

WALKING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS



WHEN THE LORD JESUS WAS ASKED which commandment was the first, He replied that the first is to love God with your whole being. But He immediately added a second – inseparable from the first – to love your neighbor as yourself. His questioner agreed, adding that to live this way “is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mark 12:28-34).

In this Jesus was saying nothing new – He was expressing the teaching of the Torah – but legalists often tried to restrict the meaning of neighbor to mean people like us. Jesus’ response was the parable of the Good Samaritan where the true neighbor turns out to be, not the priest or the Levite, but the despised heretic. We are to love all those whom God loves: in short, everyone.

Inevitably touched by the spirit of our age, we may see Jesus’ insistence on love in the light of 1960’s “flower power.” The Scriptures’ picture of love calls for much more than good feelings. In his epistle to the Romans, for example, St Paul outlines some concrete ways to love, giving us his image of a righteous believer:

“Let love be sincere. Hate what is evil, hold on to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection and anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal but be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, and persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; exercise hospitality. *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Have the same regard for one another; do not be haughty but associate with the low-*

ly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, on your part, live at peace with all. ... Do not be overcome by evil but conquer evil with good.” (Romans 12:9-21)

St Paul continues by urging support for the state *“Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs are due, obedience to whom obedience is due, honor to whom honor is due”* (Romans 13:7). He urges that we go beyond correct behavior in concern for the weak. *“We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please our neighbor for his good, that he may be edified.”* (Romans 15:1-2)

RELATING TO THE SOCIETY IN WHICH WE LIVE



St Paul’s summary speaks to us of several levels of relationships, reflecting the life of a godly person in the world. In terms of the wider society the godly strive to live in harmony with the images of God around them, allowing Christ’s way to inform their interactions. *“Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, on your part, live at peace with all”* overcoming evil, not with even more evil, but with good.

When others will not live amicably with us, then we are told to *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”* We are given the examples of Christ on the cross, of St. Stephen and the martyrs of all ages, and of so many who prayed for their Communist oppressors or who today intercede for Islamic extremists.

The godly believer respects the state and fulfills the obligations of citizenship which in our society includes more than paying taxes and customs.

All believers are called to pray for our public servants and our armed forces that they may exercise their responsibilities in righteousness. As we pray in the Liturgy of St. Basil, “Preserve the good in their goodness, and through Your own goodness make the evil become good.” While we are to respect and honor all mankind, we are not to accept their values when they run counter to godliness. Because something is generally accepted in society (“Everybody’s doing it.”) does not mean that it is acceptable in God’s sight. Rather we are told to “Hate what is evil, hold on to what is good.” Believers of every age have had to deepen their knowledge of the Gospel to be able to discern what should be affirmed in the culture around them and what must be resisted.

RELATING TO THE CHURCH



In terms of the Church the godly person relates to other believers in a more intense way than to the wider society at large. We are called to *“Love one another with mutual affection.”* We should expect our relationships among fellow Christians to be deeper than those among fellow workers, students or others with whom we do not share at the Eucharistic Table. St Paul would have us outdo one another in showing honor – not simply by words but deeds. We are urged to *“Contribute to the needs of the saints”* and to *“exercise hospitality”* to believers who may come into our life.

We are always faced with the temptation to prefer some believers over others because of their ethnicity or economic status. To us then St Paul insists, “Have the same regard for one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly.”

Disagreement on political or religious matters is another frequent cause of disunity in the Church. In such cases St Paul’s warning, “Do not be wise in your own estimation” may be a welcome reminder for mutual love. Rather “We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak.” Sometimes it is more important to be together than to be right.

RELATING TO OUR GOD

In terms of our relationship with God St Paul emphasizes perseverance. “Do not grow slack in zeal, but be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.

Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, and persevere in prayer.” There is a cycle in our liturgical and prayer life, yet there is also repetitiveness, reflecting that we are, after all, always repentant sinners before our Creator and Redeemer. The basic text of the Jesus Prayer, repeated over and over, is the symbol of this quality to our prayer life that may come to mind.

Yet we know that life’s hardships and simply the changing circumstances of our lives can affect our zeal for the Christian life and even our hope in the Lord. Godly believers are called to be steadfast in prayer –not that God needs to be convinced of our sincerity, but that we need to become people of prayer in everything that life brings us. Again St. Paul gives us our cue: *“Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circum-*

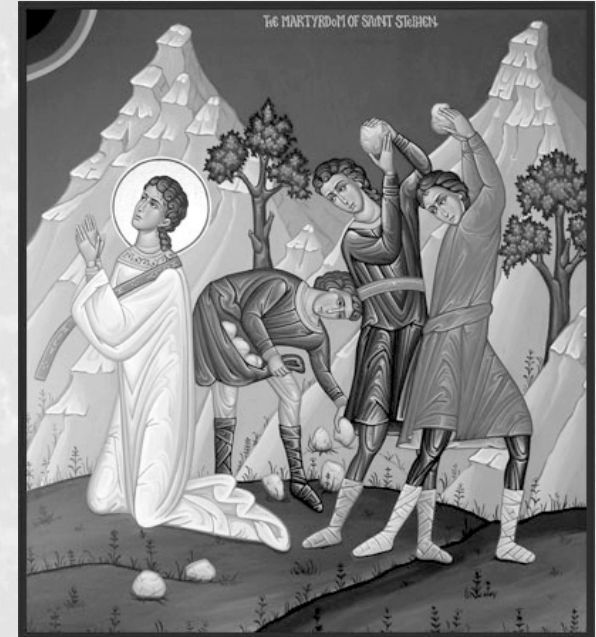
stances for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1Thessalonians 5:16-18).

The godly believer, therefore, is to be honest, ethical, trustworthy, and innocent in dealing with those around them: in short, to reflect Christ’s love for the world.

The godly believer is to be committed to prayer, unswerving in belief and steadfast in faith before God.

The godly believer is to be dedicated to the community of the faithful, both locally in the parish and beyond in the wider Church, the Body of Christ.

WALKING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS



OFFICE OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES
MELKITE EPARCHY OF NEWTON
<http://melkite.org/>

Iconography © Convent of St. Elizabeth
the Grand Duchess of Russia
<http://www.conventofsaintelizabeth.org/>