

Seek First His Kingdom: An Invitation to Christian Vocation

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Introduction

A number of years ago the abbot of a monastery answered my question of vocation – whether I should get married or become a monk – with the startling words, “God doesn’t care.” He then added, “God only cares that you seek first his kingdom.”

The context of the abbot’s words is, of course, the Sermon on the Mount in St. Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus is instructing his disciples and the crowds on the power of God to provide for basic human needs, exhorting them not to be concerned about earthly security:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive

and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But *seek first his kingdom* [italics added] and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. (Matt 6:25–33)

As you might imagine, my initial reaction to the abbot's words was disappointment. Although "vocation" is perhaps most often associated with a religious calling (whether to a lay or ordained ministry), it is also commonly used to refer to one's life's work, even simply one's occupation. I believed at the time that I was asking the right question: What did God want me to do with my life?

In the years that followed, I studied at seminary, got married, completed doctoral studies, and fathered two sons. Although I often recalled the abbot's words – "God only cares that you seek first his kingdom" – there remained the lingering suspicion that God had intended a special purpose for me that I had failed to discern. As I reflect on these words today, I realize now that the abbot had in fact answered my question. Indeed, all things – even knowledge of one's vocation – are provided to those who first seek God's kingdom.

Implicit in the abbot's scriptural admonition is an analogy between God's providential care and the disclosure of a divinely-appointed vocation. Just as the Father provides our basic human needs of food and clothing, by simple extension, so must he provide for our needs regarding our vocation in the world. And if we are not to be anxious about what we are to eat, to drink, or to wear because our heavenly Father will

provide these things, so must we not be anxious about what we are to do. Indeed, as Jesus instructs his disciples, we are *not even to ask the questions* “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” If we recognize that these questions are simply variations of the question “What shall we do?”, then we must face the notion that, according to Jesus, this kind of questioning is born out of anxiety and is not compatible with a life of discipleship. Regarding food, drink, clothing – and vocation – Jesus says clearly: seek first the Father’s kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well.

In order to understand vocation in this sense, therefore, we must answer the following questions: What does it mean to seek God’s kingdom? Why does Jesus exhort us not to be anxious? Does God call us for a special purpose? How does he reveal to us our vocation?

To answer these questions we should first ask: how do Orthodox Christians begin to answer such questions? The approach that I take in this essay – a close reading of Scripture, in particular St. Matthew’s Gospel – is foundational for the Church, our common life of faith and the locus of our salvation. Indeed, as Fr. Thomas Hopko once explained, “Everything in the Church is judged by the Bible. Nothing in the Church may contradict it. Everything in the Church must be biblical; for the Church, in order to be the Church, must be wholly expressive of the Bible; or more accurately, it must be wholly faithful to and expressive of that reality to which the Bible is itself the scriptural witness.”¹ It is my hope that by illuminating the scriptural witness my word about vocation will be faithful to our Orthodox tradition.

Seeking the Kingdom

What does it mean to seek God's kingdom? In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, to seek God's kingdom essentially means to seek his righteousness, as implied by the parallelism between "kingdom" and "righteousness" in Jesus' invitation to his followers: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matt 6:33). Although some scholars have argued that the righteousness of God connotes God's activity toward human beings, whether understood as the gift of a new covenant² or the end-time imposition of his kingdom and the vindication of his saints,³ most commentators agree that righteousness here refers to the right conduct that God requires of disciples.⁴ Why then does Jesus speak of *God's* righteousness in Matthew 6:33 and not the righteousness of disciples, as in Matthew 5:20? The most likely explanation is that it reminds the reader that divine righteousness serves as the norm of human activity and criterion of final judgment, and that the knowledge of this divine righteousness is itself a gift of God.⁵ In this context, therefore, it can be argued that "kingdom" and "righteousness" are essentially interchangeable.⁶

To seek God's kingdom, which is his righteousness, means that one must first know God's will, for God's will is to be the norm of human conduct. While the mission of Jesus unquestionably is to "save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21), a mission that is foreshadowed by his very name and ultimately accomplished by his voluntary death, the most prominent activity of Jesus during his ministry, as understood by Matthew, is teaching his followers the will of God. Uniquely

characteristic of Matthew's Gospel is the grouping of Jesus' instruction into five blocks of material,⁷ an arrangement that is reminiscent of the five books of the Pentateuch and suggestive of Jesus' role as the one greater than the lawgiver Moses.⁸ In the Sermon on the Mount, the first of these blocks of instruction, Jesus discloses the will of God by repeatedly contrasting the written law or rabbinic interpretations of the law with his own interpretations:

You have heard that it was said to the men of old, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment." *But I say to you* [italics added] that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment... (5:21–22)

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." *But I say to you* [italics added] that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (5:27–28)

It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." *But I say to you* [italics added] that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress... (5:31–32)

Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, "You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn." *But I say to you* [italics added], Do not swear at all... (5:33–34)

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." *But I say to you* [italics added], Do not resist one who is evil. (5:38–39)

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your

neighbor and hate your enemy." *But I say to you* [italics added], Love your enemies and pray for those persecute you... (5:43–44)

Although it is sometimes argued that the interpretations of Jesus represent an abrogation of the law, particularly in the matter of divorce, this seems unlikely in light of Jesus' resolute insistence that his teaching upholds the law: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt 5:17–18). More persuasive, therefore, is David Garland's explanation:

Jesus restores [the law's] original intention. He does not add more laws nor raise the standards of what is right. Instead, he recovers what God has always required in the law – much like those who removed the accumulation of grime that collected over the years on Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel in order to restore them to their full glory.⁹

A passage later in Matthew supports this interpretation that Jesus restores the original intention of the law. In chapter 19, Jesus uses precisely the argument of God's original intention to challenge the stance of the Pharisees on the question of divorce:

Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder. (Matt 19:4–6)

Although the Pharisees have framed their confrontation with Jesus as an exegetical debate on the valid grounds for divorce (cf. Deut 21:1–4), Jesus sidesteps the debate, instead upholding the law’s original intention by interpreting its stipulations on divorce as a concession to human weakness: “[Jesus] said to them, ‘For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so’” (Matt 19:8). Seeking the kingdom of God, therefore, is knowing the will of God; this will of God is revealed by Jesus, who in his teaching uncovers the original intention of God’s law.

Yet to seek God’s kingdom is not simply a matter of *knowing* the will of God; one must also *do* his will. When Herod the king assembles the chief priests and scribes to learn where the Christ is to be born, they correctly determine from the Scriptures, the repository of God’s will, that he is to be born in Bethlehem (Matt 2:4–6). Herod subsequently uses this knowledge, however, to attempt to destroy the child (Matt 2:16) rather than to worship him (Matt 2:8, 11). On another occasion, Herod is confronted by John the Baptist, known to Herod and the people to be a prophet (Matt 14:5). The issue John the Baptist raises is the king’s relationship with his sister-in-law. Despite the clear evidence of God’s will on the matter of forbidden sexual relations, revealed both in the written law (Lev 18:16; 20:21) and the prophetic word of the Baptist, Herod refuses to act rightly, instead imprisoning (and subsequently executing) the prophet: “For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison, for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife; because John said to him, ‘It is not lawful for you to have her’” (Matt 14:3–4). Thus, the knowledge of God’s will, though absolutely essential, is not

sufficient. One must also accomplish his will, as Jesus himself insists regarding his own teaching: “Every one then who hears these words of mine *and does them* [italics added] will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock” (Matt 7:24).

The portrayal of Herod represents a particularly egregious example of a Jewish leader who knows the will of God but refuses to do it. A more subtle form of disobedience, according to Matthew, is that of the Pharisees, religious contemporaries of Jesus who were known for their careful interpretation of the law.¹⁰ One can detect – even in the harshly critical portrayal of the Pharisees in Matthew’s Gospel (Matt 15:1–9; 23:4–36) – evidence of their remarkably meticulous observance of the law: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; *these you ought to have done* [italics added], without neglecting the others” (Matt 23:23; cf. Lev 27:30). In short, despite the impression one gets from Matthew’s Gospel that the Pharisees were, in Garland’s words, “monstrous hypocrites,” it is more likely that their righteousness “must have been popularly regarded as exceptional.”¹¹ Therefore, to characterize their righteousness as insufficient – as Jesus implicitly does when he warns the crowds and his disciples that the kingdom requires of them a righteousness that “exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matt 5:20) – would almost certainly have unsettled his listeners.¹²

