

The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 101

St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Topic 11A: The Teachings of Christ—Humility

‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, **went and sold all** that he had, and bought it.’ (Matthew 13:45-46)

This is radical. This is “expensive.” This requires **resolve** and **action**. This is not simply a set of rules. Not just nice moral teachings. Not so easy. Nor is this mere faith alone.

Jesus taught a big view of salvation: selling everything in order to attain it—in other words, **doing everything that we have to do in order to be saved.**

Orthodoxy has a **big view of salvation.** It is not simplistic. The Scriptures and the Church do not teach “Sola Fida”—“salvation by faith alone”—as Protestant reformers taught. Rather, Orthodoxy requires a lot of effort on our part too.

“To follow the commandments of Christ is to walk **the narrow path of self-denial.** There is no way that we can live the life that Christ came to give us if we are living in a self-centered way.” (*The Faith*, page 130)

“Jesus said His to disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’” (Matthew 16:24)

Jesus said: ¹³“Enter by the **narrow** gate; for wide is the gate and **broad is the way that leads to destruction**, and there are **many** who go in by it.

¹⁴Because **narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life**, and there are **few** who find it.” (Matthew 7:13-14)

The “broad way” leads to destruction, and many are finding that road easily. The “narrow way” is a path leading to eternal life, and few are finding it.

The “**broad way**” is the life of self-indulgence, which leads to the slavery of the passions. But the “**narrow way**” is the lifestyle which is always “crucifying the flesh with its desires and lusts”—Galatians 5:24. Denying the self its selfish desires may “hurt” for a moment, but it leads to the ultimate freedom—freedom from the

tyranny of one's evil habits, sins, demonic influences, passions, and the devil's control.

Asceticism—this denial of the self its selfishness--is **necessary** if one is to be a true follower of Christ. (Deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow Christ.)

“Coffee-table book” Christianity vs. “exercise workout-room” Christianity.

“Coffee-table book” Christianity looks good on the surface, but is really lacking in depth. To such a “Christian”, spiritual matters mean very little to one's day-to-day life.

“Exercise workout-room” Christianity affects and changes one's life.

“Jesus commanded that any obstacle which stands between us and the kingdom of heaven must be removed:

“If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out...” (Matthew 5:29-30)

This does not mean that we should physically maim ourselves, but rather that we must be willing to give up anything which leads to sin...we have to make some sacrifices.” (*The Faith*, p. 131)

Since Christ suffered, we might have to push ourselves a little, even **suffer** in our fight to give up sin. See 1 Peter 4:1-5

¹Therefore, since Christ **suffered** for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also **with the same mind**, for he who has **suffered in the flesh** has ceased from sin,
²that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. ³For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in **lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries**. ⁴In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same **flood of dissipation**, speaking evil of you. ⁵They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

See also: Ephesians 4:22

“that you put off, concerning your **former conduct**, the **old man** which grows **corrupt** according to the deceitful lusts”

James 5:10-11

¹⁰My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. ¹¹Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the **perseverance** of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

Love for God and our fellow man **is the motivation**. (In our fellow man, we see the image of God, and we are to love that image, no matter how tarnished it is.)

This love is not based on feelings or emotions, but it is Christ-like: Agape love, unconditional selfless sacrificial love that is willing to die for the other.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)

Since Christ **did** this **for us**—if our love for Him is genuine, then we will **pass** this same love **on to others**. (See: 1 John 4:10-12)

The **opposite** of this Christ-like love would be an **“antichrist self-love.”** Such a false love—the world’s idea of love—is the “devil’s parody of love”. (*The Faith*, p. 132)
It is a love of self-satisfaction, not the love of self-sacrifice.

“Often, ‘I love you’ means ‘I love me and want you’.” (*The Faith*, p. 132) (“I want to consume you as a steak to satisfy my desires and lusts.”)

Christ, the True Lover, the True Bridegroom, **laid down His life on the Cross for His Bride, the Church**. “Thus, the way of Christ is the way of the Cross. There is no other way to the resurrection and to eternal life but through **the sacrifice of suffering love**.” (*The Faith*, p. 132)

One of the victories of Christ on the Cross is the **victory of longsuffering love over evil**. The Lord Jesus suffered **innocently** at the hands of **evil-doers**, yet **did not** let their evil get into Him and poison His heart, filling it with their madness and malice.

