

Stumbling Blocks of the Christian Servant

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Every servant, sooner or later, comes up against a stone in the road that the ordinary believer does not see. It is not that the servant is a greater sinner, and it is not that the servant is held to an impossible standard. It is simply that when a soul has been entrusted with the souls of others, the stones underfoot grow sharper, because a stumble on that road does not hurt the servant alone — it scatters the little flock that was walking behind. The Lord knows this about our calling, and He does not leave us alone with it. He has given us, through the Holy Spirit and St. Paul, a quiet and careful inventory of the specific stumbling blocks that lie in wait for those who would serve: the failure of patience, the fear of hardship, the wavering in spiritual battle, and the dimming of our own inner life. None of these is a new enemy; we have met them all in some form since our first communion. But in the life of a servant, each one takes on a sharper edge, and each one asks of us a steadier response. In this lesson we will walk through these stumbling blocks together — not to frighten ourselves, but to see them in the light before we meet them in the dark, and to let the Lord arm us now for the encounter we already know is coming.

Why the Servant's Stones Are Different

If we are honest, most of us first stepped into service with a quiet hope that it would be the part of our lives where we would be at our best. The thought is sweet, and the Lord does not scold us for it. But He gently lets us discover, in His own time, that service is not the staging ground of a finished holiness; it is the arena of a holiness still being forged. The stumbling blocks that meet us when we stand in front of the children, or open the Bible with an inquirer, or sit down with a suffering parishioner, are not the stumbling blocks of the general Christian life.

An ordinary believer who gives in to impatience at the grocery store goes home and asks the Lord's forgiveness; the damage is largely his own. A servant who gives in to impatience with a confused teenager or a grieving widow does not damage himself alone — he damages the small flock the Lord has handed him, and often the damage is quiet and long. This is why St. Paul sets the servant's expectation apart from the expectation of every other disciple:

“We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed. But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by

sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left.” (2 Corinthians 6:3–7, NKJV)

It is a long sentence, and it is meant to be long. St. Paul is not composing a checklist; he is drawing a portrait. He wants every servant who reads this to see himself — and to see that the specific shape of the Christian servant's life is endurance. Not brilliance. Not charisma. Endurance. The stumbling blocks that lie in wait for us are not the spectacular ones that might fell a saint in a single night. They are the quiet, wearing ones that grind against the spirit of a servant month after month, year after year, until either the servant has been remade into the likeness of his Master, or the servant has slipped out the back door of his calling without anyone noticing he had gone.

Fr. Matthew the Poor, writing to a generation of Egyptian servants who knew his own long years of quiet labor, insisted that the servant must know his particular stones before he steps onto the road. We can do no less tonight. The four stones we will consider in what follows are the very four to which the Apostle keeps returning: the failure of our patience, the fear of harsh inevitabilities, the wavering in our spiritual battle, and the slow dimming of the servant's own inner life. Each of them is survivable. None of them is fatal to a servant who expects them, names them, and brings them to the Lord while they are still small.

The Failure of Patience

The very first word St. Paul reaches for, when he lists the marks of a true minister of God, is patience. "Much patience," he calls it, as though ordinary patience will not quite be enough. There is a reason he places it first. Of all the stones that lie along the servant's road, impatience is the one we are most likely to trip on before we realize we have lost our footing.

It is not hard to see why. Service is, by its nature, long-term investment in slow soil. We plant a seed in a twelve-year-old that may not bear fruit until he is thirty. We pray with a wandering friend for a decade before the phone call finally comes. We teach the same lesson on forgiveness to the same youth group, and we watch them repeat the same hurts the following week. In the middle of that long season, something very human rises in us: a quiet frustration, a private muttering, a thin resentment that begins to shade our prayers for the very people we were sent to love. This is the failure of patience, and every servant has felt it.

We should not be surprised by it, and we should not despair when it comes. The Lord Himself sighed over Jerusalem. St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians who had caused him more grief than perhaps any other community he served, confessed openly that he had been pressed to the edge of his strength:

“For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.” (2 Corinthians 1:8–9, NKJV)

Notice what St. Paul does with his own exhaustion. He does not hide it, and he does not glorify it. He turns it into a lesson about the architecture of patience. Patience, in the servant's life, is not the fruit of

a naturally calm temperament. It is the fruit of a soul that has been pressed past its own strength and has learned, in that pressing, to lean fully on the One who raises the dead. The servant who has never come to the end of his own patience has not yet begun to learn the patience of Christ.

St. John Chrysostom, writing to weary presbyters in Antioch who felt their congregations slipping through their hands, spoke to this stumbling block with the voice of one who had himself been worn down by it:

“Nothing so becomes a priest as patience. And nothing is so essential to those who have souls committed to their charge. For the physician is not always able to cure in one day; neither does the husbandman gather his fruit as soon as he has sown the seed. Such is also the care of souls: it demands long patience.” — St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood VI.4

Long patience. The phrase should be written somewhere on the servant's wall. When we feel our patience wavering — in the middle of a Sunday school lesson that is not landing, in the third year of a pastoral conversation that keeps returning to the same knot, in the thousandth small inconvenience of a living parish — let us remember that the Lord has not asked of us a quick patience, a brilliant patience, a patience that draws admiration from anyone watching. He has asked of us a long one. And He supplies it to every servant who will wait for it with Him.

The Fear of Harsh Inevitabilities

The second stone on the servant's road is quieter than the first, and harder to see until we are already tripping over it. St. Paul gathers it under the words "tribulations, needs, distresses." These are not persecutions in any dramatic sense. They are the ordinary hardships of a life spent pouring oneself out — a body that aches from too many late nights, a checkbook strained by a family's needs the servant cannot ignore, a sudden illness in a loved one, the long grey patch of a service that no longer thrills the heart the way it once did.

We call them inevitabilities because they come to every servant. Not one of us escapes them. The question is never whether they will come, but what we will do with our hearts when they arrive. And the great temptation, in the moment, is to quietly conclude that something has gone wrong in our calling — that a true servant of God would not be suffering like this, that the Lord must be displeased, that perhaps our service was never really His to begin with. It is a whisper, and it comes reliably. Every servant should be warned of it before it comes, because the whisper sounds, at first, exactly like the voice of our own conscience.

Scripture will have none of it. St. Paul, writing to Timothy from a prison cell, treated these very inevitabilities as the ordinary currency of the servant's life:

“Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.” (1 Timothy 6:6–8, NKJV)

Godliness with contentment. The servant who has learned that small phrase has already disarmed half of his hardships. What the world treats as deprivation — a missing comfort, a delayed plan, an unexpected expense — the servant can treat as the very soil in which the root of his godliness finally grows deep enough to hold him in the next wind. And there will be a next wind.

St. Macarius the Great, writing out of the Egyptian desert where deprivation was not a theory but the ordinary condition of his days, saw this truth from the inside:

“Until a man is broken through temptations and sorrow, he does not acknowledge his own infirmity or humble himself before God. But when he has been broken, he runs at last to God and finds that God was waiting for him all along.” — St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XV

There is a tenderness in that sentence. Our hardships are not the sign that the Lord has walked away from us; they are often the sign that He is walking toward us, and that He is bringing us home by the one road that will actually get us there. The servant who accepts his inevitabilities with a quiet heart — a smile, if he can manage it, and a Our Father, if he cannot — is letting the Lord do in him the very work the Lord sent him into service to do. The hardship, meanwhile, turns out in hindsight to have been a much smaller thing than it seemed in the moment. It is often the hollow reed the enemy wanted us to mistake for an iron bar.

