

CHAPTER 29

The Teachings of Christianity

I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.

— John 14:6

To be a Christian is to be a traveler, spiritually always on a journey excavating the inner space of the heart. A journey without end. A journey toward and into the heart of God. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” said Jesus, “for they shall see God.” Made in the image of God, man knows God by knowing himself. Entering within himself, he sees God mirrored in the purity of his own heart. It is within the true and innermost self that there can be a direct meeting and union with God.

The greatest of all lessons is to know yourself; for if someone knows himself, he will know God; and if he knows God, he will become like God.

— St. Clement of Alexandria

The goal of the Christian life is to truly know God. This was also the goal for Adam and Eve, the first human beings. Having disobeyed God, they left the path that God had marked out for them. They became corrupt, and their sin prevented them from relating “heart to heart” with God. Their minds were darkened, and they no longer could hope to become like God as their passion for fleshly desires became stronger. Since then, all people have inherited this tendency to grow away from God instead of coming closer to Him. As they mature, many lose the strength to live up to a godly standard of life and reflect His image and love.

Since man could no longer by his own efforts attain union with God, God reaches out to man through the life of Christ. Christians believe that this is the primary reason that God sent Christ into the world. By uniting man and God in his own person, Jesus reopened the path to union with God. He showed what the true likeness of God was and set that likeness once again within man’s reach. Christ, the Second Adam, came to earth to reverse the effects of the first Adam’s disobedience.

Christ (Greek for “the anointed”) opened up the way back to God, and this is why one of the earliest names for Christianity was “the Way.” It is a path on which a Christian journeys, *a way of life*. The travelers along this way do not travel alone but in a community of like-minded people called the Church.

The Christian Church

Christians believe that the one God is a Trinity of three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Church, or the body of the believers, is understood to be the image of the Holy Trinity. In the Trinity the three persons are one, yet each retains his own identity. In the same way, in the Church many people are united, yet each preserves his personal individuality.

The Church is also seen as the body of Christ. Although he was crucified nearly 2,000 years ago, Christ was raised from the dead and continues to live and to work in the world. When Christ ascended into Heaven, he did not leave the Church. He continues to dwell in and guide the Church.

The source of the Orthodox faith is the Tradition, its sense of living continuity with the church of the Apostles. The Tradition is the faith that was imparted by Jesus Christ to the Apostles and has been handed down from generation to generation. It includes the whole system of doctrine, rules of Church life, worship and holy art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages. This Tradition, though, is not a mechanical repetition of what has been handed down or the mere intellectual acceptance of a system of doctrines. It lives in the Church because it is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Tradition has to be entered into so that it flows from within the life of a believer. It is his way of life. It has been said that, "The creed does not belong to you unless you have lived it."

The Bible

One of the main sources for the Christian faith is the Bible. The Church inherited the Jewish Tanach, which became known as the Old Testament, referring to the Mosaic covenant. To it was added certain books that became accepted as scripture by the Church and which are known as the New Testament, referring to the covenant established by Jesus Christ.

Returning home to God

One of the ways that Jesus taught was through parables. These are concise stories which are rich in spiritual truth. One of the best known is the parable of the Prodigal Son. It describes the human situation in which a person leaves his home, becomes dominated by desires, realizes his folly and returns to where he came from.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all that he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'" So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's

have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. "Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him."

"My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." (Luke 15: 11-31).



There are many things to be learned from such a parable. Here are a few questions for you to think about and discuss:

- ✗ Why did the father give his share of the inheritance to the son?
- ✗ How would the son have felt if his father had denied his request and insisted he stay at home and work, since going away was wrong?
- ✗ What kind of friends did the son find when he left home?
- ✗ Did the son regret not listening to his father's advice?
- ✗ How did the younger son change through his experiences?
- ✗ Can suffering have value?
- ✗ How did the father feel, and what was he thinking, while his son was away?
- ✗ Why was the father happy to see his son, even though he had squandered all his money?
- ✗ From a long-term perspective, which is more powerful, force or love?
- ✗ Why was the elder son so angry?
- ✗ When he was working on the farm all those years, do you think the elder son did so willingly or reluctantly?
- ✗ Did he love his younger brother? How did he feel toward him?
- ✗ How might the elder son have reacted differently?

This parable helps us to understand not only the way people wander off in their self-confidence, but also the darkness of despair they may come to feel as well as the joy of love regained. It also reveals the depth of heart in the relationship between God and a human being.

