

IN VIEW OF ALL THIS, WHAT THEREFORE IS EXPECTED OF US?

The final chapter of this book must deal with the question: in view of all that God has done for us (as we have seen in the preceding chapters), what therefore is required of us?

In the letter to the Romans, Paul writes eleven long, difficult “theological” chapters, explaining to the Romans what Christian faith is, who Jesus Christ is, what He has done for us and so on. Straight theology! Then what? Chapter 12 begins, “I appeal to you *therefore* brethren,” and Paul gives a long list of specific things Christians are to do—things like:

Let love be genuine.

Hate what is evil.

Hold fast to what is good.

Love one another with brotherly affection.

Bless those who persecute you.

Live in harmony with one another.

Repay no one evil for evil.

In other words, Paul is saying, *because* God has done all these things for you, *therefore* this is the way you must act.

The same thing happens in the letter to the Ephesians. The first three chapters expound the work of Christ upon the Cross. And the fourth chapter begins,

I, therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-3).

Because this is what God in Christ has done for you, says Paul, *therefore* this is the way you must live.

In Philippians, Paul tells us that Christ, who was in the form of God, emptied Himself, took the form of a servant and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:3-8). Because God in Christ did all this for us: humbling Himself, becoming a servant for us, dying the death of a slave in our behalf, *therefore* we are to humble ourselves and become servants to our fellow men, serving one another in love.

Whatever we do as Christians, we do *not* to buy the love of God, *not* to purchase our way into heaven with our good works, *not* to pride ourselves on being better than the next man. Whatever we do as Christians, we do *as a grateful response to what God has done for us in Christ.*

Because God has forgiven us, *therefore* we are obligated to forgive those who have hurt us. “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt...should not you have mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”

Because God humbled Himself and became a slave for us on the cross, therefore we must be first in our willingness to serve. “If I then your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14). Every Christian is engaged in *diakonia*, servanthood for Christ in the world, serving Christ in the least of His brethren.

Because God comforts us, *therefore* we must comfort others. As St. Paul writes, “Blessed be...God...who comforts us in all our affliction so that *we* may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor. 1:3-5). The comfort that comes to us from God must pass through us to others. Let us examine a few more of the “therefores” that are expected of every Orthodox Christian.

OBEDIENCE

Keeping the commandments is not a slave morality that is imposed upon us by God. Before God gave the ten commandments He said to His people: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” It is only after this statement that God proceeds to give the ten commandments. Because God has redeemed His people from slavery, *therefore*, their grateful response will be to obey His commandments. The Israelites first experienced God’s redemptive love in the exodus from Egypt; then they were called to return that love through obedience. We obey because we love. Our obedience is always a *grateful response* to God’s grace and love.

LOVE

So it is with the commandment to love. Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that

you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). The commandment to love is based on what God has already done for us in Christ: He loved us even unto death on the cross. Our love is to be a *grateful response* to His love for us. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God loved us, we also ought to love one another... We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:10-11,19). Before we confess the Nicene Creed in the liturgy, we are called upon to “love one another”. Love must precede even our confession of faith.

DOXOLOGY

Another grateful response to what God has done for us in Christ is doxology and praise. In fact, the dominant theme of our Orthodox Christian faith is doxology. The Sunday liturgy in the Orthodox Church is preceded by the singing of the great Doxology. This sets the tone for the entire liturgy which is one of complete *eucharistia*: gratitude and praise, “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit...” “Blessed be the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” This is the major theme of Orthodox worship as it was the dominant motif of the early Christians. What do we find in the New Testament? Tribulation, demons, suffering, crucifixion—yet always with a doxology because Christ has taken the worst of man and overcome it. “In the world you have tribulation,” said Jesus, “but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” Not crucifixion but resurrection has the last word! No death but life! What can our response to this victory be but one of constant doxology and praise. “Doxology is the language of Orthodoxy,” says Professor Constantine Scouteris.

OUR WITNESS FOR CHRIST IN THE WORLD

Another one of the great responses to God’s love is to share Christ with others, to confess Him before men. “So every one who acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32-33).