Wavering in the Spiritual Battle

The third stumbling block is the one that catches the servant most unprepared, because it does not look, at first, like a stumbling block at all. It looks like weariness. It looks like distraction. It looks like a normal low patch. In truth, it is the long, grinding pressure of spiritual battle on a soul that has not yet learned that it is actually in one.

The burden of Christian service is not the burden of sharing a few comforting words on a Sunday morning. It is the burden of standing in front of souls that the enemy also wants, and refusing to step aside. When we teach a class, visit a hospital, counsel a struggling friend, or pray with a child before bed, we are not simply engaging in a kind activity; we are walking onto a field that the devil has every interest in contesting. He is not neutral about the service. And because he is not neutral about the service, he is not neutral about the servant.

This is not a word meant to frighten anyone. It is a word meant to save us from the quiet collapse of pretending the battle is not real. When we feel the strange drag of heaviness after a good liturgy, the sudden burst of anger the day before a youth retreat, the unaccountable dryness that settles over a morning prayer we used to love — we are not imagining things, and we are not simply tired. We are in a contest. And contests have only two postures: standing, or sitting down.

“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers,

against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:10–12, NKJV)

St. Paul does not describe the armor as optional equipment for the advanced disciple. He describes it as the basic uniform of anyone who will remain standing. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the feet shod with the gospel of peace, the shield of faith that quenches the flaming arrows, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God — these are the ordinary furniture of the servant's week. The servant who will not read the Scriptures, will not pray the Agpeya, will not confess when his conscience pricks him, will not receive the Body and Blood of Christ at every opportunity, is a soldier who has decided to walk onto the field without his helmet. He will not last the afternoon, and he should not be surprised when the afternoon goes badly.

The good news, the very good news, is that the armor has already been provided. It is not something we must manufacture out of our own diligence. It is something we must simply put on. And St. Paul ends the armor passage not with the clank of steel but with the quietest of verbs — the posture that holds the whole thing together:

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.” (Ephesians 6:18, NKJV)

Watchfulness. Not panic, not self-reliance, not anxious scanning of the horizon — watchfulness, which is the long, peaceful attention of a soul that knows Whose army it belongs to. The wavering in our spiritual battle begins the moment we stop being watchful. And it is healed the moment we return.

The Dimming of the Inner Life

The fourth stone is the most dangerous of the four, because it rarely announces itself. It simply settles in. We wake one morning and notice that the prayer rule we used to love has become a chore. The Scriptures do not speak to us the way they used to. The Eucharist, if we are not careful, can begin to feel like a duty we perform for others rather than a mystery we receive for ourselves. We are still serving — perhaps we are serving more than ever — but something underneath has grown quiet.

This is the slow dimming of the servant's inner life, and every one of us is susceptible to it. We are susceptible precisely because we are busy. A servant who is not careful will mistake the noise of his ministry for the life of his soul. He will stop praying for himself because he is so often praying for others. He will stop being fed because he has become so focused on feeding. And one day he will open his Bible to prepare a lesson, and notice, with a small cold feeling in his chest, that he has not read it for himself — just for himself, without preparation, without assignment — for a very long time.

This is why St. Paul, whose own ministry exhausts us just to read about it, was so careful to command Timothy to guard his own interior life before he guarded anyone else's:

“Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.” (1 Timothy 4:16, NKJV)

Yourself first. Not out of selfishness, but out of the plain truth that a servant cannot give what he does not possess. The lamp that lights other lamps must itself be lit. And the fuel for the lamp is not more activity; it is the quiet, personal, unhurried communion with the Lord that we so often sacrifice first when our schedules tighten.

St. Theophan the Recluse, a nineteenth-century bishop who had spent his own early years as a seminary rector before withdrawing for long seasons of prayer, wrote to a layman who had asked him how one keeps the inner life alive in the middle of a busy service. His answer is short enough to memorize and direct enough to cut clean:

“The principal thing is to stand before God with the mind in the heart, and to go on standing before Him unceasingly day and night until the end of life. If the servant keeps this standing, his service will be alive, and his soul will not wither.” — St. Theophan the Recluse, *The Art of Prayer*

Standing before God with the mind in the heart. That is the whole prescription for the servant's inner life, and it is the whole cure for the slow dimming we are describing. When we feel the flame flickering — when prayer has become mechanical, when the Scriptures have grown dry, when the liturgy has begun to feel like a performance rather than a feast — we are not being called to quit the service. We are being called back to our own altar. An hour of silent prayer, an honest confession, a morning given back entirely to the Lord without the intrusion of our ministry's demands, will often restore more than months of strained effort.

The Four Stones Together

Taken in a single frame, these four stumbling blocks are not a terrifying list. They are a familiar one. Every servant we have ever admired has walked past all four of them, and not one of them walked past them without stumbling at least once. The saints are not the servants who never tripped. The saints are the servants who refused to stop walking when they did.

And here, finally, is the comfort in this lesson. Each of these four stones is answered by a single corresponding grace that the Lord Himself supplies. To the failure of our patience, He supplies His own long-suffering, if we will ask for it daily. To the fear of harsh inevitabilities, He supplies the contentment of godliness, if we will receive it with a quiet heart. To the wavering in spiritual battle, He supplies the whole armor of God, if we will put it on each morning. To the dimming of our inner life, He supplies Himself — in the Scriptures, in the Mysteries, in the silence before the icon, if we will come.

The stumbling blocks, then, turn out to be less our enemies than our teachers. Each of them forces the servant, if he will let it, to go where he would not otherwise have gone: into the deeper patience of Christ, the deeper contentment of the apostles, the deeper warfare of the martyrs, the deeper prayer of the desert fathers. The servant who walks his full road will find that the very stones that bruised his feet have become the steps by which he climbed closer to his Lord.

Let us, then, not flinch when we see them in the path. Let us name them plainly and bring them to the Lord while they are still small. Let us ask Him, tonight, for the long patience He has never withheld

from a servant who asked. Let us ask Him for the quiet contentment that turns deprivation into gift. Let us ask Him to clothe us afresh in the armor He has already forged. And let us ask Him, above all, to keep the lamp of our own inner life burning — for it is only from that lamp that the lamps of those we serve will ever be lit.

Review Questions

1. Why does the servant's stumbling look different from the stumbling of the ordinary believer? What specific consequence of a servant's fall does St. Paul warn against in 2 Corinthians 6:3, and how does that warning shape the way we examine our own service this week?
2. St. Paul begins his portrait of the true minister of God with "much patience." Where, specifically, are we most tempted to lose patience in our own service — with a particular age group, a particular task, a particular outcome that is slow in coming — and what long-patience of Christ might we ask for by name this week?
3. The fear of harsh inevitabilities whispers that something has gone wrong in our calling. Can we recall a past hardship in our own service that, in hindsight, turned out to be the very thing God used to deepen us? What would godliness with contentment look like in the current hardship we are carrying?
4. St. Paul treats the armor of God as ordinary weekly furniture, not occasional equipment. Which piece of the armor — Scripture, prayer, faith, salvation, truth — have we neglected most in the last month, and what is one concrete discipline we can return to this week to take it up again?
5. The dimming of the inner life is the quietest of the four stumbling blocks. What is the state of our own personal time with the Lord — not the time we spend preparing for others, but the time we spend simply standing before Him? What small step can we take this week to rekindle it?