Christ’s victory over evil becomes ours when we are united with Him and are abiding in Him and living daily in His love. It is the only way to conquer evil: To be full of the love of Christ and to not let evil come into your heart to conquer you.

In the Orthodox Christian Prayers of Thanksgiving After Receiving Holy Communion, the one who has partaken thanks Christ for His Holy Gifts and prays:

“that being kept by them in Thy holiness, may I ever remember Thy Grace, and never live for myself, but for Thee, our Master and Benefactor.”

God’s HOLINESS keeps us—protects us—guards us—guides us. However...we are to live NOT for ourselves, but to LIVE FOR HIM. This must be an intentional act on our part.

“The **goal** of the Christian life is to become like God”, Who is Love. “We must **learn to love as He loves**. Our whole outlook on life must **change**, and our will must be trained. Before we can attain the heights of divine **love**, we must first attain the spirit of **genuine humility**, which St. John Climacus calls the ‘door to the kingdom’.” (*The Faith*, p. 135)

modern self-esteem theories vs. the humility of Christ

Jesus said: “Learn of Me, for I am meek and **lowly** in heart.” (Matthew 11:29)

St. Paul taught: “in **lowliness** of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.” (Philippians 2:3)

Three ways to acquire humility:

#1) Humility comes through obedience. By being obedient to a spiritual father, one **cuts off his own self-will**. (*Note*: a parishioner follows his spiritual father in all spiritual matters, but does not attain the same level of exacting material obedience in mundane worldly matters that a monastic gives to his/her abbot or abbess.)

#2) A second method for attaining humility is **the remembrance of one’s own sinfulness**. This is not a harboring of guilt over already-confessed and forgiven sins, but rather is simply a healthy mindfulness of one’s sinfulness. Remembering one’s own sins can help one refrain from judging others, and from doing them again.

Matthew 7:1-3 ¹“**Judge not**, that you **be not judged**. ²For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. ³And why do you look at the **speck** in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?”

#3) A third way to attain humility is to **read the lives of the Saints**. When we read of how women and men gave up their lives as martyrs for Christ, we realize how little we have suffered for Christ in our own fight against sin. This fact helps us think realistically of ourselves, and keeps us from getting puffed up into a proud high false opinion of ourselves.

Summary:

“When man attains true humility, he no longer experiences the commandments of Christ as an **external** law that constrains his will, but rather as a fount of **genuine spiritual freedom welling up within him:**” (*The Faith*, p. 137)

“Holy **humility** has this to say: ‘The one who loves me will not condemn someone, or pass judgment on anyone, or lord it over someone else, or show off his wisdom...A man truly joined to me is no longer in bondage to the Law.’” (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*)

Story of two Pit Bulldogs

*a real-life parable of **INTERIOR CONTROL** vs. **EXTERNAL CONTROL***

A master had two dogs: One was obedient and well-trained. It acted humble. He had earned his master’s trust and was worthy of liberty from the chain. It did not need **external** chains and leashes because it had **interiorized obedience**—it could safely be left unchained—it would never run away or bite the neighbor’s children. It had self-control. And because it had self-control, the master would give it freedom to roam around the yard.

HOWEVER, the other dog was totally disobedient and very undisciplined. It was proud, in a doggie way. It required constant **external control** as it pulled at the leash and demanded to be set free. But it had not earned his master’s trust and it was not worthy of being left untied. In fact, even though it begged and yearned for freedom from the leash, its master feared that the dog’s undisciplined lifestyle would get it into trouble—it would run away and bite

the neighbor's children. Since this dog **lacked interior discipline**, it still **required external control chains**.

God gave the Law of Moses as an **EXTERNAL** set of rules, to control us from the outside.

However, when the Law-giver poured Himself into the hearts of the Disciples on the Feast of **Pentecost**, the Holy Spirit came to dwell **INTERNALLY** within mankind.

The Gift of the Presence of God inside our hearts enables us – via our cooperation – to learn to exercise genuine **self-control** and thus experience **internal** freedom from sin. With **humility** and lowliness of mind, instead of proud self-exalting thoughts, we can learn to go beyond our **selfish desires** and we can learn to **love** others and put them **first**, as God does. As we learn to love God by loving our neighbors, we can become true **ascetics** who spiritually **crucify** the flesh with its desires and lusts.

Thus, we are practicing the Apostolic understanding of the “BIG” view of salvation, staying on the “narrow” path that leads to Eternal Life, by having not a mere faith in God, but a “**Faith working through love**” (Galatians 5:6).