The way of the virtuous life

In a sinless world people would respond spontaneously and joyfully to God's love. In a sinful world, though, one in which we are separated from God, each person has to fight against deeply rooted habits and inclinations that are the result of sin. This is why one of the most important qualities needed by a traveler on the Way is faithful perseverance.

Such a life requires continuous effort and struggle in the exercise of free will. The problem is that, no matter how hard a person struggles, he cannot perfect himself alone. He needs help. Christians believe that without God's grace a person can do nothing; but, without a person's voluntary co-operation, God will do nothing. For a person to be saved, both divine initiative and human response are required. Of the two, God's contribution is incomparably greater, but still, a person's participation is necessary.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." These are the words with which Jesus started his ministry. Repentance is also the starting point of a Christian's journey. The word means "to change one's mind." It does not mean self-pity but rather the conversion and the re-centering of one's life on God. In repentance, while one may first look backward with regret, the result is that he looks forward with hope. When one repents, a new view is opened up — not of what we have failed to be but of what, by divine grace, we can now become.

When a person repents he wakes up. He is no longer in a spiritual daze, drifting aimlessly and buffeted by the influence of passing impulses. Instead, like the Prodigal Son when "he came to himself," after repentance a person possesses a sense of purpose and direction. He knows where

he has come from and where he is going. A person in such a state lives in the present. He is not re-living the past, thinking about it either with regret or pride; nor is he living in the future worrying about remote possibilities beyond his immediate control. He responsibly plans for the future, but only so far as it depends on the present moment.

As a person grows in watchfulness and self-knowledge, he begins to acquire the power of discrimination or discernment. This is like a spiritual sense of taste that enables him to distinguish the qualities of the different thoughts and impulses he has. He learns to tell the difference between what is good and what is evil, what is meaningful and what is unimportant.

He begins to take more notice of what is happening within his mind and heart. He learns to guard his heart, shutting out any temptations that come along. An important part of this is struggling with passions such as anger, jealousy, lust or



greed, which try to take over the soul. These passions were given to man by God, but they originally had a different nature. They became distorted by sin, and now they need to be restored. Uncontrollable rage must be turned into righteous indignation, and sexual lust into true love. In this way the passions are to be purified, educated and transfigured. Man needs to channel his passions toward goodness.

For example, love should be pure. Men and women who are not married should love each other as brothers and sisters. Sexual love is meant only for marriage. Impurity comes when the thoughts and feelings that belong in one sort of relationship start appearing in other relationships. This is what happens when feelings of sexual desire invade a friendship with a person to whom we are not married. We no longer think or feel the same way about our friend but develop a “hidden (or not so hidden) agenda.” Such sexual thoughts are a distraction and prevent us from having an open and wholesome relationship. This is why Jesus stated very forcefully:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

— Matt. 5: 27-28

The challenge, of course, is to put the Christian faith into practice. Jesus vividly described what happens when a person doesn’t practice what he knows.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

— Matt. 7:25-27

Jesus and the Law

Although Jesus came with a new message, he did not see himself as coming to abolish the Mosaic Law but rather to fulfill it. In Jesus’ day, many people were caught up in the letter of the law and had forgotten its spirit. They kept the rules but forgot the purpose of the rules. Jesus challenged them and explained the centrality of heart and love in life and the law. He told people they had to keep the law, but he wanted people to move onto the next stage in their spiritual life.

A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good — except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’ ” “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

— Luke 18:18-22

Jesus taught that the whole of the Old Testament law could be summarized by two commandments.

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and

with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

— Mt. 22:36-40

This was the basis for all the commandments not to kill, commit adultery, steal and lie. The commandments were to protect the right to life, love, ownership and truth. Conforming to the law, though, was not enough. A person’s heart and motivation had to be right, too.

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

— Matt.5:21-24



Sometimes people are “self-righteous.” They have not killed anyone or broken any of the major commandments. However, they get angry with people, call them bad names, look down on others, bear grudges and hold resentments. In other words, their hearts are full of evil thoughts even if they do not follow them. This is keeping the letter but not the spirit of the commandment. Such ill feeling poisons the spirit and human relations, even if no one is physically harmed. Jesus explained that God would not accept a person’s offering if the person making the offering harbored hatred for another person. As a parent, God is not deceived by a child who is nice to Him but cruel to his brothers and sisters.

The commandment to love

Jesus taught and practiced the highest love. Love rather than law should be the basis of the Christian community. A person who loves does not even think about killing, stealing or lying. Laws against actions such as these were meant, as St. Paul said, not for righteous people but for criminals. It was love that was to bind Christ’s followers into unity with each other.

