

How much We Care about our Body and about our Soul

St Ambrose of Optina

It says in the Gospel “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36). That is how precious the human soul is! It costs more than the whole world with all its treasures and blessings. But it is terrifying to think how little we realize the real value of our eternal soul. From morning till night all our thoughts are turned to the body, that habitat of worms, that decorated coffin, and the soul, the most precious and beloved God’s creation, the image of His glory and greatness, is hardly given one thought in a week. To the serving of the body we dedicate the most blooming years of our lives and to the eternal salvation of our soul we give the last minutes of decrepit old age. The body is fed daily, like at a rich man’s feast, with full bowls and luxurious dishes: and the soul hardly picks up any crumbs of the divine word from the doorstep of the house of God. The worthless body is being washed, clothed, cleansed, adorned with all treasure of nature and art; and the dear soul, the bride of Jesus Christ, the heiress of heaven, wanders about with exhausted step dressed in a beggar’s rags receiving no alms.

The body would not tolerate a single stain on its face, no dirt on the hands, no patch on the clothing; but the soul, covered from head to toe with filth, does nothing but goes from one pool of spiritual mire to the next, and with its annual but often hypocritical confession just multiplies the patches on its clothing without renewing it.

For the wellbeing of the body all sorts of games and pleasures are required; these pursuits often exhaust the whole families, for their sake people are sometimes prepared to take upon various labours; and the poor soul hardly gets an hour on Sundays to listen to the Divine Liturgy, a few scarce minutes for morning and night prayer, struggles to collect a handful of copper coins for alms and is pleased to express the remembrance of the dead with a cold sigh.

For health and safe-keeping of the body they change the air and housing, call the most skilful and distant physicians, refrain from food and drink, take the bitterest medicine, allow themselves to be burnt and cut; and for the health of the soul, for avoiding temptations, for moving away from the infection of sin they would not take a single step, but remain in the same air, in the same bad society, in the same vicious house, and they seek no doctor for the soul, or might choose a doctor who is unfamiliar and inexperienced and conceal before him what is already known to heaven and hell, and about what they boast themselves in societies.

When a body dies grief and despair are heard, but when a soul dies from a mortal sin, often no one even thinks about it.

Thus, we do not know the value of our soul and, like Adam and Eve, we give our soul away for a piece of attractive looking fruit.

Why do we not weep like Adam and Eve at least? The weeping of the ones who lost their soul should be more mournful than the weeping of Jeremiah, who, crying for the misfortunes of his land, called: "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears!" (Jeremiah 9, 1)

We, however, are mostly concerned with the gaining of blessings, but, unfortunately, they are often worldly and temporary blessings rather than heavenly.

We forget that the worldly blessings are transitory and difficult to hold onto, while the heavenly blessings are eternal, infinite and cannot be taken away.

All-Merciful Lord! Help us learn to despise all things perishable and be concerned only with what is needed for the salvation of our souls.

From the book "A Collection of Letters of the Blessed Memory Starets and Schema Hieromonk Amvrosiy to the Laypersons".