

The Good Word

PUBLISHED WITH THE BLESSING OF HIS EMINENCE BISHOP AUXENTIOS OF ETNA AND PORTLAND, GOC-K

LEPROSY PART V: THE “περι φιλοπτωχίας” (LOVE OF THE POOR) HOMILY OF ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA

by Dr. Seraphim (James W.) Steger, M.D.,
Fellow of the American Academy of Dermatology



ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA, FRESCO, 14TH CENTURY, STUDENICA MONASTERY, KRALJEVO, SERBIA

St. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa (AD 335-395), the younger brother of St. Basil the Great (AD 330-379), in Great Lent of AD 372, delivered a riveting sermon on Christian love in action. It focused on *elephantiasis* (medical leprosy) which had recently become much more common in the Roman Province of Cappadocia. Although St. Gregory of Nyssa’s sermon focused on moral and religious issues, he presented a much more graphic description of leprosy than had either of the two Greek physicians Aretaios (of St. Gregory’s native Roman Province of Cappadocia, 2nd century AD) or

Galen (of Pergamum in the Roman Province of Asia, AD 130-210). In addition to all the symptoms that Aretaios had identified, St. Gregory added a raspy voice, and for the first time among Greek physicians and writers in the Roman Empire, he described the loss of sensation in the affected skin. This loss of feeling later became the critical diagnostic feature for distinguishing leprosy from other skin diseases. St. Gregory of Nyssa also described how most people rejected lepers outright: expelling them from marketplaces, public baths, cities -- even family members from their own households. He stressed, however, that Christ expected his followers to help these most wretched and despondent of human beings who truly embodied a “living death.” By accepting lepers as diseased and not as biblically cursed by God, by feeding them, and by physically embracing them, Christians would do much to merit salvation. St. Gregory of Nyssa also tried, by using a scientific argument, to convince his congregations not to reject lepers. According to the Bishop of Nyssa (following Galen of Pergamum’s teachings of its pathogenesis) the disease was not contagious because one could not contract the humoral imbalance, the excess black bile in the blood that caused leprosy, through physical contact with a person infected with the disease. Preserving one’s health, therefore, did not require that an individual avoid lepers, nor did society need to banish from populated areas those who had contracted this disease.^{1,2}


ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA, LENT, AD 372

REGARDING THE WORDS “AS MUCH AS YOU HAVE DONE FOR ONE OF THESE, YOU HAVE DONE FOR ME” (MATT. 25:40)

I. “I am still standing before the vision of the fearful advent of the King which the Gospel records. My soul still crouches in fear at what has been said as it contemplates in what awesome manner the heavenly King sits upon His throne of glory, as the reading states. The soul contemplates this magnificent throne which at

1. Miller, TS and Smith-Savage, R., *Medieval Leprosy Reconsidered, International Social Science Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1/2 (2006), p. 20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41887256>

2. Medical Note: The multibacillary form of leprosy, lepromatous leprosy, is contagious through “contaminated air” (such as from coughing) as Aretaios believed, as well as through direct contact with contaminated belongings, especially from sputum and respiratory secretions. However, only those who are genetically susceptible, acquire the disease (which may include other family members)!



one moment holds in itself what is boundless, the infinite myriads of angels which surround the King, and that great and awesome King Himself, Who from inexpressible glory, looks down upon human nature. The King gathers to Himself the entire race of men who have lived from the time when human beings were first created until this awesome advent, and according to the worth of their deeds in life, renders judgment to each. As [the scripture] has said, He grants the right side to those who have sought out the right choice, but to the dark and rejected ones He assigns the sentence appropriate to their deeds. He addresses each group: to one group that sweet and good sound, ‘*Come, Blessed ones,*’ and to the other the fearful and dreaded condemnation, ‘*Depart, you cursed ones!*’ (Matt 25:34, 41).

