



LIFE APPLICATIONS “1 CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 7

DEVELOPING INNER PEACE

Christian growth tends to increase during times of persecution, because Christians are forced to turn to God for strength and comfort to face adversity, and because non-Christians are impressed by the way in which Spirit-led Christians face their persecutors. During more routine troubles, however, we tend to become discouraged and to lose our peace. We worry and fret over difficult circumstances, looking for ways to solve our problems on our own without relying upon the strength of God.

St. Paul says we should present all our supplications to God in prayer, for by so doing we will have our hearts and minds guarded by the peace of God (Philippians 4:6-7). St. John of Kronstadt says regarding this point:

Through the prayer of faith we can obtain from the all-merciful God all spiritual blessings, and all indispensable earthly blessings as well, if only our prayer is fervent, and our longing for these blessings sincere...There is great benefit from prayer to those who pray: it gives rest to the soul and to the body...The Lord does not forsake those who labor for Him, and who stand long before Him; for with what measure they mete, He will measure to them in return, and He will reward them for the abundance of the sincere words of their prayer by sending into their souls a corresponding abundance of spiritual light, warmth, peace and joy.

Inner peace is more than joyful longsuffering (although the two are closely related), just as it is more than a simple psychological contentment. Instead, inner peace is a fruit of our salvation; it is borne as we are transformed by the Holy Spirit. St. Paul alludes to this when he prays, “May the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23). True inner peace results from a transforming relationship with - and submission to - the God of peace.

St. Nicodemos of Mt. Athos notes that Proverb 23:26 - “My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways” - is a call from God to us: we are to totally submit ourselves to God. As we learned in our second lesson, one of the ways in which we observe God’s ways is to eradicate the works of the flesh from our lives. St. Philotheos of Sinai tells us, “Let us cut sin out of our heart, and we will find within us the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The Orthodox Church teaches us that our passions - the urges of the flesh that divert our attention away from God - are the prime reason we lack inner peace. St. Paul vividly describes the war against passions that we are all called to fight:

I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practices. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. (Romans 7:18-23)

To combat the law of sin in his body, St. Paul states, "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection" (1 Corinthians 9:27). St. Seraphim of Sarov describes the holistic nature of disciplining and subjecting the body: "We must concentrate all our thoughts, desires, and actions in order to receive the peace of God and to cry out ever with the Church: O Lord our God, give us peace (Isaiah 26:12)." St. Mark the Ascetic summarizes the situation: "Peace is liberation from passions, which cannot be attained without the action of the Holy Spirit."

St. Theophan the Recluse tells us - in accordance with Christ's teaching that evil comes from the heart (Matthew 12:34-35) - that the greatest threats to inner peace come from the heart: "The heart continually trembles from the emotions like an aspen leaf." For this reason, St. Nicodemus teaches, "Do your utmost to guard your heart and watch over it, to keep it peaceful and quiet. When some disturbing movement arises in your soul, strive with zeal to stifle it and pacify the heart, lest this confusion makes you stray from the right path."

Sts. Nicodemus and Theophan know from experience that we cannot necessarily change the circumstances that trouble us; we can, however, change the way we respond to these circumstances. St. Nicodemus therefore says, "When passionate turmoil steals into the heart, do not jump to attack the passion in an effort to overcome it, but descend speedily into your heart and strive to restore quiet there. As soon as the heart is quieted then the struggle is over."

St. Theophan presents a solid method for preserving inner peace:

- 1) First of all keep your outer senses in order and flee all licentiousness in your external conduct, - namely, neither look, speak gesticulate, walk nor do anything else with agitation, but always quietly and decorously. Accustomed to behave with decorous quietness in your external movements and actions you will easily and without labor acquire peace within yourself, in the heart; for, according to the testimony of the fathers, the inner man takes his tone from the outer man.
- 2) Be disposed to love all men and to live in accord with everyone, as St. Paul instructs: If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men (Romans 12:18).
- 3) Keep your conscience unstained, so that it does not gnaw at you or reproach you, in anything, but is at peace in relation to God to yourself, to your neighbors, and to all external things, If your conscience is thus kept clean, it will produce, deepen and strengthen inner peace, as David says: Great peace have they Which Love Thy law and nothing shall offend them (Psalm 119:165).
- 4) Accustom yourself to bear all unpleasantness and insults without perturbation, It is true that before you acquire this habit you will have to grieve and suffer much in your heart. But once this habit is acquired, your soul will find great comfort in the very troubles you meet with. If you are resolute, you will day by day learn to manage yourself better and better and will soon reach a state where you will know how to preserve the peace of your spirit in all storms, both inner and outer.

St. Theophan concludes:

If at times you are unable to manage your heart and restore peace in it by driving away all stress and griefs, have recourse to prayer and be persistent, imitating our Lord and Saviour, Who prayed three times in the garden of Gethsemane, to show you by His example that prayer should be your refuge in every stress and affliction of the heart, and that, no matter how faint-hearted and grieved you may be, you should not abandon it until you reach a state when your will is in complete accord with the will of God and, calmed by this, your heart is filled with courageous daring and is joyfully ready to meet, accept and bear the very thing it feared and wished to avoid; just as our Lord felt fear, sorrow and grief, but, regaining peace through prayer, said calmly: Rise, let us be going; behold, he is at hand that doth betray Me (Matthew 26:46).