

VAINGLORY IS A GRAVE SIN

—by Bishop Nikiforos Theotokis—

At that time, when Jesus departed from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out and saying, "Son of David, have mercy on us!" And when He had come into the house, the blind men came to Him. And Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." Then He touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith let it be to you." And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, saying, "See that no one knows it." But when they had departed, they spread the news about Him in all that country (Mt. 9:27-31)

In today's Gospel narrative, I observe how Jesus Christ remained silent as the two blind men—from the center of the street and amidst a multitude of people—cried out in a loud voice, "**Son of David, have mercy on us!**" Furthermore, I hear the commandment He gave them after He restored their vision and enlightened their eyes, "**see to it that no one finds out**" (**Mt. 9:30**). When I consider that both Christ's silence as well as His commandment were intended to conceal the miracle, I am truly amazed and perplexed. If the Lord had acted in this manner only in this instance with the two blind men, there would be an explanation to the query. However, since we repeatedly note the God-man always acting in the same manner every time He performed a miracle, not only does our query remain unanswered, but also our perplexity grows and escalates.

After Christ cleansed the leper whom He encountered and freed him of his disease, He immediately ordered Him thus: "**See that you tell no one**" (**Mt. 9:4**). Christ stopped the chronic issue of blood from the lady who had been bleeding for many years, and thereafter He attributed the miracle not to His own power, but to the sick lady's faith. *Your faith*, He said, *healed you from your illness*: "**Daughter, your faith has made you well**" (**Mt. 9:22**). He spoke similarly when He gave movement to the paralyzed body of the centurion's slave: "**Go your way, and as you have believed, so let it be done for you**" (**Mt. 8:13**). Likewise, when he freed the Canaanite woman's daughter from the tyranny of the devil "**O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire**" (**Mt. 15:28**). When Christ visited Peter's home, He put an end his mother-in-law's fever, He cast out the demons from them who were brought to Him, and He healed all the sick people who came there seeking His help (**Mt. 8:14-17**); subsequently, when Christ saw that a great crowd had gathered around Him, He immediately departed from there: "**And when Jesus saw great**

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multitudes about Him, He gave a command to depart to the other side” (Mt. 8:18).

Christ did the exact same thing when he calmed the storm at sea and stopped the wind: He immediately departed, and having crossed to the other side of the sea, “**He came to the country of the Gardarenes**” (Mk. 5:1). When He made the paralytic rise from his bed, immediately “**Jesus withdrew**” from the multitude in order for Him to remain unknown (Jn. 5:13). When He fed the five thousand men with five loaves of bread, He forced His disciples to depart from there (Mt. 14:22). And when He fed the four thousand men with seven loaves of bread, He immediately left and went to the region of Magdala (Mt. 15:39). When He went to the home of the ruler of the synagogue to resurrect his daughter, Christ sought to hide the miracle: first, He told everyone present, “**Depart, for the girl is not dead but sleeping,**” and, in following, “**He put them all outside**”—only then did He resurrect the deceased girl (Mt. 9:23-25 & Mk. 5:40).

When Christ, having exited from the synagogue, healed all the people who had been brought before Him from various illnesses, then He not simply told them to “keep silent,” but He sternly warned them to remain silent: “**He warned them not to make Him known**” (Mt. 12:16). When Christ’s face shined like the sun and His garments became white as light upon Mount Tabor, and a voice from the cloud was heard saying, “**This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!**” (Mt. 17:5), then He commanded His disciples to remain silent: “**Tell this vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead**” (Mt. 17:9).

Faith in Christ is necessary for salvation; the publicizing of miracles serves as a lantern and a magnet, which illumine and attract the heart of man toward faith in Christ. Yet, when Jesus Christ came to the world to preach the faith, He took such great care and went to great length in order to prevent the publicizing of His miracles. He lights a lamp only to hide it under a basket (Mt. 5:15)—this is indeed astonishing! Did Christ act in this manner in order to avoid vainglory? Would He have inhibited the transmission and propagation of the faith on account of a single sin that seems so trivial? Yes! On account of vainglory. This is precisely why the God-man paid so much attention to evading vainglory: in order to show us that salvation is spoiled by vainglory. Vainglory is indeed a grave and dreadful sin. From the very beginning until the end of man’s life, vainglory maliciously plots against man’s salvation in all types of ways.

The first passion to surface in man is this passion of vainglory. We observe no blameworthy passions in infants, until vainglory makes its presence. When you compliment an infant, it shows signs of happiness; when you praise a child, it rejoices and becomes motivated. If, on the other

hand, you speak to it with disapproval, it instantly becomes sad and starts to cry. This evil vainglory follows man right up to death; for children, teenagers, adults, seniors, even people advanced in years and with one foot in the grave desire and seek honor and praise. What is even more remarkable than all this, is that vainglory oftentimes accompanies man even after death. What are the expensive clothing, extravagant monuments, tall mausoleums, sculptures of faces, pretentious and grandiose inscriptions, and the various other things arranged either by us prior to death or friends and relatives after death? They are nothing other than the putrid smoke of desire for glory. Concerning such people, the holy prophet of God spoke thus: **"And their graves will be their homes forever. They will be their dwelling places from generation to generation. They invoked their own names on their monuments"** (Ps. 48:12).

Within every single person, vainglory finds a suitable substrate upon which it forms and thrives. The various favorable hereditary and acquired traits that man possesses serve as substrates and nourishment for vainglory. People desire to be complimented for their good looks, for their good judgment, and for their keen intelligence. People go to great lengths in order to be recognized by others for their popularity, their wealth, and their status. People yearn and diligently seek to be acknowledged as a teacher, a scholar, and an artist. People desire and do everything in their power to be known as righteous, prudent, upright, and virtuous.