II. “Because my soul is moved to such fear of what has been read that it seems to be close to these events and to perceive none of the present elements, my mind spends no time in looking at any other of the details presented to analysis and in pondering them logically. These issues, however, are not small or worthy of only a little discussion: that is, to understand how one always present can have an advent, because Christ says, *Behold, I am with you always* (Matt. 28:20). If it is a matter of faith that He is with us now, how can it be proclaimed that He will come, as though not present now? If, as the Apostle says, *In Him we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:28), no trick of the one who has grasped after all things (the devil), can separate in space, those who hold fast to Him, so that either now He is not present with those embraced [by Him] or, in some later time, He would expect to be again present with them.

III. “I shall postpone [the question] as to what is the throne of the incorporeal or how there is a circumscription to that which is boundless because these are too great for the present moment. On the other hand, in order that I might not be pushed into the ranks of those who have been rejected [by the Lord], to the best of my ability I will turn my discourse to the issue (proposed above) for the common benefit.


IV, “Too much, my brothers, too much have I, when faced with this threat, been terrified, and I do not deny the suffering of my soul. I would wish that you not hold these fears in low esteem. For he is blessed who fears all because of reverence. The word of wisdom somewhere says that he, who holds a serious matter in contempt, will be held in contempt by God (Prov. 28:14). Therefore, let us consider before the time of these evils how not to suffer the trial of these miserable ones (rejected by the Lord).

V. What brings release from such fears? Choosing that way of life which the Word has just shown us, the truly fresh and living way. And what is this way? *I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger and naked, and sick, and in prison. As much as you have done for one of these, you have done for Me.* And because of this, He says, *Come, ye blessed of my Father* (Matt. 25:35-40). And what do we learn from these words? It is for us on our own authority to choose or not to choose one of [these paths]. We will be in that place to which we incline with our will. Therefore, let us make the Lord of blessing our own Lord, the One Who counts concern for those in need as concern for Himself.

VII. “We should do this especially now when the commandment takes much more substance according to the present condition of life when many are in need of necessities, but many are also in need regarding their own bodies, people who have been wasted away by this terrible disease. Thus, in concern for these victims, let us fulfill for ourselves the good command of love. I shall now speak clearly concerning these people mutilated by this terrible disease [*elephantiasis, leprosy, the Elephant Disease*]. As much as this disease is greater in these victims, so much more is the blessing clearly greater for those who carry out the labors of the commandment.

VI. “What is to be done? Not oppose the command of the Spirit! That command is not to alienate ourselves from those who share our nature nor to imitate those who are condemned in the Gospel. I mean the priest and the Levite who without sympathy passed by the man who needed mercy, the one left half dead by the robbers according to the narrative (Luke 10:30ff.). If the priest and the Levite are guilty because they did not return to the swollen wounds on the man’s naked body, how are we not responsible who imitate these guilty men? Was it indeed much more to gaze on the one who had fallen among robbers compared to gazing on those who have been seized by this malady?

VII, “You see a man transformed by this terrible disease into the shape of a four-legged creature. In place of hooves or claws, he takes up wooden sticks with the palms of his hands and leaves behind marks on the ground, novel tracks for human pathways. Who would know from such tracks that a human being impressed such marks by his passing? Man, upright in stature, looking toward the heavens, having hands from nature for the service of his labors, is bent down to the ground and becomes a four-legged creature that differs little from an unreasoning animal. With a rough and painful breath from deep within his internal organs, his voice is rasping; he is even more miserable than the



animals, if one must dare to say this. Animals maintain their character from birth in everything as much as possible, and nothing of these attributes was altered to any other characteristic because of any sort of misfortune.

VIII. “This man, on the other hand, as though his nature has been altered, appears as something different, not the living being he was accustomed to be. His hands have taken up the function of feet; his knees have become his supports [on the ground]. The supports given him by nature (his feet) and his ankles have either fallen away completely or are hanging haphazardly and are dragged along according to the situation in the manner of small boats, pulled along by the side of [a larger ship]. Thus when you see a man in such circumstances, do you not feel regard for your common relationship? Do you not have mercy on a being of your own race, or do you feel revulsion at his misfortune, and hate the supplicant and flee his approach as though it were the assault of a wild beast? And yet it would be well for you to consider carefully that an angel has taken hold of you, a man; and that [this] angel, though without a body or any material nature, felt no disgust at one who was mixed with flesh and blood.

