

Fifty Five Maxims for Christian Living, Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko

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Transcript

People all over the world are quoting the well-known 55 Maxims of Fr. Thomas Hopko of blessed memory, one of the most practical and digestive lists of helpful tasks available to the Christian today. Back in 2008, Fr. Thomas recorded those maxims for Ancient Faith Radio listeners, and in this special podcast we take you back there and let you hear in his own words, along with short commentary, the well-loved 55 Maxims.

A few years ago, I was asked: “Father Thomas, if you summarized, in the shortest form, what a practical life of a believing Christian, of a human being who believes in God and believes in Christ, what would it be like? What kind of maxims or rules or whatever that would be, what would that include?”

And in response to that request, I made up a list of what I called “55 Maxims,” 55 things that a believer, very simply, would do if they were really a believer and were really obedient to God and wanted to live the way God would have us live. And I will just now, read these maxims to you.

1. Be always with Christ. Trust God in everything. Never forget God.
2. Pray as you can, not as you think you must. Pray as God inspires you to pray, not as you want to, but as God gives. And for a Christian, that would mean in one’s heart, in one’s room, and in one’s Church.
3. Have a keepable rule of prayer that you do by discipline. You can’t just pray when you feel like it. You have to pray by discipline, the times of day where you would remember God and say your prayers.
4. Say the Lord’s Prayer several times a day—just as one is getting into one’s car or walking into one’s office or into one’s classroom or before eating a meal, when waking in the morning, when going to sleep at night. Just say the Lord’s Prayer. It’s the prayer that the Lord gave, a short prayer, but it contains everything that a human being needs to pray if Christ is crucified, raised, and glorified.
5. Have a short prayer that you constantly repeat when your mind is not occupied with other things. This short prayer could simply be “Lord have mercy” or “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy.” The person just might say “Jesus.” A person might say “God,” but just some short prayer that fills the mind when the mind is not working in order to have the remembrance of God in one’s life, in one’s heart.

6. We, Orthodox, would say make some prostrations when you pray. Kneel down. Bend over. Bow down. Use your body. As St. Ephraim, "If your body is not praying when you're praying, you're not really praying." Prayer is not just an activity of the mind and heart. It's an activity of the whole person.
7. Eat good foods in moderation. Fast on fasting days, and of course during Lent that's an entire fast. But eating good foods, not the kind of foods that could harm you and eating in moderation and when fasting, fasting in secret.
8. Practice silence, inner and outer. Just sit for a few minutes everyday in total silence. Turn off all the appliances. Open one's self to God. Don't think about anything. Watch the thoughts that come, and turn them over to God.
9. Do acts of mercy in secret. Just do some good things that no one knows about.
10. [...skipped...]
11. Go to liturgical services regularly. Go to Church. Stand there. Listen. Pray. Don't pay attention to the people—oh yes, be attentive to their presence. But be there for the sake of the service itself.
12. Go to Confession and Holy Communion regularly. Participate in the Church's sacramental life.
13. Do not engage intrusive thoughts and feelings. When feelings come upon you, when thoughts come upon you, don't engage them. If you accept them, they've got you, and you will sin. So you've got to cut them off, right at the very start.
14. Reveal all your thoughts and feelings to a trusted person regularly. Normally, that would be one's pastor, or one's Spiritual Father or Mother, one's elder. But every human being, every Christian, must have someone who knows everything about them. And that we regularly report to them about what is going on in our life.
15. Read the Scriptures regularly—not reading them to fight with others, not reading them to show off quoting, but reading them as fuel, as food. Because if we don't read the Scriptures regularly, we die. It would be like trying to live without eating or to drive a car without putting fuel into it.
16. Read good books, a little at a time. Don't gobble them up. Don't read through it to say "I've read it." Slowly read books. Sometimes, read the same book two or three times over again—trying to put into practice what it says.
17. Cultivate communion with the Saints. Learn who the holy people were in Christian history. Learn who they were who taught, who suffered, who died, who lived a Christian life. And emulate them. As St. John of the Ladder said: "Anyone who does not emulate the Saints is a fool, but also a fool would be someone who tried to imitate another person in the details of his or her life." You can't do that, but we must learn from the holy people.
18. Be an ordinary person. Be one of the human race. Don't ever say: "I thank you God, I'm not like other people. Try to be like others as much as you can. Be

ordinary. As the Russian writer Chekov said: “Everything outside the ordinary is from the Devil.”

