

A COMMENTARY ON THE APOSTLE PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

According to the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church

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Chapter Three

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CHAPTER THREE

Spiritual Growth Required

BACKGROUND: After describing the difference between a spiritual and a worldly person, Paul continues that he cannot speak to the Corinthians as he would to those more spiritually inclined.

3:1-4. And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal? When Paul first visited the Corinthians to teach them about Jesus Christ, he found that their concerns were more worldly than spiritual; therefore, he could not teach them deep spiritual truths—only introduce them to basic facts. He is distressed to discover that they still have not gone beyond that point. Proof of their spiritual immaturity is the fact that there is jealousy and strife among them. Some brag that they were taught by Paul, others by Apollos or Cephas, as if the distinction of one’s teacher gave certain rights and was more important than the Gospel that was conveyed to them.

Jealousy and envy have often caused havoc, even in the Church, and some of our most godly leaders have suffered because of it. Look at the Apostles. Peter was the object of sinful jealousy on several occasions. So was Paul, who because of the jealousy and envy of others was arrested several times, imprisoned, stoned, exiled. He did not let this distract him from his ministry. Disregarding the envy of lesser people, he preached the Gospel all over the world, made his testimony in front of kings and rulers, and in the end silenced the critics by his faith, his patience and his endurance.

But it’s not only the famous who suffer through envy. Plenty of ordinary Christians have gone through agony because others have envied their courage and confidence. For example, there were those brave Christian women, here in Rome, who were hounded by unbelievers who resented their peace and joy in believing. Out of sheer envy, their enemies tried to make them act the parts of pagan goddesses in heathen rituals; and when they refused, they were shamefully put to death.

Jealousy has divided homes. It has come between husbands and wives, contradicting the Bible’s claim that a wife is bone of her husband’s bone and flesh of his flesh. Envy and jealousy have brought ruin to prosperous cities and overthrown great nations.

So let’s remind ourselves that envy and jealousy are nothing but tricks of the mind, attitudes, self-induced fantasies; and let us put them from us. CLEMENT¹

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). Why will there be no envy or jealousy in Heaven?

3:5-7. Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Paul and Apollos are both servants of the Lord, doing that which He directed. While, perhaps, one of them introduced a person to the Gospel and the other guided that person to a deeper understanding of it, the efforts of each would be futile without God, Who alone makes it possible for the seeds of faith and love to grow in accepting hearts. The power of the Gospel comes not from the messenger but from the message.

3:8. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. All aspects of God's work are of equal value toward salvation because anything done with love shows faith in Him. He expects each of us to use the gifts we have been given to do the work at hand (Lk 12:48).

Judgment is in accord with grace; and as you have used what was given you, so shall the Judge judge you. BASIL²

The level of enthusiasm and dedication with which a person uses his talents in God's service is rewarded accordingly.

The Lord Jesus in His mercy grants rest to each according to his works—to the great according to his greatness and to the little according to his littleness, for He said, *In my Father's house there are many mansions* (Jn 14:2). Though the Kingdom is one, yet in the Kingdom each finds his own special place and his own special work. ISAIAH OF SKETIS³

3:9. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. Those who pass on Christ's teachings help God build His Church, which is made up of those who believe the Gospel and try to live by it.

3:10. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds upon it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. When Paul was among the Corinthians, he taught them the basic truths about salvation through Christ. Another of God's workers followed, to add to that knowledge—a process which continues in each generation. Each of God's workers is answerable to Him and must be sure that he is teaching and guiding according to the truth, so that the resulting Church will be strong. Clergy, laity, parents—all Christians who witness—must not teach what they “think” is so, but only that given to us through the Apostles and preserved by the Church through Holy Scripture, writings of the Church Fathers, Liturgics, Hymnology, Iconography, etc., where they agree and speak as a whole.

3:11. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. The Church can stand only on the truths that He taught.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). What does this verse say about groups which point to the teachings of specific individuals as their foundation?

3:12-13. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become manifest; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. Gold and silver soften in great heat. They become malleable but are not destroyed. Fire also purifies and strengthens them, revealing their glory. These precious metals represent those whose faith is based solidly on truth, allowing God to mold them in His image and to stand firm in good times and in bad. In the same fire, however, wood, hay and straw burn, and are easily consumed (Heb 12:29). They represent those whose faith is vulnerable to destruction by life's difficult moments.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (c). Does questioning God during the difficult times of life indicate flimsy faith?

God is love. The icon of the Last Judgment depicts the truth that on Judgment Day, love will pour forth from His throne like a river of fire. It will illuminate everything, disclosing the quality of each person's faith or lack thereof as well as the faith of those s/he brought to the Kingdom. By it, the righteous will be enlightened, soothed and healed. But by it also, sinners will be "scourged."⁴ They will know they do not belong to God but it will be too late to change (where there can be no corruption, there can be no change).

It is totally false to think that the sinners in Hell are deprived of God's love. Love is a child of the knowledge of truth, and is unquestionably given commonly to all. But love's power acts in two ways: it torments sinners while at the same time it delights those who have lived in accord with it.

ISAAC THE SYRIAN⁵

Of his own volition, the sinner will try to flee from God's presence (Mt 25:41). This is the concept illustrated by Rom 12:20: showing kindness to enemies is like heaping coals of fire on their heads. But God's love follows, the fire that is never quenched (Mk 9:43). In the wake of this eternal fire, sinners will find themselves:

- separated from God:

Nothing is more grievous than the wretchedness of being deprived of God's good things.

CHRYSOSTOM⁶

- bearing eternal shame:

...before God the Father and His Anointed, before angels, archangels, principalities and all mankind.

