

And the Kingdom of Heaven is like...
Stories of the Heart
Jesus told.

Camp St. Raphael 2004



Group 2

Lesson 1:

What is a parable?

In the next few days we will explore several of the parables that our Lord used to teach us about the Kingdom of God. We will examine how each parable can change us, and help us to grow in our faith. But today, let us discover what a parable is, and why Jesus used them to teach many truths about God, the Kingdom, the Church, and His love for us.

The word, Παραβλε (parable), can be defined in English using several different words, each of which provides a part of the total reality. One such word is allegory.

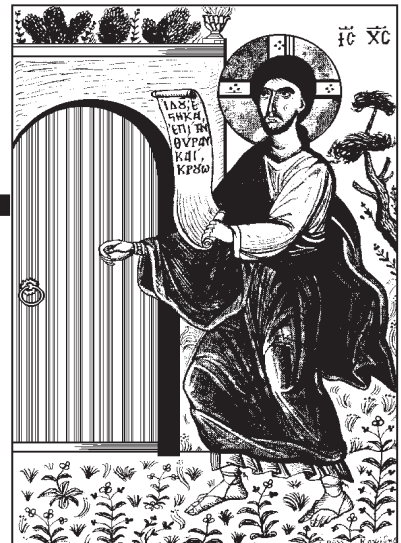
An allegory is a specific type of story that has two meanings. One meaning is the surface meaning; the plot of the story. It is what's really happening to the characters. The second meaning is a deeper, and often spiritual meaning that is found by deciphering the symbolic meanings of certain aspects of the story. If we are not careful and pay very close attention, we may miss the second meaning of the story altogether.

A second word is metaphor. **A metaphor is a word picture.** An analogy is a kind of metaphor. An analogy is a story that takes something that is familiar to the reader or hearer and uses it to explain an idea that is difficult to understand. Often metaphors are given rich detail, and use strong comparative language. The Kingdom of Heaven is like: a treasure that was buried in a field, a mustard seed, a pearl of great price,

all of these are strong comparisons. Through metaphors, we are taken from the difficult, new and abstract to the simple, familiar and concrete.

A third word is symbol. If a metaphor is a word picture, then **a symbol is a word map.** The Cross as a symbol, is a good example of this concept. When we think of the Cross, our mind begins to pull together a series of stories, ideas, memories, and feelings. Our prior understanding of scripture, theology, liturgy, the person of Christ, our salvation; in short, all aspects of our Faith come flooding through our mind. One thought leads to another, and another, and so on. Like a road map, the symbol directs our thoughts. We are able to bring to mind as much detail as we know, and have time to contemplate.

The last word is riddle. **A riddle is a word puzzle.** It stimulates the mind to work out the answer to a set of clues. The answer is often humorous or surprising. Riddles are not readily understood by all people. A person needs to have attained some knowledge of the subject



"Parables challenge the hearer and call for faith to perceive the mysteries of the Kingdom."

of the riddle in order to analyze the clues, and understand the answer. In the case of the parables, the “answer” is intended to lead our mind, our heart and our passions (i.e.: our spirit) into the Kingdom of God.

Here is what the Orthodox Study Bible says regarding the parables and their use by our Lord: “Parables challenge the hearer and call for faith to perceive the mysteries of the Kingdom. Insight into God’s Kingdom does not come simply through an intellectual understanding of the parables. Spiritual enlightenment is communicated through faith in the Person, words, and deeds of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Indeed, a parable, as perfected by Jesus, is a flash of brilliance that dazzles the eye of the heart, the nous (νοῦς). Parables lift our spirit so that we desire above all else to follow our Lord’s teaching. And we are led by the Holy Spirit to use our whole being, body and soul to “see with spiritual eyes, and hear with spiritual ears” and to put that which we have heard and seen into action.

Why parables?

Here is Jesus’ own explanation of why He taught the multitudes using parables, as recorded by St. Matthew:

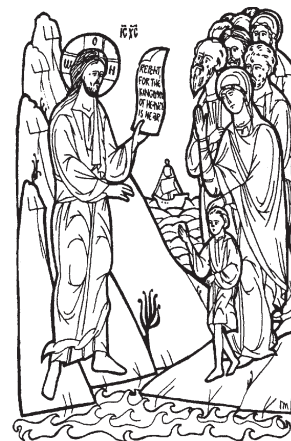
Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given, For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they

do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says:

“You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive.

For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.”

Isaiah 6:9-10



Jesus Teaches

Parables have been around for a long time! Jesus was not the first one to use parables to teach important lessons to His followers. The Jews and other ancient peoples used parables to teach and explain important truths. It was a method of teaching that was familiar to the people. This is why Jesus chose to use parables to teach the people about the Kingdom of Heaven, God, and Himself. In His parables, He used settings and themes that were common to everyday life. Activities like farming, baking bread, praying in the temple, or the marriage feast.

Jesus knew that teaching in this way was easy for anyone who wanted to learn to understand. If their hearts and minds were open to the teaching, they could understand, but if they had hard and closed hearts, they could hear His words, but not understand anything beyond the plot of the story. Understanding God's plan through the parables was a choice for the hearer. It marked a new beginning for some, and remaining in spiritual darkness for others. In this way, Jesus did not force anyone to hear and act on His words, instead, He invited everyone!

The disciples came to Jesus after he had taught the people using the parable of the Sower and the seed. They asked him why he spoke to them using parables. He explains that the disciples were given understanding of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven because they had already made their choice to follow him. They had repented, and believed; they had dropped everything and followed Jesus. This faith allowed them to hear with spiritual ears and see with spiritual eyes. They were spiritually mature enough to understand the true message of the parable. The people, were not given understanding of the mysteries of the kingdom until they turned to God to be healed. Jesus is not withholding the truth from anyone; rather He freely gives it to all. But only those with faith can truly perceive the Kingdom of God.