Books & References

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 6:3–7; 2 Corinthians 1:8–9; 1 Timothy 6:6–8; Ephesians 6:10–18; 1 Timothy 4:16 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book VI.
- St. Macarius the Great, *Spiritual Homilies*, especially Homily XV.
- St. Theophan the Recluse, *The Art of Prayer* (compilation of his letters to inquirers).
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, *Words for Our Time* (selected pastoral writings on the servant's life).
- Metropolitan Youssef of the Southern United States, *Between Icon and Offense* (on contemporary stumbling blocks in service).

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes

Discovering Our Talents

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

There is a quiet question that settles over every servant, sometimes in a moment of stillness after liturgy, sometimes in the middle of a sleepless night: what exactly has the Lord given me, and what does He want me to do with it? It is one of the most intimate questions a disciple can ask. It is also one of the most unsettling, because it lays bare how little we often know ourselves, and how much we have quietly been comparing ourselves to others. The Gospel does not treat this question as optional. Our Lord tells us, in the parable of the talents, that every servant has been handed something — not the same amount, and not the same kind, but something real and something meant to be invested. To discover our talents is not the work of self-flattery; it is the work of honest gratitude. The Giver has already given. Our labor is simply to recognize what He has placed in our hands, to accept it without comparing it to anyone else's, and to give it back to Him multiplied. In this lesson we will sit with that quiet question together, and we will let Scripture and the Fathers help us see, perhaps for the first time, what the Lord has already been entrusting to us all along.

The Parable That Still Finds Us

Our Lord told many parables, but few of them unsettle a servant the way the parable of the talents does. It does not feel like a story about somebody else. Every time we hear it, there is a faint pressure in the chest, because we know, in some quiet way, that the story is about us.

A master goes on a long journey. Before he leaves, he does something striking: he places his own wealth into the hands of his servants. Not a bonus, not a loan — his wealth, his own property, to be carried while he is away. To one he gives five talents, to another two, to another one, "to each according to his own ability" (Matthew 25:15). The detail is worth lingering over. The master does not distribute the money randomly. He knows each servant. He has measured each one. He gives to each exactly what that servant can carry, no more and no less. And then He goes away.

Two of the servants get to work. The third does something that, at the time, probably felt very reasonable: he digs a hole and buries the talent in the ground. He does not spend it. He does not lose it. He simply keeps it safe, untouched, so that when the master returns the silver will be exactly where he left it. And we know, without even reading to the end, that this will not go well for him:

"After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few

things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”
(Matthew 25:19–21, NKJV)

The tenderness of that last line is often missed. "Enter into the joy of your lord." The reward is not a bigger purse or a grander title; the reward is the joy of the Master Himself. To discover our talents and to invest them is, finally, not a transaction. It is a homecoming. It is the return to a joy that has been waiting for us all along.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching on this very passage to a congregation of ordinary Constantinopolitan laymen — many of whom had decided, quietly, that the parable was about somebody more talented than they were — pressed the point home with his usual bluntness:

“The talents here are each person's ability, whether by way of protection, or by way of money, or by way of teaching, or by way of anything of the kind. Let no one say, 'I have but one talent, and can do nothing.' For you can do even with this single talent something worthy of acceptance.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homily 78 on Matthew

No one is exempt from the parable. No one has been handed nothing. The question is never whether the Master has entrusted us with something; the question is only whether we have had the courage, yet, to notice what it is.

The First Step: Honest Gratitude

Before we can invest anything, we must see it. And before we can see what we have been given, we must be willing to stop comparing it to what others have been given. This is harder than it sounds. Comparison is perhaps the single greatest thief of the servant's gifts. It convinces a beautifully patient teacher that she is only useful if she can also sing. It convinces a warm-hearted visitor of the sick that he is worthless because he is not also a preacher. It convinces a natural organizer, whose quiet spreadsheets keep the whole ministry running, that his gift does not count because no one applauds it from the pulpit.

St. Paul will not permit this in the body of Christ. He writes to a Corinthian church already tearing itself apart over whose gift was most impressive:

“There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all.” (1 Corinthians 12:4–7, NKJV)

Three times in two verses, the Apostle refuses to let the Corinthians rank one another. The diversity of gifts is not a problem to be solved; it is the Holy Spirit's own design. And the purpose clause at the end is worth memorizing — to each one for the profit of all. Our gift is not given for our self-esteem. It is given for the body. The moment we begin to measure our gift against someone else's, we have forgotten whose body this is.

Honest gratitude, then, is the first step in discovering our talents. It sounds like this: "Lord, I will stop looking at what you have given my neighbor and start looking, with quiet thankfulness, at what You have given me." It is a small prayer, but it opens a door. Because the moment we stop comparing, we begin to see. The things we had dismissed as "not really gifts" — the patience with children that runs in our bones, the quiet way we know when a neighbor is hurting before anyone else has noticed, the stubborn ability to keep a meeting running on time — begin to appear, slowly, as exactly the silver the Master has placed in our hands.

St. Macarius the Great, writing out of the desert to monks who themselves struggled with comparison, said it beautifully:

"The grace of God is distributed to each according to his measure, and each is called to serve with his own measure and not with the measure of another. The one who serves faithfully with a small gift is greater before God than the one who serves carelessly with a large one." — St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XXXVII

Greater before God. The sentence should lift a weight off of every servant who reads it. We are not in a competition. We are in a garden, and each plant has been placed exactly where its particular kind of light will help it grow.

The Shape of a Spiritual Gift

What, then, does a spiritual gift actually look like in the ordinary life of a servant? We sometimes imagine that the gifts St. Paul lists — teaching, prophecy, healing, wisdom, hospitality, mercy — belong only to the spectacularly equipped, the platform speakers and famous abbots. This is a quiet lie, and it keeps many good servants from ever stepping forward.

A spiritual gift, in the life of an ordinary disciple, is usually not a flash of fire. It is a quiet strength that shows up when we serve. It is the thing we find, somewhat to our surprise, that we can do with a certain ease — not because we are clever, but because the Spirit has placed it in us. It is the thing others seem to notice before we do. It is the thing that, when we are doing it, leaves us tired but not drained — spent, but strangely filled.

St. Paul, writing to his own disciple Timothy, speaks of the gift as something Timothy already possesses but must consciously stir up:

"Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all." (1 Timothy 4:14–15, NKJV)

The gift is already in us — we did not acquire it by our effort, and we cannot misplace it by our failures. But it must be stirred. A gift left untouched does not grow; it grows quietly smaller. A gift stirred up — by use, by prayer, by the encouragement of the church — grows strong enough to carry souls. St. Paul adds a second, even more direct word later in the same letter: "Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6, NKJV). Twice in two

short letters, the Apostle urges his beloved disciple to keep the flame alive. If Timothy needed the reminder, so do we.

