

LUKE: 13: 10-17

10. And he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.

11. And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself.

12. And when Jesus saw her, he called her to him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity.

13. And he laid his hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God.

14. And the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because that Jesus had healed on the sabbath day, and said unto the people, There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the sabbath day.

15. The Lord then answered him, and said, Thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering?

16. And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?

17. And when he had said these things, all his adversaries were ashamed: and all the people rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by him.

There is a fine line between obeying a commandment according to the letter of the commandment and understanding its spirit and being guided accordingly. Crossing this line without discernment is dangerous. God gives us His commandments to guide us.

Commandments are guides and are not cast in stone. We need to understand what a commandment is trying to help us accomplish in our spiritual life and use that discernment to guide us as to how to best fulfill this commandment. A simple example is the commandment of fasting. God requires us to fast because without fasting, it is impossible to correctly live a spiritual life. When our bodies are filled with rich foods, we become lethargic. We want to enjoy ourselves. We do not desire to be "distracted" by spiritual pursuits such as praying or reading spiritual literature. God as our Creator knows what our weaknesses are. He helps us maintain the correct balance between our physical and bodily needs. He gives us fasting periods where we can concentrate more on our soul rather than our body. This is the main reason that God tells us to fast.

If we understand correctly what God is doing, we will fast willingly and the fast will be of benefit to us. But if we simply look at the letter of the fasting commandments and abstain from proscribed foods accordingly, our fast may in fact be dangerous to us. A pregnant mother may need food that is proscribed to maintain her health as well as the health of her unborn child. A sick person may need to eat some of the forbidden foods. A person may abstain from the proscribed foods but do nothing at the same time to strengthen himself spiritually. These kinds of fasting serve no purpose and can even hurt us physically and spiritually.

Another danger with obeying a commandment strictly according to the letter is that one will do it hypocritically. This is the grievous mistake made by the ruler of the synagogue, for which the Savior sternly scolded him. He demanded adherence to the Sabbath rest where it was not appropriate, while willing to ignore the commandment when it served his purpose. By this he purposely distorted the spirit of the commandment. Another example of this kind of hypocrisy is obeying a commandment strictly to be recognized and praised by people.

The last danger that we will discuss is trying to discern the spirit of a commandment on our own, without proper direction. God's law is divine. We are sinful. Our sinfulness often prevents us from understanding correctly God's intent. Because of this, we always need guidance when trying to understand God's commandments. This is why we have a spiritual father. This is why we read spiritual literature. Saints who are "pure in heart" are our best guides. Therefore, we need to always consult these sources when making important spiritual decisions and not act on our own.

My dear brothers and sisters, God wants most of all that we give Him our hearts. He gives His commandments to help us make the right decisions. He gives us divine Grace to enable us to accomplish the spiritual tasks we need to do in order to open our hearts to Him. Let us wisely, and with true spiritual guidance and understanding, strive to live the kind of life that will enable us to understand correctly God's law and fulfill it to the best of our abilities. What better time to do this than now when we have started the Nativity Fast, which prepares us for the glorious birth of our Savior.

With Love in Christ,

Archpriest Serge Kotar