

SUNDAY BEFORE THE THEOPHANY OF  
OUR LORD, GOD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST



*Icon of the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan -- January 6th*



**January 4, 2015**  
**TONE 5**

**SUNDAY BEFORE THEOPHANY**

*THE SYNAXIS OF THE SEVENTY HOLY APOSTLES; OUR VENERABLE FATHER THEOKTISTUS,  
HEGUMEN OF THE CUCUME MONASTERY IN SICILY*

SCHEDULE OF SERVICES FOR THE WEEK OF JANUARY 5 – JANUARY 11

MONDAY, JANUARY 5 – *THE HOLY MARTYRS THEOPEMPTUS, BISHOP OF NICOMEDIA AND THEONAS; OUR  
VENERABLE MOTHER SYNCLETICA OF ALEXANDRIA*

9:30 AM – Royal Hours

8:00 PM – Blessing of Water followed by “3 Hami Bor” - “God With Us” Complines

TUESDAY, JANUARY 6 – *HOLY THEOPHANY OF OUR LORD*

9:30 AM – Divine Liturgy with Great Blessing of Water

SATURDAY, JANUARY 10

NOTE: GREAT VESPERS WILL NOT TAKE PLACE TODAY.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 11 – *SUNDAY AFTER THEOPHANY*

9:30 AM – Divine Liturgy For All Parishioners

*If you are reading the bulletin during the Liturgy (including the homily),  
please **stop** and be attentive – будьмо уважні!*

*Liturgical Calendars for 2015 are  
available in the church hall. Special  
thanks to Goodbody Mortuary for  
once again sponsoring our calendars.*

*“Are you angry? Be angry at your  
own sins, examine your conscience  
and judge your evil deeds. This is the  
benefit of anger, wherefore God placed  
it in us.”*

*– St. John Chrysostom*

**Let’s go Caroling!**

Between December 25 and February 2  
let’s visit our parishioners, shut-ins, and  
nursing homes. If you are interested in  
participating or you would like to be  
visited or you know of someone who  
would like to be visited, please contact  
Fr. James or Olena.

**Warm Welcome!**

We warmly welcome all of our visitors!  
It’s good to have you with us!

**January Birthdays:**

Nicholas Hirniak	–	1/7
Michael Miller	–	1/15
Anna Sywyj	–	1/16
Mark Hartman	–	1/23
Susie Boyko	–	1/23
Ephrem Tooma	–	1/24
Iryna Khanyk	–	1/24
Christian Hartman	–	1/26
Colin Hartman	–	1/26
Xenia Moore	–	1/26

***Многая і благая літа!  
Many blessed years!***

## THE UN-MORAL CHRISTIAN

Fr. Stephen Freeman    blogs.ancientfaith.com    December 17

In recent articles I have challenged the place of contemporary morality in the Christian life. Some have had difficulty with this, wondering how we should then think about the commandments that are directed towards our behavior. Others have suggested that my challenge is merely semantic. There are certainly semantic distinctions being made here – but the reason for them is important and goes beyond mere words. But if it is not proper to think of ourselves as “moral” beings, how should we think? How do we confess our sins if morality is not the issue?

Our culture sees morality as the rules and standards by which we guide ourselves. These rules of conduct are external and can be described and discussed. They are the rules by which we choose how to behave and by which we sometimes judge others. In this, everybody can be said to be “moral.” Atheists invariably adhere to some standard of conduct – it is just what human beings do. We are sometimes inconsistent and often cannot explain very well the philosophical underpinnings of our actions – but everyone has rules for themselves and standards that they expect of others.

But it is precisely this that sets Christians apart – that makes them “unmoral” (not “immoral”). The nature of the Christian life is not rightly described as the adherence to an external set of norms and standards, even if those norms and standards are described as being “from God.” The “unmoral” life of Christians is a different *mode of existence*. The Christian life is not described so much by what it does as by how it does.

This “unmoral” life is not distinguished by its behavior. If this were not so, then an atheist “acting” like a Christian, would seem to be a Christian. Indeed, at one point in our culture, a “Christian gentleman” meant nothing more than a “gentleman.” This is often the case in public morality. Most Christians seem to be little different from their non-Christian friends. They cannot describe how it is that they differ other than to say that they “think” certain things about God and the universe. But did Christ die only to give us certain ideas?

If the unmoral life is not about behavior, what is it about?

It is about *being a god*.

