

## Bible Study Notes 1/21/2015

### **Mark 11:23-26**

<sup>23</sup> For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. <sup>24</sup> Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them. <sup>25</sup> And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. <sup>26</sup> But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.

St. Theophylact says “Marvel at the divine love for man, how God even gives the power to work miracles, a power which He alone by nature possesses, to us who by faith have become like unto Him, so that we are even able to move mountains. The mountain is also the proud mind, high and rugged. Therefore, a proud man should rebuke this mountain, this passion of pride which besets him and strives to drive him away from God’s protection and providence; for it is pride that makes a proud man say that he can accomplish all things by himself without God’s help. Such a man ought to say to his pride, “Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea, that is, go back among worldly, unbelieving men who are in the sea of this life.” And a man who casts away his pride does not doubt, that is, he is not divided and separated from God. But a proud man is parted from God when he says, “I have received nothing from God, and I have no need of any alliance with Him.

While there is no mention specifically in the Scriptures of Christ’s disciples moving a mountain, there have been some occasions of this that have been passed down to us by Sacred Tradition. For example, St. Jerome (340-420AD) related an account of St. Gregory the Wonderworker (who lived about 100 years before him, 213-270AD) moving a mountain by faith. As recounted in the Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints (originally compiled by St. Dimitri of Rostov 1651-1709AD and very recently translated into English)

*“Once, the holy wonder-worker wished to build a church in a beautiful place at the foot of a mountain. He began to dig the foundation but found that the available area was too small. The saint therefore prayed for a long time, after which he commanded the mountain in the name of Jesus Christ to depart from its place sufficiently to permit him to build the church. Immediately the mountain began to shake, and then moved as far as was necessary. Such was the faith of God’s favorite, that it was capable of moving mountains! Many unbelievers saw this miracle, turned to the Lord, and were baptized. Indeed, Gregory’s fame spread everywhere because of the astounding miracles he worked through God’s power.”*

St. Theophylact goes on to say that “He who in his innermost being believes in God lifts up his whole heart to God and, in the words of David, he pours out his soul before God. He who has thus lifted up his heart to God is united to God, and his heart is thus made warm and has full assurance that it may obtain its request. Whoever has experienced this will understand. I think

that all those who pray with at least a moderate degree of attention experience this. This is why the Lord says, "You shall receive whatsoever you ask with faith." He who believes gives his whole self to God, speaking to God with tears, and as it were, clasping the feet of the Master in prayer. Do you want to know another way to receive what you ask for? Forgive your brother, if he has sinned against you in any way. Do you see how easy it is to obtain God's gifts?"

I once met a man who told me that he believed in God when he was a child, but now doesn't believe anymore. When I asked him why he told me that he really wanted a red bicycle and prayed to God that he would receive this. However, he did not get the bicycle and so came to the eventual conclusion that God does not exist. This question of faith has long been one of the "big" questions and much debate has centered on the supposed contrast between faith and reason. Yet, we have all heard of countless instances when one of Christ's followers believed in Him and prayed for help for themselves or for someone in need and miracles happened. We read about the miracles of Christ and of the Apostles in the Book of Acts and the Epistles of St. Paul, in the lives of the early martyrs and saints throughout the centuries. We can still read about and witness miracles in our times today. The miracle of the Holy Fire occurs every Pascha in Jerusalem in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher; myrrh-streaming icons can be seen in Orthodox churches around the world; and many who make pilgrimages to the relics of holy saints often receive miraculous help and healing all over the world.

Getting back to the boy praying for the red bicycle: why didn't God answer his prayer? While we cannot know for certain why God does what He does, we can be sure that He created us, that He loves us, that He wants our good. In a real way, God is truly our Father and acts towards us much as any loving parent would. If a five year old child asked his father for a loaded pistol, would the father give him this? No, because the child is too young to handle a gun and might harm himself or someone else with it. Who know, if God had given the boy the red bicycle, he might have come to think that God is like some sort of magical ATM machine where you can get anything you want just by "praying for it." This could then lead to disaster. What if later the boy got mad at someone and prayed that God would kill the other person? What if as a young man he prayed for lots of money and things, and God gave him all that and he became a worldly and dissolute person and lost his salvation? The point is, God had some reason for withholding the red bicycle at that time from this particular boy and we must trust that while the boy or any of us might not understand why God did this, He had good reason and acted in the boy's best interest ultimately.