Another reason why Jesus taught using

parables was to protect His spiritual message from distortion. By clothing the message in a concrete narrative, He could preserve the purity of the teaching throughout the ages. A list of facts, or a set of laws could be distorted, or changed through time. A story with a familiar situation remains intact within the human

memory. All of the elements are tied together, and build upon each other, to create a meaningful whole, which can be transmitted unchanged from ages to ages. In fact, it is amazing how clear and relevant the parables are today--even in our modern society. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann puts it best when he states: "Books and words, created quite recently yesterday and the day before, have become

outdated, have fallen into nonexistence. They no longer say anything to us; they are dead. But these ingenious stories, so simple in appearance, live on, full of life. We listen to them and it is if something happens with us, as if someone has glanced into the very depth of our life and said something which relates only to us, to me."

"But these ingenious stories, so simple in appearance, live on, full of life."

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann



Heart Check

1. In your own words, what is a parable?

2. What spiritual good does studying the parables do for us?

3. Why did Jesus use parables to teach the mysteries of the Kingdom?

4. Explain the difference between the multitudes who followed Jesus and His disciples. Why was it given to the disciples to understand the Kingdom of heaven, and not given to the multitudes?

5. What do we need to do to be able to understand the mysteries of the Kingdom? Are we prepared to do this?

6. What is Fr. Alexander Schmemmann talking about when he speaks of the relevance of the parables? When have you experienced this?

7. How does the idea of Jesus preserving His teaching within a “concrete narrative” change the way we look at the parable stories?

Preparing the Soil

When we start a garden, we usually begin by setting aside a place for our garden. A place where the new plants will thrive. Next we begin digging in the area in which we intend to plant. Slowly working the soil, breaking up clumps, throwing out the rocks, removing roots from grass or weeds that we find, and adding organic matter to fertilize it. This part of the process takes time, and a lot of effort, but it is the only way to ensure that the seeds we plant will have a chance to grow healthy and strong.

Our prayer life is the same. We begin by setting aside some time each day for prayer. We should pick a time that we will have few, or better no distractions. And we begin. In prayer, we will start by working the soil of our heart, softening the hard parts, removing obstacles that keep us from loving our neighbor, and adding the sacraments of repentance, confession, and forgiveness. Soon, our hearts, like that soil will be ready for seed, and it will be a fit place for the Holy Spirit to dwell and grow in us.

Here is your first “Yeah Boy” challenge of the week: Make a plan to set aside 10 minutes each day to pray. It can be anytime that you can regularly be free from distraction. Most of the time this is in the morning, when you wake, or just before bedtime. What time is best for you?

Lesson 2:

The Sower & the seed

What kind of soil are you?



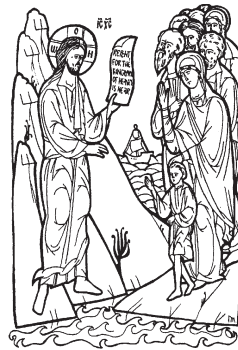
Here is the parable of the Sower and the seed as recorded by St. Matthew:

"Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: "Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Here is Jesus' explanation of the parable of the Sower and the seed as recorded by St. Luke:

"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have not root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. Now the ones that fell among thorns are those

who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience."



Jesus Teaches

Jesus explains all there is to know about the parable of the Sower and the seed. He teaches that He is the Sower who

went out to sow seed. The seed that He sows is the word of God, that is the knowledge of the Kingdom of God. Since this knowledge is for everyone, Jesus scatters seed far and wide, on good soil, on rocky soil, on soil full of thorny plants, and even on hard packed paths--the wayside. These four types of soil are like the conditions of our hearts. Because we are people, and not soil, we can change the condition of our heart--for good or for bad!



The Wayside

We are like the wayside, when we are angry, prideful, or when we refuse to love others. A hard heart is turned away from God, and cannot hear the Holy Spirit. We forget or ignore all the goodness and love that we know, and fall into worry or doubt. We may become selfish, or make wrong choices. This is how the devil (the birds of the air) takes the word of God from us--we have our hearts turned away from God, and are open to evil suggestions! A lifetime of hard-heartedness can bring a lot of misery to us! But Jesus also explains that there can be a change in us! The phrase: "lest they should believe and be saved." refers to this possibility of change. **How can we change? The Holy Spirit will comfort us!** Our hard hearts can be healed, but we must desire this to happen. And we must believe that God will answer our desire. Repentance and prayer can soften our hearts again, and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us back to life in the Kingdom of God.

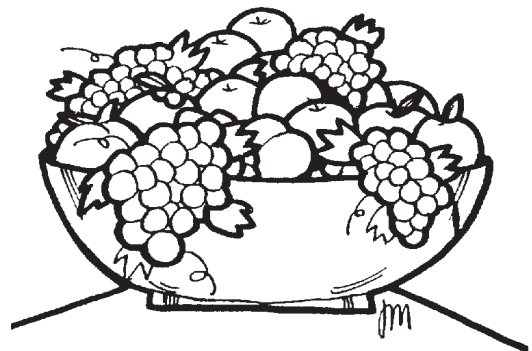
The Rocky Soil

When our hearts are like the rocky ground, we find that our faith, like the soil is thin. We must establish and maintain a relationship with God if we are to be strong enough to remain faithful Orthodox Christians. When we are not growing in our faith by praying, fasting, and participating in the sacraments of the Church we become weak in our spirit. Our "roots" become shallow, and cannot find the nourishment or the water that they need to survive. So, when hard times come, like the hot sun in the parable, we wither and die. **How can we survive? The Holy Spirit will lead us!** Because we are people, and not plants, God has given us everything we need to flourish. At our Chrismation, we

were sealed by the Holy Spirit, who lives inside of us! Even when we do not know what to pray, He will help us to pray. It is the Holy Spirit who inspires us to learn the prayers and hymns of the Church, and to sing and chant them from our heart. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us encouragement and strength from inside to fast and pray throughout the year. It is the Holy Spirit the illumines our heart and mind when we read the Bible or about the lives of the Saints. It is the Holy Spirit that warms us from within when we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Liturgy. We are not alone! The Holy Spirit will lead us into prayer, participation in the sacraments, and reading of the Bible, which will heal our shallow roots and help us to stand firm in the hard times.