IX, “Why do I speak of angels? The very Lord of angels, the King of heavenly blessedness, became man for your sake and put on Himself this foul-smelling and filthy flesh, bound up together with the soul within it, so that He could heal your sufferings by means of His own touch. You, however, being the same in nature with the sick person, flee from one of the same race. Brother, let this evil counsel in no way at all be acceptable to you. Consider who is deliberating concerning whom, a man concerning a man. [Consider] that you possess no quality of your own alien to your common nature. Do not make rash predictions about the future. Whenever you condemn this disease when it has already appeared in some other body, you make an unlimited judgment against all nature. You have a share in this nature along side of all the others. Therefore, let this speech be about an issue common to everyone.


X. “How is it that no sorrow at these images overcomes you. You see men wandering like scattered cattle in search of nourishment. They have rags for clothing, pierced all around with holes. Their staff in their hands are their weapons and their mode of conveyance. They cannot grasp the staff with their fingers, but they bind it to their palms with straps laced cross-wise. [They have] a ragged sack and a morsel of moldy and rotting bread. Their sack is for them their hearth, house, mattress, bed, treasury, table, every

contrivance of life.

XI. “How, then, should the one in these circumstances reckon himself? [He should consider himself] a man, the one created in God’s image, established to rule over the earth, holding under his control the service of all the animals. This person has come to such a point of misfortune and of change that his appearance causes doubt since he neither bears clearly on his person the distinct marks of a man nor those distinguishing marks of some other animal. If you compare him to a human being, the human characteristics stand opposed to his shapeless form; if you turn to compare him to animals, these do not offer any similarity to his appearance.

XII. “Such people as these [victims of Elephant Disease] alone look only to one another and flock together with each other because of the similarity of their sufferings. They have become repulsive to all others, but out of necessity they are not repulsed by one another. Driven out from everywhere, they flow together to form their own people (*demos*). Do you see these joyless dancers and their mournful, distressing dance? Do you see how they walk in procession with their misfortunes, how they make a theater of their own deformed nature? Like some performers, they display the great variety of their ailments to those who gather about them. They are poets of sorrowful melodies, inventors of dark tales, composers of these painful songs, tragic poets of this new ill-fortuned tragedy, making no use of various tragic narrative to add to their sufferings, but filling the stage with their own evils. What scenes [they present], what tales!

XIII. “What is it then, that we hear them say? How, without having committed any unjust deed, they were rejected by those who bore them, how they were driven out of cities, driven out of common associations, of feasts, and of festivals, like some murderers or those who kill their own fathers, condemned to perpetual flight. But they are far more unfortunate than these [criminals]. Indeed, it is possible for murderers to migrate somewhere else and live among men. These people, however, alone of all others, are rejected everywhere as though declared to be common enemies to all men. They are considered worthy of no shelter, of sharing no common table, of using no [common] implements. And this is not the worst suffering. Springs of water, used commonly by other men, do not well up for them. Nor are rivers trusted to strip off any pollution of their disease. If a dog laps up some water with his blood-seeking tongue, the water is not considered to have become polluted because of the animal. If a sick person (with leprosy) should approach



the water, it is immediately declared unapproachable because of the man. They endure such situations; they suffer such things. Because of all this, these wretched persons must throw themselves before men and beg from everyone who passes by.

XIV. “Often I have cried over this dark scene; often I have experienced despair regarding nature. Now I am confused in my memory. I have seen this miserable suffering; I have seen this scene full of tears. Dead men are placed along the paths of passersby, but not really men, but the wretched corpses of those who once were human, who lack any signs or identifying markings to confirm [their human nature]. They have no physical characteristics by which they can be recognized as men.

