



Bible Study

July 1, 2015

Romans 15:7-16
Matthew 12:38-45

Romans 15:7-16 (NKJV) -

Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God. Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: "For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name." And again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people!" And again: "Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!" And again, Isaiah says: "There shall be a root of Jesse; and He who shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, in Him the Gentiles shall hope." Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another. Nevertheless, brethren, I have written more boldly to you on some points, as reminding you, because of the grace given to me by God, that I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 12:38-45 (NKJV) - Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." But Jesus answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here. When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation."

Commentary -

As St. Paul tell us in today's epistle reading, our Lord Jesus Christ came first to the people of Judea, and He came to them as the fulfillment of all of the promises of the Old Covenant, all of the promises given to their forefathers in the Law and the Prophets and the other Scriptures. He came to fulfill the Law that they had been given by Him, which they had been unable to keep. He came to rescue them from bondage to sin which kept them enslaved, and led them to death. He came to establish the Kingdom of God on this earth, freeing them from the domination of the powers and principalities that rule this age. He came to bring into existence the age to come, and set in motion the new Creation.

Despite this reality that it was He who fulfilled all of the deepest longings, the most fervent hopes of the Judean people, they did not receive Him. As St. John summarizes in the preamble of His Gospel account, "He came to His own, but His own received Him not" (John 1:11). For centuries they had longed for the day in which God would come to once again visit His people, yet when He did, they did not recognize or accept Him. This was, sadly, in keeping with the track record of the forefathers, who had likewise not only disbelieved and rejected the prophets sent by God to call them back to repentance and life, but had actively persecuted and even murdered them.

And so, as today's Gospel reading begins, the leaders of the Judean people again come to Jesus to ask for a sign. This is a signal that these leaders did not believe what Jesus was teaching them day after day, directly and in parables. The request for a sign was a challenge to Jesus' authority. It was a veiled accusation that He was a false prophet. If He were legitimately speaking for God, and they highly doubted that that was the case, then He should be able to perform some miraculous sign or wonder to prove to them that He had authority and that what He was saying was true. Christ calls out their unbelief for what it is, and offers in response to their request that they will receive but one sign, that of Jonah. By this, He refers back to Jonah who spent three days in the belly of a sea creature deep beneath the earth and then returned to preach to the Ninevites. By this, then, He also refers by analogy to His own death, burial, and Resurrection, after which likewise the Gospel would be preached to the Gentile nations.

But speaking of those Ninevite Gentiles, Christ goes further. Ninevah was, in the day of Jonah, the capitol of the Assyrian Empire, one of the most brutal Empires of conquest that the world has ever seen. Their accounts of destroying cities are full of all manner of atrocities, tortures, and mass beheadings with the heads displayed as trophies. It was to this capitol of wickedness, violence, and evil that God sent the prophet Jonah with the message to repent or be destroyed. In response, the inhabitants of that wicked city, from the king to the beggar, sat on the ground in sackcloth and ashes, weeping in repentance of their sins. Jerusalem, on the other hand, the capitol of God's chosen people, to whom He has revealed Himself in Person, will not listen. Likewise, the Queen of Sheba traveled a great distance to come to Jerusalem and hear whatever wisdom Solomon might have to reveal to her. Yet those in Jerusalem, to whom Christ had come near, had no interest whatsoever in anything that He had to say to them.

Finally, Christ offers them a parable to describe the spiritual jeopardy into which the Judeans who hear and reject Him have placed themselves. He has indeed come to conquer the powers and principalities of this present evil age and drive them out. He has indeed come to purify the remnant of Israel to, through it, create a new people of God, and He will indeed accomplish His task. But once He has driven out those powers of wickedness and evil and set His Kingdom back into order, there is a vacuum of sorts. This 'spiritual vacuum' will be filled by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon those who choose to follow Christ and enter into His Kingdom. In those who reject Christ, however, that emptiness remains, to be filled once again by that same wickedness which Christ once defeated and cast out. This time, however, that evil has multiplied, deepened, and strengthened, and with Christ having died once for all, how will it then be removed again?