Thorny Soil

Like the tender plants that were choked by thorns, our hearts can be consumed by the enticements of the world and all that we have to do each day. Our lives are busy! We can be running from morning until night doing *things*. Many of these things are good and wholesome activities, but some activities are not good for us. Spending a lot of time thinking about and planning what to wear in order to "fit in" or be "noticed", playing hours and hours of video or internet games, or routinely staying up late to



finish homework because we didn't use our time wisely in the afternoon or evening. When being "cool" or having fun becomes the *focus* of our life, we forget about God, and we start to miss Church or SOYO activities because we "have plans". This is how we allow the word of God to be choked out of us by the "cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches" (Matt 13:22b). **How can we refocus? The Holy Spirit will help us!** Setting aside a specific time each day to be quiet and to pray will redirect our life. Saying the Jesus Prayer when our lives are so busy, and we are tired is one way to keep the remembrance of God in our hearts. By practicing these spiritual disciplines, little by little, the Holy Spirit will help us to turn our whole life back toward God, and He will again be our center.

Good Soil

Our hearts are like the good soil when we see spiritual fruit being borne in our lives. **But how will we know? The Holy Spirit will fill us!** When we have joy and peace even though we have much to do. When we choose to make time for God each and everyday, because we love and look forward to our time together. When we feel happy for others when they have successes, or when they get something new, instead of being angry or jealous. When we pray for others and share their sadness, knowing that God is near. When we are

patient even when that is very hard. THEN: We will have a strong desire to spend time with others who love God.

We will long to be in Liturgy and say the prayers and sing the hymns. This is the how the Comforter, The Spirit of Truth, who is in all places and fills all things, will *fill us!* And what will happen to us and the world around us? Our lives, turned fully toward God, though we are still living out in the world, "will yield a crop, some a hundred fold, some 60, some 30"!

And He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' "Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed."

Isaiah 6:9-10



Heart Check

1. How are we like the four types of soil?
2. Have you experienced all four types of soil in your life? When?
3. "If we don't grow, we die!" How does this statement describe our spiritual life?
4. How does spiritual growth keep us healthy?
5. How does the Holy Spirit help us to grow

in our Faith? What is our contribution to this process?

6. How can we control the busyness in our lives?

7. What, specific things can we do to become and stay good soil? Are we willing to do these things?

8. How does this parable change us?

Sowing Good Seeds

One of the ways that we can sow good seeds in our own life is to get into the habit of reading the Bible every day. The Bible is a big collection of books, some of which are challenging to read. The Church has several plans (called a lectionary) for reading it in small bites each day.

Another good seed to plant in our heart is to pray either morning or evening prayers each day. The Orthodox Study Bible has an order for morning and evening prayer, as well as a lectionary in it.

Here is your “Yeah Boy!” challenge for today: make a plan to read the daily Bible reading each day for the rest of the summer!!

·THE SOWER OF GOOD SEEDS·



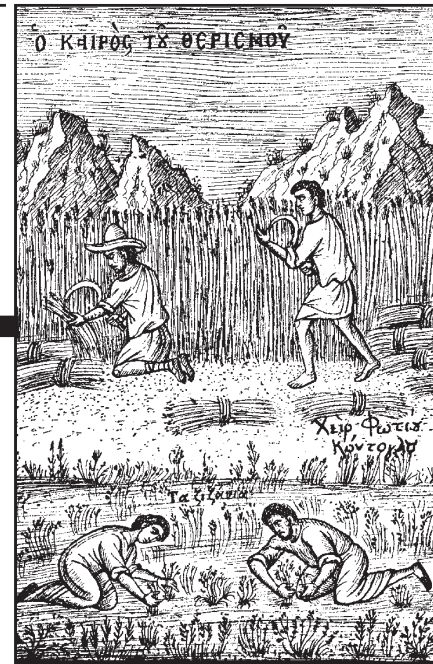
Lesson 3:

The Wheat & the Tares

What kind of fruit do you bear?

Here is the parable of the Wheat and the Tares as recorded by St. Matthew:

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."



Jesus explains the parable of the Wheat and the Tares. As recorded by St. Matthew:

He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"



Jesus Teaches

In the parable we studied yesterday, we discussed our response to the word of God. How the condition of our hearts prepare us to reject, cast aside, ignore or embrace the word of God. The parable of the Wheat and the Tares builds on the parable of the Sower. In this parable, the Lord teaches about the works of the devil in the world. As before, the man who sows is Jesus. He sows good seed in good soil, and all of the seeds sprout forth. But an enemy comes in the middle of the night and sows weeds. This is the devil, and the tares or weeds are his children, which he plants among the wheat, which are the children of God. That the devil comes in the middle of the night is important. It teaches us to be watchful over our soul always! To guard our hearts against being sown with evil thoughts or false teaching. Our hearts are hidden on the inside, where God alone can see. It is the condition of our hearts that determine how much and what kind of fruit we will bring forth. Wheat, or the children of God will bring forth good fruit, while the tares bring no fruit or evil fruit. The field is the whole world, and the seeds are the Church which is scattered throughout the whole world. The Church is a hospital for sick and hurting hearts. It is also a place where strong and healthy hearts can work for the good of the Kingdom. In the Church we find both wheat and tares.