But does vainglory perhaps flee from man when it does not find within him such substrates and sources of nourishment? Does it perhaps depart when man happens to be void of all the aforementioned positive attributes? No! Even in such cases, vainglory strikes the imagination and renders man a senseless fool. People who are unattractive want to look attractive and be considered beautiful; they who are insignificant, despite their inferiority, want to appear wealthy and distinguished; they who are unlearned still want to be viewed as wise and educated; they who are full of sins nonetheless desire to be regarded as righteous and holy. Vainglory has such tremendous power!

Moreover, this passion is extremely deceptive and underhanded, and it apprehends us almost imperceptibly. When, for example, a chanter happens to be singing or reading alone in church, then he is battled by sleep, he can barely project his voice, he has difficulty annunciating the words, and he has no desire in his soul for prayer. If, however, he turns his eyes and notices that parishioners have come and are filling the church, immediately sleep vanishes, his voice suddenly becomes loud and melodious, he pronounces the words clearly, he is filled with great zeal and

strength; in one word, he becomes a different person. What has caused this speedy change? If you suggest that this change has resulted "from the Right Hand of the Most-High" (Ps. 76:11), you are mistaken. On the contrary, this is a change that came about from the right hand of Satan, who imperceptibly waters man with the water of vainglory. This water physically invigorates a person and makes him spring up like a green plant, but simultaneously rots and dissolves the grace of his virtue.

The same thing applies to every other good work as well. When I hear others speaking about my valor, or praising my virtue and accomplishments, then I become overjoyed and motivated. When, however, no one compliments me, or speaks well about me, or acknowledges my efforts, then I become gloomy, slothful, and listless. This is in fact the spirit of vainglory that is conquering my heart. Unfortunately, I the wretched one remain insensitive and completely oblivious to all this.

God spoke about this passion of vainglory clearly. Even if a person's conscience is in deep sleep, God's words are capable of waking it up. "**Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in Heaven**" (Mt. 6:1). This is how Christ spoke concerning almsgiving. With respect to prayer and fasting, He stated that people who pray or fast in order to appear virtuous before others will receive no other reward, other than the praise of men: "**Assuredly, I say to you, they have received their reward**" (Mt. 1:16).

If God had only made reference to this sin with the above words, these verses would certainly have sufficed and adequately informed every person to remain distanced from vainglory, so that one is not deprived of the heavenly payment. However, God issued additional frightening and dreadful decisions against them who are vainglorious. The God-inspired prophet David calls them who are vainglorious man-pleasers because they do everything for show, only desiring to be admired by others: "**For God has scattered the bones of man-pleasers**" (Ps. 52:6). Bones represent the strength, means, and ways that we utilize in order to receive praise from others. When we use our beauty, or wealth, or wisdom, or virtue in order to receive recognition and glory from others, then God scatters and strips these goods from us, and, subsequently, we remain naked and humiliated: "**They have been put to shame because God has destroyed them**" (Ps. 52:6). Do you hear what vainglory's punishment is? Scattering and destruction of bones; shame and destruction from God.

But why, you may ask, is there so much condemnation and punishment for such a small vain desire for glory, which doesn't bother anyone? Why? Because the vainglorious person wrongs himself, he

wrongs his fellow man, and he even attempts to wrong God. First, he wrongs himself because he sells an eternal kingdom and exchanges it for temporary smoke; because he toils pointlessly sowing tears, only to reap sorrow and shame. Second, he wrongs his fellow man because he fools him, and he cunningly snatches and steals esteem, respect, and praise from others. Third, he even attempts to wrong God Himself because he prefers the glory of men instead of the glory of God; because he delegates the rewarding of virtue to man, in place of God; because he transfers the time and place that God has appointed for the rewards to the present; because he seizes the glory that is due to God for virtue. God deserves to receive the glory associated with the accomplishments of virtue, “**for it is God Who works in you both the desire and the ability to do what is good**” (**Phl. 2:13**). The vainglorious man usurps this glory, desiring and seeking praise from others.

What value do the works of the vainglorious man have? Absolutely none. Such a person’s works resemble “**whitewashed tombs which appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness**” (**Mt. 23:27**). They resemble fruits that appear shiny and colorful externally but are rotten and full of worms internally. Virtue consists of a soul and a body, just as the human being who carries out the virtue. The soul of virtue is the purpose for which man carries it out; the body of virtue is the actual good deed. Man’s soul defines his bodily actions; the incentive behind virtue determines the value of virtue. If the soul is good, then the body’s actions are good. If the soul is evil, the body’s physical actions will be evil as well. If the intention is holy, then the virtuous work will be holy. If the ambition is evil, then the virtuous deed will also be evil.

Examine the intent of a vainglorious person’s virtuous deeds. What does he aim to achieve through his virtue? Nothing other than personal gain, self-profit, empty praise and vain compliments from others. Thus, his intent negates the grace of virtue, it disperses the holiness of virtue, and transforms virtue into sin. God is a spirit (**Jn. 4:24**); thus, He desires us to worship Him with our soul: this constitutes a holy objective. On the contrary, when our intent is evil, God turns His face away from our sacrifice, just as He did not accept Cain’s offering. Then He becomes displeased with us, just as he became displeased with Cain. “**For God has scattered the bones of man-pleasers. They have been put to shame because God has destroyed them**” (**Ps. 52:6**).