To seek God’s kingdom, therefore, means to perform the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, who despite their extraordinary attentiveness to the details of the law fall short of the right conduct required by God. The failing of the Pharisees

– and one of the reasons that their righteousness is unacceptable to God – is that their conduct, which outwardly appears to be good, in fact conceals iniquity within. One of the charges against the Pharisees – that they cleanse the outside of cups and plates¹³ while ignoring the extortion and selfishness within (Matt 23:25–26) – metaphorically points to a discrepancy between appearance and reality, between the outside and the inside, between the Pharisees’ actions and their heart¹⁴ as their root problem. This character flaw of the Pharisees – of the inside failing to correspond to the outside – is directly attacked by Jesus when he compares the Pharisees to whitewashed tombs:¹⁵ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity” (Matt 23:27–28). The righteousness of the Pharisees, in other words, despite its apparent acceptability, is actually not righteousness at all. Therefore, to perform the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees means to perform actions that are not only outwardly good but also inwardly acceptable – the actions, in other words, of a good and undivided heart.¹⁶

To define the root problem of the Pharisees simply as the failure of the inside to correspond to the outside, however, although essentially correct, is missing one element: the necessity of purity of intention. For example, one is inclined to accept the testimony of Paul the Pharisee that he excelled in Judaism (Phil 3:4–6), presumably because he was able to express faithfully the intention of his heart in acts of righteousness as defined by the law. Arguably, therefore, the hypocrites

who sound a trumpet when giving alms (Matt 6:2) or pray on street corners (Matt 6:5), although rightly condemned by Jesus, do intend to fulfill the ethical and religious requirements of the law. Their problem is that by drawing attention to themselves they show that their actions are motivated by another intention as well – the desire to be praised by others. Jesus warns the crowds and his disciples that this condition of divided loyalties betrays an anxious self-concern that is incompatible with the life of discipleship. Moreover, it effectively contradicts their very confession of faith: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt 6:24).

The condition of being “‘divided’ in one’s fealty to God,” therefore, can be understood here as an “inner incongruity,”¹⁷ rather than a failure of intentions corresponding to actions, or even of words corresponding to deeds. Indeed, the actions of a hypocrite, so defined, do correspond to intentions; the intentions, however, are not necessarily made explicit, either to the hypocrite himself or to others.¹⁸ One can say, therefore, that the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is possible only for the disciple whose divided heart has been renewed or made whole, who manifests the singleness of purpose that is pronounced blessed by Jesus in the Beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8).

In short, to seek God’s kingdom means to possess the understanding and intention of God himself, the very mind of God, and to perform corresponding acts of righteousness. Such acts of righteousness are, in a sense, not one’s own but are those of God, as Jesus

teaches in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (5:43–48)

Providential Care

Many of us are likely to agree that to seek the intention of God and perform corresponding acts of righteousness is, or should be, the goal of all Christians. But then understandably we move on to more basic questions – What shall we eat and wear? What shall we do? In each case, the biblical answer is the same – Do not be anxious. We are not to be anxious, because, as Jesus declares, our heavenly Father knows what we need and will provide it (Matt 6:33). He knows, for example, that we need food and clothing. In the missionary discourse of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples, who also need food and clothing, not to rely on their own resources but on the hospitality of those who will receive them and accept their message of the kingdom:

These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And preach as you go, saying, 'The

kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying, give without pay. *Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the laborer deserves his food. And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay with him until you depart* [italics added]. As you enter the house, salute it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if any one will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town." (Matt 10:5–15)

The vulnerability of these missionary disciples – those who paradigmatically seek first God's kingdom – is itself to be understood as a sign of God's providential care: they are truly helpless, but God himself will care for them. And indeed, God does provide them with food and clothing, but only through those who accept the word of the kingdom. When the word is rejected, on the other hand, as it will be (Matt 10:14), rejection simply becomes another opportunity for the disciples to bear witness to the gospel: "Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them and the Gentiles" (Matt 10:17–18). Therefore, the disciples are exhorted not to become anxious, not to succumb to the condition of divided loyalties. Rather, they are to remain focused on their one task, which is to proclaim the word of the kingdom: "When they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak

or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt 10:19–20). Remarkably, the consolation of the disciples who face hunger, persecution, even death for the sake of the gospel is not that they will be delivered from their distress – they will not be. Their consolation rather is that God himself will provide the words of their testimony. For this reason, they are not to be anxious.