Sadly, the people of Judea, despite Christ's warnings, pleadings even with tears, and the love and compassion He poured out upon them day by day, chose, for the most part, to reject Christ, both His Person and His words, going so far as to have Him condemned to death. St. Paul spends much of his Epistle to the Romans meditating on and seeking to understand this terrible tragedy; that the fulfillment of all of the dear promises to Israel was rejected by that same Israel. What he has seen, however, is that the cutting off of most of Judea has led to Christ's Gospel extending beyond His old covenant people to encompass all the nations, and the entire world. Paradoxically, the refusal of the people of Judea to embrace Christ has led to Christ embracing the people of all of the other nations of the world, and drawing them into relationship with Himself.

This is central to St. Paul's conception of what is happening in the Church. In the Church, Christ is receiving both Judean and Gentile to Himself, and reconciling them not only to Himself, but to each other. The Apostle sees this as the beginning of the age to come, of the new Creation, in which heaven and earth will become one, and the mystical union of God and humanity which already exists in the Person of Jesus Christ will come to be a reality for every human person who enters into the eternal life of the world to come.

The chief mark, and the calling to which St. Paul urges us on in today's epistle is that just as Christ has received us into His Church, and into His Kingdom, as the Judeans to whom He first came failed to receive Him, so we also would receive Him by receiving one another. This receiving of our fellow human beings is multi-pronged. First and foremost, it is an expression of goodness, an expression of love. It is a genuine love for one another of the type shown by Christ Himself, whom we are reminded here by St. Paul became a servant. We must love, sacrifice ourselves and our own desires for, and serve our fellow human persons to receive them in the bond of peace. Secondly, after showing this love, we must share our knowledge with one another by teaching one another. Knowledge and teaching take second place to love because outside of the context of service and self-sacrificial love, knowledge puffs up with pride and teaching becomes force. Within the context of love, teaching is a true sharing of the light and the revelation that God has given to His people, one with another. Finally, part of this receiving is to correct one another. This is third again, for a reason, because only within the context of shared love and of teaching can correction happen without creating argument and division. When a person knows that they are loved and is actively learning the Truth, then he or she is ready to be corrected where they are on the wrong path and reconciled again to Christ and to His Church.

Finally, brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called by today's Scripture readings to openness. First an openness to Christ, to hear what He has to say to us, even when what He says is not what we would like to hear. We are called to an openness that allows that we might be wrong in our words and thoughts and actions. We are called to an openness that allows Christ to reach into any part of ourselves and our lives and to change us without our resistance. This openness to Christ then expresses itself every day in our lives as an openness to the other people around us whom God has placed in our path. This means we are open to listen to and to learn from them. We are open to be corrected by them, meaning we are open to the possibility that we ourselves do not have all the answers. Finally and most importantly, we have an open place in our hearts and lives for them, to offer them the love of Christ, and the acceptance and fellowship that come from being a part of our community.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) Christ told the leaders of the people of Judea things that they didn't want to hear. He told them that they were not as righteous and holy as they thought they were, and called on them to repent of their sinfulness. He told them that judgment was close to coming upon them for their sins. When you hear or read a message or a Scripture that accuses or condemns you or some of your behavior, how do you respond? Do you attempt to justify yourself by saying, for example, that it is just someone's opinion, or trying to find a way to reinterpret Scripture so that your behavior

- or opinion is acceptable? Do you believe what you want to believe and look for arguments to support yourself, or are you willing to accept and believe hard truths that you don't like?
- 2) Do you think that visitors or newcomers to your church community would describe their experience there as having felt the acceptance of Christ in love? Within your community, would visitors and newcomers describe their interaction with you as being one of love and acceptance? Would they even know who you are? Think of ways in which you can work to help others feel a part of the Body of Christ in your community.
 - 3) St. Paul calls on us to love, teach, and correct the other people in our lives in that order. This is because the love that God shows us also involves His teaching and correcting us, as a Father who loves His children teaches and corrects them. Teaching and correction without love are pride and the attempt to dominate and control others. A kind of love that does not include teaching and correction is not real love, because it reflects no caring for real well-being and future of the person 'loved'. Do the people in your life know that you love them? Is that a word that they would use to describe how you relate to them? Do they also know that you are an Orthodox Christian, and what you believe about Christ, and about how a life in Christ is to be lived?

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