19. Be polite with everyone—first of all, the members of your own family. Sometimes we feel, we could be rude with our own family members but nice to people outside. No, we must begin with kindness to those closest to us first.
20. Maintain cleanliness and order in your home. God doesn't live in clutter or in filth and dirt. Yes, we don't have to be fanatics about having everything prissy clean, but we have to have a Sophianic order, at least in some parts of our house where we live and eat and where we pray especially.
21. Have a healthy, wholesome hobby. Have something where you exercise your brain just for the pure joy of it.
22. Exercise regularly—got to move around.
23. Live a day, and even a part of a day, at a time. Don't be in the past, and don't be in tomorrow. St. Benedict said: “Do what you're doing. Be present where you are.” What does God want me to do, right now—not later tonight, not tomorrow morning, not yesterday, but right now?
24. Be totally honest—first of all, with yourself. The greatest sin is the lie, and the greatest lie is the lie about God, and the lie about me and God. Be totally honest.
25. Be faithful in little things. Jesus said it. “He who is faithful in little, inherits much and is put over much. And those that are not faithful in little, lose the little they have.” In St. Luke's Gospel, the Lord even said: “lose the little, they think that they have.” Fidelity in small, ordinary things.
26. Do your work, and then forget it. Don't carry it around with you. Be totally attentive to what you're doing, but don't carry it in your mind. Have your mind focused on what you're doing at the present moment.
27. Do the most difficult and painful things first. We tend to do the easy things, the things we like, and put off the things we don't. We should try to reverse that and do the most difficult and boring things first.
28. Face reality. Don't live in fantasy. There's a Russian saying: “God is everywhere except in imagination and fantasy.” Face the realities of your life.
29. Be grateful. Be grateful in all things.
30. Be cheerful. Act cheerful, even if you don't feel like it, especially in the presence of others.
31. Be simple, hidden, quiet, and small. The Holy Fathers say: “If you want to be known by God, seek not to be known by people.” And again, it's simplicity, hiddenness, quiet, smallness.
32. Never bring attention to yourself. Never, consciously, bring attention to yourself. Wherever you are, do what the other people do. That's especially important in Church. When you go to Church, do what the people there are doing. It's what St. Ambrose told to St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, when she asked: “What

should I do when I go to Rome?” He said: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”
Fast as the Romans fast. Stand as the Romans stand. Sing as the Romans sing.