We are also not to be anxious, because, as Jesus assures us, the suffering and failure of those who proclaim the gospel do not represent the failure of the gospel itself. Those who turn away the missionary disciples are held accountable for their actions on the day of judgment (Matt 10:14–15), when it is revealed that the encounter with the disciples represented not only an opportunity to care for needy strangers but also an invitation to enter the kingdom. It has generally been maintained that the criterion of judgment in the parable of the last judgment (Matt 25:31–46) – “the least of these my brethren” – is the poor and neglected of all the nations. More recently, however, some scholars have argued that “the least” should be regarded as the missionary disciples,¹⁹ who have followed the instructions of Jesus not to rely on their own resources but to depend on those to whom they preach the gospel for their food and clothing. At the final judgment, it is revealed that those who cared for the vulnerable missionaries have in fact ministered to the Son of man, who is both universal judge and the content of the good news. By caring for the needy disciples, they are shown to have implicitly accepted the gospel message. By caring for the needy disciples, they have

ministered to the Son of man: "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'" (Matt 25:37–40). Therefore, having performed the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, they are pronounced blessed by the judge and invited into the kingdom. On the other hand, those who neglected the needy disciples have also implicitly rejected the word of the kingdom. Consequently, they are sent "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt 25:41), thus realizing the terrible outcome in store for those who refuse to accept the missionary disciples and their message: "And if any one will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town" (Matt 10:14–15). We are not to be anxious, in other words, because the apparent failure of our human efforts does not invalidate the gospel. This is indeed good news.

We are also not to be anxious, as Jesus reminds us, because life is more than food and clothing more than the body (Matt 6:25). Indeed, the ultimate expression of God's providential care is not that he provides for our material needs but that he provides his word as food and clothing, the means by which he renews a divided heart and makes possible the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. When Jesus, after having fasted for forty days in the wilderness,

is tempted by the devil to change stones into bread in order to satisfy his hunger, he rebukes the devil, testifying that his food is the word of God: “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (Matt 4:4; cf. Deut 8:3). In his response to the devil, Jesus exemplifies the singleness of purpose that is characteristic of an undivided heart. In the parable of the wedding feast (Matt 22:1–14), on the other hand, one of the guests is cast out of the feast because he is not wearing the proper clothing – a wedding garment: “But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt 22:11–14). The several hyperbolic elements of the parable – killing of messengers, destruction of the city, indiscriminate invitation, harsh treatment of the unworthy guest – support the interpretation that more is intended here than a cautionary tale about proper wedding attire. Rather, as many commentators have observed, the parable is an allegory of the history of salvation and final judgment.²⁰ The wedding garment in particular denotes the works of righteousness required of those who have accepted the invitation of the kingdom, understood not as works meriting salvation but as works evidencing God’s righteousness.²¹ Works of righteousness are evidence of God’s prior activity, however, only if they correspond to a renewed heart,²² the true object of God’s providential care, who graciously bestows his word as food and clothing.

Finally, we are not to be anxious because anxiety, whether about the cares of the world or in the face of persecution, makes the word unfruitful, as the allegor-

ical interpretation of the parable of the sower makes clear:

Hear then the parable of the sower. When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart; this is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. (Matt 13:18–23)

The word of the kingdom, which is offered indiscriminately to both the good and the bad alike (cf. Mat 22:10), not unexpectedly provokes responses of uncomprehending rejection and fruitful reception: earlier, Jesus had warned his disciples that their message would be rejected by some and accepted by others (Matt 10:11–15). Surprisingly, however, there are also some who will receive the word of the kingdom immediately and with joy, yet whose anxiety – the expression of a divided heart – will cause the word to be unfruitful, the very condition of those who reject the word outrightly. Arguably, the posture of unbelievers is even preferable to that of anxious believers – they at least do not (wrongly) perceive themselves as fruitful receivers of the word, they at least can still be confronted by their unbelief and possibly be saved (cf. Rev 3:15–16). Fruitful reception, therefore, the condi-

tion wherein works of righteousness correspond to a renewed heart, is possible only when one's loyalties are not divided, when neither worldly cares nor the fear of persecution distract one from the single-minded pursuit of God's kingdom. Blessed, indeed, are those who seek the kingdom of God with a pure heart.