In the beginning, most plant seedlings look alike; it is very hard to tell one plant from another. And that is why the man (Jesus) tells his servants (the angels) to be patient, and do not to pull up the tares. The servants might be too quick to judge which is a young wheat plant and which is a tare. It is better to wait to see what the mature plant looks like, and what fruit it bears before pulling it up. For we all will be known by the kind of fruit that we bear! (Matt. 3:8; 7:15-20) Not only do the plants look alike, but their roots grow close together, and some are intertwined. If the servants pull up the tares, they may also pull up the wheat because the roots of the two plants are tangled. The act of pulling up the tares, even carefully done, might do so much damage to the wheat, that it is lost in the process. This is why in the Church we are not thrown out for our “weedy “ actions, but rather, we are encouraged to repent and become “wheat” once more. God’s plan is to let both grow up together, and separate them at the harvest (day of judgement).

In real fields, wheat is always wheat, and weeds are always weeds, they cannot change. The parable teaches that people CAN change. What looks at the outset to be weeds, can end up to be wheat. “Weeds” can repent and become “wheat.” Take St. Paul, for example. As Saul of Tarsus, he persecuted Christians. Yet, he underwent a miraculous change of heart, and ended up being “wheat” that is still bearing fruit! It is also true, however, that what appears to be “wheat” can be weeds! Jesus had 12 disciples who were closer to Him than any of the rest of his followers, all looked like “wheat,” and yet one was not. Judas Iscariot gave in to despair and hung himself. A “weed!”

Often “weeds” can have a very damaging influence on the “wheat” around them, leading others into factionalism, gossip, and

other forms of disunity. "Wheat" can also become "weeds" through spiritual laziness or hard heartedness. But a strong and healthy heart in a "wheat" plant can do much to resist the damage of the "weeds." Strength and health of the heart come through maturity. There is a lifetime of work to be done by those who tend the field--parents, Godparents, sponsors, and Priests. The "wheat" in the Church can have a huge affect on the "weeds," and help to turn them into "wheat." God loves us so much, that He gives us a lifetime to blossom into wheat and bring forth abundant good fruit. This is why the man (Jesus) tells his servants to wait until the harvest. At the end of the world, when our Lord comes again, the angels will separate the wheat from the tares. The wheat will be gathered up into the Kingdom, while the weeds will be burned.

Feeling Weedy?

Some of the Fathers have also interpreted the field to be our own hearts. While patience and growth are the key to a healthy field in the Church, we need to be more active in uprooting tares that appear within us! When we let down our guard, tares of false teaching can creep into our hearts. This is what happened to the men who slept after they planted their field. They were not watchful! How can this happen to us? We can be dazzled by heresy. There are many books written these days about "understanding" Holy Scripture, or how to pray, or how to know God's will in your life. They are in all the

bookstores. There may be a bit of truth in some of them, however much of the time the author is basing the book on ideas that are not believed by the Orthodox Church. Some books contain the very same heresies that were condemned by the ecumenical councils! We must carefully filter all that we read, even that which is labeled as Christian, through the Faith. Remembering Holy Scripture, what the Fathers have said, and what we have been taught in our parish by our Priest and teachers. We should pray, asking the Holy Spirit to guide us when we are reading, so that whatever is not Orthodox will become clear to us. And then we may ask our parents, or Priests about it. Above all, we must be very selective about what we choose to read, or to watch or to listen, remembering always to whom (God) we belong.

There are other ways our hearts can become a bit "weedy". We can be fooled into thinking that we can just go to Liturgy on Sunday, or that we just have to believe in God. We can allow ourselves to get and stay angry. We can ignore opportunities we have to practice our faith. We can refuse the sacraments. We can delight in pride that we are "wheat" and not "weeds." The list of "weediness" is very long! Proverbs 4:23 says: "Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life." We must be watchful over our hearts! Repent when we err. Forgive when we are wronged. Love always, and pray all the time. In this way, we can become and stay "wheat," bear good fruit, and be gathered up in the Kingdom at the harvest.





Heart Check

1. Why is it important to understand how Satan tries to attack us?
2. What are some ways he can influence us?
3. What does this parable say about judging others on the basis of their actions?
4. Why is patience good for dealing with tares in the world, but not good for dealing with those in our own hearts?
5. Why is it important to be watchful? What are some ways that we can be watchful?
6. How do we participate in the nurturing of the weak and hurting hearts in our own parishes?
7. How does this parable change us?

Tending our field

Once the good seeds of praying and reading scripture are planted in our hearts, we will still need to be watchful, so that the devil will not sow tares while we are unaware. An unguarded heart is open to being sown with tares such as pride, greed, envy, anger, confusion, doubt, and laziness. St. Paul says that we should pray without ceasing. This is a great way to be watchful, because tares can't be sown in a heart that is praying! The Jesus Prayer is a great way to learn to pray always. You can learn to say it in the rhythm of your breathing. You can say it while counting the knots on your prayer rope. Another way to pray always, is to memorize small prayers, hymns or psalms. Then at any time you can pray them from memory! You can pray these prayers on behalf of others, for your personal needs, or simply to the Glory of God!

The Jesus Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Psalm 1 summarizes the parables of the Sower and the Seed, and the Wheat and the Tares. This psalm is quite familiar to us, because we hear it chanted at Great Vespers each week. Meditation on the psalms is an excellent way relieve stress, dispel fear, avoid temptation, and to draw closer to God.

This is your "Yeah Boy!" challenge of the day: Make a plan to memorize the Jesus prayer, and these six verses with your Christian Ed group and with your cabin during the rest of the week. Then, when times are tough, call these prayers to mind, and be watchful!

Psalm 1:1-6

1. Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
2. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night.
3. He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper.
4. The ungodly are not so, But are like the chaff which the wind drives away.
5. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.
6. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the ungodly shall perish.

Lesson 4:

The Mustard Seed & The Leaven

How big is your faith?

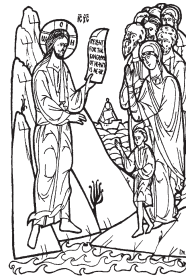
Here is the parable of The Mustard seed:

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

Here is the parable of The Leaven:

Another parable He spoke to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened."