In Luke chapter 10, we read about how Jesus sent out his disciples and they returned saying how even the devils were subject to them through His Name. But Jesus said, "*Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.*" Here we can see that miracles are not the primary reason for us to follow Christ, but rather, our salvation is what is most important. However, witnessing miracles and learning about them from Scripture and Tradition can help strengthen our faith.

If God so chose, He could easily reveal Himself to us in visible form right now. Yet, this would not take much faith on our part, since it would be easy to believe in something we could perceive with

our senses. God wants us to have a deeper and stronger faith than just an external, outward kind of 'faith.' In Hebrews 11, St. Paul writes "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen..." Again, didn't our parents try to teach us to do what was right? But if we were only obedient and faithful to their commands when they were present (because they might scold us or punish us if we didn't) then what good would that do? As soon as they were out of sight, we would just do the bad thing they told us not to do. The idea is that we're supposed to learn to do what is right by trusting that our parents loved us, so that we can then develop the ability to do the right thing the rest of our lives, even when our parents are no longer around. Our heavenly Father also wants us to choose what is good of our own free will, not just because He is standing by ready to punish us if we don't.

The Epistle reading for today also complements the Gospel.

### **James 3:11-4:6**

<sup>11</sup> Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? <sup>12</sup> Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? Either a vine, figs? So can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh. <sup>13</sup> Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? Let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. <sup>14</sup> But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. <sup>15</sup> This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. <sup>16</sup> For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. <sup>17</sup> But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. <sup>18</sup> And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace. <sup>4</sup> From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? <sup>2</sup> Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. <sup>3</sup> Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts. <sup>4</sup> Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. <sup>5</sup> Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? <sup>6</sup> But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

St. Gregory the Great writes at length about this: "...Those who bewail transgressions, yet forsake them not, are to be admonished to acknowledge themselves to be before the eyes of the strict judge like those who, when they come before the face of certain men, fawn upon them with great submission, but, when they depart, atrociously bring upon them all the enmity and hurt they can. For what is weeping for sin but exhibiting the humility of one's devotion to God? And what is doing wickedly after weeping but putting in practice arrogant enmity against Him to whom entreaty has been made? This James attests, who says "whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God."

St. James also said that faith without works is dead. It is human nature to want to have one's cake and eat it too. We want to be saved and to live righteously and yet we are weak and sinful and so

often are unable to live up to our lofty calling. The key thing is when he says we cannot be both a friend to the world and a friend of God. Just as Christ said we cannot serve God and mammon. He also said, what shall it profit us if we gain the whole world, but lose our soul?

The “world” is a term that is used both to describe our present life on earth, but is also used to represent all that is opposed to the kingdom of heaven. As Christ said to Pilate, My kingdom is not of this world.

According to St. Isaac the Syrian:

“The world is the general name for all the passions. When we wish to call the passions by a common name, we call them the world. But when we wish to distinguish them by their special names, we call them the passions. The passions are the following: love of riches, desire for possessions, bodily pleasure from which comes sexual passion, love of honour which gives rise to envy, lust for power, arrogance and pride of position, the craving to adorn oneself with luxurious clothes and vain ornaments, the itch for human glory which is a source of rancour and resentment, and physical fear. Where these passions cease to be active, there the world is dead; for though living in the flesh, they did not live for the flesh. See for which of these passions you are alive. Then you will know how far you are alive to the world, and how far you are dead to it”

The important thing to remember, is that we cannot really overcome the world without God’s help. As Christ said, *“In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”*

So let us ask Christ’s help to strengthen our faith so that we may one day be counted worthy to be united with Him in the Kingdom of Heaven!