XV. “Among beings they alone hate themselves. They alone commemorate their birthdays with curses because they hate this day which began for them such a life. They are men who are ashamed to call themselves by this common term so that they might not insult his common nature by their sharing this common name.

XVI. “They live always with lamentations because they have an unceasing reason for their sorrows. As long as they see themselves, they always have something to arouse their sorrowing. They are at a loss whether that which they no longer have of their bodies or that which remains to them gives them more pain. [Are they distressed over] how much the disease has already consumed over what the disease has left to them? Are they distressed because they can see such things about themselves or because they are not capable of seeing since their eyesight has been darkened by the disease? [Are they distressed] because they have such tales to relate concerning themselves or because they are unable to recount their sufferings since they have been deprived of their voice by the disease? Are they anguished because they have need of such nourishment or because they cannot easily take in food since the disease has destroyed the parts surrounding the mouth and thus has hindered eating? [Are they distressed] because in their feeling they suffer the misfortunes of the dead or because they have been deprived of their sense perceptions? Where is their sense of sight? Where is their sense of smell. Where is their sense of touch? Where are their other senses which, as the disease progresses, its corruption consumes little by little?

XVII. “Because of these things, the sick wander through all places like animals migrating to more abundant pastures. They carry around their misfortunes as their provisions for purchasing food, and to all they display their disease in places of begging, having need of men to guide them because of their sickness and


supporting each other because of their profound need.

XVIII. “Each one of the sick according to his own ability becomes a support for the other, they make use of the limbs of one another in place of their own missing limbs. They do not appear singly, but their misery brings something wise regarding the meaning of life, so that they desire to be seen with one another. Each one of them is by himself pitiable, but to make men more sympathetic, they add their own misfortune to those of others and thus make their own ill-fated contribution to the common goal. From some other misfortune, each one collects mercy for himself. One presents hands that have been cut off, another an inflamed and swollen stomach, another a damaged face, and still another a rotting leg. Each one, laying bare whatever part of the body happens [to be afflicted], has displayed in that part, his suffering.

XIX. “What then! Is it enough that such a violation against the law of nature is for naught and that there be this tragic account of the sufferings of nature [an oration] describing the disease rhetorically and presenting with passion a memorial in words? Or is there a need for some deed on our part to show sympathy and affection toward such as these? As landscape paintings are to things in their reality, so are speeches distinguished from deeds. For the Lord does not say that salvation is in speaking, but in performing the deeds of salvation. Thus, it is necessary for us ourselves to take up this command regarding [such sick persons].

XX. “Let no one say that it is sufficient to provide food to those who have been removed to the farthest border lands, distant from our lives. Such a view does not make any display of mercy or sympathy, but is a specious plot to drive out completely these people from our lives. Are we not then ashamed of our lifestyle, if we have pigs and dogs living with us under the same roof? The hunter often does not ban the puppy from his own bed. The farmer knows to greet his calf with a kiss. And [if] this were not much, the traveler washes the legs of his donkey with his own hands and lays his hand upon the animal’s wounds and cleans up the manure and takes care of his bed. Should we treat one of our own family and race with less respect than these animals? Let this not be so, my brothers! Let this charge not be confirmed against men!

XXI. “It is fitting to recall who we are and who are those about whom we deliberate, that this is a case of human beings who discuss human beings, people who have in themselves no individual characteristic against their common nature. *For all there is one entrance into life* (Wisdom 7:6). There is one way of sustaining life



for all -- food and drink. There is a similar way of working in life. There is one constitution of the body and one conclusion of life. Every complex structure comes to its own dissolution. Nothing that has been put together has a solid constitution. For a short while our body is stretched out by the spirit like a bubble, and then we are extinguished leaving no trace in life of this temporary inflation. Even those memorials on steles and stone tablets and in inscriptions do not last forever. Recall what the Apostle said, *Do not be arrogant, but be afraid* (Rom. 11:20).