There is a modest spiritual practice here that every servant can take on. Once a month — perhaps on the first Saturday, perhaps at the beginning of Lent or Advent, perhaps simply on a quiet Sunday evening — sit down with pen and paper and ask: "Lord, what have I done in the last month that felt, even briefly, like You were working through me? Where did I find strength I did not bring with me? Where did I find words I did not plan?" The answers to those questions are often the clearest window we have into what the Lord has actually placed in our hands.

St. Basil the Great, counseling those entering the ascetic life, saw this kind of honest self-examination not as pride but as obedience:

"Each of us ought to consider carefully what spiritual gift he has received from God, and bring it faithfully into the common service of the brethren. To hide the gift out of false modesty is as disobedient as to flaunt it out of pride." — St. Basil the Great, The Long Rules, Q. 7

False modesty is not a virtue. It is a quiet disobedience that dresses up as humility. The Lord has not hidden the talent in our ground to protect us; He has placed it in our hand to invest.

Gifts Are the Giver's, Not Ours

Here is the second great danger, and every servant who begins to discover his talents must meet it eventually: the quiet slide from gratitude to ownership. It happens so subtly we rarely catch the moment. We begin by saying, "Thank you, Lord, for what You have placed in my hand." A season later we are saying, "What I can do for this parish." A season after that, we are quietly wounded when someone else is asked to do the thing we had come to think of as our contribution.

The Fathers saw this drift long before any of us did. St. Paul, writing to the Ephesians, sets the whole framework of the gift inside a single word: the Giver.

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1–3, NKJV)

Notice the posture before the gifts are even mentioned. Lowliness. Meekness. Longsuffering. These are not the character traits of a person who owns what he has; they are the character traits of a person who knows he has been lent everything. St. Paul then moves directly into the list of gifts Christ has given to the Church (vv. 11–13), but only after he has set the posture. The posture is the prerequisite. Without it, the gifts become private property. With it, they remain what they always were: the Lord's generosity working through our hands.

There is a practical discipline here that guards the servant's heart. When we catch ourselves being praised for a gift — a sermon well received, a class that went beautifully, a meal prepared with love for

a grieving family — the holiest thing we can do in the moment is to pass the praise up. A quiet "glory to God" under the breath, a single sign of the cross on the way out of the room, a whispered Psalm at the kitchen sink as the dishes clatter: all of these are small acts of returning the gift to its Giver. They are not performances of humility. They are the servant's own safety.

St. Augustine, writing to a friend who was being widely praised as a preacher and was beginning to feel the weight of the attention, left a line worth copying onto the inside of every servant's heart:

"You have nothing that you did not receive. If, then, you received it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? Whatever you have, return it with thanksgiving, and you will find that the Giver has only begun to give." — St. Augustine, echoing 1 Corinthians 4:7 (Sermon 159)

The Giver has only begun to give. That is a promise worth holding on to. The servant who returns every gift with thanksgiving is never impoverished; he has simply placed his silver in the only bank that pays in eternal interest. And he has kept his heart free for the next gift the Lord is already preparing to entrust.

The Servant of One Talent

The parable of the talents ends with a sad figure, and we should not pass over him too quickly, because most of us, on our weaker days, have flirted with becoming him. He is the servant of one talent. He received less than the others, and he compared. He decided, somewhere in his heart, that since his portion was small, it was not really worth investing. He dug a hole. He buried the silver. He told himself a story about his master that justified his inaction:

"Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.'" (Matthew 25:24–25, NKJV)

Read those words slowly. There is so much self-justification in them that it aches. He calls the master hard. He blames the hardness of the master for his own fear. He says, with false courtesy, "there you have what is yours," as though returning an untouched talent were a kindness rather than a waste. And yet the master's response is not anger at the inventory; it is sorrow at the fear itself. The tragedy of the one-talent servant is not that he had little. The tragedy is that he let his fear of his own littleness keep him from doing anything at all.

Let us be honest with ourselves. How often, in our own service, have we quietly buried the one talent in our hands because we could not see it growing into five? How often have we declined to teach the small class because the large one was given to someone else? How often have we failed to visit the quiet parishioner in the hospital because we told ourselves we had nothing important to say? How often have we withheld the quiet, unspectacular gift we actually possess, because we did not believe the Lord could do anything meaningful with a single talent?

The Lord can. He does. The whole history of the Church has been written by one-talent servants who did not bury what they were given. St. Paul reminds the Corinthians that the strength of God is in fact most visible through the weakness of His servants:

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." (2 Corinthians 4:7, NKJV)

Earthen vessels. Clay pots. The servant does not need to be a silver chalice to carry the treasure; he only needs to be open-mouthed and unburied. The single talent entrusted to us, handed back to the Lord with love, becomes in His hands a multiplying thing. And we are the ones He chooses to do it through.

Bringing It Home

So how, practically, does a servant go about discovering his talents? Not through a personality test, and not through a dramatic spiritual experience, though neither of those is forbidden. The ordinary road is gentler and steadier. It has four small landmarks, and any of us can walk it beginning this week.

The first landmark is prayer. Let us ask the Lord, directly and plainly, "What have You placed in my hand?" He is not offended by the question. He is, in fact, delighted that we are finally asking it. The Father does not hide His children's gifts from them; He waits for them to ask, so that the discovery can come as a conversation between Father and child rather than as a performance review.

The second landmark is the voice of the Church. The people around us — our fathers of confession, our fellow servants, the parishioners we serve — often see what we cannot see. A father of confession who says, "You have a real gift for listening to young men," is not flattering us; he is telling us what the Holy Spirit has been showing him. The servant who listens to the Church's voice about his gifts discovers them more quickly than the servant who tries to figure them out alone.

The third landmark is willing experimentation. Many of us will not know what is in our hand until we begin to use it. A gift discovered is almost never a gift identified in advance; it is a gift noticed in the middle of use. So let us say yes, this year, to the small, ordinary invitations to serve. Let us teach the class no one else wants. Let us visit the shut-in no one else has time for. Let us stand at the welcome table when the weather is cold and no one is waiting to greet the newcomers. In the midst of those quiet services, the Lord often reveals to us, with a kind of startled joy, what He has placed in our hands.

The fourth landmark is faithfulness over flash. Whatever the Lord shows us we have been given, let us commit to use it without needing applause. A talent used in a hidden place, for a small audience, with no recognition, is still multiplying. The Master is not grading on visibility. He is grading on faithfulness.

May the Lord who entrusted His wealth to servants like us give us the courage, tonight, to look at what is already in our hands and to see it plainly. May He keep us from the quiet disobedience of false modesty and from the quieter disobedience of private ownership. And may He, at the end of the long day of our service, say to each of us — not because we were great, but because we were faithful — "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your lord."

