

Lecture #5: Returning to God

If you have strayed away from God, He is always waiting for you to come back no matter what your past is or how many sins you have committed. He gave us the **Church** as an ark through which we can sail back into His bosom.

I. Be honest about your failures

You cannot restore your relationship with God, unless you first examine yourself and confess your sins to God's steward (your father of confession). You must be ready to confess your sins, and be genuinely wishing to change your behavior.

Excessive guilt, however, is Satan's way to keep you in bondage after you admit your failures. Remember, we are all sinners and God can forgive any sin when your repentance is honest.

II. Accept responsibility

It is easy to blame others for your failures, but even if somebody else has been a contributing factor, you are still accountable.

Recall Saul who blamed the Amalekites for his failure. When Samuel confronted him with his failure, he responded "but the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen" (1 Samuel 15:21).

Be honest in front of God and accept responsibility for your willful act of disobedience.

III. Practice the sacraments of repentance and confession

Repentance means a change of mind that leads to true regret and remorse over the sins committed. You get a deep realization of the pain resulting from disobeying God.

This results in a deliberate change of behavior. Forgiveness is always available, but without repentance and confession you are not ready to receive the cleansing power of God.

IV. Restore relationships

There are three relationships to restore:

- Ask God for forgiveness in order to restore your relationship with Him
- Forgive yourself, and let go of guilt. If you maintain a strong guilt feeling about the sin you committed, that sin will constantly remain in your mind increasing the temptation to fall in the same sin again
- Restore relationships with those you have hurt. For example, if you criticized somebody in public, apologize and ask for their forgiveness. There are sins however where such restoration is not possible

The person who was hurt also plays an important role in this restoration. Chastisement and condemnation decrease the chances of true restoration of relationships. When somebody comes to apologize for wrongly treating you, respond with gentleness.

Remember the behavior of the Lord Jesus Christ when a woman caught in adultery was brought to Him? The Lord Christ replied "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." (John 8:7) The Lord did not say the woman was not guilty and did not attempt to defend her, but treated her gently.

Similarly, if somebody apologizes to you, you should treat them with a spirit of gentleness, humility and love.

V. Learn the lesson

Although God does not cause us to fail, He uses our failures to teach us lessons that will prevent us from straying again. The only time that failure is unprofitable is when you refuse to learn from the experience.

You need to take this opportunity to learn more about yourself and about God. If you learn and grow, then you have turned your failure into a positive experience.

The lessons you learn can also help others. For example, drug addicts freed by God, speak of their hatred for this sin.

VI. Be thankful to God

Thank God for His forgiveness of your sins and reaffirm your desire to refocus your life on Him and to recommit yourself to Him.

However, even with God's forgiveness, the sinner still must face the consequences of his sin. A thief who has repented in front of God will still go to jail.

God brings discipline in the life of the sinner in order to put him back on the right path. You should thank God for His loving correction, since discipline is intended to protect you from committing the sin again.

King David said, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes." (Psalm 119:71)

The Church plays a major role in the process of knowing and even returning to God. As in the time Noah, those who were able to survive the flood were able to do so through the protection that the ark provided. We are now in the flood of the world, and we will only be able sail safely when we are sheltered inside the Church.

The Church teaches us to offer thanksgiving in every thing we do and to be honest in the way we examine our lives. Also in the Church, our relationship with God is restored every time we come confessing our sins and abiding in the Lord Christ through communion. And through the life of discipleship to the Church fathers we will always be able to know the way back when we go astray.