XXII. "It is unclear whether or not you are formulating a charge of cruelty against yourself. Do you tell me that you flee the sick person? What charge do you have against the man? [Are you accusing him] because the moist element has been corrupted within him, and some rotten humor has been distributed by the blood because the black bile has been poured into the moist element? This is to listen to the doctors discoursing on the nature of disease. What injustice has this person done, if his nature is in a state of flux and instability and has slipped into the form of a disease? Do you not see that even in healthy bodies, a person sound in all else, has often suffered from a boil or a dark carbuncle or some other ailment of this kind? [This occurs] because the moist element in this section [of the body] has been heated beyond what is necessary and because of this suffers an inflammation and redness and a certain emaciating disorder. What then? We do not fight against the sick part of the flesh, do we? Just the opposite! We turn every healthy part of the body to treat what has fallen sick. The sickness is not repulsive. Or, if this [sick] part were to cause us harm, the healthy part would cease from the treatment of the sick part.


XXIII. "What is the reason, then, that alienates us from these sick people? What is it?" Not fearing the threat of the One Who says, *Depart from Me to everlasting fire; As much as you have not done for one of these*, and He says, *you have not done it for Me* (Matt.25:41-45). If people thought that this were the case, they would not hold such an opinion about these sick so that they push them away from their persons and consider concern for these wretched people a pollution of our life. Therefore, if we consider the One Who spoke these words worthy of trust, we must take hold of these commands without which it is impossible to be considered worthy of what we hope for. [The victim of leprosy] is a stranger, is naked, is in need of food, sick, and in prison -- he is everything to you which has been mentioned in the Gospel. He goes about as a naked vagabond, sick and lacking necessities because of the poverty resulting from his illness.

XXIV. "Because[the leper] has nothing from home and is incapable of becoming a hired person, he is of necessity completely lacking in the basic supports of life. He is bound like a prisoner by the disease. Thus, you have the complete fulfillment of the commandments fulfilled in these people, and you hold the very Lord of all things in your debt because of your philanthropy to this sick person. Why do you struggle against your own life? For a person not to desire the God of all as his very own companion is nothing else than to have a powerful enemy against oneself. Just as God becomes a resident [with us] through the commandment, He is in the same way driven away by cruelty. He says, *Take upon yourselves my yoke* (Matt. 11:29). He identifies the labor of these commandments as the yoke.

XXV. "Let us heed the one who gives the command. Let us become the draught animal of the Lord by binding ourselves with the yoke straps of love. Let us not shake off this yoke; it is useful and light and does not chafe the neck of the one who goes under it, but [the yoke] soothes it down. As the Apostle says, *Let us sow bountifully so that we might reap bountifully* (2 Cor. 9:6). The stalk which shoots up from such a seed has a great yield. Deep is the standing crop of the Lord's commands. High are the fruits of His blessing. Do you wish to learn to what height the increase of His fruits stretches? It reaches to the very heights of heaven. As much as you do for these people, you harvest for the heavenly treasures.

XXVI. "Do not lose hope in what has been said, and do not consider the love for such as these [lepers] something contemptible. The hand has been mutilated, but it is not too weak for an alliance. The foot is useless, but it is not hindered from running to God. The eye is melted away, but it sees with the spirit the invisible riches. Do not then consider the ugliness of the body. Wait a little while, and you will see something more unbelievable than any miracle, not so much what has occurred in the realm of nature, always in flux, but that which lasts forever. Whenever the soul has been freed from its connection with the perishable and earth-bound, then it is dazzling with its own beauty.

XXVII. "Here is the proof [for what has been said]. That rich pleasure seeker did not find the hand of the poor man repulsive in the afterlife, but he asked that the finger of the poor man, formerly decomposed, become for him the conveyance of a drip of water, desiring to lick the moisture from around the poor man's finger with his own tongue. He would not have desired this, if he had seen the unsightly quality of the body in the character of the soul. How fitting it was that in vain the



rich man repented in the afterlife? How much did the poor man bless the harshness of his life? How much did the rich man condemn his own lot as destructive to his soul, his lot apportioned to him because of his wealth. If it were possible to return again to life, with whom would the rich man choose? Would he choose to be among those fortunate according to this life or with the unfortunate? It is perfectly clear that he would prefer the lot of the unfortunate since he asked that there be some guide from among the dead for his brothers so that they might not be injured by the arrogance of wealth in the extravagance of the flesh, and because of the slippery quality of pleasure, slide down and be taken into the same chasm of Hades (*cf.* Luke 16:19-31).