Review Questions

1. The master in the parable of the talents "gave to each according to his own ability" (Matthew 25:15, NKJV). What does that detail tell us about how the Lord has distributed gifts, and how does it guard us against the two dangers of comparison and of false modesty?
2. St. John Chrysostom warns that no one is exempt from the parable — no one has been handed nothing. What is one gift we have quietly dismissed as "not really counting" that the Lord may in fact be asking us to invest?
3. St. Paul tells Timothy twice to stir up the gift that is in him. What is one concrete practice we can take on this month — prayer, examination, conversation with a father of confession, trying a new area of service — to stir up the gift the Lord has given us?
4. The slide from gratitude to ownership is subtle. Can we recall a moment when we felt quietly wounded that someone else was asked to do the thing we had begun to think of as ours? What does St. Augustine's reminder — "you have nothing that you did not receive" — invite us to do with that memory?
5. The servant of one talent was not condemned for having little. He was condemned for burying what he had. Where, in our own service right now, have we been burying a small gift because we could not see it growing into something larger? What would it look like to dig it up this week?

Books & References

Scripture: Matthew 25:14–30; 1 Corinthians 12:4–7; 1 Timothy 4:14–15; 2 Timothy 1:6; Ephesians 4:1–13; 2 Corinthians 4:7 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homily 78 on the Gospel of St. Matthew.
- St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies, especially Homily XXXVII.
- St. Basil the Great, The Long Rules (on discerning and using one's spiritual gifts in community).
- St. Augustine, Sermon 159 (on 1 Corinthians 4:7 and the gratitude of the gifted).
- St. Theophan the Recluse, The Path to Salvation (on stirring up the gift of God).

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes

Commitment in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Every servant begins, somewhere, with a first yes. Perhaps it was whispered at a retreat, perhaps offered in a quiet conversation with a father of confession, perhaps almost stumbled into when an older servant simply asked for help. The first yes is often easy. It is the second yes, and the hundredth, and the one offered on a tired Tuesday night in February when no one else is watching, that reveals what kind of servant we are becoming. Commitment, in the Christian life, is not a single decision; it is the thousand small decisions by which we keep showing up. Our Lord did not ask His disciples for a feeling about Him; He asked them to follow Him. And He warned, gently and more than once, that the servant who tries to keep one foot in the kingdom and the other outside of it will eventually be tired of both. In this lesson we will let Scripture and the Fathers teach us what commitment actually looks like in the life of a servant — what it costs, what it gives, and why the Lord Himself supplies it to every servant who is willing, daily, to be supplied.

The Shape of a Committed Life

When we hear the word commitment, we sometimes reach for something dramatic — a grand renunciation, a vow, a single moment of decisive rupture. Commitment in the Gospel does look like that sometimes, but most of the time it looks quieter and stranger. It looks like an ordinary servant who, year after year, simply will not walk away.

The best picture of commitment in the whole of Scripture may be the one St. Paul gives us near the end of his own life. He is in a Roman prison. He has been beaten, shipwrecked, misunderstood, imprisoned more than once, abandoned by friends, and is now awaiting execution by a distant emperor. Any observer would say his ministry has ended in failure. And from that cell, to a young disciple who may have been tempted to doubt whether all of this had been worth it, Paul writes a sentence that has steadied every committed servant ever since:

“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:6–8, NKJV)

Poured out as a drink offering. That is the image a committed servant finally arrives at. Not a single heroic moment, but a whole life tipped over slowly onto the altar, until every drop has soaked into the ground. Paul did not quit when it got hard. He did not quit when it did not get easier. He kept showing

up, and at the end, he could say the three simple phrases that are the anatomy of a committed life: I fought, I finished, I kept.

Our Lord Himself, on the night before He laid down His life for us, reached for the same posture in His own prayer, speaking to His Father about the service the Father had given Him:

"I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do." (John 17:4, NKJV)

The Lord speaks these words before the Cross, not after it. He considers His work finished not when the tomb is emptied but when His will is fully surrendered. Commitment, in the pattern our Lord Himself set, is not measured by outcome. It is measured by surrender. The servant who has surrendered his will has, in the deepest sense, already finished the work, even if many years of faithful labor still lie ahead.

The Servant Who Tries to Serve Two Masters

Of all the dangers that erode commitment, none is older or more stubborn than the attempt to serve two masters. It is older than the Gospel itself — we see it in every covenant struggle in the Old Testament, and we see it in our own hearts on the drive home from a weekday liturgy. The Lord is not unkind about it. He speaks to it as a Father who knows we will try this, who has seen every generation of His children try this, and who refuses to let us pretend it will work:

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." (Matthew 6:24, NKJV)

Notice how honest the Lord's language is. He does not say, "It is difficult to serve two masters." He says, "No one can." The attempt itself is not only unwise; it is impossible. The servant who tries it will not end up with divided loyalty — he will end up, sooner or later, choosing one and resenting the other. And almost always, when we try the experiment, the master who loses is the one who is not standing in front of us demanding. God, in His patience, rarely shouts. The other masters — comfort, approval, entertainment, career, the thousand small claims on our time — are always shouting. If we do not consciously choose the quiet master, the loud masters will consume us by default.

This was the great conflict that faced the early Christians, and it is the reason the Apostolic letters return to it so often. Many of the first disciples came from wealth or status. Some were women of rank; some were officials in the imperial service; some were merchants with long-running businesses. Walking with Christ cost them things the world considered non-negotiable. They made their choice anyway. St. Paul himself is perhaps the clearest example — a Pharisee of Pharisees, educated at the feet of Gamaliel, on track for a life of respected authority in Judaism, who traded the whole thing for the name of Christ:

"But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for

whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.” (Philippians 3:7–8, NKJV)

The vocabulary is blunt on purpose. What he had once considered profit he now considered loss. What the world still prized he now treated as rubbish — not because those things were evil in themselves, but because he had found something worth infinitely more, and a man with infinite treasure does not carry costume jewelry around in his pocket any longer.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching on this passage to Christians in Antioch who still had one foot in the old Roman ways, pressed the image with characteristic warmth:

“The man who still clings to his former loves cannot run freely with Christ. He is like a runner carrying heavy baggage: the race is not lost for lack of feet, but for the refusal to set down the bag. Set it down, beloved, and you will see how fast the Christian soul can truly run.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homily 11 on Philippians

Set it down. That is the whole counsel. The committed servant is not the servant who sprints hardest. The committed servant is the one who has finally, lovingly, set the bag down.

Desire and Determination

What, then, is commitment made of? If it is not a feeling, and it is not a single heroic decision, what is it? The Fathers and the ascetic tradition are remarkably clear on this: commitment is the union of two quieter things — desire and determination. Each is insufficient without the other. Together, they form the backbone of the committed life.

Desire is the first. A committed servant wants the Lord. He wants Him with real warmth — not a generic spirituality, not a nostalgic affection, but a desire for the Person of Christ Himself. Without this desire, commitment becomes grim duty, and grim duty cannot survive the second decade of a servant's life. This is why the Psalmist teaches us to pray, again and again, for the kindling of our own desire:

“As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” (Psalm 42:1–2, NKJV)

The image is tender and bodily. A deer that has been running hard in the summer heat does not merely prefer water; it needs water. Our prayer is that our souls would acquire that quality of thirst — that love for Christ would become not one of our interests but our deepest hunger. Where that thirst is alive, commitment takes care of itself. Where that thirst has gone quiet, no amount of grit will preserve us for long.

