

The Church this week continues to prepare us spiritually by the Sunday Gospel reading, which tells how we will be judged by our Savior at the end of this world, on the day of the Dread Judgment.

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

32 And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

33 And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

34 Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

35 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

36 Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

37 Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

38 When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

39 Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

41 Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

42 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

43 I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

44 Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

45 Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

46 And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

The details on this reading are pretty straightforward, need little interpretation, and demonstrate very clearly the criteria the Savior will use to determine what the eternal fate of each and every one of us should be. This criteria in one word is LOVE. All of God's law and commandments can be summed up in His two major commandments which are, first of all to love God, which we can do only if we obey the second commandment, to love our neighbor. As St. John the Theologian, the apostle of love, warns us in his first general epistle (4:20-21) if we say we love God but do not love our neighbor, we are liars.(His words, not mine).

What does it mean to love? What does God expect from us? These are neither simple nor frivolous questions. Because of the way evil has distorted the correct understanding of love, it is vital for us to correctly answer these questions.

The devil does not want us to be saved. Knowing that love is a prerequisite for salvation, he instilled in people a distorted understanding of the nature of love. He taught people to love themselves first and foremost. The sinful world embraced this distortion, understanding it as genuine love, and self-love established a hold on people. It has become a way of life for all of us. And being a byproduct of pride, it separates us from God. All of our sins are the result of self-love and often lead to deadly passions that begin to rule over and control us.

What, then, is the true nature of correct, divine love? Our Savior, during His life on earth, showed us how to correctly love. It is a life of self-sacrifice, self denial. We should live not for ourselves, but always putting the interests of all people ahead of our own. ALL PEOPLE- not just the ones that we like or care about. Even people, who are our enemy, hurt us or are just evil people. Our life should be a life of active love and service to our neighbor. We should strive to see the image and likeness of God in every single person that we come into contact with. And we should do this willingly, not because we have to or because we benefit from it in some way. By doing this, our hearts soften and we are able to reach out to God, to love Him as we should.

But how is it possible to love in such a selfless manner? How can I love a person who has hurt me? How can I sincerely pray for a person who has done evil to me or is just a evil person? Why should I help a person who is a bum and won't help himself? The answer is that we are not able to love in such a manner by ourselves. Yes, it is impossible to do this with God's help. The Savior warns us that without Him, we cannot do anything. Without His Grace, we are helpless.

God's Grace is what empowers us to be able to correctly love both people and Him. And to obtain this Grace we need to live according to the teaching of our Church. This is why we pray at home, and attend church regularly. This is where fasting teaches us self denial. This is why our parents taught us to be polite, kind, and gentle as the Church taught them. This is why we go to confession, which cleanses us to be able to worthily receive the Most-Holy Body and Blood of our Savior. This is why we freely and willingly forgive our enemies. All of these things give us Grace. Then we need to use the Grace to live and love correctly. And the more that we use this Grace, the more we receive additional amounts from God. This on-going way of life changes our

cold, hard hearts into hearts that are warm, compassionate, gentle, generous, god-like. Our hearts open to God, and He invisibly moves into them giving us truly peaceful and blessed happiness. This is how we are saved.

My dear ones, by giving us these important reminders and lessons in the weeks preceding Great Lent, our Mother, the Church, is helping us to prepare for Great Lent. It is a time of intense, honest self-introspection, to identify where we have fallen short spiritually in order to humbly plead to God to help us change; then, to use His Grace and help to correct our spiritual defects and strive to become the kind of people God is asking us to be.

With Love in Christ

Archpriest Serge Kotar