33. Listen when people talk to you. To be attentive to others is one of the greatest gifts. Keep your mind awake and pay attention when people speak to you.
34. Be awake, and be attentive. Be fully present where you are—wakefulness, watchfulness, attentiveness.
35. Think and talk about things no more than necessary. We should speak only when it’s necessary to speak. In fact the Scripture says: “We should speak only when spoken to.” The Fathers say: “We often repent of idle talk but very seldom have to repent of maintaining silence. Sometimes we do, because we have to speak. But we should talk and think about things no more than absolutely necessary.
36. When we speak, speak simply, clearly, firmly, and directly—nothing superfluous, not putting on airs. Again, simplicity is the rule.
37. Flee imagination, fantasy, analysis, figuring things out. Once and for all, we have to stop trying to figure things out. God can illumine our mind and give us insight into the nature of things, but we can’t figure it out. We don’t have the equipment to do it, and we should stop trying.
38. Flee carnal, sexual, things at their first appearance. You can’t dialogue with lust and *pornea* and immorality of the flesh. It always wins. It always has the arguments on its side. Flee it at its first appearance.
39. Don’t complain, grumble, murmur, or whine. Complaining, thinking, looking at the faults of others, we work during Lent and all our life to stop doing that. We pay attention to ourselves.
40. Don’t compare yourself with anyone. The Last Judgment is not on a curve. God doesn’t compare us one to another. Each one of us stands according to who we are, what we have received, what we have been given, and what our vocation is.
41. Don’t seek or expect praise from anyone or pity from anyone. I and my friend Paul Lazar used to call it the “PP.” No praise. No pity. We always want to have people to think: “Oh, how wonderful you are” or to say “Oh my, how hard you work or how much you suffer.” We seek to flee the pity and flee the praise of others.
42. We don’t judge anyone for anything—no matter what. This doesn’t mean we just say “Everyone’s fine and good.” That’s not true. But we don’t condemn them. We don’t get in to what makes them tick. We don’t tell them always what to do. What they do, we do. And we show people what we believe by what we do. But we don’t judge anyone for anything, and if we do, then the Lord judges us the same way.
43. Don’t try to convince anyone of anything. Once and for all, we have to stop trying to teach other people. I’m not trying to teach you now, I hope. I’m just trying to tell you what I think is true. Then you can do with it, what you want. But it can’t be my desire to convince you and to win in an argument. I can only, to use a

Scriptural word, “bear witness” or “make testimony.” But I can’t have as my goal to convert the other. And that’s even true with evangelization. We’re not out there to convert people. We’re out there to bring them the joy of the victory of God in Christ. What they do with it is between them and God.

44. Don’t defend or justify yourself. The Saints say: “Those who try to justify themselves commit suicide.” We don’t need to justify ourselves. God will vindicate us. We don’t need to defend ourselves. God is our defender.
45. Be defined and bound by God alone and not by people. We don’t let anyone define our life. God defines our life. And even the closest people to us should not be defining our life—our parents, our spouses. No, only God is defining who we are, and we’re only bound to his definition.
46. Accept criticism gratefully, but test it carefully. We are not obliged to put into practice every criticism that’s given to us. Sometimes the criticism is false. But we certainly must welcome it, be grateful for it, test it. And St. John Chrysostom said, even when we’re accused of something, even if we think it’s not true, we should accept the criticism as true and put it into practice then we’ll never go wrong. Because if our accuser is right, we have repented, and we have pleased them. If they’re not right, we put them to shame.
47. Give advice to others only when asked to do so or when it is your duty to do so. This is very important. You don’t go around giving free advice or counsel. If people ask us, we tell them. I was asked, “Father Tom, say some things on Ancient Faith Radio. I say: “Okay, cause you asked me.” So when we’re asked, we can answer. If it’s our duty, if it’s our job—like a parent or a pastor or a supervisor in operation or a teacher—then we must do it. That’s our work. But we never give counsel or advice, unless we’re asked or unless it’s our duty to do so.
48. Do nothing for anyone that they can and should do for themselves. It is not charitable to do things for others that they should be doing for themselves. We rob them of their life when we do that. So we should help people to do what they have to do themselves and not do it for them. Now there’s plenty of people who can’t do for themselves what they need to do. Then, we help them. But we should never be helping people to do things that they should be doing for themselves.
49. Have a daily schedule of activities, avoiding whim and caprice. Again, the Holy Fathers teach us that *idiorhythmia*, capriciousness, whimsicalness is the cause of all of our downfall. We have to be disciplined. We have to have a rule for ourselves, and try and follow it. Of course, the rule is not some kind of iron law. In a sense it’s made to be modified or broken, but we have to have it. Each night when we go to sleep, we should tell ourselves what the next day should look like, and then try to keep that rule. Things will happen, but we should try to keep the rule.