Today we confess Christ before men publicly every time we recite the Nicene Creed in the liturgy. Our job is to keep confessing Him in the “liturgy after the liturgy” when we return to our places in the world. This is not a difficult task. Look at the blind man who was healed by Jesus. He

confessed Christ among men simply by stating what Jesus did for him: "...[O]ne thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25). For example, you fall into a conversation with a neighbor, co-worker, or stranger. They, not you, bring up a problem or concern. As they talk, you remember how God helped you with one of your own problems. If you share your experience, you may fumble with words or even blush. You may come away certain that you have made a grievous mistake by sharing. But the outcome of your sharing is not up to you. It is the Lord's job to take your witness, however grand, or simple or weak, and use it to get to the heart of the one hearing you; to get him to connect to the Source of Power that will help him also, as it helped you. Who can tell what it might mean to others if we quietly testified what the Lord did for us in time of weakness or sorrow?

CONFESSING CHRIST STRENGTHENS FAITH

We are greatly strengthened when we make a public confession of faith in Jesus. Our faith is tremendously fortified by such an act. Try it! Say to a member of your family, "You know, one of the most precious persons in my life is the Lord Jesus. I simply cannot tell you what He has meant to me in my life—how He leads me and guides me, and enriches my life every day." Just a simple confession, but how greatly it strengthens your faith when you say it with your lips. You will actually feel your faith growing stronger within you. Or take another example: you meet someone who does not come to church and you confess Christ by saying, "You know, I simply cannot tell you how much guidance and strength I receive in church every Sunday. Why I can hardly wait for Sunday morning to come along. Mind if I pick you up next Sunday and we worship together?" Not only will your faith grow stronger when you confess Jesus this way, but you have His word for it that He will not forget it: one day He will "acknowledge" you before His Father in heaven.

John Berryman wrote a poem in which he recalls how boldly the martyrs of the early Church confessed their faith in Christ. He looks at his own life and thinks of the many things that can happen to him before the end comes. He prays that no matter what happens his lips may be ready to confess his Lord: "Cancer, senility, mania, I pray I may be ready with my witness."

THE STEWARDSHIP OF TIME, TALENTS AND POSSESSIONS

Another response to God for His gracious love is the stewardship of our time, talents and possessions. We are called to use our God-given talents to serve God and glorify Him.

The word steward is an English translation of the Greek word *oikonomos*, which means manager. Every Christian is a manager of the time, talents and possessions God has loaned to him. He is responsible to God for the use of these gifts and will be called on by God one day to give an account of how he used them.

Much needs to be said about the importance of stewardship since the entire work of the Church as the Body of Christ in the world today depends on it. Our monetary gifts to the Church are translated into deeds of love. Consider what our gifts to the Church can do. They give legs to a word like love and send it off on urgent errands of mercy. They bring hope, health, sanity and salvation to people in the spirit of Christ. They put clothing on the naked, food in the stomachs of the starving. They preach God's word. They administer the sacraments. They educate young people in the faith. They gather workmen to build schools, hospitals, colleges, seminaries, churches. They bring new life to the handicapped.

TWO PLATES—NOT ONE

Someone said one Sunday during the offering, "Here we go again! There's always a plate." The person was right in one way and wrong in another. There is not one plate—but two! One is man's: the offering plate that is passed to us every Sunday. The other is God's. And that is the paten, the plate that carries the Precious Body of our Lord during the liturgy.

God gives *first*. He gives us our body, mind, life, health, talents. On the paten—the plate of God's mercy—He gives us Himself as the Bread of life, the manna from heaven. He gives forgiveness, strength, courage. He gives victory over sin and death. He gives eternal life. "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which He lavished upon us" (Eph. 1:7-8). God gives! That is the meaning of the first plate—the paten.

THE SECOND PLATE

The second plate which is passed to us every Sunday is the offering plate. It represents our response to the first plate. We are invited to give in gratitude for God's generosity, for His limitless forgiveness and mercy. The emptiness of the offering plate represents the aching needs of the world—spiritual hunger, physical hunger, etc., which we are called to help remedy through our sharing. It represents the great spiritual hunger that exists in the world—the God-shaped vacuum in every heart—that only Christ can fill.

We give, but He gives first. However much we give, it will never be more than just a fraction of what we receive.

"There's always a plate." Indeed there is. Not one but two. First God's, then man's.

