

Homily

# St. Phanourios & The Rich Young Man

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost, St. Matthew 19:16-26

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St. Andrew the First-Called Orthodox Christian Church

**The Life and Intercession of Saint Phanourios:** In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen. On Thursday of this week the Church celebrated the life of the newly-revealed Holy Martyr Phanourios. Little is known of his life, and we possess no detailed life for St. Phanourios in our synaxarion. Nevertheless, St. Phanourios is greatly venerated in Rhodes, Crete, and in Egypt. In the year 1500 he appeared to some people on the island of Rhodes and showed himself forth in healing miracles. In some newly discovered ruins of an ancient church there in Rhodes was found an icon of the saint dressed as a young soldier holding a cross in his right hand with a burning candle on top of it, and on the perimeter of the icon were twelve scenes from St. Phanourios' life from which we derive most of our knowledge of his life as a martyr. This icon, though very old, was like new and appeared to have been painted that same day. Bishop Neilos came to the site and read the icon on which was St. Phanourios' name. Bishop Neilos petitioned the Ecumenical Patriarch for funds with which to rebuild the ancient church and name it after St. Phanourios. To this day this ancient church bearing St. Phanourios' name stands in Rhodes.

There are two traditions surrounding St. Phanourios' life that I would like to share with you in order that you might profit from his heavenly friendship and intercession. The first concerns his mother. The tradition is that she was a great sinner, and that despite his piety Phanourios was unable to convert her. So great was his love for his mother that he

prayed more for his mother's salvation than for his own. While suffering martyrdom St. Phanourios prayed to God, "For the sake of these my sufferings, Lord, help all those who will pray to Thee for the salvation of Phanourios' sinful mother".

The second is a custom associated with St. Phanourios which I have received, and which I wish to give to you. The saint's name "Phanourios" sounds very similar to the Greek word which means "I make known" or "I reveal". Therefore, when someone loses something, Saint Phanourios' assistance is invoked to reveal or make known the whereabouts of that which has been lost. In thanksgiving for finding the object, the thankful supplicant bakes and then gives away a loaf of bread or a cake for the repose of the soul of Saint Phanourios' mother. And so I bring before you this pious custom for your benefit. St. Phanourios will help you if you have lost something and are in need, but remember to do your part by baking and giving and praying for the repose of his mother's soul. We hope to soon obtain an icon of the Saint for our Church. His feast is celebrated every year on August 27<sup>th</sup>. O newly-revealed Martyr Phanourios, pray unto God for us!

**The Rich Young Man:** In this morning's Gospel we read about a rich young man who came to our Savior with an earnest and urgent question. "Teacher, what good thing shall I do to obtain eternal life?" (v. 16). Far from tempting our Savior (as some have supposed) this young man showed forth his earnestness in several ways. He came before our Savior in humility, and bowed before him. The evangelist says nothing about this man tempting Jesus with this question, and in other places when questioners were acting deceitfully this was pointed out by the evangelist and by Jesus in His response (cf. Ch. 22:15-22). Additionally, the young man went away with sadness of heart when he received his answer...a disposition not likely to exist in a person querying Jesus with deceitful intent. The final evidence of this young man's sincerity lies in the account given us by St. Mark. There we find recorded that our Savior looked upon this young man, and "felt a love for him" (10:21). This young man was both sincere and devout. He is to be commended for his commitment to the commandments of Christ, and for entertaining the question that most rich people studiously avoid putting to themselves:

“What good thing must I do in order to obtain eternal life?” In answering this earnest seeker Jesus gives a two-fold response.

**Obedience to the Commandments as the Way of Eternal Life:** Our Savior’s first and general response to him is to call him to obedience to God’s commandments. “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments” (v. 17). Notice what Jesus does *not* say. He does not say, “Your obedience to the commandments contributes nothing to your salvation. All you have to do is to believe in Me”. No. Contrary to what so many Christians in our Protestantized milieu say, Jesus did not give the young man a simple formula of faith or intellectual assent for him to latch onto as his assurance of eternal life. Instead, our Savior made abundantly clear that our obtaining eternal life has everything to do with our keeping of the commandments of God. The young man asked Christ to specify which commandments, and our Savior responded by naming the 5<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> of the Ten Commandments and adding the summary of the second half of the Decalogue, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”.

On the other hand it should be noted that our Savior is not teaching this young man that if he keeps the commandments he will earn, deserve, or merit salvation. There is a Roman Catholic doctrine called supererogation which teaches that an individual can exceed the requirements of God’s commandments, and establish a treasury of merits which can be applied to others who are sinners. From the medieval period on it is quite common to hear the West speaking of the “merits” of the saints. This is not Orthodox language. This whole approach to salvation is quite rationalistic and based on a false understanding of God’s justice and the essence of salvation.

What our Savior is teaching this young man, and us, is that the way of obedience to God’s commandments is the way of salvation. By applying ourselves wholly to the pursuit of love, which is the goal of all the commandments, and in so doing cooperating with God in a divine-human synergy we work out the process of our salvation. The road of obedience to the commandments is the path of our divination, of our triumph over the passions and conformity to the Person of Jesus. As Christ is formed in us we return more

and more to our natural state of closeness and obedience to God. As this happens progressively we are progressively saved and made partakers of eternal life. Eternal life is a gift, which is bestowed on us in Holy Baptism. It is increased in us as we live and grow in Christ, and it is permanently settled in the faithful at the Second Coming of our Savior when everyone's conformity to the commandments is judged by Christ. Even our greatest Saints who have kept the commands of Christ so carefully do not consider themselves to have merited salvation or to deserve any kindness of God. They quote the Psalmist, "If thou O Lord shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, Lord who shall stand? But with Thee there is forgiveness" (Ps. 129:3-4). Even after keeping the commands of their Savior they consider themselves to be unworthy servants (St. Lk. 17:10). Nevertheless, this does not negate the simple fact that they have all entered into eternal life by keeping the commandments since to learn to overcome self-will and to live in the will of God is salvation itself. Our Savior modeled true "life" on the earth by keeping the commandments of His Father without blemish.

**Notice lastly, the great danger of riches.** Our Savior added to His exhortation to this young man because even though this young man had kept the commandments of God, he sensed correctly that he was still lacking eternal life. How could this be? Christ had just instructed the man that to enter into life one should keep the commandments. The young man kept the commandments, but lacked eternal life. How could this be? The answer was that he had one passion, so dangerous, so evil, that its presence nullified an entire life built on the commandments of God. This passion was the "love of money", what St. Paul calls "the root of all evils" (1 St. Tim. 6:10). How pernicious is this passion! Able to ruin and obviate completely an otherwise righteous life! And so, Christ showed the young man the way of perfection, the angelic life, the monastic way, of disenfranchisement. "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven, and come, follow Me" (19:21). "But when the young man heard this statement he went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property" (v. 22). How alluring and dangerous is money. Foolish is the man who greatly desires it, for all the money in the world will render him a pauper, and keep him from seeing the Kingdom of God. This young man failed to see that Jesus was not ultimately asking Him to give up his possessions, but to greatly increase them! May the Lord protect us all from this vice, and grant unto us all to be keepers of His commandments, and in being such to enter into eternal life! To Him be all glory forever. Amen.