50. Be merciful with yourself and with others. Of course, we're to be merciful to others, but we must be merciful to ourselves too. We cannot judge ourselves more harshly than God does, and the worst sin is despair. So we should be living by the mercy of God all the time—taking responsibility for our life, but not berating ourselves or beating ourselves up. God does not want that. There is no merit in that. Repentance is what God wants, not remorse or some type of self-flagellation.
51. Have no expectations, except to be fiercely tempted to your very last breath. St. Anthony said it. He said: "A truly wise person knows the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, true and false and clings fiercely to what is good, true, and beautiful, but fully expects to be tested, to be tried, and to be tempted til his very last breath." He said that without being tempted, no one can enter God's Kingdom—without temptation, no salvation. The whole life of a man on Earth is a trial, according to Scripture. Job said it. So we are being tried every moment, we should expect it. We should never expect the trial to go away. We don't ask God to take our crosses away. We ask for the power to carry them. God doesn't tempt anybody. But in the providence of God, we are tested all the time so that our salvation can be ours, and that we could be victorious by the victory of Christ.
52. Focus exclusively on God and light. Never focus on darkness, temptation, and sin. That's classic teaching. Fill yourself with good things. Don't be mesmerized by dark things. Don't meditate on evil things. Meditate on good things, and God will take care of the rest.
53. Endure the trial of yourself and your own faults and sins peacefully, serenely, under the mercy of God. This is very important. St. Seraphim of Sarov said: "To have the Holy Spirit is to see your own wretchedness peacefully, because you know that God's mercy is greater than your wretchedness." St. Thérèse of Lisieux, a Roman Catholic saint who died at 24, she wrote to a friend: "If you are willing to bear the trial of your own wretchedness, serenely, then you will surely be the sweetest dwelling place of Jesus." We have to bear our own faults, serenely. St. Paul said: "Where sin has abounded, grace has superabounded." And we cannot let the devil rejoice two times. Pythagoras said: "When we fall, the devils rejoice. When we stay down, the devils keep rejoicing." And nothing puts the devils more to shame than having fallen, we stand up again. So we must bear peacefully, calmly, our own weaknesses, our own failings. Expect them. Don't make them happen, but expect them. We are not God.
54. When we fall, get up immediately and start over. As often as we fall, we stand up again. And we will fall. It says in Scripture that the wise person, the wise man, falls seven times a day, that means a lot, but he gets up again. The fool does not get up again, and the fool doesn't even know that he has fallen. The wise person knows when he falls, but he gets up again. In fact, the tradition says: "It belongs only to

God, never to fall.” It belongs to demons to fall and not get up again, but it belongs to human beings, certainly to Christians, to fall and to get up again, to fall and to get up again. One Desert Father even described human life, according to Christian faith, in that way. When he was asked by a pagan, “What does it mean to be a Christian?” he said: “A Christian is a person who falls down and gets up again, who falls down and gets up again, who falls down, is lifted up again by the grace of God to start over.” And you can start over every moment anew.

55. And finally, get help when you need it, without fear and without shame. We all need help. A Russian saying is: “The only thing you can do alone, by yourself is perish,” is go to Hell. If we are saved, we’re saved with others. So we must have counsel. We must have friends. We must be with others. And sometimes, we need specific help, like if we’re caught on drugs or alcohol or sex. Then, we have to go and get that specific help, like we would go to a doctor when we are sick. Sometimes, we don’t know what to do, so we need help. We have to go to an elder person, a more experienced person to give us guidance. But we should never, ever, be ashamed or afraid of getting help. It’s just a normal part of the human race. In the lenten season, as a little a mini-life, it’s a time when we take advantage of all the help we can get. We take the help of the Scripture writers. We take the help of the saints. We take the help of the services. We take the help that God provides in all the various ways that he provides it—for the sake of our life, our healing, and our salvation. So the last maxim, number 55: get help when you need it without fear and shame. Be a human being. Be a Christian.