The seed of the mustard plant is very small. In Jesus' time, it was the smallest seed known. Mustard plants range in size from small ground cover to large shrubs. One variety that grows in England on the coast of the English channel grow into a shrub large enough to produce a woody trunk 2-3 inches in diameter. Wood from the shrub is used to make walking sticks. Some sources say that the Palestinian variety can grow to a height of 10 feet and is a favorite roosting place for small birds. The Botany lesson aside, why did Jesus tell this parable?



Jesus Teaches

Jesus told this parable right after the parable of the Wheat and the Tares. Recall the parables we have studied this week. The Sower and the Seed tells what happens to all of the seeds sown by God; specifically, that 3/4 of the seed fell on ground that was bad for growing a healthy crop capable of bringing forth good fruit. In the parable of the Wheat and the Tares, we learned what dangers exist for that 1/4 of the seed that fell on good, and fertile ground. This crop was infiltrated by tares, which sought to disrupt the healthy growth of the wheat, either by choking it out, or by the act of farmers removing the tares. This is a very small portion of the whole who will choose to hear, accept, and act on the word of God sown in their heart! Yet, only these will grow to bear good fruit--some a little, some a bit more, and some in great abundance Like the seed of the mustard plant, great things come from this small group!

In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus is the mustard seed, as well as the man who sowed the seed. Jesus, as a picture of the seed is easy to understand, for it is an icon of the resurrection. In order for new life to spring forth from the seed, it must be buried in the ground, where it lies for a time. To the observer on the surface of the earth it is as if the seed were dead; all of the changes taking place are hidden from our eyes. But what a glorious day it is when the green shoot bursts forth from the earth! Jesus speaks of this very idea in John 12:24, to his apostles just after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it produces much grain." Just as the wheat lives on generation to generation, so does the Kingdom of God, within each of us.

In his time, Jesus and his disciples were just a small portion of the people of Israel. Jesus was virtually unknown to most Jews until he began his public ministry. A few of the older Jerusalem Jews might have remembered the 12 year old boy who sat "in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions." Some might even have recalled their amazement over "His understanding and answers." (Luke 2:41-52) Soon, though, a small group of fishermen, tax collectors, headed by Jesus, a carpenter's son, would shake the world of the Jewish hierarchy. So much so, that they would seek to kill Him. Jesus chose as his apostles men who were considered by society to be politically weak, unimportant, and uneducated. He sowed

the seeds of life, hope, and love among them for three years. What an amazing crop they produced! A crop that is still bearing fruit over 2000 years later! That this group was the instrument by which God's plan of spreading the Gospel message to all the world was fulfilled, is astonishing. As astonishing perhaps, as the huge plants that grow from such small and humble seeds.

The mustard plant in the parable, we are told, will become greater than all the herbs. The mustard plant is the word of God, the message of the Gospel, and all the other herbs are the teachings of various philosophers. Blessed Jerome writes thus: "The preaching of the Gospel is the least of all teachings. In the very beginning it seems improbable: It preaches man and God, a God Who dies, and the scandal of the Cross.

Compare this teaching with the tenets of the philosophers, with their books and brilliant oratory, with the composition of their speeches," St. Jerome continues, "and thou shalt see how the seed of the Gospel is the least of all these seeds. But this (the teaching of the philosophers), while penetrating deeply at first, does not give life; on the contrary it grows weak and becomes exhausted, and dries up like grass. But the Good Tidings, while seemingly small, upon being sown in the soul of the believer or in the whole world, take root like a powerful tree."

At the time Jesus was teaching, there were also great schools of philosophy. Many learned people were enamored by the way

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it produces much grain."

teachers of Platonic, and Socratic logic could explain difficult things. In this group, the mind (intellect) was very important. It was the goal of these schools to understand everything on earth and in the heavens to the fullest, using their reason and logic. In the parable, the huge plant that results from such an insignificant seed, teaches that the Gospel will spread, and become more enlightening and more well known than all of the philosophers that were known at the time. The birds of the air represent all of the people in all of the places on earth to whom the Gospel is spread. The birds nest in the branches of the mustard plant where they have protection against the elements and predators. They raise their young, and are nourished by the seed of the plant. As they go off, they too, spread more seeds. This is a picture of how the young church was spread, and how it continues to thrive, nurture and spread today.

The Leaven

The second parable, that of the leaven, explains how the Gospel message works to change us from inside out. In the parable, it is Jesus who places the leaven into the human heart. It is he who can transform the human soul! St. Symeon, the new theologian agrees that Jesus is the true leaven. To explain this concept, he teaches that the Lord is saying to us: "I am the leaven that the soul receives and puts into its three faculties, and so is leavened and be-

comes entirely like me, for as the leaven is, so also the flour that is kneaded with it becomes." (from Discourse 34,11)

Blessed Theophylact in his commentary on Matthew has this to say: "The three measures are the three faculties of the soul--and the woman is the soul which hides the preaching within all three of its faculties, so that it is all mixed together,

leavened and sanctified.

So every part of us must be leavened and transformed into that which is more Godlike. For He [Jesus] says, 'till it was all leavened.'" St. Augustine agrees that the three measures of meal are the three powers (faculties) of the human soul: the intellect, the appetite, and the passions. He goes on to explain that the intellect is the power of thought, the appetite is the power of operation, and the passions are the power of feeling.



In the parable, the measures of meal are not "cups" like we might imagine. But rather, they constitute enough meal to feed a hundred people. It would take quite a while to prepare this amount of dough, and for it to rise properly to be baked. This is how the change happens in us, it is worked out slowly, over a lifetime. Little by little our heart is made cleaner and cleaner, and the Holy Spirit increases more and more. There is no limit to the capacity of our heart leavened by God!