Determination is the second. Desire without determination is sentiment; it feels lovely on retreat and evaporates in the parking lot. Determination is the steady yes of the will, given every morning, that carries the desire through the dry stretches it cannot feel its way through. St. Paul, writing to the Hebrews about the servants of the old covenant who kept their faith through long adversity, gives the theology of determination in a single image:

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:1–2, NKJV)

Endurance. That is the hard word in the sentence, and it is the word that separates the committed servant from the enthusiastic one. Endurance is not the absence of feeling; it is the faithfulness that is still walking on the mornings when feeling has not yet arrived. And the Apostle gives us the trick for keeping endurance alive — not by looking at ourselves, which always collapses us, but by looking at Jesus, the author and finisher of what He Himself is building in us.

St. Isaac the Syrian, writing to monks who had discovered that the first flame of zeal had cooled and now had to decide whether they would continue, left a sentence worth writing on the servant's heart:

“The true servant of God is not the one who is always fervent, for no man is always fervent. The true servant of God is the one who, in his fervor, does not grow proud, and in his dryness, does not stop walking.” — St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies LXV

In our fervor, not proud. In our dryness, not stopping. That is the double pattern of determination in the committed life. We all have our fervent seasons; we all have our dry ones. The question is not which season we are in tonight. The question is whether, in both seasons, we are still walking.

The Joy the World Does Not Know

There is a particular joy that belongs to the committed servant, and it is worth speaking about plainly, because the world does not know it and will not admit that it exists. The world is sure that the committed life must be narrow, joyless, and exhausting. It has never actually watched a committed servant up close.

The committed servant is, in fact, one of the most deeply joyful people any of us will ever meet. Not giddy, not untouched by sorrow, not pretending that the road is easy — but quietly, durably joyful, in a way that those around him can feel without being able to name. Where does the joy come from? Our Lord tells us, simply, in the farewell discourse — the last conversation He had with His disciples before the Cross:

“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.” (John 15:11, NKJV)

His joy — His own joy — in us. That is the astonishing promise. Committed service is not the tax we pay for discipleship; it is the channel through which the Lord's own joy comes to rest in us. The world's joy is tied to favorable circumstances. Christ's joy is tied to nothing outside of Himself. That is why, in Acts, we find St. Paul and Silas singing hymns at midnight from a prison cell (Acts 16:25, NKJV). They were not performing piety. They were so full of the Lord's joy that it was simply coming out of them.

St. Luke, in his summary of the life of the very first committed community in Jerusalem, leaves us a single astonishing verse that tells us what committed service produces when a whole people gives itself to it together:

“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.” (Acts 2:46–47, NKJV)

Gladness and simplicity of heart. Those are not the words the world expects to hear attached to a life of daily self-offering. But they are the exact words Luke uses, because they are the exact state of a people who have discovered what our Lord told His disciples at the Last Supper: His joy, remaining in them, making their own joy full.

Our own Lord said something one more time in that same chapter — a sentence that, perhaps more than any other, captures why the committed life ends up being the most blessed:

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35, NKJV, recording the words of the Lord Jesus)

St. Paul quotes this line to the elders of Ephesus at the end of his ministry among them. He does not offer it as a motivational saying. He offers it as a plain observation after decades of service: the giver is more blessed than the receiver. The truly committed servant is not making a sacrifice; he is accepting an inheritance. He is discovering, over the course of a long obedience, that the joy the world promised him and kept him running for all his early years was always thinner than the joy the Lord had quietly waiting for him the moment he finally set the bag down.

The Cost, and Who Pays It

None of this, of course, means that commitment is cheap. Our Lord never pretended it was. In fact, He made a point, repeatedly, of warning would-be disciples to count the cost before they said yes, precisely because He wanted us to say yes with our eyes open:

“For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it — lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’?” (Luke 14:28–30, NKJV)

He does not say this to discourage the builder. He says it to make sure the builder has chosen a tower he will finish. The mockery the Lord warns against is not the world's contempt; it is the grief of a servant who walked away before the work was done. Better to be a humble builder of a small, finished tower than an ambitious builder of an abandoned one.

So yes, there is a cost. We will miss certain Saturday mornings. We will decline certain promotions. We will have conversations with friends who do not understand why we are so committed to a parish that, from the outside, seems to give us little in return. We will pass on certain entertainments, certain

conveniences, certain seasons of rest. These are real losses. We should not pretend they are not. But here is the quiet secret the committed servant eventually learns: the Lord Himself is the one who pays the cost. Not us.

St. Paul says this with beautiful precision when he tries to account for the energy he somehow keeps finding for ministry, long after his own strength should have been spent:

"To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily."
(Colossians 1:29, NKJV)

Read the sentence slowly. I labor — yes, the servant really does labor. It is real work, with real sweat. And yet: according to His working which works in me mightily. The labor is not ours alone. The Lord is the one working mightily in us. The cost of our commitment is not drawn from our own account; it is drawn from His infinite one. We are more like the jar than the wine. We are not meant to supply what is poured out; we are meant to be clean, open, and present so that what He pours out can reach the people who need it.

Fr. Matthew the Poor, writing to a generation of Egyptian servants whom he had watched weary themselves by trying to fund their commitments from their own depleted hearts, put it as plainly as a pastor could:

"The servant who believes that he himself supplies his own service will collapse beneath it within a few short years. The servant who has learned that his service is supplied entirely by Christ can serve, without collapse, for the rest of his life. The whole art of Christian commitment is to become, truly, the second kind of servant." — Fr. Matthew the Poor, Words for Our Time

The whole art. May the Lord teach it to us tonight.

A Prayer for the Daily Yes

Commitment, in the end, is not a vow we make once and keep in a drawer. It is a small yes renewed each morning, most often under our breath, before our feet have even hit the floor. Let us not despise its smallness. A lifetime of these small yeses is what produced every committed servant the Church has ever canonized. The Lord is not asking us to commit to fifty years tonight. He is asking us to commit to tomorrow morning's prayers, and to the next phone call, and to the Sunday school class the week after next. The rest will be given as it is needed.

So let us pray, tonight, the prayer every committed servant eventually learns to pray. Let it be a short one, and let it fit easily on our lips. "Lord, I am Yours. What would You have me do today, and who would You have me love?" That prayer, offered with a quiet heart at the beginning of an ordinary morning, is the whole of commitment distilled into two sentences. The Lord will answer it. He always does.

May He who called us to this service, and who has kept us in it until now, supply the daily yes we cannot supply by ourselves. May He kindle in our hearts, when the desire has gone quiet, a fresh thirst

for Himself. May He steady our determination, when the road has grown long, with the cloud of witnesses who walked it before us. And may He, on the day when the work is finally finished, find us still pouring, still running, still keeping — so that with St. Paul we may say, without pride but with quiet joy, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."

