

Bible Study Notes: Wed. October 29, 2014: Luke 9:44-50

⁴⁴ Let these sayings sink down into your ears: for the Son of man shall be delivered into the hands of men. ⁴⁵ But they understood not this saying, and it was hid from them, that they perceived it not: and they feared to ask him of that saying. ⁴⁶ Then there arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be greatest. ⁴⁷ And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a child, and set him by him, ⁴⁸ And said unto them, Whosoever shall receive this child in my name receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me receiveth him that sent me: for he that is least among you all, the same shall be great. ⁴⁹ And John answered and said, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name; and we forbad him, because he followeth not with us. ⁵⁰ And Jesus said unto him, Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us.

This Gospel passage really has two parts: the dispute among the disciples about who should be greatest and the issue of whether anyone had the right to cast out devils in Christ's Name if they did not join the group of disciples and follow Christ with them.

St. Theophylact says that the dispute about who was greatest was from the passion of vainglory. Since this account took place shortly after the Lord was Transfigured on Mt. Tabor, and together with Peter, James and John came down and found the other disciples unable to cast a demon out of a boy, St. Theophylact says that this was probably why they were quarreling about who was greatest—probably as though to pass the blame onto whose fault this was, who was the weakest disciple, etc.

While it is true that some Christians have been filled to a much greater degree with Divine Grace than others, the Lord clearly admonished the disciples (and us) that following Him is not a competitive sport with winners and losers, great and small, etc. Then Jesus takes a child to be near Him and uses the child as an example of how we should be: innocent, simple and humble. Those who are of the world are scheming, devious, proud and arrogant and worldly people think they will be more successful and stronger by such behavior. But spiritually, it's just the opposite: as Christ also said in Luke 9:48, "*He that is least among you, the same shall be great.*"

The Holy Fathers teach us that humility is the greatest of the virtues, since it casts down pride, which was the sin of Satan. Our Lord Himself was the ultimate example of humility when He permitted Himself to be abused, mocked, beaten and crucified—not because of anything He had done wrong, but to show us an example of how we should act. Only by trusting in His words, "My kingdom is not of this world," does this make any sense, for this seems opposite to our human nature, to suffer pain and hardship in this world. Yet, it is by enduring such things that we draw closer to God and His Heavenly Kingdom.

Concerning the other section about not forbidding others who do good in Christ's name but do not 'follow with us,' St. Cyril of Alexandria points out that this is similar to the time of Moses, when God told him to choose 70 men from among the elders of Israel and that He would give them of the Spirit that was upon Moses. However, not only did the spirit of prophecy descend upon those men, but also upon all those who had remained in the camp. Then Jeshua asked Moses to forbid those others from prophesying. But Moses would not forbid them, saying instead: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, the Lord putting His Spirit upon them."

This same account is also found in Mark 9:38-40. St. Theophylact says that at the beginning of the Lord's preaching, there were some who were vainglorious and wanted to work miracles themselves. When they saw that the name of Jesus was powerful to do many things, they called upon this name, and indeed they worked miracles, although they were unworthy of divine grace. They were permitted to work miracles because the Lord wished to spread abroad His preaching, even by means of those who were unworthy. There is an interesting footnote (scholion) found in the Greek text, which adds: "*Therefore they did not follow Jesus, together with His disciples, on account of the austere and self-denying life of the apostles, and because these men wanted to follow their own will and lead a more careless way of life.*"

These words of our Lord, certainly raise an important question for Orthodox Christians today. In a way, these original disciples who stuck together and followed the Lord through thick and thin, were like the Orthodox Christians. We might say that others who did not follow with them, but did good works in Christ's Name are an image of the non-orthodox. If divine grace can work even in those who are unworthy, then does it make a difference whether one is orthodox or non-orthodox?

This question takes on special significance today both for orthodox converts as well as those who encounter the Orthodox faith and are struggling to understand it. Also, an orthodox convert today, likely has many close family members and friends who are not interested in Orthodox Christianity and may even have negative feelings toward the new orthodox convert.

Then there is the whole question today of the ecumenical movement, which would also seem to affirm this. After all, if divine grace can be given to anyone, doesn't that sort of 'level the playing field' and suggest that really all denominations, even all religions are in fact essentially the same?

For a start, a closer look at this Gospel does show that it is those who call upon the Name of Christ who are not forbidden to good in His Name. This effectively rules out the vast majority of non-Christian confessions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Moslems, Jews and anyone else who does not at least confess Christ.

Then there are the enormous numbers of so-called denominations with a Christian framework: well over 40,000 distinct versions of the Christian faith. Some of them are firmly convinced that one must be a member of their denomination if one is to have any chance of salvation.

However, it is vitally important to realize that what we call the Orthodox Church is not simply yet another denomination that just happens to be older or is found in certain countries like Russia or Greece. We must always remember that the Orthodox Church IS THE FULLNESS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH; THE BODY OF CHRIST ON EARTH; THE ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC (ECUMENICAL) AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH. The other 'non-orthodox' Christian denominations have all broken away from this original church. They have introduced various errors, even heresies into their beliefs—even to the point where many consider the Orthodox Church itself to be in error!

Notwithstanding all this, it is equally important to not act with arrogance or condescension toward anyone and to imitate the innocent, humble and simple child that the Lord told us about. We must see that we have been given a great gift to have become Orthodox Christians. It is not up to any of us to determine who God will allow into His Heavenly Kingdom and who He will cast out at the Judgment. We do know this: that to whom more is given, more will be expected, so we certainly have our work cut out for us.

Today's 'ecumenical movement' is generally not something that is very productive for Orthodox Christians to be involved in and promote. This is because in most cases, the various leaders of the ecumenical movement view the Orthodox Church as merely one of the many tens of thousands of denominations. Yet there can be only one Truth and Orthodox Christians have a sacred duty to uphold that Truth and to live according to it, to the best of our ability. The rest is in God's hands, but if we do our part, in the words of St. Seraphim of Sarov: "Acquire the spirit of peace and thousands around you will be saved!"