This, of course, is shocking language, but it is the Christian faith. The life of a fish is about being a fish. It is not about swimming or breathing water (though these certainly are part of a fish’s life). But a man with a special device can breathe water and swim for days without ever becoming a fish. In the same way, the Christian life is not about improving our human behavior, it is about taking on a new kind of existence. And that existence is nothing less than *divine life*.

But is our primary confession simply that we fail at being gods? As difficult as it may be to understand, this confession is closer to the point than repeatedly admitting that we’re only marginally good at being moral. One of the failures of morality is that it seems so tantalizingly *possible*. And so we distract ourselves as we wrestle with our morals, condemning ourselves for what we somehow imagine that we *can* and *should* do.

But think carefully about the commandments of Christ: “Be perfect. Even as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Morality withers in the face of such a statement. Christ’s teaching destroys our moral pretensions. He doesn’t say, “Tithe!” (Priests and preachers say “tithe”). Christ says, “Give it all away.” He doesn’t just say, “Love your neighbor.” He says, “Love your enemy.” Such statements should properly send us into an existential crisis.

The disciples recognized this. “Who then can be saved?” They wondered.

Christ responded, “With men it is impossible. But with God all things are possible.”

The modern fascination with morality is a theological travesty for Christians. It is the reduction of the Kingdom of God to the Democracy of the Mediocre: “I give thanks to God, for I’m doing better and making progress!”

But the Kingdom of God is found in what we cannot do. Morality is not a treasure buried in a field – that treasure is nothing less than the Divine Life of God.

So how do we live the Divine Life of God?

*“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. (Gal. 2:20)*

This is the life in which we moment by moment offer ourselves up to God. We voluntarily empty ourselves before Him and yield ourselves to what He can do in us.

*“..to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us...be glory. (Eph 3:20-21)*

The root of this life is our communion with God. And the rupture of this communion is the true nature of sin.

*“..for whatever is not from faith is sin. (Rom 14:23)*

And this is the proper character of our life. We *eat* Christ. We *drink* Christ. We *breathe* Christ. We do all things in Him and through Him. Learning this manner of life is the task of our faith. It is the path of the saints and the teaching of the Fathers.

We could describe our lives in a “moral” manner, but this would not touch upon our communion with Christ. Our “moral” efforts, when done apart from Christ, do not have the character of salvation about them. Christ does not die in order for us to act in a certain manner. He died in order to enter into our death that through our dying we might enter into His life.

In confession, it is our *communion* that should most concern us. We do many things that are contrary to Christ’s commandments, and they are worth mentioning. But we miss the point of our existence if we fail to see that it is our broken communion that matters most. Morality is little more than our feeble attempt at self-sufficiency.

*“Apart from Me, you can do nothing. (Jn. 15:5)*

Confession is the sacrament of repentance, our turning to God. It is not the sacrament of the second chance and the harder try. Our failures, including our moral failures, are but symptoms. It is the disease itself that should demand our attention. This emptiness and futility of lives is often experienced with shame and embarrassment. We feel that we should somehow be able to do better. But Christ intends to bring us to this recognition of our futility. It is why our salvation begins at the point of death (the ultimate futility). Since everyone can die, everyone is capable of salvation. But it is death that we most fear.

*“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Heb 2:14-15)*

Our fear of death is a place of bondage because our new life can only begin there.

*“Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. (Luk 17:33)*

The point of confession is to lose our life. If moral failure is part of that – well and good. But moral success can be just as problematic. Witness the Desert Fathers:

*“Abba Lot said to Abba Joseph: “Father ... I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation, and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart ... what more should I do?” The elder stretched up his hands to heaven and his fingers became fire. He said, “Why not become all flame?”*

Indeed. Why not?



**THE MORAL CHRISTIAN: A RESPONSE TO FR. STEPHEN FREEMAN**  
December 19, 2014 by Dylan Pahman

In a recent post at Glory to God for All Things, “*The Un-Moral Christian*,” Fr. Stephen Freeman critiques what he sees as common conceptions of Christianity as moral, defined as “the rules and standards by which we guide ourselves.” These, he writes,

“are external and can be described and discussed. They are the rules by which we choose how to behave and by which we sometimes judge others. In this, everybody can be said to be “moral.” Atheists invariably adhere to some standard of conduct—it is just what human beings do. We are sometimes inconsistent and often cannot explain very well the philosophical underpinnings of our actions—but everyone has rules for themselves and standards that they expect of others.