Review Questions

1. St. Paul describes the committed life as being "poured out as a drink offering" (2 Timothy 4:6, NKJV). What does this image tell us about the shape of Christian commitment — and how is it different from the world's pictures of success in ministry?
2. Our Lord says plainly, "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24, NKJV). What are the other masters that quietly compete with Christ for our loyalty in the current season of our life, and what is one small yes to Him we can offer this week that will silence one of them?
3. St. Isaac the Syrian says the true servant is the one who in his fervor does not grow proud, and in his dryness does not stop walking. Which of those two failures are we more at risk for in the current season — pride in fervor, or stopping in dryness? What does faithfulness look like specifically for us right now?
4. The early Jerusalem community ate their food "with gladness and simplicity of heart" (Acts 2:46, NKJV). Where, in our own committed service, have we experienced this particular joy the world does not know? How do we guard it when the road becomes difficult?
5. St. Paul says, "I labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily" (Colossians 1:29, NKJV). In what area of our service have we been trying to supply the energy from ourselves? What would it look like, this week, to ask the Lord to supply it instead?

Books & References

Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:6–8; John 17:4; Matthew 6:24; Philippians 3:7–8; Psalm 42:1–2; Hebrews 12:1–2; John 15:11; Acts 2:46–47; Acts 20:35; Luke 14:28–30; Colossians 1:29 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homily 11 on Philippians.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, especially Homily LXV (on fervor and dryness).
- St. Augustine, Confessions (on the long yes given daily to God).
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, Words for Our Time (on the Christian servant's reliance on Christ).

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes

Tribulation

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Every servant, if he walks long enough, arrives eventually at the door of tribulation. It is not a door we would have chosen, and our Lord does not scold us for the reluctance we feel as we approach it. He simply tells us, with a tenderness that is often missed, that this door has been built into the road of every disciple, and that He Himself has already walked through it before we ever had to. Tribulation is not the sign that something has gone wrong in our service. It is often the sign that something very right is about to happen in our soul. In this lesson we will sit with the Lord's own words about the sorrows of His disciples, and with the Fathers who discovered, through long experience, that the very pressing of the heart against grief is the way the heart becomes large enough to hold Christ. We will not pretend that tribulation is light. But we will learn to carry it as those who have a Comforter waiting on the other end of every weight — and who, quietly, has been with us the whole way.

The Lord Does Not Surprise Us with Sorrow

On the last night before His passion, in the stillness of the upper room, our Lord prepared His disciples for the sorrows that were already on their way. He did not soften the forecast. He did not promise that the faithful life would be an easy one. What He gave them instead was infinitely better — a sentence that every servant has carried into his own dark hours ever since:

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33, NKJV)

Read the sentence slowly. He does not say, "You may have tribulation." He says, "You will have tribulation." It is not a possibility; it is a given. The Lord is so gentle with us about this, and yet so clear. He does not want us surprised by what is coming. He does not want us to reach our first real affliction and conclude, in panic, that we must have strayed outside of His will. Tribulation is inside the will. It was inside His will for Himself; it is inside His will for us.

And in the very same breath, He hands us what we will need. "In Me you may have peace." "Be of good cheer." "I have overcome the world." He does not only announce the sorrow; He announces the victory that has already been won over it. Between the announcement and the victory, the servant stands — not crushed, not abandoned, not surprised, but held.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching to a congregation worn down by the troubles of fifth-century Antioch, opened this verse with his usual warmth:

"He did not say, 'I will deliver you from tribulation,' but, 'in Me you shall have peace.' The storm is without; the calm is within. And the calm is stronger than the storm,

because Christ Himself is in it.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John, LXXVIII

The calm is stronger than the storm. This is the secret that changes everything for a servant in tribulation. Our Lord has not spared us the weather of this world; He has given us a Person to stand with us inside it.

The Comfort That Meets Every Affliction

If the Lord is honest about the tribulation, He is even more generous about the comfort. The Christian servant is never left alone in his sorrow. St. Paul, who had seen more of both affliction and comfort than most of us will ever see, opens his second letter to the Corinthians with a blessing so full of tenderness that it is worth reading every time we find ourselves under a weight:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4, NKJV)

Hear every word: Father of mercies, God of all comfort, comforts us in all our tribulation. The sentence is not rationed. There is no affliction too small for His mercy and no affliction too large for His comfort. And there is a purpose tucked quietly into the end of it — that we may be able to comfort others with the same comfort we have received. The Lord does not waste a single one of our sorrows. Every tear He has wiped away in us becomes a cup of water we can carry, one day, to someone else's thirst.

Many of us have stood beside a grieving friend and known, without being told, that the person sitting next to us understood our grief in a way the well-meaning stranger across the room simply could not. That knowing came from somewhere. It came from a tribulation our friend had once carried himself, and from the comfort the Lord had poured into him in it. This is one of the quiet miracles of Christian service: the sorrows we would never have chosen become, in His hands, the very instruments by which we bless the people He sends to us next.

St. Paul continues the thought a few verses later, with a sentence that every servant should memorize against the day he will need it:

“For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us.” (2 Corinthians 1:8–10, NKJV)

Notice the threefold tense: delivered, does deliver, will still deliver. The comfort of God is not a past event to be remembered; it is a present river to be drunk from, flowing out of a future we already

belong to. The servant in the middle of tribulation can say, in the same breath, He has delivered me before, He is holding me now, and He will not stop holding me until the work is done.

The Fire That Tests the Gold

Scripture gives us more than one image for what tribulation does in the life of a believer, but few are as tender or as penetrating as the image of the refiner's fire. The fire is not cruel. It is not punitive. It is the loving labor of a craftsman who will not stop until what is precious in the metal has been freed from what was never part of it.

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:6–7, NKJV)

St. Peter, a man who had himself been tried in the fire of denial and restored by a Lord who kept no record of it, speaks here with an inside knowledge. Trials do not destroy faith; they reveal it. Whatever survives the fire was real gold all along, and it is now free of the dross that had clung to it. What burns away in tribulation was not our faith; it was the pretensions that had accumulated around it, and which we could not have removed on our own.

St. James, in the opening lines of his letter, counsels the same thing and draws the same conclusion:

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” (James 1:2–4, NKJV)

Count it all joy. That is a startling instruction, and we should not pretend it comes easily. St. James is not asking us to feel joy in the moment of pain; he is asking us to reckon, with the mind of faith, that the pain is doing something in us we could not accomplish any other way. Patience is not given as a character trait; it is grown as a fruit, and it grows in only one soil. The servant who wants to be patient with his people must accept the curriculum the Lord has set for his own patience — and that curriculum, almost always, includes tribulation.

St. Macarius the Great, writing out of the long austerities of the Egyptian desert, saw this truth so clearly that he made it the axis of his teaching on the Christian life:

“As gold that has passed through the fire shines brighter, so the soul that has passed through many temptations shines with a brightness nothing can imitate. The fire did not destroy what was true; it revealed it. Do not be afraid of the fire, therefore; only be afraid of running away from it.” — St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XXVI

Do not be afraid of the fire. It is not the fire that ruins the servant; it is the fleeing from the fire before its work is complete. If we will stand where the Lord has placed us, He Himself is the Refiner beside us, and He does not overheat His own gold.