XXVIII. “Why are we not rendered prudent through stories such as these? Why do we not engage in the virtuous business enterprise which the divine Apostle recommends? He says that your abundance should be for their lack so that their excess of relief (from suffering) in the life hereafter will be sufficient for your salvation (*cf.* 2 Cor. 8:14 *ff.*). If, then, we wish to take something useful, let us be first in making an offering. If we wish to be taken into the eternal abodes (Luke 16:9), let us receive them now into our homes. If we wish to be healed of the wounds of our sins, let us ourselves do this for the bodies of those who are suffering. *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*

XXIX. “Perhaps, however, someone will say that this command is good for later, but right now he must be wary of some contagion and of the infectious quality of the disease. So that he might not suffer something unwanted, he thinks that he must flee the approach of such as these. Such are his words, excuses, and inventions -- some specious coverings for his indifference regarding the commands of God. This, however, is not the truth. No fear attaches to carrying out this command. Let no one treat evil with evil. How many can one see among those who from youth to old age are employed in caring for those sick and have not at all weakened the natural sound constitution of the body because of such efforts? Nor is it likely that this would be the case.


XXX. “Whenever these types of [apparently contagious] diseases occur such as epidemic humoral fluxes or other diseases of such a type that they depend on some outside cause such as corrupt air or water, many people suspect that the diseases cross over from those already seized by the sickness to those who draw near. I, however, think that in this situation the ailment does not induce disease in the healthy person from

contagion, but rather that a common flux of humors is responsible for the similarity of the disease in many cases. These others, however, believe that [this] disease has its origin by crossing over from those already stricken to other people. This ailment, however, is marked out in the patient when the internal structure of such as disease is established and the blood suffers a certain contamination by the admixture of corrupting humors.

XXXI. “It is possible to learn that [what I have outlined above] is the case from the following fact. Does any contagion of the stronger nature ever occur from those of good health to those who are sick, even if the healthy are most heavily involved in caring for them? This is not the case. It is thus not likely that in the contrary direction the ailment would transfer from those who are sick to those who are healthy. If, on the other hand there is so much gain from the commandment that the kingdom of heaven is prepared by fulfilling it, and on the other hand, there exists no harm to the body of the one who cares [for the sick], what is it, then, that prevents this command of love from being realized?

XXXII. “You say, however, that it is burdensome to force yourself to such physical labors when the condition of many sick people is loathsome. Fine, then. I agree with this statement that it is difficult. Will you identify any other work of virtue which is not painful? The divine law required much sweat and toil for the hopes of heaven and showed that the road of life for human beings is hard to travel, and this law made it narrow on all sides by requiring more difficult and rough tasks to perform. *Narrow and straight* He says, *is the road that leads to life* (Matt. 7:14). What, then? Because of this [difficulty] are you going to neglect this hope of such good things because it is not possible to attain them through laziness? Let us ask the youth if prudence does not seem burdensome or if freely to enjoy the passions does not seem more desirable than a self-disciplined way of life.

XXXIII. “Are we, then, on account of this, going to uphold [this voluptuous form of living] because it is sweet and easy, and, in addition, shun the difficult way to virtue? This does not seem good to the Law Giver of life who blocks the wide and broad, downward directed path for leading this [earthly] life. For He says, *Go through the narrow and compressed gate* (*cf.* Matt. 7:13). Therefore, let us cure the physical aversion of those who are healthy with the persistence of active labor. Indeed, through persistence habit can make it possible to carry out what seem to be the most difficult [chores]. Therefore, let no one say that this task is



burdensome, but rather that it is helpful to those who seek its fulfillment. Moreover, since the reward is great, one must look past the labor for the sake of the reward. In fact, with time what is now difficult will become sweet through habit.