To him, however, Christians ought not to think of themselves as moral, understood in this way, at all. He writes,

“The nature of the Christian life is not rightly described as the adherence to an external set of norms and standards, even if those norms and standards are described as being “from God.” The “unmoral” life of Christians is a different mode of existence. The Christian life is not described so much by what it does as by how it does.

Instead, he insists that “the Christian life is not about improving our human behavior, it is about taking on a new kind of existence. And that existence is nothing less than divine life.”

On the one hand, I completely agree with him regarding the end or goal of our life in Christ: theosis or deification. This is certainly *more than* a matter of outward “adherence to an external set of norms and standards.” I also agree that an over-focus on external norms can trap one in a sort of Pelagian perfectionism that gives too much credit to human effort and too little to divine grace. And he is certainly right to say, “Our ‘moral’ efforts, when done apart from Christ, do not have the character of salvation about them.”

But, on the other hand, I argue that he’s ultimately

overplaying his hand. To be more than moral, as Fr. Stephen is using the term, nevertheless requires first being moral. In particular, my thesis is twofold: Fr. Stephen (1) overlooks a common distinction among the Fathers between normative expectations for beginners in the faith versus the higher standard for the more mature (such as monastics and others who can devote their whole lives to the God), and (2) he undervalues the role of outward adherence to external norms as part of the process of internalization of the life in Christ.

One caveat: Fr. Stephen begins by noting that his differences with some may be merely semantic, but then, however, he continues to say that “the reason for [semantic differences] is important and goes beyond mere words.” Thus, I will try my best to stick to the substance of his essay rather than getting too caught up in terminological peculiarities, while, at the same time, acknowledging that some differences may be more apparent than actual.

That said, consider Fr. Stephen’s reflection on the teachings of Christ:

“But think carefully about the commandments of Christ: “Be perfect. Even as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Morality withers in the face of such a statement. Christ’s teaching destroys our moral pretensions. He doesn’t say, “Tithe!” (Priests and preachers say “tithe”). Christ says, “Give it all away.” He doesn’t just say, “Love your neighbor.” He says, “Love your enemy.” Such statements should properly send us into an existential crisis.

By contrast, many of the Fathers, grounding their teaching in the Gospel, understood at least two, if not more, modes or standards of living the Christian life, which shed a different light on these more difficult commandments.

I begin with St. Ambrose. He writes, “Every duty [of the Christian life] is either ‘ordinary’ or ‘perfect.’” To Ambrose, ordinary duties correspond to a Christian appropriation of the Ten Commandments, given “from God” to Moses on Mt. Sinai, according to the Scriptures. “These are ordinary duties, to which something

is wanting,” he writes. These norms are expected of all Christians as a basic starting point. Perfect duties, on the other hand, go beyond this standard. He grounds this in the story of the rich young ruler from the Gospel according to St. Matthew:

“Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?”

So He said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”

He said to Him, “Which ones?”

Jesus said, ““You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?”

Jesus said to him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” (Matthew 19:16-21)

St. Ambrose here picks up on Jesus’s condition: “If you want to be perfect.” To him, this goes beyond what is ordinary to a higher standard.

While this does seem to spark an “existential crisis” for the young man, who “went away sorrowful” (19:22), Ambrose, while being attentive to the text, through this distinction suggests a more hopeful reading, I think, than common pessimistic assumptions about the man’s fate, like that of the Apostles (“Who then can be saved?”—19:24). Indeed, St. Mark even notes that, after telling Jesus that he kept all the commandments, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him” (10:21). Christ challenges him to a higher standard, yes, but he does not criticize what he had already attained. Christ’s response, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:16) is intended to counter such existential despair, not to commend it.

A similar distinction can be found in St. John Climacus’s Ladder of Divine Ascent. He writes,

“Some people living carelessly in the world put a question to me: “How can we who are married and living amid public cares aspire to [the standard of] the monastic life?”

I answered: “Do whatever good you may. Speak evil of no one. Rob no one. Tell no lie. Despise no one and carry no hate. Do not separate yourself from the church assemblies. Show compassion to the needy. Do not be a cause of scandal to anyone. Stay away from the bed of another, and be satisfied with what your own wives can provide you. If you do all this, you will not be far from the kingdom of heaven.”

Don’t nearly all of these statements, which clearly resemble the Ten Commandments, have an external focus? They may not be reducible to that aspect (e.g. “carry no hate”), but it is notable that Climacus does not simply say, “Be perfectly humble” or “Be deified”—more clearly internally oriented commands—but rather, “Do whatever good you may.” There is a graciousness here reminiscent of the *Didache*, which, after describing the way of life in similar terms, states, “[I]f you can bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect, but if you cannot, do what you can.” Those who are immature (myself most of all, no doubt) need to begin somewhere.

