

A HOMILY FOR THE SUNDAY OF THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

About the Lessons Taught by the Gospel Reading

Brothers and sisters!

Today we heard the Gospel reading telling about the Lord's conversation at Jacob's well with the Samaritan woman, who later became a saint. Photine was her name in Greek, and in Slavonic she is called Svetlana. Most, I think, would agree that this story is one of the most interesting and compelling in the entire New Testament, so I am certain that when it was read today, everyone listened to it with utmost attention. Therefore, I will not recount the story, but proceed directly to lessons it offers our minds and hearts.

The first lesson today's Gospel lection teaches is that we should emulate the Samaritan woman's holy curiosity; that is, her desire to know divine truth. We see that at the beginning of her conversation with the Saviour, she is confused. Christ's teaching about "living water" is incomprehensible to her. She cannot make the connection between physical water and living, spiritual water. But as soon as she concludes that she is speaking with a mighty prophet, her thoughts shift to spiritual concerns, and she asks Jesus where we ought worship God. This was an old point of disagreement between the Jews and the Samaritans. She hoped that in time the Messiah would come and clarify the matter, but she would rather not wait till then to learn the answer. Obviously, the question had occupied her thoughts previously, most likely because she recognized that the life she was leading was not acceptable to God. Her conscience reminded her of her debt before the Lord and urged her to find a

way to please Him. Thus, her sincere, her good, her holy curiosity; for curiosity is not always a bad thing, but can be employed both for good and evil. The Lord always comes out to greet such holy curiosity as Photine's with truth and grace: He arranges for the salvation of people such as the Samaritan woman and, through them, for the salvation of others. By simultaneously revealing both His own omniscience and the answer to the woman's question, Christ enables her reception not just of this, but of other sacred truths, such as the very great truth that He is the Messiah: the Son of the living God.

Another beautiful trait of the Samaritan woman which we should emulate is her love for her neighbor. Saint Photine was deemed worthy of great joy: to speak face to face with the Christ. Does she hide the blessing, keeping it only for herself, like Mary, the sister of Lazarus? No, for her's is an entirely different character. Great was Mary's holy love for Christ (and

the Saviour blessed her for it), but Saint Photine's extends beyond Christ to her fellow man. Her worthy question leads her not just to the true answer, but to Truth Itself. She knows that there are others in her city who are concerned about the same question as she, and she rushes to tell them that she has found the One Who can answer every worthy question. The citizens follow her back to Christ, He receives them lovingly, and He makes many disciples there. A similar result always obtains when people approach the Lord with worthy questions in a humble, devout spirit. He reveals the truth to them either directly, or through His appointed ministers, or through other good, pious people. And often, the now-enlightened inquirers succeed in revealing it to the still-unenlightened.

Equally instructive is how the Lord did not hesitate to rebuke the Samaritan woman, and how she accepted reproach meekly and wisely, using it as a sword against her sin, and not as

a sword against herself. As the wise Solomon said: *Rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee.*¹ We should all accept rebuke wisely, especially when it comes from those specifically charged with overseeing our conduct: superiors with respect to subordinates, spiritual fathers with respect to spiritual children, parents with respect to sons and daughters, and so forth. With a wise spirit Saint Photine accepted Christ's reproof: *He whom thou now hast is not thy husband.* She opened her conscience to Christ and assented to His stern, direct words as a call to deliverance. Repentance awoke her spiritually, enabling her heart to receive further illumination by divine truth, in accordance with the Apostle's words: *Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.*²

But perhaps the most significant of all the weighty lessons taught by today's Gospel lection is to be found in these famous

¹ Prov. 9:8

² Eph. 5:14

words spoken by the Lord to the future Saint Photine: *Woman, believe Me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father. The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.* This means that the Old Testament Church, which was limited to a certain time and place, and embraced only one nation, was temporary and about to come to an end. The New Testament Church, however – the Church of grace – embraces all the rightly believing of every land and all peoples, and will exist forever.

What does it mean to worship in spirit and in truth? For the Old Testament Jews, especially in the final period before Christ's first advent and during His sojourn on earth, worship consisted largely in offering sacrifices of animals and had more

or less degenerated into mere formality. The letter of the Law and correct performance of ritual had quenched the spirit. The scribes and Pharisees were perfect embodiments of this approach. In their obsession with what was secondary, they *omitted the weightier matters of the Law: judgement, mercy, and faith*,³ as Christ says. They strained *at a gnat* and swallowed *a camel*.⁴ The Lord insists that they ought to have concerned themselves chiefly with the more important things, without leaving the lesser things undone. True New Testament worshippers of God, however, do exactly as Christ directs. Their chief concerns are repentance in preparation for judgment, mercy toward their neighbors, and the other good deeds directed by Christian faith. They pray as did David already in Old Testament times, saying, *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. A heart that is broken and*

³ Matt. 23:23

⁴ Matt. 23:24

*humbled God will not despise;*⁵ therefore, Christ's words are fulfilled in them – namely, *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*⁶

It has already been two thousand years since Christ commanded worship of the Father in spirit and truth, and declared that it is such worshippers that the Father seeks. May God grant that we, dear brothers and sisters, be numbered among such worshippers! Amen.

⁵ Ps. 50:12,19

⁶ Matt. 5:18