A Special Calling

Does God call us for a special purpose? If by "special purpose" we mean marriage, a particular job, even a calling to ministry, then the answer is "no." As the abbot once remarked, "God doesn't care." God doesn't care because all vocations, as the Apostle Paul would have said, are "lawful" (cf. 1 Cor 10:23). God doesn't care because all vocations, in a sense, have been blessed.²³ The word of the kingdom is preached indiscriminately to show not only that good and bad alike are invited to enter the kingdom (cf. Mat 22:10), but also that the kingdom is offered to rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female, in other words, to all human beings of every social status and occupation (cf. Gal 3:28; Col 3:11), essentially sanctioning these social roles and occupations. In his letter to the Ephesians, for example, Paul instructs the various members of the household to pattern their lives after Christ's obedience and sacrificial love (Eph 5:21–6:9). It is noteworthy that Paul does not question the legitimacy of slavery, which at the time was not only the dominant social and economic institution of the Roman Empire but also arguably the most oppressive. Masters are not asked to release their slaves; slaves are not encouraged to seek their freedom. Rather, Paul reminds both masters and slaves that their relationship is to be informed by the

example of Christ:

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ; not in the way of eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. Masters, do the same to them, and forbear threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. (Eph 6:5–9)

Paul's instructions have the effect of transforming slavery into a positive metaphor of life in Christ, challenging his readers to view an institution of oppression and exploitation as an opportunity for Christian witness.²⁴ While modern readers are often dismayed that Paul did not apparently take a stand against slavery, the point here is not to condone a social injustice.²⁵ Rather, the aim is to argue that the overriding intention of Paul is to articulate the possibility of Christian witness in every stratum of society. More often than not, we today are faced with a choice of vocations rather than being forced into an occupation not of our choosing. Nevertheless, the possibility of witness is the same in both situations. From this perspective one can say that all vocations – marriage, monasticism, investment banking, carpentry, teaching, medicine, military service, ordination, professional sports, itinerant preaching – are indeed “lawful,” since all vocations have the possibility of being transformed into a positive image of life in Christ.

While it is true that all vocations are “lawful,” it is also

true that not all vocations are “helpful.” All vocations are “lawful,” but some vocations – those ostensibly at odds with a biblical ethos – prove more difficult than others to transform into an image of life in Christ. The rich man in Matthew’s Gospel, for example, is unable to enter God’s kingdom, despite faithfully observing all the commandments (Matt 19:16–22). Because he is unwilling to exchange his great possessions for a heavenly treasure, “he becomes a sign of how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom, much to the astonishment of the disciples, who apparently hold the view that property is a sign of God’s favor: ‘Who then can be saved’ (Matt 19.25)? And like the rich man, many of us also turn away from this invitation [to sell what we have, give to the poor, and follow Christ], whether our possessions are many or few, before we understand the meaning of Jesus’ words: ‘With men this [salvation] is impossible, but with God all things are possible’ (Matt 19.26).”²⁶ All vocations are “lawful,” but some vocations prove unfruitful because we forget that they too must be animated each day by the spirit of Christian charity. In this regard it is important to recognize that the vocations that seem to match well with the life of service envisioned by the Bible, such as ministry, medicine, teaching, and so on, can be the ones we most forget need to be illuminated by this Christian charity.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul upholds the believers in Corinth who have correctly grasped the concept of Christian liberty, in this case, their right to eat meat offered in sacrifice to idols. Nevertheless, he also admonishes them for failing to understand that their newfound liberty in Christ is intended only for the purpose of building up of the community: “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are

lawful,' but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor" (1 Cor 10:23–24). To seek one's own good at the expense of the neighbor, especially if it causes the neighbor to stumble, is to sin against Christ, as Paul warns the Corinthians (cf. 1 Cor 8:12). To seek one's own good at the expense of the neighbor is to act from a divided heart, the condition of anxious believers, who make the word of the kingdom unfruitful and thus are condemned on the day of judgment (cf. Mat 7:21–23). To seek the neighbor's good, on the other hand, to build up the neighbor even at the expense of one's own freedom in Christ, is to actualize the saving pattern of Jesus' kenosis, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:5–8). To seek the neighbor's good at one's own expense, in other words, is to have the mind of Christ, a sign that the word of the kingdom has indeed been fruitful. All vocations, therefore, are "lawful," but only insofar as they are used to build up the community of believers. All vocations are "lawful," but only those that seek the neighbor's good are "helpful."