We may add to these the distinction found in St. Basil, St. John Cassian, St. John Climacus again, and St. Nicholas Cabasilas between three dispositions of obedience in our life in Christ. In Cassian’s *Conferences*, Abba Chæremon grounds this in his reading of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31). Cabasilas, a bit more succinctly, writes,

“The Spirit permits us to receive the mysteries of Christ, and as it is said, to those who receive Him “He gave power to become children of God” (Jn. 1:12). It is to the children that the perfect love belongs from which “all fear has been driven away” (cf. 1 Jn. 4:12). He who loves in that way cannot fear either the loss of rewards or the incurring of penalties, for the latter fear belongs to slaves, the former to hirelings. To love purely in this manner belongs to sons alone.

Thus, slaves obey through fear of punishment,

hirelings for desire for reward, and lastly children out of perfect love for love's sake, unmindful of external punishments or rewards. This purity of heart, however, is the goal, not the beginning. As Proverbs teaches, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7). Beginning with the more consequentialist and seemingly external ("fear of either the loss of rewards or the incurring of penalties"), as we spiritually mature, we move beyond our starting point. Then, and only then, will we too say with St. Antony: "Now I do not fear God, but I love him: for love casteth out fear."

What the Fathers seem to be saying is the following: You would like to be deified but you do not know the way? You wish to love as a true child of God but you cannot? Learn from those who have walked this way before you. They began by fasting and praying and trying to fulfill the commandments, with much fear. Over time, these became a habit, internalized as a second, virtuous nature. Or rather, as the tarnish of passions is more and more cleared away from the image of God within you, your true nature as a

child of God will shine through, restored in the likeness of Jesus Christ. This is firstly a matter of his grace, offered to you through the mysteries of the Church, but it is also a matter of synergy—you must cooperate with the work of this grace; you too must act. And in acting moral, you become more than merely moral, transfigured by the grace of God within you.

Fr. Stephen objects, "Our failures, including our moral failures, are but symptoms" of the true disease: lack of communion with God. But does not treating a disease also require basic treatment of the symptoms? Should we not expect our Great Physician to do both?

Similarly, if we wish to walk the narrow road that leads to life, we must do so one step at a time. If this means starting with basic, Ten Commandments, natural law, or even—to some degree—crudely consequentialist and "external" morality, some of which even a virtuous atheist may do or affirm, then so be it. We cannot expect to reach the end of the road, if we do not first start at the beginning.

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### Parishioners That Are Home Bound

If you or a loved one cannot make it to Church, Fr. James would be more than pleased to visit at your home, in the hospital, at a nursing home, or any other place. Please schedule a visit with Fr. James.

#### ***Please Note:***

When you are away, please don't forget that the church still relies on your contributions. Our bills do not go on vacation. Your absence on any Sunday does not negate your obligation to support your home parish.

### Last Sunday's Bulletin

If you haven't yet picked up last Sunday's bulletin, it is available in the church hall, or on our website, [stjohnthebaptizer.org](http://stjohnthebaptizer.org).

#### **Pastor:**

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***The Baptism of the Lord and Our Baptism***

The prophet proclaimed, "He desires mercy," thereby announcing from on high the mystery of baptism and the immeasurable grace of the Crucified. It is Christ who desires mercy, and this was His reason for becoming man. He who was born without opening the virginal womb "will turn again and take pity on us." Indeed, He has taken pity on us by freeing us from error. Upon the cross He triumphed over all sin. "He has cast our sins into the depths of the sea," for He has washed them away in the saving waters of Baptism.

Consider what Baptism is and proclaim its grace. All blessings are contained in it. It purifies the world; it restores nature. It is a speedy redemption, a simple remedy, a liquid fire that burns away sin, a sponge that purifies the conscience, a garment that never wears

out. It is a womb that conceives without passion, a tomb in which those who are buried are born again. It is the ocean in which sins are drowned, the element that witnesses to the devil's defeat.

It is the seal of Him who takes possession of the fortress, the unfailing advocate before the Judge. It is the stream that extinguishes the fires of hell, the grace that gives admission to the supper of the Lord. It is a mystery, both old and new, foreshadowed even in the time of Moses. To Christ our God be glory forever, through endless ages. Amen.

*Basil of Seleucia*

**For more information on Eastern spirituality, visit  
[www.mytheosis.com](http://www.mytheosis.com)**