Just as in the parables we have studied previously, the condition of the dough is crucial for the leaven to make it rise. Leaven is an old word for yeast, a

microorganism, which when it grows, ferments the flour mixture, producing carbon dioxide gas, which causes dough to rise. It only took a small amount of the leaven permeate the whole and begin a living and creative process. And so it is with us, Jesus causes our hearts to change, and soon our actions are different, too! In the case of dough, spoiled, impure flour will not produce a suitably nutritious environment for the yeast, and the dough will not rise. Our hearts, if they are not receptive to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are not conducive to being made holy. This is what King David speaks about in psalm 51:10-11, when he cries to God: "Create in me a new heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take You Holy Spirit from me." Through our cooperation with the Holy Spirit, our heart is changed, it is no longer stale, old, hard, or impure, but rather a soft, pure, and fitting place wherein God, Himself can dwell.



Heart Check

1. How is the seed of the mustard plant an icon of the resurrection?
2. In what ways were Jesus, His disciples, the Gospel, and the location of His ministry seen as small or weak in the eyes of the world?

3. What happened to the spread and success of the Gospel despite the world's view? What does this teach us about God's plan? What does this teach us about God, Himself?

4. In what ways does the Church nurture and protect us as the mustard plant did for the birds?

5. How does God change us from the inside out?

6. How is this change of heart like the action of the yeast in the parable of the leaven?

7. What is the result if our hearts are stale or hard? What will happen if they are fresh and receptive to being changed? How can we have a heart that is fresh and receptive?

8. How do these parables change us?

Nurturing the Crop

Have you ever wondered why, I mean WHY we fast--or pray--or give alms? We do these things first of all because Jesus teaches us to do them. He shows us how to give alms (6:1-4), how to pray (6:5-15), and how to fast (6:16-18), and he teaches that these three things are directly related to our uprightness to God. These are spiritual disciplines, or medicines for our souls and our bodies. When we faithfully practice fasting, prayer and the giving of alms, we are being healed. They are a gift from God to us!

When the Saints speak of the heart, they are not talking about the great pump that circulates our blood. Instead they are talking about the part of us that is deep inside of us wherein the Holy Spirit dwells. This is our spirit, and it is not in any one place in our body, but permeates it. Our body is both flesh and spirit. And we cannot separate the two. In heaven, we will have a body just like the one that Jesus had after his resurrection! We will not be like the angels which are only spirit.

As the Fathers have taught, our spirit (heart) has three powers: the appetite, which influences the things we do; the intellect, which influences what we think; and the passions, which influence how we feel. Just as our body has eyes to guide it, so also does the spirit have an eye. The eye of the spirit is called the nous. All visual images come into our body through the eyes. We must protect our eyes from injury and disease in order to keep our vision clear. It is the same for our spiritual eye, all that enters our soul comes into it through the nous. If we allow words,

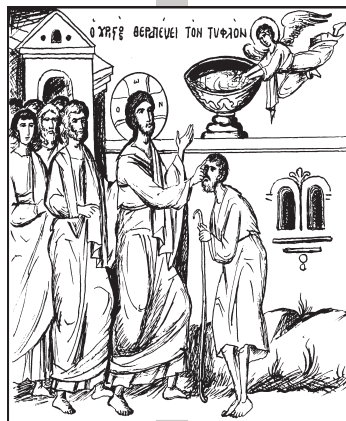
images or substances that are impure, graphic, or violent into our souls, our spiritual eye becomes darkened. It is less and less able to help us to see what things are bad for us and what things are good for us! This is how we can become spiritually blind.

This is where the spiritual disciplines of fasting, prayer, and given alms can heal us! When we fast from certain foods as well as the amount, with our bodies, our appetite for things that are not good for us will become less. When we pray, we learn to control our mind-to keep it focused on God.

Prayer strengthens the mind to avoid thoughts, doubts and worries that are unhealthy for us. The more we pray, the better able we are to withstand these temptations and assaults by the evil one. When we give alms, (which can be money, items, or our time) to those who need us, we learn to love our neighbor, and desire his well being. We find that our selfish desire for our own

comfort, will diminish. Jesus taught us to do all three of these things together, not just one, apart from the others. That is why sometimes when we fast, we become hungrier for the foods we have given up. But, if we pray and give alms along with the fasting, we will find that it all works together for our good. And even if we do struggle with our discipline, knowing that we are being healed, by Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, we will find joy!

Here is your Yeah Boy! challenge for today. Make a plan to joyfully keep the weekly fasts that the Church prescribes by fasting, praying and giving of yourself to those who need you. Make a list of ways you can accomplish this goal!



Lesson 5: The Treasure, The Pearl of Great Price & The Net

Where is your treasure?

Here are the parables of the Treasure buried in the field and The pearl of great price as recorded by St. Matthew:

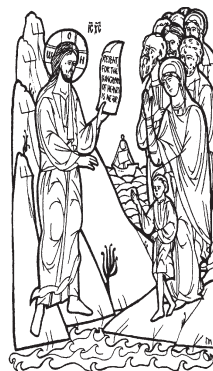
Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.



Jesus asked them "Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord."



Jesus Teaches

The account of the parables of the Treasure, the Pearl and the Net is different from the previous parables. It is found only in St. Matthew's gospel; occurring after Jesus explains the meaning of the parable of the Wheat and the Tares to his disciples. This is a private discussion between Jesus and his disciples--everyone present has an open heart and mind to the teaching. He gives them the explanation for which they have asked, and then adds three more parables to his discussion with them. Jesus tells the first

two parables to emphasize the great value of the Kingdom of God, and the sacrifice one must make to obtain it. The third parable, that of the Net is a picture of the day of Judgement. The discussion closes with Jesus asking if the disciples had understood all that he had told them. "Yes, Lord." is their answer.

Jesus knew the hearts of his disciples; he knew that they were responsive to His teaching, and that they, were willing to drop everything and follow Him. They had a desire to hear and understand everything that He said. It was by their great faith, that they could understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God, and perceive its value. He knew they were spiritually mature, and that they would be ready to take on the work of teaching others, when the time came. At their call, they had done the same thing as the man who found the treasure, and the merchant who found the pearl had done--they left their old life without question, to obtain the great treasure that Jesus offered.

