest in some way: on a mortgage, on a car loan, on a credit card. In willingly agreeing to pay interest, you are giving your creditor an occasion to sin. You are tempting someone else to do that which displeases the Lord, according to Psalm 14 [15] and all of the Bible.

Usury is a sin, regardless of the fact that we stopped feeling sorry for it. I am guilty of it. You, almost certainly, are guilty of it. And in this Lenten season of repentance, it is worth considering this sin. Thou shalt not steal. Nor shalt thou encourage others to steal, even from yourself. To charge interest, or to commit to paying interest, is to violate the law of God. It is a sin. We are sinners. And very prolific sinners indeed.

Some will argue, of course, that usury is a good thing. Money-lending makes venture capital available, which makes free enterprise available, which makes invention and production and exploration available, which makes capitalism and modern wealth and technology and progress available. Make no mistake: without usury, without modern banking, the world would be a much different place today. The world would be centuries behind in “progress” as we currently define it.

In a sense this is true. But in another sense, because of usury, because of the modern ways that money is created out of thin air, we have progress... but we also have regress. None of us is in a position to see truly how the scales of justice are tipping on this particular matter. Modern usury has truly created the First World prosperity that we Americans enjoy; but it has arguably also created the Third World poverty that other countries endure. We blame it on their culture, their government, their history. But the truth is that colonial debt-slavery – caused by unpayable rates of interest – has made much of this Third-World misery come into being.

Right now I don’t sound like a very good capitalist. That is because capitalism as we know it could not exist without usury, without charging interest on loans. With the lure of lucrative interest, most of the loans would not have been made that financed the Industrial Revolution.

But my business before you is not to persuade you of the truth of capitalism. My work is to persuade you of the truth of Christianity. And Christianity, it cannot be doubted, has from the earliest times opposed lending money at interest. The Bible never says that economic progress or technological advancement pleases God. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that usury displeases God. To believe otherwise requires such intellectual contortions, so much twisting of logic, so much bending over backwards, that one can no longer look at oneself in a mirror.

Call me impractical if you must; but if the choice is between capitalism and Christianity, I choose Christianity. I hope you will do the same. But as I said at the beginning, you might decide that you want to renounce your faith rather than confess your sinfulness.

But if you want to acknowledge your complicity in usury, what then shall we do, you and I? How shall we repent?

This is not so easy to sort out. I cannot tell you that I am going to walk away from my mortgage tomorrow. My family needs a roof over its head, and right now that mortgaged roof is the best and maybe the only one I can provide. I cannot tell you to close out your savings accounts and cash out your retirement plans. That would be irresponsible. Just as it can be fatal to cut off a drug addict “cold turkey,” it might be catastrophic to pull out of this web of usury in one fell swoop. I cannot even tell you to cut up your credit cards, for to command that would be to force you into the isolation of an Amish farm community.

In the Divine Liturgy we pray for the forgiveness of sins voluntary and involuntary. For almost all of us, our involvement in usury is an involuntary sin: in this society, there is no way to exist without being involved somehow in the charging of interest. May God forgive us and give us light to see how we can free ourselves from this curse.

Even so, there are some things that we can do, we who are committed to living in a way that pleases God, and not just to go with the flow like dead fish.

We can resolve to rid ourselves of current debt, and to not encumber ourselves with further debt, as much as possible. This means living within our

means. This means saving up ahead of time to make purchases rather than buying on credit. We are penalized, of course, for being savers. With inflation as a constant of modern life, money sitting unused is money losing value, slowly depreciating. But buying on credit brings its own financial penalties. In particular, I would challenge us as a parish to continue to strive to pay off that large and burdensome debt that ties our hands so tightly. We give to the bank monthly interest payments that might better have been used for ministries: for bringing ourselves and others closer to God.

Secondly, in our personal financial decisions, we can resolve never to loan out money at interest to any friend or family member. But rather to give freely as we are able, or at worst, to lend and ask no more than the original loan to be paid back in a reasonable time.

Thirdly, we must begin to open our eyes to the ways that the sin of usury pervades all of our society in negative ways. Our whole American financial system is built on usury. All of our national wealth is a façade. Give a man twenty credit cards, and he can quickly acquire for himself the illusion of wealth. And the illusion persists... until the bills come due.

So it is for us in America. Like a house built on sand, our personal wealth is built on the shaky foundation of longstanding debt. Each of us as a citizen of our municipalities and counties of our state, and of this nation, has a share in the enormous debt that our governments have run up at all levels. We are in truth a nation of debt-slaves, living on a very nice, very comfortable First-World plantation. But slaves and peons we are, and we are only the worse off for being ignorant of our true servitude.

Saint Paul told the Christians in Rome (Romans 13:8), "Owe no man anything but to love one another." In that love for one another and for God, we must seek to avoid charging, and to avoid paying, the evil interest of usury. The Scriptures tell us that this is clearly what pleases the Lord, and this is clearly what blesses His people.