



## **How Not to Sink Like a Stone in the Raging Sea of Life: A Homily for the 9th Sunday After Pentecost in the Orthodox Church**

If you are like me, you are often easily distracted from what is really most important in life. It is so easy to worry obsessively about matters beyond our control and to waste our attention on fantasies of what the future may hold. With all of the bad news in the world today and our own personal struggles, we may face powerful temptations to fill our minds with fear. When we do that, however, we sink into a deep abyss, just like St. Peter in today's gospel reading.

As he walked on the water with Jesus Christ, St. Peter let himself be distracted by the dangerous wind and the waves of a stormy sea. Instead of focusing his attention and trust in the Lord Who miraculously enabled him to walk on the water in the first place, St. Peter let doubt and fear fill his mind. So he began to sink, to be consumed by the turbulent sea that scared him so much; but when he called out in terror for help, the Lord reached out to St. Peter and saved him from drowning.

The story is even more profound when we remember that St. Peter had just asked Christ to let him walk on the water. St. Peter actually tested Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." As was often the case, this disciple spoke before he thought. Indeed, he was the one who would actually be put to the test to see if he really had faith; and he fell short.

We can all understand St. Peter's situation, for we have all been like him at one time or another; indeed, we may be like him this very minute. With pride, we like to think that we have a lot of faith and even put ourselves in situations where we know we will be tested, but then our fears, passions, and weaknesses take over. When that happens, we pay more attention to the dangers that threaten us than to the Lord Who gave us life in the first place and continues to enable us to walk by faith even through the most difficult challenges that the world presents. And when we do so, we sink like a stone thrown into the sea or someone who has jumped off a tall building.

For as St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, our one true foundation in life is the Son of God. Our entire life is built on Him, the One by Whom all things were made, the One Who became the second Adam to heal our corrupt humanity, the One Who conquered death in His third-day resurrection, the One Who has brought us into the eternal life of the Holy Trinity.

When we turn away from Him, we turn away from being truly human in His image and likeness. That is why St. Peter started to descend to the deep when he gave more attention to his fears than to trust in the Lord. And it is why we all experience the weakness of slavery to our habitual sins, to our passions that we know all too well. We may believe with our hearts that Christ is the Savior, but our faith shows its weakness when we are confronted with a difficult challenge, when the waves seem so big and the winds seem so strong: and then we feel like someone who all of a sudden realizes that he is trying to walk on the water in the middle of a storm.

Fear, panic, and anxiety will then seem more real to us in than will faith, hope, and love. The key question, however, is what do we do then? For we have freedom, we are God's fellow workers and He



never forces us to love and serve Him. We may give in to our temptations and allow our lives to be controlled by our self-centered desires and fears. Out of pride, we may live as though it were simply up to us to figure out how to cope as best we can with whatever may happen. That may sound noble, but it is a path that leads only to continued slavery to sin as surely as trying to walk on water by our own power leads only to drowning. Despite our best efforts, we cannot conquer sin and death by ourselves.

Thankfully, St. Peter came to his senses about his situation and called out, probably at the top of his lungs, “Lord, save me!” In crying out for Christ’s help, St. Peter showed that he did have some level of faith, but it was not the quality of his faith that saved him. It was the mercy of the Lord. Like him, we all stand in constant need of the mercy of Jesus Christ. That is why we sing “Lord, have mercy” so many times in our services. It is why the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” is at the heart of spiritual vision. We focus on the Lord’s mercy so much because, like St. Peter, we know that we are sick and weak, constantly tempted to turn our attention and trust elsewhere, especially to ourselves.

No matter what our personal challenges are and no matter what problems the world faces, no one has to be distracted from humble trust in the Lord’s mercy. Remember that He endured and conquered even death and Hades for our salvation. He came to the same corrupt and scary world in which we live with wicked people trying to kill Him even as an infant. He is no stranger to even our worst problems.

So instead of being paralyzed by fear and worry, we must call to Christ with confident hope no matter what, keeping our attention focused on Him. We must do our part each day in order to grow in humble faith. As we stand before our icons at home in daily prayers, we should ask for God’s mercy upon our loved ones, those who suffer around the world, and on ourselves as we meet whatever challenges the day holds. Whenever we are tempted to sinful words, deeds, or thoughts of any kind, we should call upon the Lord’s aid, whether silently or aloud. And we can all do many things in our daily routines while offering short prayers, such as the Jesus Prayer, from our hearts.

Of course, it takes effort to guard our thoughts and to pray with humility when we are tempted. How much easier it is in the moment simply to welcome anger, pride, lust, fear, despair, and hatred than to reject them. That is surely why our epistle passage today refers to us as fellow workers with God, for we have to exert effort to do God’s will. And, no, we will not do this work perfectly. But the more we struggle and perhaps fail, the greater awareness we will have that our situation is like that of St. Peter. Apart from the mercy of Christ, we will sink and drown. Apart from Him, we are like a building without a foundation which will collapse under its own weight.

As St. Paul wrote, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” A temple must be holy and dedicated to God. For us to be a temple requires vigilance and perseverance to ground our lives in the mercy of Christ, for we are so often tempted to worship the false gods of our own devising. All the more the reason is to maintain a daily rule of prayer and to pray the Jesus Prayer as much as we can. For if we are not intentionally welcoming, inviting, and cooperating with the Holy Spirit each day of our lives, how on earth are we going to be able to live as holy temples in the midst of a corrupt and dark world?

The basic point is very simple: The more we turn our attention to Christ and His salvation, the better we will be able to walk with Him on the water through the storms of our own lives and of our fallen world. The more mindful we are, the closer watch we will keep on our thoughts, the more strength we will have to



reject the lies that we so often tell ourselves—and instead to open our hearts to the mercy of the One who is our foundation, our Savior, and the victor over sin and death. Apart from Christ, we will sink like stones. But in Him, we become fellow workers with God for our salvation.

We cannot stop the world's storms from raging or even calm the seas of our own lives very well. But we can keep our eyes and our hearts centered on Christ and call out to Him with humble trust that He will hear our cry, "Lord, save me!" just as He did St. Peter's. Let us focus our lives and attention on Him, and not on our fears, worries, or other temptations.