The Kingdom of God is both the treasure that was hidden as well as the Pearl of great price. The field wherein the treasure hides is our heart. Jesus teaches in Luke 17:20-21, that the Kingdom of God is within each of us. It is expressed in the way we live--it is found in our Orthodox Faith! Some of the Saints liken the parable of the Treasure hidden in the field to the life of those who were born into the Orthodox faith, and faithfully live it throughout their lives, and the parable of the Pearl of Great price to those who seek the True Faith, find it, and convert. These

parables, taken together are a picture of our life as the Body of Christ.

For those of us who have been Orthodox our whole lives, this treasure is familiar, we look around our home, and we see the Orthodox faith in the Icons, and in each other. We learned the Faith by watching and listening those around us, as they lived it, keeping fasts and feasts, and as they taught it, saying the prayers and reading the Scriptures. We learned about heaven in the Liturgy. As we grew, so did our faith, and we began ourselves to read about our Faith. We learned to serve others by following the holy examples around us and in the lives of the Saints. We love being Orthodox, and we are spiritually rich!! We live our Faith throughout the year, week by week, fasting, praying, growing, serving, living, loving, and drawing closer to God. We do not know another way. The treasure is indeed in us and around us!

Then the Lord awakens in the soul a great love for His glory...This is the pearl of great price which a man can acquire by selling all that he has, and so experience the inexpressible joy of making it his own.

St. Diadochos of Photiki

Some of us found Orthodoxy! We saw it in you, who already were Orthodox! And when we did, we recognized it as a precious pearl, one that we desired to possess above all else. We knew from the first moment we saw the True Faith, that to have the Pearl of Orthodoxy, was to be rich beyond any human measure. Many of us searched long and hard, gave up family ties, money, friendships, and Church buildings to find the Orthodox Faith. We eagerly learned many things, and faithfully gave up some ideas we had carried with us for a long time. We found a completion to the part of the Truth we had known previously. What a blessing to live as one of the faithful throughout

the year, week by week, fasting, praying, growing, serving, living, loving, and drawing closer to God. We do not want any other way. The treasure is now in us and around us!

Just as the Kingdom of God is “hidden” in each of us, the Church, has “hidden” the truth of the Gospels, and all of Holy Tradition within her. Jesus gave His disciples the True Faith, the Truth of God, His plan for man, and the Gospel of love. This is the treasure, the pearl of great price, which they had to preserve and pass on unto ages of ages. The ecumenical councils defended and recorded the Faith as it was handed down to them. Like the merchant, they worked hard to find and preserve the Faith which has always been believed by the Church. The Saints of old lived the Faith, and gave us an example of how to grow close to God while still on earth. To live in the world, but not of it. And always, the Holy Spirit, dwelling in us, gives us the strength and courage to follow in the footsteps of those who came before. To find for ourselves, and to hide in our hearts, that same Faith which has always been believed by the Church.

It is in the Liturgy that we find The Kingdom of Heaven in full expression on earth! The word Liturgy (Gk: *λειτουργία*), literally translates as: “*the work of the people.*” And it is a very holy work, indeed, to work (worship) in the field (Church) wherein a great treasure (The True Faith) is buried. Our prayer, thanksgiving, and praise during the Liturgy is heard by God, and He

blesses us and lifts us up into the Kingdom. This is our true home, and where we draw very near God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the Liturgy, we worship together with those around us in both the material and the spirit world. We are praying the same prayers, and singing the same hymns on earth as in heaven. We come humbly before God and ask his blessing on all of the world. We enter into a very intimate discussion with Christ, even taking His Body and Blood into our body. We leave with the comfort and presence of the Holy Spirit; refreshed in body and spirit, and fortified to do all the good works that God has planned for us to do!



And what of the parable of the Net? The net is the Gospel that is cast into the sea, which is the world. The Gospel is there for everyone to hear. In the net, many things are caught, some good and some bad. That is the way of the world, some people hear the Truth and it is life-giving, because they obey it. Others hear the Truth and ignore it. St. John Chrysostom (*On Matthew*, homily 47), made a distinction between

the bad fish in the net and the tares, even though their ends are the same. He saw the bad fish not as those who, had never believed, had rejected the Gospel, and were actively distorting the doctrines of Christ, but rather, he saw the bad fish as those who had believed, but never tried to live the faith. The bad fish are spiritually lazy, and unrepentant in this regard, they are “just going through the motions” of the Faith. In contrast, the good fish are not perfect, but they are the those who, believe and then strive to live the Faith according to the Gospel. When they fall, they repent and begin again, throughout their whole lives.

In this life, we are not called just to be *good*; we are called to be *holy*. We must keep trying to live as children of the Most High. Praying, fasting, giving alms, worshipping, and loving one another. Because, the truth is, one day our Lord will return, and “the angels will come forth, separate the wicked from the just, and cast them (the wicked) into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.” God has great mercy towards us, and our Lord knows our hearts. St. Gregory Palamas says that we don’t have to be perfect, but we do have to be striving toward perfection. If we continually repent, and turn our hearts to God, work to make our heart a fit place for the Holy Spirit, and do all that we can to acquire the Pearl of great price, throughout our lives, we will be counted among the wheat, the good fish, and the just.



Heart Check

1. Are we so responsive to Christ’s call that we are willing to drop everything to follow where He leads us?
2. What are some of the signs that we are spiritually mature? Spiritually immature?
3. How can we grow more mature?

4. How do the two parables of the Treasure and the Pearl teach about how people come to know and to “hide” the True Faith in their heart?

5. How do these parable teach us to appreciate our own journey, as well as those of others? How are we blessed by those around us?

6. What does it mean to be “just going through the motions” of the Faith? What is the end of one who lives their whole life that way? Are we ever like this?