EVAGRIOS THE SOLITARY⁷

-alone in a crowd:

...neither seeing nor being seen, but in so vast a multitude, thinking that we are alone because of the darkness [absence of God's light].

CHRYSOSTOM⁸

The worm that does not die (Mk 9:44) may describe the sinner's unending despair at seeing others (like the rich man's Lazarus, Lk 16:25-6) enjoying eternal happiness, which they have denied themselves.

3:14-15. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. Judgment, characterized as "fire" in its effects, will reveal the overall direction of each person's life to see if faith in and love for Christ were evident. Beyond that basic criterion, however, the question of the quality of our work for God has to do with our relationship with Him, our "reward," which is unlimited in its potential depth.

If there is a reward and a punishment in this revelation—and there really is—it does not come from God but from the love or hate which reigns in our heart.⁹

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (d). Can anyone be "saved" (from exclusion from God's Kingdom), without trying to bring others to Christ?

3:16-17. *Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.* A Baptized, Chrismated believer who is making the effort to live his faith and grow spiritually is a part of the Church, the “temple of God,” in which the Holy Spirit dwells. God does not look kindly upon those who weaken this holy temple by causing divisions.

3:18-20. *Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their own craftiness,” and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”* He who focuses entirely on the wisdom of this world courts disaster because of its fickle and temporary nature. Conversely, he who concentrates on knowledge of the Kingdom of God may be considered a fool in this world but is the possessor of true wisdom, which will lead to eternal life with God.

3:21-23. *Therefore let no one glory in men. For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.*

No one should impoverish his/her spiritual growth by complete dedication to a person, whether parent, teacher, leader, or Saint, other than as examples to follow. Those who have responded to and live by the Gospel of Jesus Christ naturally love, respect, and perhaps even revere their spiritual fathers and others who have lived with and before them and have guided them in their spiritual growth. However, a true teacher of the Gospel will always point to Jesus Christ as the only vehicle through whom one can possess all the glories of the Kingdom (Jn 14:6). All good things belong to those who belong to Christ because Christ belongs to God—is God—part of the Holy Trinity.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a). Why will there be no envy or jealousy in Heaven? Because there will be no competition in that perfect place. Each person in God’s Kingdom develops a unique personal relationship with Him that begins during one’s days on earth and continues eternally. The special qualities of this relationship are known only to Him and to us. Just as Christ gave Simon the new name of Peter—from the Greek word *petros*, meaning *stone* (Jn 1:42)—symbolizing the rock-like faith that he demonstrated in proclaiming that Jesus was Christ, the Anointed One (Mt 16:16), God has a name for each of us symbolizing that which has developed between us and Him (Rev 2:17).

(b). What does the fact that the Church is built on the truths of Christ (3:11) say about groups which point to the teachings of specific individuals as their foundation? Any group founded upon the teachings of someone other than Christ (like Joseph Smith’s Mormons, Charles T. Russell’s Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Mary Baker Eddy’s Christian Scientists) does not have Christ as the Head, therefore is not the Church (the Body of Christ). In Orthodoxy, only the Church as a whole, acting in accordance with the truths taught by Christ, which it has preserved, has the authority of Christ and is infallible, as when it comes together in an Ecumenical Synod representing all the people.

...the Apostles, like a rich man depositing his money in a bank, lodged the truth in the hands of the Church: so that every man, whosoever will, can draw from her the water of life. For she is the entrance to life; all others are thieves and robbers. On this account we are obligated to avoid them,

to choose those things pertaining to the Church with the utmost diligence, and to lay hold of the tradition of the truth. For how stands the case? Suppose there arises a dispute relative to some important question among us. Would we not desire recourse to the most ancient churches with which the Apostles held constant intercourse and to learn from them what is certain and clear in regard to the question?
IRENAEUS¹⁰

(c). Is the questioning of God during difficult times an indication of flimsy faith? To question God in times of duress or to temporarily waver when tempted to disobey is not a sign of flimsy faith. What matters is that if we make a mistake we repent, confess and begin again, and that, to the end, we continue the struggle.

(d). Can anyone be “saved” (from exclusion from God’s Kingdom), without trying to bring others to Christ? If we really believe that Jesus Christ is the Savior of mankind, we will try to live a Christ-like life, which must include bringing the truth of His Gospel to others, because that is what He did. To know what He was like, we must study His word and live a prayerful, sacramental life, as He did.

Each of you, if he will, is a teacher, although not of another, yet of himself. Teach yourself first. If you teach yourself to observe all things He commanded...you will have many emulating you. For as a lamp, when it is shining, is able to light ten thousand others but being extinguished will not give light even to itself...so also in the case of a pure life, if the light that is in us is shining, we shall make both disciples and teachers numberless, being set before them as a pattern to copy.
CHRYSOSTOM¹¹

¹ Winter (Day 10).

² Toal, Vol. Three, p.363.

³ *Ascetical Homilies*, XI, 10, p.131. (Ware, *Way*, p.137).

⁴ *Homily 84* (Alexandre Kalomiros, *The River of Fire*, Seattle: St. Nectarios Press, 1980, XIV).

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Schaff, “Homily XXIII on Matthew,” Vol. X, p.164.

⁷ G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware. *The Philokalia: The Complete Text compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth*. Vol. One, p.36.

⁸ Schaff, “Homily I on Hebrews,” First Series, Vol. XIV, p.369.

⁹ Kalomiros, XIV.

¹⁰ Roberts and Donaldson, “Irenaeus against Heresies, Book III,” Vol. I, p.416.

¹¹ Schaff, “Homily V on Second Thessalonians,” Vol. XIII, p.396.