

Bible Study Notes: Feb. 11, 2015 -- 1st Epistle of St. John 3:20-4:6

“For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment. And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us. Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world. Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.”

Trusting in God

Verse 3:20 *“For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.”* St. Justin Popovic says that sometimes we ‘draw back’ from the great challenges of divine love and our heart may feel ‘No, I am not capable of such divine love.’ However, we should then take comfort in the fact that *‘God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things.’* He will give our small heart the necessary powers and courage to endure the self-sacrificial struggle of love.

Listening to our Conscience

Verse 3:21, *‘...if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God...’* St. Cyril of Alexandria says “As long as you are in this life, do not ignore or reject the warning of your conscience. For if you do so, when you have run your course, your conscience will rise up against you and turn you to eternal punishment. You will not have to endure this if along the way you show yourself kind toward this adversary and accept his well-intended rebukes with gratitude.”

St. Isaac the Syrian also says, “A man cannot acquire hope in God unless he first does His will with exactness. For hope in God and manliness of heart are born of the testimony of the conscience, and by the truthful testimony of the mind, we possess confidence in God. The testimony of the mind consists in the fact that a man’s conscience does not accuse him of negligence in anything within his powers that it is his duty to do... Thus boldness comes from the achievements of virtue and a good conscience. It is a bitter thing to be enslaved to the body. He who is aware of his hope in God, even to a small extent, will never more be compelled to serve this austere master, the earthly, perishable body. (An excellent study in the workings of the conscience can be found in the novel *Crime & Punishment* by Dostoyesvsky).

Obedience to God makes Prayer Effective

Verse 22: *“We have confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him because we keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.”* St. Justin Popovic says that “God fulfills man’s prayers when man fulfills God’s commandments. ‘Obey God in His commandments,’ says St. John Chrysostom, ‘so that He may obey you in prayer.’ The man who keeps the commandments of God is always wise, persistent, and sincere in prayer; he knows what he needs, when he needs it, and how to implore God. He always pleads for something only if it is beneficial for the salvation of the soul, i.e., that which is evangelic divine, immortal and eternal. The holy Theologian has spoken to us, and now we know the mystery of prayer. The mystery is in keeping the commandments of God. This is the rule of the Gospel: whosoever keeps the commandments of God, God fulfills his every prayer. For example: the saints keep the commandments of God, therefore God fulfills their prayers, whether they are in heaven or on earth.”

Faith & Love: Each strengthens the Other

Then St. John clearly tells us what His commandment is: *“that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.”*

St. Justin goes on to say, “Behold, the condensed Gospel of salvation: faith in Christ and divine love...he who believes in Christ believes because he loves Him. Love grows through faith, and through love, faith grows. One through the other increases and perfects itself. They are spiritual twins...This two-in-one virtue (love and faith) gives birth to the rest of the evangelic virtues in the soul...Keeping the commandments trinitizes man, because this Christianizes and spiritualizes him. A Christian’s life is one unceasing continuous *podvig* (i.e.; spiritual struggle) of Christianization, spiritualization, divinization (i.e., trinitization. The entire Christian life is one unceasing and indivisible struggle to become like Christ, to establish the Spirit in man: theosis=establishing the Trinity within oneself...” (Sometimes this process has been also been described as purification, sanctification and deification.)

St. Justin continues, “...Only at the descent of the Holy Spirit on Holy Pentecost was the Holy Spirit shown specifically to mankind—what He is and how He is. In this way, man was given the capability and criterion to correctly orientate himself in the spiritual world for the first time. From Holy Pentecost, we know what the Spirit of God is. Knowing this, we also know what the Spirit of God is not; everything that is not like Him, that does not resemble Him but has opposing characteristics—such a spirit is not of God...”

Discernment of Spirits comes with Spiritual Practice

In Chapter 4:1, *“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.”* St. Justin says ‘...the discernment of spirits is simultaneously, a gift of the Holy Spirit and struggle on man’s part...of the grace of God and the free work of man...the ability to discern good and evil, good and evil spirits, takes spiritual exercise, spiritual ‘gymnastics’ and spiritual struggle. Before all else, this is spiritual practice, through which grace-filled wisdom is achieved...the senses, both internal and external, through grace-filled exercises, can discern if a spirit is of God or not...the faculties of the senses are exercised through the help of all the grace-filled evangelic virtues...

The Two Spirits: Either of God or of the Devil

(Verse 2-3) *“Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.”*

Again St. Justin says “...all the spirits fall into two categories: those that are of God and those of the devil. The ones of God recognize and confess that Jesus is the incarnate God the Logos, the Lord and Savior. Those of the devil are the ones who do not recognize this. The devil’s philosophy is this: Not to acknowledge God in the world, not to acknowledge His presence in the world, and not to acknowledge His Incarnation in the world; to profess and preach that there is no God either in the world or in man, that there is no God in the God-man, that it is senseless to believe that God was incarnated in man, that He cannot live in man, that man is completely without God, a being that does not have God or anything that is of God, that does not have anything, divine, immortal or eternal. Man is entirely transient, entirely mortal; he belongs in the animal world and is not different from them in any way. That is why it natural to live as animals, which, therefore, are his lawful ancestors, original forbears and natural brothers...” (Darwinian evolution promotes this idea) “In reality, this is the philosophy of the Antichrist, who desires to replace Christ at any cost, to occupy His place in the world and in man... Every spirit: a spirit can be a person, a teaching, an idea or a thought. Every teaching, every idea, every thought that does not acknowledge that Jesus is God—the Savior, the Incarnate God, the God-man—originates from the Antichrist, it belongs to the Antichrist.”

Spiritual Warfare

Verse 4:4 *“Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.”* Again, St. Justin says, “This world is a battleground upon which a battle is constantly being fought for or

against Christ...the weapons of our battle are the evangelic virtues: patience, love towards enemies, prayer, fasting, truth, righteousness, goodness, meekness, humility, etc....Warring with these weapons, we always achieve victory through the Lord Christ, Who loves us.”

St. Hilary of Poitiers said, “*God’s power to save is always much greater than the devil’s power to do harm.*”

The Nature of the Spirit of the World

Verse 4:5 “*They are of the world therefore speak they of the world and the world heareth them.*” St. Justin goes on to say, “...’the world heareth them because they tell it that which pleases it, that which does not weary it, which does not frighten it by depths, or heights or endlessness. Their thoughts are narrow like the world, shallow like the world, short like the world; that is why they are so simple to comprehend. In all of this, the world imagines itself...as something in which God does not exist...”

(It’s easy to see examples of this around us today: the secular world tries to establish an earthly kingdom without God, without Christian values; but we can also see examples of those who claim to be Christians, but in many so-called ‘contemporary’ churches, mega-churches, etc., there is often the tendency to ‘water down’ the Christian faith and message and to be as much like the world as possible with the idea that this will be appealing, will help draw people to Christ and of course build up membership.)

The Nature of the Christian Spirit

(St. Justin) And we Christians, where are we from?

Verse 4:6 “*We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.*”

(St. Justin again) “We are of God through the soul which has the image of God: through holy baptism we are of God, born again...if we believe, if we love, if we pray, if we fast, if we perform any evangelic struggle, we are born of God through all such labors, we become God’s...Living in the Holy Mysteries and the holy virtues we in reality, live in God: *For in Him we live, and move, and have our being.* (Acts 17:28)...Therefore we bravely claim: we are of God. Everything we have is of God; the spirit, the soul, the heart, the body, possessions, teaching, thoughts, works, life, and existence. Thereby, whosoever knows the true God heareth us, for those who are similar to each other will recognize each other...”