Does God call us for a special purpose? If by "special purpose," on the other hand, we mean a life of witness that informs all vocations, then the answer is "yes." Indeed, we Christians have only one true vocation – to witness to the salvation that God has accomplished in us. This vocation is strikingly depicted in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21–35), who is released by the king from the impossible debt

of ten thousands talents for no reason other than that he pleads for mercy. Subsequently, the servant is expected to witness to his “salvation” by showing the same mercy to others. When he refuses to forgive a fellow servant the insignificant sum of a hundred denarii, however, his forgiveness is withdrawn and the servant is cast into prison. The lesson of the parable is clear: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt 18:35). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus likens the witness of salvation to a light that shines before others: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:16). To perform good works openly before others, however, risks bringing praise to oneself rather than the glory to God. Indeed, the good works of the hypocrites are rejected by God because their intention is to secure the praise of others (Matt 6:1–5), the condition of a divided heart. The light of salvation, on the other hand, is none other than the word of the kingdom, which not only sustains the afflicted messenger of the gospel but also ascribes the messenger’s works to the power of God:

For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way,

but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (2 Cor 4:5–11)

The Scriptural Mind

How does God reveal to us our vocation? God reveals our vocation by transforming our hearts, the seat of our understanding and intention. God reveals our vocation, in other words, by giving us a scriptural mind.

Some fifty years ago Fr. Georges Florovsky bemoaned the Orthodox Christian's clear loss of the scriptural mind, despite our retaining "some bits of biblical phraseology." The biblical idiom had become archaic for the modern man, its relevance no longer a certainty. Fr. Georges expressed concern that our continuous process of reinterpretation, which he equated with the project of demythologizing Scripture, risked losing "the uniqueness of the Word of God." Instead, Florovsky asked,

Would it not be safer to bend our thought to the mental habits of the biblical language and to relearn the idiom of the Bible? No man can receive the gospel unless he repents – "changes his mind." For in the language of the gospel "repentance" (*metanoieite*) does not mean merely acknowledgment of and contrition for sins, but precisely a "change of mind" – a profound change of man's mental and emotional attitude, an integral renewal of man's self, which begins in his

self-renunciation and is accomplished and sealed by the Spirit.²⁷

Certainly, we today should use whatever tools we have at our disposal to identify our talents and our interests, and to match them to the needs of the world. Certainly, we should seek the advice of wise elders and discerning peers to help us discover our true calling, the one we are best suited for. Certainly, we should make the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane – “not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt 26:39) – our daily petition, continuously framing our search for vocation in its proper context. But above all we should learn “to bend our thought to the mental habits of the biblical language” so that we might not only remind ourselves but also teach others that the most immediate question – What shall I do? – is not yet the most important one. The most important question is rather: How shall I witness in whatever I do?

I would like to conclude with a practical suggestion. While all vocations may indeed be “lawful” – and this must be affirmed – I am certain that unless one first seeks the kingdom of God, unless one first acquires the scriptural mind, not all vocations are “helpful.” To acquire the scriptural mind, however, is not simply a matter of memorizing scriptural verses or faithfully attending divine services during Lent. Rather, to acquire the scriptural mind is a long process that begins with a daily encounter with God’s word, not unlike the encounter that was prompted by our question of vocation. Not unexpectedly, the world is inhospitable to those who would acquire the scriptural mind, refusing to allow us the time in our normal lives to study, to pray, to reflect, and finally to repent. We need time for

these activities to become an everyday part of our lives. Therefore, I propose that before anyone would answer the question of vocation, he or she should undertake a serious program of post-baptismal catechesis at a seminary, preferably for a year or two. While the formal requirements of a degree program may seem like an unnecessary concession to the ways of this world, still I can think of no better place (outside of a monastery) to begin a life of study, prayer, and reflection in community, without which the biblical language remains merely an archaic idiom and a life of witness the vocation only of saints.

Notes

1 Thomas Hopko, "The Bible in the Orthodox Church," in *All the Fullness of God: Essays on Orthodoxy, Ecumenism, and Modern Society* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 49–50.

