



Bible Study

July 29, 2015

I Corinthians 13:4-14:5

Matthew 20:1-16

I Corinthians 13:4-14:5 (NKJV) -

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.

Matthew 20:1-16 (NKJV) – The Lord said, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’ So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’ But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I

am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

Commentary -

In today's Gospel reading, our Lord uses a parable to describe the relationship between our working, striving, and struggling in this life, and the Grace of God. The nature of this relationship is the stumbling block that separates many Christian groups from one another and from the Orthodox Church. Despite these deep differences of interpretation that have divided many Western Christians for centuries, the teaching of Christ and the Scriptures on this topic is very clear, and understanding how our working and striving connects to the many blessings that God continually pours out upon all of us, but most especially our salvation from the power of sin and death, requires really only the understanding of one principle, that being the principle which St. Paul elucidates in today's epistle reading: Love.

In the parable that Christ tells, as was commonplace in Palestine in the first century, a landowner hired a group of day laborers to work on his estate for the day. A denarius was a Roman coin that was typically valued at the price of a day's labor from an unskilled laborer. In addition to hiring a group of laborers at the beginning of the day, the landowner continued to hire more laborers throughout the day even until quite close to the working day's end. When the time came for the workers to receive their wages, the householder gave every worker a denarius as his wage, without regard to what part of the day they had actually spent laboring. This caused some dismay from those who had worked a full day, and were rewarded the same as those who had only worked for an hour. In response, the householder reminds them that he gave them exactly what he promised them, and that it was his money, and he could give it out as he saw fit.

We are to understand here in the person of the householder God Himself. All of us desire to receive God's blessings, chief of all to inherit life eternal in His Kingdom which has no end. It is clear that there is nothing that any human being can do to earn eternal life, and communion and fellowship with the God who created him. Nothing within our power could possibly merit or earn the infinite and invaluable blessings that God bestows upon us, and quite to the contrary, our sin and rebellion thoroughly disqualifies us from it by any objective standard of justice. Nonetheless, because He is a good God, who loves mankind, He has poured out His blessings upon us. As St. Paul tells us, "At just the right time, while we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6). Our Lord Jesus Christ defeated the powers that held our world in bondage and set us free from the power of sin and death and hell while we were unable to fight back. Even as we had turned our back on God, He delivered us.

The Grace of God, His Love, His Power, His Peace, His Wisdom, are poured out into and through His Creation continually from moment to moment, day to day. He offers Himself to each of us, whether we were taught to follow Him from our birth, or if we only come to know Him in the last moments of our lives. He offers us eternal life in communion with the Holy Trinity whether we have spent our life in constant striving for holiness, or if we turn to Him for only a momentum in a life of sluggishness. Like the returning Prodigal Son, He does not wait for us to come home and abase ourselves, or to meet some criteria or requirements before we are worthy of His Love, rather He runs out to meet us and makes us worthy of His Love by loving us.

Likewise, we in our lives continue to struggle with the sin that still ensnares our hearts and souls, to resist the temptations of this world and to draw ever closer to Christ. And this life which we live as Christians is indeed work, it is indeed a struggle. It is a long race, and not a short sprint. But

though we work, we do not serve God as slaves, cowering in hopes that He will see fit not to punish us. Nor do we work to attempt to earn His favor or affection. Rather, we serve our Lord out of love, a love with which He first loved us. Just as He offers Himself to us and for us, we also offer our efforts and our struggles and our work to Him out of love.

Real love seeks no reward. There is nothing that we could render back to the Lord as repayment for all that He has given for us, and He did it all for us despite our sin and rebellion. Likewise, if we are truly struggling and working for the Lord out of love, we will seek no reward or recognition, receiving all of His gifts with gratitude, and with the acknowledgment that we are not worthy of them, nor could we ever be. Likewise, if we are laboring out of love, there is and can be no room for envy of others or pride in ourselves, only the humble service that recognizes that it has received an incredible gift which one can never repay.

While we live in this world we know and understand and can love only partially. This is what makes our way with Christ difficult. This world, corrupted by sin, is heading toward judgment, through which it will be transformed and purified in the Kingdom of God. When we seek to draw closer to Christ out of love, without other motives, we go against the grain, against the current of this world, which will seek to drag us under and destroy us. But the same love of Christ, the experience of which set us on our path, will see us through to that day when we shall know Him face to face, as He knows us, and so shall we live with the Lord forever.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) The Gospels continually tell us that those who seek reward or credit or thanks for their good works have wasted them, because they have already received their reward. On the other hand, Christ Himself promises to reward with eternal life those who struggle after Him out of love. When you offer service to the Church or to other people, do you seek credit for what you do? Do you desire to be acknowledged by other people for the good you do? Do you become angry when you don't feel that you've been rewarded or credited properly?
- 2) In Christ's parable, those who feel that they have worked longer and worked harder become jealous of the money given to those whom they feel are less worthy. When struggling with sins and other issues in this life, do you find yourself becoming jealous of others who you think have it easier? Do you find yourself questioning God's fairness because you believe you deserve more or better? Stop and consider how we would be treated by God if He based it on what we deserve, rather than on His love for us.
- 3) St. Paul speaks of the growth of God's love in us as the measure of our maturity as Christians. True love drives out sin. Do you see your life, day to day, the way you respond to work and family and friends, as grounded primarily in love? To what extent is there still envy, pride, and grudge-keeping going on in your heart? The way to replacing those passions with the Love of God is to more and more fully experience that Love, particularly in forgiveness and repentance. As we are healed and restored, we find that same Love that healed us overflowing to others.

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