A woman traveling through Europe sent this cable to her husband: "Found a bracelet. Price: \$75,000. May I buy it?" He promptly wired back, "No, price too high." But the operator missed the comma and the reply read, "No price too high." So the woman bought the bracelet. Later the husband sued the cable company.

When it comes to our giving to God, there is no minimum and no maximum. No price is too high for Him Who is the Pearl of Great Price.

How should we give to God? Following are some guidelines.

GIVE PROPORTIONATELY

The trouble with most of church giving is that it is out of proportion to what we have, to what we earn. The important thing in Christian giving is not "how much" we give, but "how much in comparison to our ability". A gift does not need to be large in order to be significant. It is great or small in proportion to the amount of other things we possess. One of the great examples of Christian stewardship is the poor widow who came into the Temple one day and gave all she had. It wasn't very much, just a fraction of a cent, but it caused the treasury bell to ring and Christ to give her a commendation that keeps ringing down through the centuries: "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all of those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living" (Mark 12:43,44).

GIVE LOVINGLY

Give proportionately as God has blessed you. And then give lovingly. True Christian giving begins with my personal commitment to Christ, and it proceeds from there. It says, "If you don't love God, don't give. God does not need the token support of those who do not really care." And conversely, Christian giving says, "If you do love God, let your giving be some indication of the measure of that love."

GIVE GENEROUSLY

Give proportionately, lovingly. Give generously. "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly." When it comes to giving to God and His work, if you must err, err on the side of generosity, as you would if your loved one were in need and presented a request. Err on the side of going beyond what is practical and try what is spiritual. "He who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully," writes St. Paul. Give abundantly and you will receive abundantly.

GIVE WISELY

Give proportionately, lovingly, generously. Give wisely. Many of the ancient Greek coins have an owl on them. The owl was to remind people that they should be as wise as owls in the spending of money. How does a Christian spend money wisely? A wise Christian will sit down and make two columns. Column #1 will be entitled, "WHAT ARE WE LIVING FOR?" and Column #2 will be "WHAT ARE WE SPENDING FOR?" We can never determine wisely what we shall spend for until we realize what we are living for. What we are living for will determine what we do with our possessions.

GIVE GLADLY

Give proportionately, lovingly, generously, wisely. Give gladly! "Everyone must give," St. Paul says, "as he has determined in his heart; not grudgingly, nor of necessity, *for God loves a cheerful giver.*" Give from your heart—cheerfully.

An example of cheerful giving is Alvin Dark, a former manager of the San Francisco Giants. He wrote,

Tithing... Giving the first tenth of my income back to God was just as unquestioned in our home as putting on my socks before my shoes. And a nickel out of every 50 cents was quite a lot when I got up every day before dawn to pedal around my paper route. But as the years went by and my income increased, I found out I could never win in this game of giving to God. He always outgave me. He gave to me physically, financially and in a dozen other ways. He led me into a satisfying career in baseball. Actually, if I belong to Him, He owns me and my income too, all of it. I have learned that tithing is just a symbol of my trust in Him.

GIVE HUMBLY

Give proportionately, lovingly, generously, wisely, gladly. And finally give humbly. Those who follow the Hindu religion must bring their thank offerings to the local priest in the following manner. They fall to their knees, close their eyes, and then place the offering in the open hand of the priest. When asked the reason for this, they reply, "We close our eyes because we are ashamed to bring so little. We are ashamed because no matter how great our gift, it is tiny when compared to His love for us. So, as we present our gift, we fall to our knees in deep humility."

No matter how much we give to God, we ought to close our eyes and fall on our knees humbly because we bring so little when we think of how much He gave for us on the Cross and still gives.

BLESSED TO BLESS

Our response to God's gracious act of salvation, therefore, is a constant doxology of thanksgiving and praise. God said to Abraham, "I will bless thee...and thou shalt be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). We are blessed to bless. We are forgiven to forgive. We are loved to love. We return that love through obedience. We are saved to help others find salvation. We are comforted to comfort. We are served to serve. Christ confesses us before His Father in heaven as his very own that we may confess Him among men in the world. He daily loads us with blessings that we may use them to glorify and serve Him proportionately, lovingly, generously, wisely, gladly and humbly.