XXXIV. “It is necessary to add something to what has been said, [that would be] that sympathy for the unfortunate is also helpful for the healthy throughout this present life because, for those who possess intelligence, it is good to show mercy in the midst of others’ misfortunes, for such behavior makes provision of the future. In view of the fact that all humanity lives with one nature and that no one has any certain security of a continually prosperous life for himself, it is proper always to remember the Gospel command which advises that whatever we wish that men would do for us, we should do [for others] (cf. Matt 7:12).

XXXV. “As long as you sail in safety, stretch out your hand to the one who suffers shipwreck. The sea is common to all, as are its little waves, and the great confusion of its [mighty] waves. Dangers, hidden beneath the waters, rocks, and promontories, and all the other evils which cause the destruction of life awaken in mariners the same fear. As long as you remain free of suffering, as long as you sail the sea of life free of danger, do not pass by without mercy the one who has fallen. Who stands as surety for you that you will always have a fortunate voyage? You have not yet put in at the harbor of rest; you have not yet stood beyond the waves; a life of stability has not yet come to you. As a seafarer, you are still carried through life. You will ready for yourself sea companions of the quality you yourself will show yourself to be toward a person in distress.

XXXVI. “Would that we all might arrive at the harbor of rest through the Holy Spirit and enjoy calm during the voyage of life which lies before us. Would that the practice in these commandments and the rudder of love be present within us, commandments through which we, set on our course, might attain the land of the promise in which stands the great city whose builder and creator is our God to whom be glory and power unto the ages of ages. Amen.”³ ✠ ✠ ✠

LOVING THE LEAST OF CHRIST’S SERVANTS BY EXAMPLE⁴

Through their powerful sermons, writings, and personal examples the Cappadocian Fathers St. Basil

the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, and St. Gregory of Nyssa, were able to transform Cappadocian society’s attitudes and behavior toward those afflicted with the *Holy Disease*. In other parts of the empire the transformation was slower. In AD 397 St. Gregory the Theologian came to Constantinople to battle the Arians who controlled all the churches. Two years later the Orthodox had regained all the churches. Elected Archbishop of Constantinople by the Second Ecumenical Council in AD 381 he served for 2 more years battling heretics before he retired. All the while the Zotikos leprosarium was still operating across the Golden Horn waterway on the Mount of Olives in Pera, but under the control of the Arians. However, when St. John Chrysostom arrived in Constantinople as the newly elected Patriarch in AD 397, he immediately sought to alleviate the enormous suffering that he saw surrounding the Imperial City. Consequently, St. John conceived of building another large leprosarium complex outside of the capital. He planned to give lepers a healthy place to live, near a river, and with all the benefits of a home and the communal life that they were being deprived of:

EXCERPT FROM *THE FUNERAL ORATION IN PRAISE OF SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM*, ANONYMOUS, C. AD 406

“(61) ... [St. John] himself emptied out, so to speak all his feelings of care toward those who were stricken with what is called the *holy disease*. I believe that this disease has acquired such a name because it surpasses all human misfortunes and pain. For it is truly the worst of diseases, a disease at the same time inspiring pity and hatred. It draws even the soul as hard as a diamond to pity, but it also drives away the most philanthropic soul, whenever it might be necessary to touch the afflicted body. This disease dissolves the bond of family relationship and overturns the law of friendship; this disease deprives those taken by it of the joy of life and of the repose of death. On the one hand, this disease makes living something odious, and on the other hand, it makes death long. This disease demands very many things for its treatment, but at the same time deprives the victim of everything. For in addition to these other evils, the Demon who hates the human race sowed among all people a suspicion against these wretched brothers, a suspicion that believed that this sickness was contagious and that it could transfer to those who came close to it. Thus, all of those people who dwell in homes and cities forbade that those with the disease should enter their houses or agoras, baths, or cities. Even if someone was a son, he decrees these same [restrictions] against the one he sired, even though the son is living. Even if the victim is his brother, his friend, or his constant companion, once the disease has begun, he approves the same restrictions for him as for all the other sick people, and this occasion for sympathy thus extinguishes the flame of loving affection which nature has enkindled.