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

— Jn. 13:34-35

The key is that we should love as Jesus loved — unselfishly and sacrificially. He loved people so purely that he was prepared to do and give anything for them. It was the same quality of love that God had when He was prepared to sacrifice what was most precious to Him.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

—John 3:16

Jesus was not only a mediator of God's love. He also freely sacrificed himself.

"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

— Jn. 15:13

And he taught people such sacrificial love that would embrace not only friends but enemies as well.

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

— Lk. 6:27-28

Jesus not only taught this, he did it. His life was the embodiment of his words. Even when he was on the cross, he prayed for those who were crucifying him:

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

— Lk. 23:34

Loving one's enemies

One of the most difficult of Jesus' sayings was about turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

— Matt. 5:38-48

Let us think about this in terms of our own relationships. When we are treated badly, insulted or hit, how do we respond?

Recently a newspaper reported that a teenager had been shot to death by the angry owner of a summer home because the young person stole some flowers from his garden. Although this is an extreme example, tragically this kind of response is not unusual. People often retaliate and try to hurt another person so that he "will not do it again." This may take the form of shouting abuse or an act of uncalled-for violence. The ego of some people is so sensitive that they feel justified in destroying another person to maintain their own dignity. Unfortunately, even nations behave in this way, committing terrible atrocities in revenge for some incident. The Mosaic Law to which Jesus referred challenged such behavior and set a standard of justice that few people even today are able to meet.



Fortunately, not many people behave like the above example. Still, in human terms, loving one's friends and hating one's enemies may seem natural or even just. When we are mistreated, there are normally two ways we can respond:

- ✘ We can become angry and resentful. If the person is smaller or the same size as we are, we may respond in kind or at least look for a way to get our own back.
- ✘ If the person is bigger than we are and we are frightened, we may submit and do anything to avoid being hurt. We do what we are told and say what we are told to say.

Does either of these responses solve the problem of evil? The first can multiply it, leading to feuding. Both parties feel justified in the way that they behave, and the original cause of the conflict may even be forgotten. The second response can perpetuate evil by allowing the original injustice to go unpunished. The oppressor enjoys abusing his victim, whom he thinks doesn't deserve respect.

Jesus challenged people to go beyond justice and the "normal" way of living. Injustice occurs because of human selfishness and pride. Justice ensures that acts of injustice are compensated but does not necessarily cleanse the evil in the human heart. Solving this evil, the cause of injustice, was Jesus' concern.

Jesus' teaching about "turning the other cheek" is often misunderstood. It does not mean that you should let people take advantage of you. Turning the other cheek does not mean being passive in the face of evil. It does not mean compromising, changing one's opinions and pretending that what is evil is good. It does not mean losing self-respect and being weak and cowardly. "Turning the other cheek" means, firstly, that we should not respond to evil with evil. As a wit observed, "An eye for an eye, and soon the whole world will be blind." Instead, we should repay evil with good, and hate with love. This is active. It takes an intentional decision to embrace our enemies and demonstrate concern about their well-being because they are also God's children. This is certainly not easy. It takes enormous courage to love one's enemy.

When Christ told people to love their enemies, he challenged them with examples from their daily life. At that time, a Roman soldier was entitled to require any Jew to carry his belongings for one mile. You can imagine how annoyed a person might be when his lawful business was interrupted and he was forced to carry a soldier's heavy load, especially when that soldier represented an oppressive empire. Seething with anger and resentment, he would probably carry the baggage for not an inch more than one mile. Then he would let his burden fall and return to what he had been doing. Jesus told the Jews to do more than they were asked. He said they should gladly carry the baggage for two miles!

Imagine what would happen if you treated someone badly for no reason. If that person responded by treating you equally badly, you would realize that he was no better than you. If he became overly submissive and lost his dignity, you would lose

respect for him. But how would you feel if someone you mistreated reacted in neither of these ways? What if he didn't complain or become resentful, but instead embraced you and treated you with generosity and kindness? The more you would try to hurt him, the more he would love you. He would absorb all your hate and resentment and not return it. After a while you would have to recognize that he was a different kind of person and, in fact, was worthy of admiration. Your conscience and heart might be touched, and you would wish to have him as a friend, since he would be someone who would love you even when you behaved badly. You might even come to the point of apologizing and asking for forgiveness.

In this context how would Roman soldiers have felt if Jews went the extra mile? How would this have changed the relationship between Romans and Jews? And how would our lives change if we practiced this way of life?