7. How is the parable of the Net a “Wake Up!” call for us? How is it also a picture of Hope?

8. How do these parables change us?

Bearing Good Fruit

Our garden is planted, and up are sprouting the seedlings of renewed faith. We have had a week of prayer, study, worship, communion, and fellowship. All of these have helped us to prepare our hearts to grow in the Faith! Now it is time to go back into our homes, parishes, and communities. St. Maximos, the Confessor said that “Theology without action (praxis) is the theology of demons.” He means that just learning about the Faith is not good enough, we have to **LIVE** it! This means that we really do pray each day. That we really do read our Bible each day. That we really do try to avoid temptations, prayerfully, with God’s help. That we really do keep the fasts as well as the feasts during the year. And yes, that we really do give of ourselves to others, especially those who need our help.

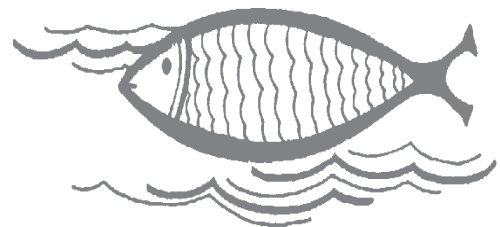
Orthodoxy teaches that we are made in the image and likeness of God. We all possess the

image, a small seed of God, because God, Himself gave it to us, it is always there, no matter how far we stray from the Truth. The likeness is up to us. It is our striving to live the life, and become through grace true sons and daughters of the Most High.

Some of the Fathers call it perfection, others, theosis, but whatever the name, this is the Holy work to which we have been called. The more we work in the garden of our hearts, the more abundant will be the harvest. And the more we will resemble the seed (image), which is

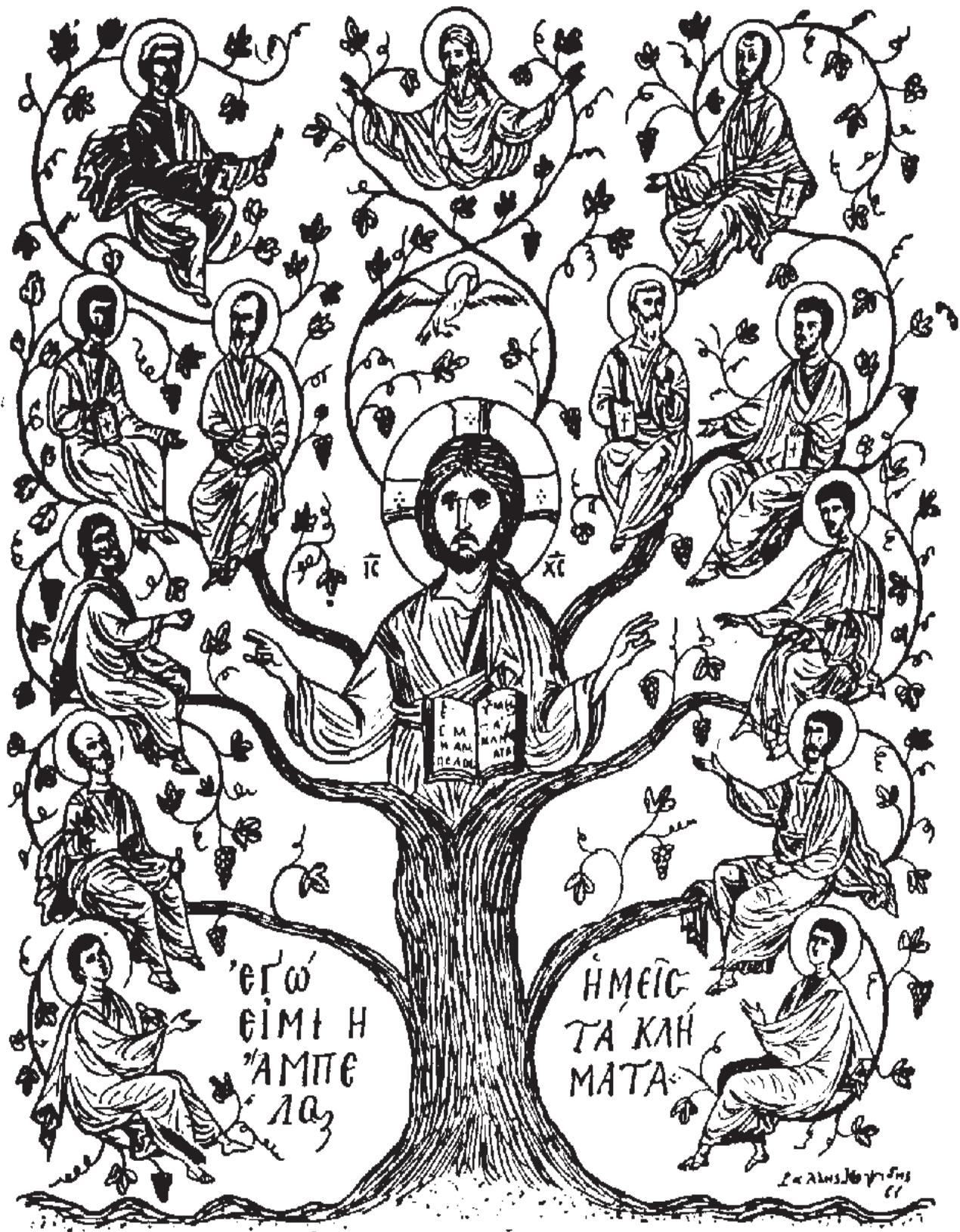
Christ.

Here is your last “Yeah Boy!” challenge for the week. Make a plan to get involved at Church-- and stay involved! Give back to your parish family some of what you have learned this week. Make a list of ways you can accomplish this goal.



“Theology without action (praxis) is the theology of demons.”

St. Maximos, the Confessor



I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.