“(62) When the blessed one [St. John] saw many among these sick stricken abandoned along the roads in the land of the Bithynians -- unburied corpses, moving cadavers,

3. St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Regarding the Words “As Much as You Have Done for One of These, You Have Done for Me”*, in Miller, TS and Nesbitt, JW, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2014, pp. 173-185.

4. Miller, TS and Nesbitt, JW, pp. 43-45.



Dr. Seraphim Steger, Editor, THE GOOD WORD

c/o St. Seraphim of Sarov & St. John of Kronstadt Orthodox Church
6063 Lake Murray Blvd.
La Mesa, CA 91942-2506,
U.S.A.

creeping bodies, rational beings who sent forth inarticulate sounds, who displayed only so much of their natural character that those who saw them knew that at one time they had been human beings -- the saint moistened his cheeks with streams of tears, and said, 'What must one do for his fellows if he would lighten such a misfortune for these brethren?' Some people said that they gave a little silver to these people, but that they had to free themselves from the sight of these stricken ones. The saint, however, said that people of ordinary character would do such a thing, but he turned his thoughts to building houses for those without hearths and to devising for them the comforts of those who dwell in the city.

"On account of the size of the building project and the great number those gathered together -- for the number of those sick with such disease was in the thousands -- the saint said that he wanted to build a dwelling and make room not only for as many as one could calculate, but also so that there should be no more of those in the land who were wrestling with this misery. He said he planned sufficient revenues for all those afflicted ones for all time through the possession of fields and that he planned to allocate the possessions of the fathers for those expelled from their paternal homes on account of the burden of the body. He said that he would do this not only for those sick at that time, but in case any other person was ever seized by the shackles of this disease so that the person would have a place to flee to as to his own refuge.

"By chance, he managed to purchase what was the goal of his plan, banishing from his mind every delay. He carried out the first step of his labors by finding a place for sale which was most especially suited for this use. This place happened to possess the lightest air and a river flowing past which would be useful for the sick in cleaning the filth from their wounds. As soon as he purchased it and began the foundation, (63) a war awaited him within; because the Devil, seeing that those who were fighting with Chrysostom had relaxed their efforts a little, worked myriad evils so that the saint could not stand the blow. Those who happened to be the owners of fields which were near to this location made

accusations that they had suffered an injustice, as though the disease had already passed to them; the river which previously made the land fertile for them, now was suspected of bringing the infectious ruin of these sick persons even to the landowners.

"Cowardly because of their suspicion, deserving of pity because of their cowardliness! These landowners ought to have acknowledged thanks to God that they have been established only as observers of others' misfortunes and that they have never tasted the experience of such suffering themselves. They, however, have both hated the water and also fled from that same water that washed the wounds of those human bodies, water which was not confined in one place but by the current of its flow was able both to show and to hide from onlookers what was offensive."⁵

As noted above, the wealthy aristocracy complained to the Empress Eudoxia, who then used the bishop's project as part of a campaign to depose him from his episcopal throne. As a result St. John suffered humiliation, persecution, and exile at the hands of the empress and of selfish magnates because these people feared a contagious disease more than the commands of the Lord to assist those in need.⁶

For her persecution of St. John, in a vision before his death, the Apostles St. Peter and St. John appeared to the hierarch and prophesied that the Empress Eudoxia would be stricken with terrible suffering and death as God's punishment evidenced by the fact that her grave later shook for 3 days after her burial.⁷ ❖ ❖ ❖

5. Miller, TS and Nesbitt, JW, pp. 186-191.

6. St. Demetrius of Rostov, *Life of St. John Chrysostom, The Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints, Volume III, November*, Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 1997, pp. 309-310.

7. Bishop Nikolai Velimirović, *For Consideration, The Prolog from Ohrid, Vol. III*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, England, 1986, p. 183.