



LIFE APPLICATIONS “I CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 8

ADJUST YOUR TREATMENT OF OTHERS

St. Gregory of Nazianzus makes the extremely important point that there is no universal approach to an individual’s spiritual situation. Instead, a spiritually mature Christian needs discernment to assist a weaker Christian in maintaining health and balance in his or her spiritual life.

St. John Cassian, in discussing the work of a spiritual director, notes an important fact that is relevant for all Christians when dealing with weaker individuals: a discerning individual can help another person to “walk the royal road,” avoiding both extreme self-control and indifference and laxity regarding spiritual disciplines and the spiritual life. Also talking about spiritual directors, Fr. Joseph Allen states that by properly exercising his gift of discernment, a spiritual director can elevate a weaker Christian’s consciousness regarding that person’s motivations and behaviors, which will in turn sharpen the individual’s conscience.

While in their writings St. John and Fr. Joseph were speaking to spiritual directors and ministers, there are nonetheless things that laypersons can learn from this. It is easy for a “knowledgeable” Christian (like St. Paul discusses in 8:1-2) to give “just the facts” to someone who is new to Orthodox Christianity, or weak in their faith, but ultimately cause tremendous spiritual damage to that person by doing so without love for the individual: even a cursory of many Orthodox websites and forums will reveal people who use their knowledge about the facts of Orthodoxy as a weapon with which to attack people. The key is that whatever you say or do to help another Christian, it must be done with a genuine concern for that person, rather than simply to demonstrate your own “superiority.”

Notice that both St. John and Fr. Joseph talk about using discernment when dealing with another Christian. You can only discern a person’s true state in life through an attentive, concerned relationship with that person. It is very difficult for you to give good advice to someone you’ve just met about a situation about which you know little or nothing.

When you are a mature Christian who has a solid relationship with another Christian, you realize that there is no “one size fits all” approach to dealing with the spiritual life of a person. As St. Gregory says,

The same medicine is not in every case administered to men’s bodies. A difference is made according to their degree of health or infirmity. So also are souls treated with varying instruction and guidance. Some are lead by doctrine, others trained by example. Some need the spur, others the curb. Some are sluggish and hard to rouse to the good and must be stirred up by being smitten with the Word. Others are immoderately fervent in spirit, with impulses difficult to restrain, like thoroughbred colts who run wide of the turning post - to improve them, the Word must have a restraining and checking influence.

In other words, before you tell someone what you believe they should do, be sure that you know them and know their situation, and adjust your advice to fit what they truly need, rather than what you think they need.