2 Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 84–87.

3 Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), 118.

4 For example, W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 1:661; Dan O. Via, Jr., *Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 85.

5 In the parable of the last judgment (Matt 25:31–46), the reader learns what is revealed to the sheep and the goats only when it is too late – that the care or neglect of the least is in fact the care or neglect of Jesus, who is thus both criterion of judgment and universal judge.

6 This is argued by W.D. Davies and Dale Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 1:661. "Righteousness is the law of the realm, the law of God's kingdom; and to participate even now in God's eschatological rule one must strive for the better righteousness of 5.20. Righ-

teousness is the narrow gate that leads to the life of God's kingdom. Thus, to seek the kingdom is to seek righteousness and to seek righteousness is to seek the kingdom."

7 Although the blocks of material, or "discourses," lack clear beginnings, they are generally defined roughly as follows: Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5–7); Missionary Discourse (ch. 10); Parables of the Kingdom (ch. 13); Discourse on Church Relationships (ch. 18); and Eschatological Discourse (chs. 23–25). See David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 31 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988).

8 See Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

9 David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad Press, 1993), 63.

10 The Apostle Paul, writing about his prior life as a Pharisee and persecutor of the church, leaves little doubt about his and his party's high regard for the law and its observance: "If any other man thinks he has confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless" (Phil 3:4–6). See also Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.110; 2.162.

11 Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 62.

12 One is reminded here of the disciples' astonishment – "Who then can be saved?" – upon being told by Jesus that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt 19:24). The lesson is that human status and achievement, even apparent signs of God's privilege (cf. Gen 24:35; 26:12–13), are irrelevant before the kingdom.

13 Possibly related to Lev 11:31–32, which requires that a vessel be washed in the event that a dead "swarming thing" should render it impure. See E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 39, 199–205.

14 In the biblical idiom the heart represents the seat of human understanding and intention.

15 The practice of whitewashing tombs may have been intended to mark tombs so as to prevent inadvertent overshadowing, which

arguably would cause the person to contract corpse impurity. See Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 39.

16 It has often been argued that the Pharisees in Matthew's Gospel represent the members of Matthew's Church, who themselves appear outwardly righteous but are full of iniquity within. The evangelist's oblique accusation against the members of his own community recalls the word of the prophet Jeremiah, who challenged the leaders of Judah to repent despite their appearance of righteousness (Jer 7:1–15). Contemporary readers of Matthew's Gospel, therefore, are challenged to see that they themselves are like the Pharisees. See John A. Barnet, *Not the Righteous but Sinners: M. M. Bakhtin's Theory of Aesthetics and the Problem of Reader-Character Interaction in Matthew's Gospel*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 246 (London: T&T Clark, 2003).

17 Jack Kingsbury's definition of hypocrisy. See Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 1988), 20.

18 David E. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew 23* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), 100–101, has concluded that the dominant meaning of hypocrisy in Matthew's Gospel is a type of self-deception rather than a conscious pretense to fool others.

19 See, for example, Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 243–45; John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 120–23

20 For example, Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 220; Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 94.

21 Gundry, *Matthew*, 439; Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 223.

22 Some scholars have argued that the wedding garment signifies repentance, which is the transformation or renewal of the heart. See Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 522–23.

23 The point here is not to suggest that exploitative, demeaning, harmful "vocations," such as prostitution, drug-dealing, and so on, are blessed. Clearly, they are not. Rather, my provocative assertion is intended to challenge the thinking that there exists only a handful of "good" occupations suitable for life in Christ. The real challenge facing Christians, as I argue below, is how can we make our expression of a particular profession "good."

24 On the use of slavery as soteriological symbol, see Dale B. Martin, *Slavery As Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

25 On the other hand, in his letter to Philemon, Paul does ask the master to accept his runaway slave Onesimus as a brother and no longer as a slave (Phlm 10–20). Would the writers of the New Testament have been opposed to the eradication of slavery? Not likely. See Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), who shows how the New Testament can be used as a guide for contemporary ethics.

26 John Barnet, “Stewardship and the New Testament” in *Good and Faithful Servant: Stewardship in the Orthodox Tradition*, edited by Anthony Scott (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 49.

27 Georges Florovsky, “The Lost Scriptural Mind,” in *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, MA: Norland Publishing, 1972), 10.