Tribulation That Produces

St. Paul, in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Romans, traces one of the most beautiful chains of consequence in all of Scripture. Tribulation does not simply come and go; if we will let it, it begins a cascade inside the soul that ends, astonishingly, at hope and at the love of God poured out in our hearts. Read the chain slowly:

“And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” (Romans 5:3–5, NKJV)

Tribulation → perseverance → character → hope → the love of God poured out. That is the pathway the Apostle traces, and it does not run the other direction. The servant who has never been tried has nothing in him that perseveres. The servant who has never persevered has no character formed in the fire. The servant who has no character formed in the fire has a thin hope — the kind of hope that is really just a preference for things going well. But the servant who has walked all the way down that chain has a hope that does not disappoint, because it is held together on the other end by the Holy Spirit Himself.

There is a wonderful practical freedom in this verse for the servant in the middle of a difficult season. When the difficulty rises, he is not expected to enjoy it; he is expected to trust that it is producing something. Not wasted, not empty, not meaningless — producing. And if perseverance is being produced today, then character is being produced tomorrow, and hope is being produced next year, and the love of God is already flooding the heart of the servant who is still walking.

The Book of Acts summarizes the entire missionary theology of St. Paul and St. Barnabas in a single clause, as they strengthen the disciples of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch:

“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22, NKJV)

Many. Not a few. Not the occasional misfortune. Many. The plural is tender, because it means the Apostle knows what the servant is in for, and he still says, with his hand on the servant's shoulder, "Keep going. This is the road. It is the only road there is, and it leads all the way home."

St. Gregory the Great, a bishop who had more than once asked the Lord to be spared his own pastoral burdens, eventually wrote a sentence that every tired servant can carry in his pocket:

“The storms of this life are not punishments for the righteous; they are the winds by which God drives our ship toward the harbor we could not otherwise reach. Without them we would linger in shallow waters forever.” — St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia on Job*, XXVI

Winds that drive us toward the harbor. That is what tribulation does in the life of a soul that has stopped fighting the wind. The servant who can say, in the middle of the squall, "Lord, You are steering," is already halfway home.

The Company of Those Who Have Gone Before

One of the Lord's kindest gifts to a servant in tribulation is that He has not sent him down this road alone, or first. The entire eleventh chapter of Hebrews exists to remind us that we are walking a path whose every difficult turn has been walked already by saints who are now standing, finished, at the other end of it. When tribulation comes, the first pastoral thing we can do for ourselves is to remember that we are not the first.

"Others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented — of whom the world was not worthy." (Hebrews 11:36–38, NKJV)

The writer of Hebrews is not trying to crush us under the weight of these examples. He is trying to situate our own troubles in the long procession of faithful sufferings, so that when our hour comes we will feel, not singled out for cruelty, but gathered into a company whose songs are already being sung. The very next verses complete the picture:

"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:1–2, NKJV)

The cloud of witnesses. That image alone has carried countless servants through long dark nights. When we pray through our tribulation, we do not pray as isolated figures in an empty room; we pray as members of a throng who have prayed before us, who are still with the Lord, and who are, in some mysterious way, still with us. The martyrs under the altar, the desert fathers in their caves, the mothers of the Church at their weaving, the bishops in their exiles — they are praying with us.

And the One we are finally looking to is not any of them; He is Jesus Himself, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross. Even He, on the road of tribulation, did not endure for its own sake. He endured for the joy. He saw us, on the other side of that cross, and the seeing of us gave Him strength to finish. It is fitting, then, that we should see Him on the other side of our own small cross, and let the seeing of Him give us strength to finish.

St. Isaac the Syrian, writing out of a lifetime of monastic struggle, placed this truth at the very heart of his counsel to those learning to bear affliction:

“Do not look down at your feet when the road is rough; look up at the face of Christ. He walks before you. Every stone that bruises your foot first bruised His, and He has turned every stone into a step that leads home.” — St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, LI

The Weight of Glory

There is a final mystery in Christian tribulation that Scripture simply hands to us, without arguing for it, because it can only be received. The mystery is this: the very weight we carry here, when carried in Christ, is being transmuted into a glory whose weight the present language cannot describe. St. Paul says it in a single sentence of almost unbelievable hope:

“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” (2 Corinthians 4:17, NKJV)

Light affliction. A moment. And yet the very affliction that feels heavy to us is itself the instrument by which the Lord is forging an eternal weight of glory. Our tears, our tiredness, our long patience with a difficult year — none of it evaporates. All of it is being gathered, by Hands we cannot see, into a brightness that will justify every ounce of the carrying.

St. Paul pushes the contrast even further a chapter earlier, because he wants no servant to miss the proportion:

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” (Romans 8:18, NKJV)

Not worthy to be compared. This is the voice of a man who has been stoned and shipwrecked and imprisoned speaking about his own sufferings, and deciding that the glory on the other side so outweighs them that the comparison is almost comical. If St. Paul, after all he endured, could say that, then the servant in the middle of his own hard season can borrow the Apostle's confidence and hold on.

And hear, finally, the last and greatest word of the chapter — the word that seals this whole lesson with the tenderness of the Father who has been there with us the whole time:

“For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38–39, NKJV)

Nothing. No tribulation, however heavy, is strong enough to pry us from the love of God. This is the ground we walk on when everything else is shaking. It is the bedrock beneath the servant's feet when the road has grown long and the body has grown tired. And it is, in the end, not our grip on Him that keeps us, but His grip on us that holds.

May the Lord who wept over His friend's grave and wept over His own city keep our tears as His own. May He be, in our affliction, the calm in the middle of our storm, the comfort beneath every weight, the Refiner beside every fire, the Captain of the wind that drives our ship home. And may He teach us, in the quiet work of a long service, that tribulation is not the end of our story but one of the most cherished chapters of it — the chapter in which we finally stopped trusting ourselves and began to trust, with all our heart, the God who raises the dead.

Review Questions

1. Our Lord tells His disciples plainly, "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33, NKJV), and at the same time gives them His own peace. How does this pairing change the way we interpret the hardships we meet in service, and how does it guard us from the fear that something has gone wrong when tribulation comes?
2. St. Paul calls God the "Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3–4, NKJV), and teaches that the comfort we receive is meant to become the comfort we pass on. Where, in our own experience of past tribulation, has the Lord formed in us a cup of water that He has already been asking us to carry to someone else?
3. St. James asks us to "count it all joy" when we fall into various trials (James 1:2, NKJV). What is the difference between feeling joy in the moment of suffering and reckoning joy with the mind of faith, and how can we cultivate the second when the first is not available to us?
4. Romans 5:3–5 traces a chain: tribulation produces perseverance, character, and hope. At which link of that chain do we sense the Lord currently working in us, and what does it look like to stay faithful in the middle of that particular work?
5. Hebrews reminds us that we are "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" (12:1, NKJV), who have already walked the road of suffering and are praying with us. Which saint's witness do we most need to remember this week, and how would remembering them change the way we carry our current weight?

Books & References

Scripture: John 16:33; 2 Corinthians 1:3–10; 2 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Peter 1:6–7; James 1:2–4; Romans 5:3–5; Acts 14:22; Hebrews 11:36–38; Hebrews 12:1–2; Romans 8:18, 38–39 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John, especially Homily LXXVIII.
- St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies, especially Homily XXVI.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, on sorrows and the refining road.
- St. Gregory the Great, Moralia on Job, on the winds that drive the ship of the soul.

- Fr. Matthew the Poor, Words for Our Time (pastoral letters on sorrow and consolation).

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes